

The Provision of Education for Prisoners by Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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ABSTRACT

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is one of the educational establishments which offer opportunities to all those who wish to study at the university level. STOU is open to all occupational groups such as workers, housewives, monks, the disabled, members of hill tribes and secondary school graduates. Those who have completed only lower secondary school but have five years of work experience could also apply. STOU also offers short courses for those who seek additional training in specific occupational areas or vocations. This short article focuses on one of STOU's target groups, namely, prisoners in various prisons and correction centres in Thailand. Thus far, more than 1,200 prisoners have received bachelor degrees from STOU in various academic fields.

INTRODUCTION

In this age, the provision of educational services does not have to be restricted to conventional classroom settings. Advancements in information and communication technologies now enable people to search for knowledge to support their needs, study at their own pace and seek instructions that suit their level of skills. To cater to the diverse needs, the provision of educational services must satisfy the multiple target groups and employ different modalities to deliver the services. At the same time, there needs to be flexibility and equal access to education. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is one of the educational establishments which offer opportunities to people who wish to study at the university level. It enables those who wish to seek knowledge as well as those who want to improve their knowledge to study in an open educational system. Through the means of distance learning, anyone can study on their own, wherever they are and whenever they want to.

As an open university, STOU's mandate is to *'provide lifelong education and develop the quality of life of the general public by upgrading the level of knowledge of those already in the workforce and expanding educational opportunities for those with secondary school qualifications. The university has carried out its mission by establishing a distance learning system which employs self-instructional media, radio broadcasts, television programmes, satellite communications and the Internet. These enable students to study on their own without having to attend a conventional classroom*

which would be obligatory in normal educational systems.' Thus, STOU not only provides education but also opens up new learning opportunities so that Thais could improve themselves.

STOU began offering university-level education to prisoners since 1974, when a prisoner in Bang Kwang Central Prison learnt that STOU provided distance education. As this mode of learning allowed students to take courses and study on their own without having to attend classes, he applied and became a student in the School of Communication Arts.

Like other STOU students, he studied the reading materials and other learning aids. It was only when examinations approached that he informed the university that he could not sit for the papers at the location specified by the university as he was in prison. When Dr. Vichit Sri-sa Arn, Founder and then President of STOU, was informed about the prisoner's predicament, he saw a way to contribute to STOU's mandate to expand education opportunities. Providing university-level education to prisoners was also consistent with the wishes of His Majesty the King of Thailand. Following a formal meeting between Dr. Vichit and the Director-General of the Department of Corrections, a joint decision was reached that university education would henceforth be offered to prisoners in the various prisons and correction centres in Thailand.

For the inmate who was the pioneer student, temporary arrangements were made so that he could take his exams in the Bang Kwang Central Prison. This marked the beginning of STOU's practice of offering education services to prisoners. Afterwards, a system and regulations for the provision of educational services to prisoners was developed. Thus, distance learning for prisoners became a regular service provided by STOU. All these started from recognising a prisoner's efforts to pursue higher education through distance learning. Creating opportunities for prisoners to study also reinforces the Department of Corrections' principle that "*the purpose of serving the terms of the prison sentences is to remedy the wrongs that have been done and is not for seeking vengeance.*" It was therefore appropriate to expand education opportunities for prisoners and to launch a long-term cooperation between the two institutions.

THE APPROACH TO OFFERING UNIVERSITY-LEVEL EDUCATION TO PRISONERS

Except for some necessary special arrangements, the distance education system provided for inmates does not differ much from that provided for other students. The following provide an overview of the university-level education STOU offers in prisons and correction institutions under the Department of Corrections:

- (1) *Application.* STOU regulations on the eligibility of applicants for the Bachelor Degree programme recognises the right to education of all people. Inmates can, like any other person, apply to study at STOU. It only requires applicants to seek approval from the Department of Corrections, which acts as custodian of the prisoners and is responsible for rehabilitating them.
- (2) *Textbooks and study materials.* As with any other students, texts and study materials are delivered by post to the prisoners. These include student manuals, textbooks, self-assessment quizzes, exercises and other printed materials such as newsletters, time-tables for radio and television programmes as well as lecture schedules.

- (3) *Audios and other media learning tools.* These are provided to assist students in their studies. The extent to which the prisoners can benefit from these services, however, depends on the policies of various prisons and correction centres e.g. rules and regulations regarding the use of the radio, television, VCDs and DVDs.
- (4) *Orientation of new students.* During the initial years, STOU organised student orientations whereby a group of lecturers visited the prisons and correction centres to introduce the concept and system of distance learning. Later, formal student orientations were no longer organised as many prisoners who graduated from STOU became involved in introducing distance learning and providing practical guidelines for new students.
- (5) *Lectures.* These are given for selected courses and only if they have more than 10 students. In general, lectures are presented only in large prisons and correction centres where there is a large number of students.
- (6) *Practical sessions.* For some of the courses which emphasise on practical skills, students are required to attend practical sessions on specified dates at stipulated times and venues. These practical sessions are generally organised in the Bang Kwang prison because it has the largest number of students and is therefore the location of most STOU activities for prisoners.
Seminars on occupational experiences. These are intensive seminars which STOU students are required to attend after completing most of their courses. The aim is to consolidate all the lessons learnt prior to graduation so that the students have the benefit of learning the practical and application aspects of the courses. The seminars are held at Bang Kwang prison.
- (7) *Examinations.* STOU holds examinations for prisoners in around 80 prisons and correction centres in the various provinces.
- (8) *Graduation ceremonies.* Each year, STOU sends graduation certificates by mail to prisoners. This is a normal practice when a student is unable to attend the graduation ceremony. On special occasions, such as the commemoration of the university's 10th, 12th and 20th year of establishment, STOU and the Department of Corrections organised graduation celebrations for prisoners who graduated.

In 1984, with the cooperation of the Department of Corrections, the first ever STOU Corner was set up in the Bang Kwang Central Prison. A library in a high-security prison could be regarded as a great educational phenomenon. STOU Corner houses over 10,000 STOU textbooks and additional readings, all of which are available to inmates through direct borrowing and inter-lending among high-security sections. Currently, there are 10 official STOU Corners in central prison libraries and penitentiary facilities in various parts of Thailand.

In 1999, the Office of Documentation and Information which is in charge of STOU's library and information services together with the Educational Promotion Section of the Department of Corrections decided to launch a programme to train prison staff on library works and services. Since its inception in 2000, the annual training programme has strived to create a new breed of prison librarians and library assistants. They have become one of the driving forces towards the setting up of prison libraries in all 138 correctional and penitentiary facilities throughout the country.

In addition, with the gracious support of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, prison libraries are able to play an integral and prominent role in education and rehabilitation in the Thai correctional system. The Princess, who is keenly interested in the well-being and education of inmates, presided over the opening of "Prom Panya Prison Libraries" in six prisons and correctional facilities. "Prom Panya Prison Libraries," when translated into Thai means, "the library with a myriad of educational materials." These libraries have turned out to be a quality brand for the model prison library.

In 2007, in response to changes and increasing needs from the user community, the Office of Documentation and Information together with the Educational Promotion Section of the Department of Corrections decided to review and revise Prison Library Standards 2003. The revised standards were adopted in 2007.

At present, efforts to offer university-level education to prisoners are undertaken as a joint project between the Department of Corrections and STOU. The principle is to return decent citizens to the community. Apart from serving their sentences, prisoners need to be rehabilitated and taught law-abiding ways. In addition, they require occupational training and skills so that they can earn a living to support themselves and their families instead of falling back into breaking the law. It is by recognising that the best way to correct behaviour and to rehabilitate prisoners is through education that STOU and the Department of Corrections have jointly launched the "University-Level Education for Prisoners to Return as Decent Citizens to the Community" project.

With the long experience of providing university-level education for prisoners since 1974 and with more than 1,200 prisoners who have already graduated, there has not been any news of graduates who reverted to their former ways after leaving prison. With whatever limitations they may have, all have made considerable progress. Some faced considerable hardship during the initial periods of returning to society before they could start making a living. They nevertheless managed to adjust and move forward. Thus, by opening access to university-level education to prisoners, STOU is not only giving them opportunities to learn but is also opening doors for them to return to society as honest and decent citizens.

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