

DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL SERVICES MODEL FOR SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY: PERCEIVED FACTORS AFFECTING THE SUCCESS OF STUDYING IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out with the main objective to develop a model for educational services to help STOU students learn successfully. The specific objectives were: to study opinions of bachelor's degree students of STOU toward the educational services which are important to and affect the success of studying in the distance education system; and to identify guidelines that can improve such services from students, lecturers and related staff. The samples consisted of 1,460 bachelor's degree students from 10 faculties of the university who lived in every part of the country, 100 lecturers and 100 support staff from related offices of the university. Research instruments were in the form of 3 sets of questionnaires and an interview. The data were analysed using the frequency, mean, percentage and content analysis. The educational services model was developed by synthesising all data obtained from related literature and from the field study. Then, the model was evaluated by 15 experts. Major findings were: 1) the students expressed their opinions that the most importance factor which affected the success of their studies was they were able to experience intellectual growth in STOU. The next important factor was the contents of each subject were valuable; 2) Students, lecturers and support staff proposed similar guidelines for developing the educational services; and 3) the proposed model of educational services comprised of services in 3 periods: pre-learning, during-learning, and evaluating period. Within each period, a number of services were identified.

Keywords: *distance education, a model of educational services*

INTRODUCTION

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is the only open distance learning university in Thailand. STOU follows the lifelong learning philosophy. The university was established with the main objective of extending and expanding higher education opportunities for all Thai people throughout the country, regardless of age, sex, occupations and locations. It provides educational opportunity for people who missed out on the chance to attend conventional universities and for working people who want to upgrade their education. STOU employs distance education in teaching and learning. Learners are people in every age group. They are able to study without having to leave their work.

The university was established in 1978 and started the first academic year in 1981 with bachelor's degree programmes offered in 3 schools, namely, school of liberal arts, school of educational studies, and school of management science. At present, the university offers bachelor's degree programmes in 12 schools. Moreover, master's degree and doctoral degree programmes in several fields of study are also available.

The university's distance education system is a multi-media system which comprises the main and supplementary media. The main media is print-based such as text books and worked books. Supplementary media includes radio programmes, television programmes, CD/VCD, tutorial activities and practice and training programmes. The university has continuously developed its distance education system. Realising the importance of media and technology in education, the university has introduced electronic-based media as another channel for teaching and learning.

Each year, there are about 60,000 to 70,000 of new enrolled students. The total number of students at present is about 150,000. (Planning Division, STOU, 2010). Of the total number, about 90 percent are bachelor's degree students. After 36 years of its establishment, it now has more than 200,000 graduates.

However, in providing distance education to a large and different groups of people throughout the country, the university still faces a number of problems. One of the main problems which is similar to other open universities is the high dropout rate. The dropout rate is about 30 percent and it occurs often in the early year of new students. A number of educators and researchers have studied about student dropout and retention. For example: Noel and Saluri (1985) found several reasons why students dropped out, the main reason being the difficulty faced by students in adjusting themselves to the learning system. Allen (1993) stated that the following factors affected students' retention or dropout: obtaining clear and update related information, the university offering pre-basic knowledge courses, having good learning support services, and results of prior study. Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995) found that; worrying about examination was the cause of dropout and Cantazaro (1996) found that the experience of failing the examinations a few times was also the cause of dropout. Sungstri and others (2006) found similar results where such students needed to be contacted by the university regularly. They needed help to understand the subject contents and needed help when they failed the examination.

To prevent students from dropping out and for them to learn successfully, education support services is necessary. In the distance education system, learners need more learning support than those in the conventional education system. This is because learners do not meet lecturers regularly as most of the time, they are studying on their own. Allen (1993) proposed a model of learning support services to prevent students from dropping out. It comprised 8 strategies: admission strategy; financial support; orientation and learning skills development; academic advise and counseling service, especially for the at risk group; support for students who lack main basic knowledge; career planning; media and teaching and learning process; and student activities. Simpson (2004) strongly confirmed the necessity of student support services. He categorised support services into 2 main groups: the academic and non-academic support services. The academic support services were, for example, tutoring; training in reading, report writing and arithmetic skills; making conclusion of subject contents; and following up on students' study progress. The non-academic support services were, for example, information service; guidance and counselling services; advising funding resources; and providing learning facilities. Sharma (2005) also proposed a model of educational support services which quite similar to Allen's model. It consisted of the following: admission strategies; study programmes which serve students needs; learning support services; creating student interaction through the use of technology; format of

contents delivery through media; orientation strategy; and following up strategy for at risk students.

The university's administrators have paid close attention to this problem, especially now when there is stiff competition among higher educational institutions. Several strategies were identified and introduced. However, it is necessary to clarify the main problems and identify a model which is appropriate to the context and the nature of distance learning students. In order to come up with a proper framework in providing learning support services to enhance student retention, the researchers have conducted this study. The study was carried out with the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study was to develop a model for educational services to help STOU students learn successfully. The specific objectives were: 1) To study opinions of bachelor's degree students toward the educational services which are important to and affect the success of studying in the distance education system; and 2) To identify guidelines that can improve such services from students, lecturers and related support staff.

Method of the study

The study followed the conceptual framework which was developed from analysing and synthesising a number of related studies. It was found that one of the main problems that most of the distance educational institutions faced was the high dropout rate. The causes of dropout stemmed from the aspects of both learners and institutions, as shown in the studies by a number of educators. In the distance education system, learning support services was recognised as an importance factor which affected student retention or dropout. Therefore, this study was designed to develop proper learning support services to help students learn successfully in the distance education system of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. The details of the study were as follows.

The research sample comprised 3 groups of people: (1) 1,460 bachelor's degree students who were randomly selected from 10 schools/faculties and they live in every part of the country; (2) 100 lecturers who were randomly selected from 400 lecturers of the university; and (3) 100 support staff who were randomly selected from 5 related offices of the university. Research instruments used were 3 sets of questionnaires for the 3 sample groups and interviews. Questionnaires were in the form of: multiple-choice; 5 and 7 point rating scale; and open-ended questions. They were approved by 3 experts in the field and were tried on 30 students, 10 lecturers and 10 support staff before being used for data collection. Data of students were collected with the co-operation of the student club of each sampling province and through the mail. Moreover, 60 students were selected as representatives of every school/faculty for indepth interview. For lecturers and related support staff, they were contacted where they received the questionnaires directly from the researchers. Data obtained were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, rank of order, and content analysis for open-ended questions.

The researcher analysed and synthesised the data obtained from both related literature and field research in order to develop the educational services model. The model was proposed during a seminar involving 15 experts in the field of distance education. Then, suggestions and recommendations of the experts were used in adjusting the model.

The main results of the study can be concluded as follows:

1. **Opinions of bachelor's degree students toward the educational services which are important to and affect the success of studying in the distance education system. (Students were asked to rate the 7-point rating scale questionnaires)**

It was found that the students rated rather high and high level of importance and satisfaction to the overall services provided by the university. The most importance factor which the students found that affected the success of their study was that they were able to experience intellectual growth in STOU ($\bar{\chi}$ =6.27). The next important factor was the contents of each subject are valuable ($\bar{\chi}$ =6.18) and they obtained good services from the regional centres. When each aspect of the educational services was considered, the results were as follows: For the aspect of services of the regional centres, students gave high importance to the item "got quick response when contacted staff of the regional centres" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.90). The next important factor was the item "in general, I agree that the regional centres are very useful and support students" (χ =5.74). These items were also given high level of satisfaction by students.

For the aspect of Curriculum, students gave high importance to the items "Modules are of good quality" ($\bar{\chi}$ =6.18) and "textbooks of the university have good quality" ($\bar{\chi}$ =6.18). They also gave high level of satisfaction to these factors. For the aspect of tutors, students gave high importance to the items "Tutors are very knowledgeable in their field" ($\bar{\chi}$ =6.04) and "Tutors are concerned about my academic progress" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.84). They also gave high level of satisfaction to these two items. For the aspect of study fees, students gave high level of importance and high level of satisfaction to the item "Policy on payment of fees is flexible" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.47). For the aspect of learning support services, students gave high level of importance and high level of satisfaction to the factors "Learner handbook provides helpful information on rules, regulations and policies" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.91) and "Student disciplinary procedures are fair" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.75). For the aspect of faculty, students gave high level of importance and high level of satisfaction to the item "Faculty provides academic advising to learners" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.68). For the aspect of IT accessibility, students gave high level of importance and high level of satisfaction to the item "my LMS is easily accessible" ($\bar{\chi}$ =5.80).

2. **Guidelines for improving the educational services from the opinions of students, lecturers and related support staff.**

Students, lecturers and related support staff gave suggestions to improve each aspect of the educational services as follows: 5-points rating scale questionnaire)

For registration service, most of the students, lecturers and related staff proposed the same suggestion – that an information centre which can immediately respond to registration questions of students should be made available. (students ($\bar{\chi}$ =3.42), lecturers ($\bar{\chi}$ =4.57) and related staff ($\bar{\chi}$ =3.47))

For curriculum and subject contents, most of students and related staff proposed the same idea that each chapter of the university's textbook should have a conclusion ($\bar{\chi}$ =3.28 and 3.52 respectively) while the lecturers suggested that the contents in each chapter should not be overloaded ($\bar{\chi}$ =3.54).

For corresponding with the university, most of students, lecturers and related staff had the same suggestion that students who faced problems should be able to contact the

university via telephone(hotline) immediately. (students (\bar{x} =3.40), lecturers (\bar{x} =4.72) and related staff (\bar{x} =3.88))

For corresponding with the lecturers, most of students suggested that advisors should be assigned to each group of students according to their subject major and advisors should follow up on the students in their group (\bar{x} =3.24). Most of the lecturers proposed that they should draw up a schedule for students to contact them (\bar{x} =3.93) while the related staff suggested that advisors should follow up on the students in their group(\bar{x} =3.68).

For tutoring service, most of students and related staff proposed the same suggestion that face-to-face tutoring session of every subject should be uploaded on the website and television channel of the university so that students who could not attend the tutoring session can access (students \bar{x} =3.49, related staff \bar{x} =3.82). Students also suggested that intensive face-to-face tutoring should be made available to the subjects which most of students failed (\bar{x} =3.47). Lecturers suggested that the university should inform students that they can form groups through their student clubs and invite lecturers to conduct tutoring activities (\bar{x} =4.13).

For guidance and counseling services, most of students, lecturers and related staff proposed the same suggestion that the university should set up a follow-up system to help students who failed their examinations or not to register for two or more semesters (\bar{x} =3.56), lecturers (\bar{x} =4.13) and related staff (\bar{x} =3.78)).

For the services of funding and student clubs, most students and lecturers had the same suggestion that funding should be made available to students who helped in promoting the university (\bar{x} =3.39 and 4.18 respectively). Related staff proposed that the university should promote the student club in each province and provide space for the setting up of an office (\bar{x} =3.78).

For library and computer services, most of the students suggested that the STOU corner should not be available only in the public library at the provincial level but also at the district level (\bar{x} =3.41). Most of lecturers and related staff proposed that the STOU corner in each provincial public library should be developed in order to provide better and wider service (\bar{x} =4.19 and 3.80 respectively).

For the services of the regional centres, most of the students suggested that the university should decentralised authority to the regional centres in following-up and giving assistance to the at risk group of students (\bar{x} =3.40). Most lecturers proposed that the regional centres should coordinate with the mass media to highlight the university's activities and students admission (\bar{x} =4.28). Related staff suggested that the university should support the regional centres to provide more learning support activities such as developing distance learning skills or preparing students for examination (\bar{x} =3.85).

For the evaluation, most of the students, lecturers and related staff had the same suggestion that students who did not pass the examination for 2 times or more, should be given assistance. (students (\bar{x} =3.74), lecturers(\bar{x} =3.97) and related staff (\bar{x} =3.67)).

3. **The proposed model for educational services to help STOU students learn successfully.**

The model proposed from this study comprised services in 3 periods.

3.1 Educational services at pre-learning period. They included:

- (1) Providing related information for people who are interested to study with the university to make decision in selecting programmes of study;
- (2) Providing knowledge and understanding about learning by distance education system; and
- (3) Organising orientation for new students through various media.

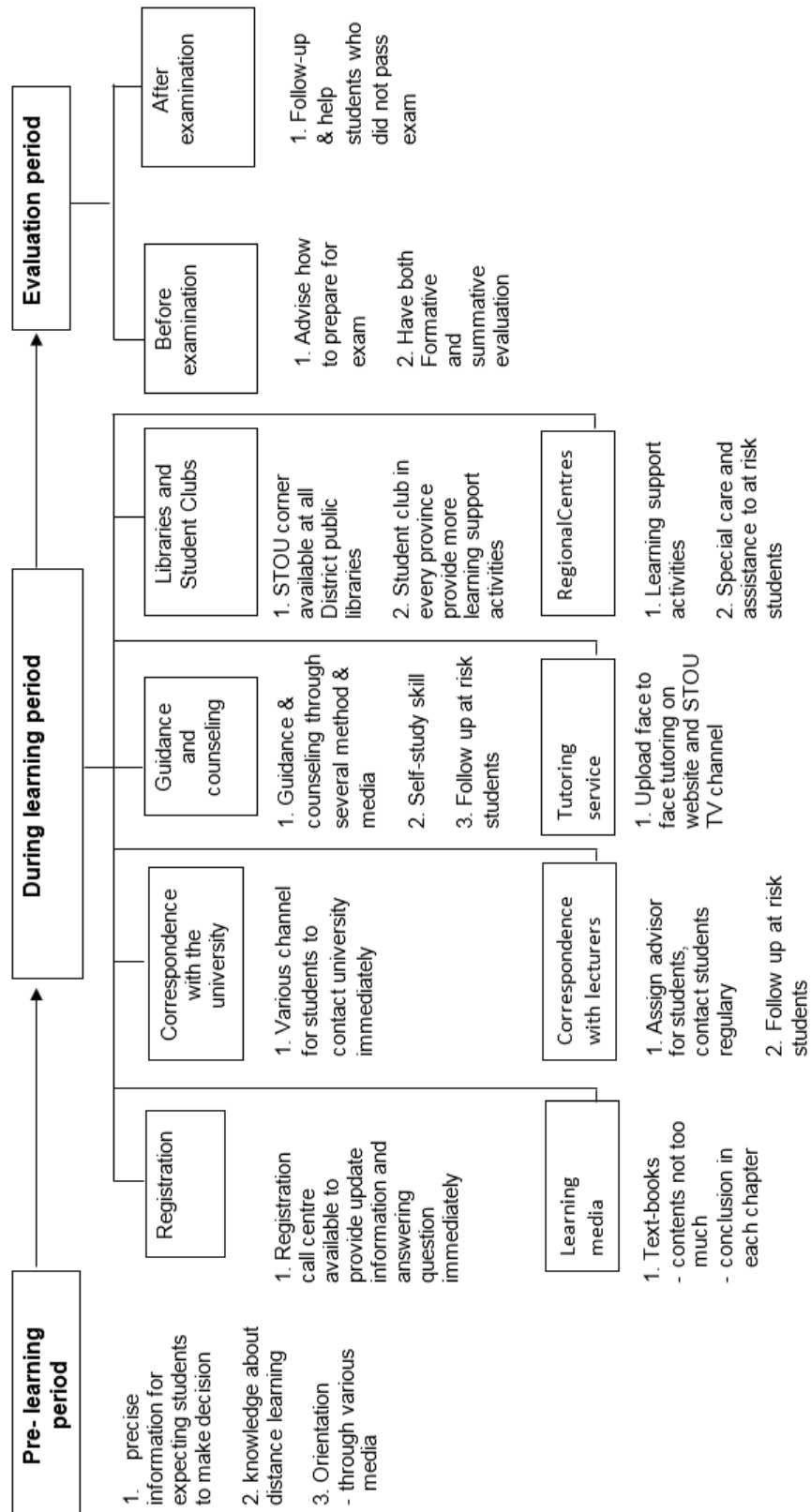
3.2 Educational services during learning period. They included the following services.

- (1) Registration service: set up registration call centre to provide precise and up-to-date information and responses to student questions promptly;
- (2) Learning media: for textbooks, each chapter should not have too much content but should have conclusion at the end;
- (3) Correspondence with the university: providing several channels for students to contact the university immediately;
- (4) Correspondence with lecturers: lecturers contact their students regularly and follow-up on the at risk group of students;
- (5) Tutoring service: face-to-face tutoring session of every subject is uploaded on the website and television channel of the university for students who have missed out to access at anytime;
- (6) Guidance and counseling services: providing guidance and counseling service through several methods and media. For examples: providing knowledge about distance education, providing self-learning skill, giving advise about time management and following up and giving assistance to the at risk students;
- (7) Services of the regional centres: every regional centre throughout the country provides more learning support services to students in local areas. For the at risk students, special care and assistance are provided ; and
- (8) Library and Student Club: setting up of STOU corner at every district public library throughout the country. The Student club in every province is encouraged to organise more learning support activities.

3.3 Educational services at evaluation period. They covered:

- (1) Services before examination – the University should provide advice to students on how to prepare for examination. For evaluation, it should consist of both formative and summative evaluations. Scores of formative evaluation should be increased;
- (2) Services after examination. Clinic for following-up and helping students who did not pass examination should be set up.

A Model of Educational Services for the success of STOU students studying in distance education system



CONCLUSION

Educational support services are found to be a necessary factor for helping students learn successfully in the distance education system. This is because distance learners, most of the time, learn on their own through different types of instructional media. They do not meet up with lecturers regularly like those in a conventional education system. A number of educators, such as Noel and Saluri (1985), Allen(1993), Garland (1993), Onwuegbuzie and Seaman (1995), Cantazaro (1996), and Sungsi and others (2006) found that there were several factors which were the causes of dropout. Some of the main factors were related to the availability of the educational support services from the institutions. An appropriate approach to educational support services should be one that can promote students retention, or in other words, prevent learners from dropping out of the system. Distance educational institutions should recognise the importance of the educational support services where they should be provided to serve the needs of distance learners and help them learn successfully. ((Allen(1993),Simpson(2004), and Shamar(2005)). Student dropout does not only affect the cost of investment of the university, it also impacts student's expenditure, self-respect and time and the nation's investment on education. The model for educational support services proposed by this study was developed using the data from the needs of learners and suggestions of lecturers and related staff. It was evaluated and accepted by the experts in the field of distance education. The researcher believes that with appropriate administration and implementation, the proposed model from this study would be useful to keep STOU students in the university system until the end of their programmes, thus, reducing the number of dropouts. Moreover, the findings from this study may be used as a guideline for other open universities

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