

A Model for Providing Continuing Education at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were to: (1) investigate existing continuing education courses offered by Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University to determine the desirable conditions of the courses; and (2) propose a university-level model of continuing education to promote lifelong learning. This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, STOU's continuing education courses were investigated through in-depth interviews with 14 administrators and the desirable features of the courses were determined through in-depth interviews with 10 experts and enquiries with 56 learners at the Office of Continuing Education and 479 learners at 10 centres, 60 of whom were additionally interviewed. In the second phase, the data from the first phase were synthesized, a model was constructed, and then it was evaluated by 15 experts, administrators, and relevant personnel through focus group discussions. The research findings revealed that the desirable conditions of the University courses are: (i) in terms of administration structure, the university should have a responsible organisation, a committee, and personnel; (ii) policies and various plans for continuing education; (iii) courses that focus on working skills and credit transfer for specific age groups; (iv) and mixed learning methods with strengthening on learners' needs regardless of age and career. The university model that was developed in this study consists of two parts: model core components (target group, general objectives, scope of content, programme features, content dissemination methods, content disseminated media, and evaluation) and factors promoting continuing education (policy, goal, continuing education committee, administration structure, action plan, personnel and resources, network creation, public relations, and monitoring and evaluation).

Keywords: *continuing education course, continuing education provision, Distance Education System, model, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand*

Introduction

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is an open university which employs the distance education system. Its aim is to expand opportunities for higher education among people who do not have the opportunity to study in a classroom setting.

STOU provides education for everyone regardless of gender, age, occupation, and living space. Currently, the university offers courses at all levels, i.e., bachelor, master, and doctoral degree, as well as undergraduate certificates in many majors.

The continuing education (CE) provided by STOU for the public is the Achievement Certificate Course, which brings the undergraduate curriculum to the public. Interested individuals can enrol in any subject using the distance learning method. After registration, they will receive documents and media for self-learning. At the end of the semester, they will undertake examinations as university students. Once they pass the exams, they will receive a certificate and be able to accumulate credits which will be transferred to a degree course. Many short-term training courses of academics and professions for various target groups are provided for 2 to 5 days by the Office of Continuing Education throughout the year. In addition, STOU disseminates knowledge on various subjects through various media which people can access, watch, listen, such as through the radio, television, and Internet.

The university has been providing CE services to the general public for over 30 years and many have been able to further their studies through continuing education even during rapid changes in social conditions. However, STOU has to reform its education management and CE as the subject areas which the target audience need to learn may have changed and the method of knowledge transfer may need to be adjusted to reflect the changing conditions and advancement of technology. Regarding the reform or development of CE, the university should review past operating conditions and study the needs, directions, and guidelines for CE to promote lifelong education. This will result in comprehensive and useful information that can be used to synthesise and propose a CE management model that is appropriate in accordance with the needs of the people at present and the future social environment.

Lifelong learning is a significant topic. In this regard, STOU uses the distance education system to apply knowledge and expertise in distance education media to provide CE for the public. If management directions and guidelines of continuing and informal education are studied from learners, a CE model suitable for their needs can be proposed in accordance with the current social context.

Literature Review

According to the Thai National Education Act B.E. (revised in 2002 and 2008) which relies on the lifelong education philosophy, the Thai education system consists of three forms of education: formal, non-formal, and informal (Office of the National Education Commission, 2008). CE can be provided in the form of non-formal and informal education.

Under the 1987 Asian and Pacific Lifelong Education Programme (APPEAL), Sakya and Meyer (1998) proposed six forms of organising CE, including education after literacy, education for transferring equivalents of a programme in which the learners can transfer their knowledge to the curriculum of formal education, education for income generation, education for quality of life and life skills development, education for individual interests, and education for the future which focuses on preparing people to acquire knowledge and skills for working and subsistence in the midst of economic and social changes in any country or the world.

The Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education Promotion (2018) stated that CE is the provision of learning activities for the general public of all age groups. It aims at enabling target groups to attend learning activities which meet their needs in career, life skills, community, and societal development according to the Khit-Pen philosophy and Sufficiency Economy philosophy through four types of activities:

interested groups which are organised for learners with common interests; mission-based learning activities organised for learners through mobile districts and provinces; vocational classes and public training activities which are aimed at enabling people to attain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for living in today's society; and individual learning activities which are provided to serve any individual learner who needs to attend CE courses of educational institutions or a network.

For the process of organising CE, Knowles (1980) had proposed six steps: (a) survey the needs of target groups, (b) identify the objectives of the study programme, (c) design a curriculum, (d) prepare teaching and learning activities, (e) organising teaching and learning activities by following adult education principles, and (f) measure and evaluate learner achievement. Billett et al. (2015) found that a successful CE system consisted of a widespread learning culture, policy support, employer involvement, and positive worker engagement. Ramos and Gopinathan (2016) compared continuing professional development between Singapore and the Philippines and suggested that in providing technical and vocational education and training, organisers should consider a country's level of economic development and unique geopolitical context. Jitcharat et al. (2017) conducted a study on guidelines for organising CE in higher education institutions in Thailand and proposed that CE organisers should have special policy, plan, agency, and personnel for organising CE programmes. The needs of the target groups should also be analysed and served.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Westervelt (2021) stated that there had been a gap between higher education institutions and students for decades. The institutions need to establish a new operation to serve the students' needs. STOU realised the need to provide CE for people to learn throughout their lives so it offered CE programmes in the form of non-formal and informal education.

CE as non-formal education includes Achievement Certificates and short-term training programmes. The Achievement Certificate programmes are undergraduate courses and graduate degree programmes. Those interested in a course could apply and register, after which they will receive materials to study on their own. They will undertake the same examinations as university students. Those who complete their courses will accumulate credits. If they take up multiple courses, they can be transferred to a degree programme. Short-term training programmes are academic and professional courses for approximately 2 to 5 days. The Office of Continuing Education organises training throughout the year. The target group ranges from working people to the elderly.

For CE as informal education, the university provides knowledge as a service to the public through the radio, television, and the Internet in fields such as health, the environment, food, law, occupation, arts, and culture, etc. This service is also provided to the students of the University. In addition, the university provides learning resources through libraries to serve students and the public. These libraries are located at the university's main campus and Regional Distance Education Centres (RDECs) in different regions across the country.

Research Objectives

This research was conducted with the following objectives:

- i. to investigate the existing provision of CE courses at STOU to determine the desirable conditions of CE courses at STOU; and
- ii. to propose a CE model for STOU which will promote lifelong learning in society.

Research Method

The research process consisted of two phases, which were as follows:

Phase 1a: Study of the Current Conditions of Continuing Education at STOU

The sample included 14 administrators relevant to CE. They were purposively selected as follows:

- i. The current director and one former director of the Office of Continuing Education;
- ii. The current director and deputy director of the Office of Educational Technology; and
- iii. The directors of all 10 RDECs.

The research instrument was an interview to identify the current situation of the CE offered at STOU. The researchers conducted a face-to-face interview with each respondent and the data obtained was analysed through content analysis and categorised into groups of similar contents. Then, the researchers described the contents and made conclusions based on the topics defined.

Phase 1b: Study of Desirable Conditions of Continuing Education at STOU

The sample was composed of two groups:

- i. Ten experts in continuing and distance education who were purposively selected for an in-depth interview;
- ii. A total of 595 learners who were randomly selected and coincidentally studied who comprised:
 - A total of 86 learners in CE activities organised by the Office of Continuing Education at STOU answered questionnaires (56) and interviews (30); and
 - A total of 509 learners in CE activities at RDECs during June and August 2019 answered questionnaires (479) and interviews (30).

The research instruments consisted of: 1) an in-depth interview form for the experts which was designed to find out the desirable conditions of STOU-CE; 2) a questionnaire for learners regarding the desirable conditions of STOU-CE consisting of three parts (Part 1: Learners' basic information, Part 2: Benefits of participation in STOU-CE activities, and Part 3: Desirable STOU-CE services), and 3) in-depth interviews with learners regarding the desirable conditions of STOU-CE. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and content analysis.

Content validity of the research instruments was conducted by three CE experts as Item Objective Congruence Index (IOC). Each question was determined as follows: agree = 1, disagree = -1, and not sure = 0. Each item should have a score of not less than 0.5. The instruments had an IOC of 0.67-1.00.

Phase 2: Developing a Model of Continuing Education for STOU to Promote Lifelong Learning

The research team undertook the following processes:

- i. synthesised all the information from the first phase to create a model for STOU-CE through the distance education system; and
- ii. conducted a focus group discussion with six external experts, five STOU administrators, and five personnel relevant to CE and distance education to obtain suggestions for the drafted STOU-CE model for promoting lifelong learning. The

data gathered was analysed through content analysis. All suggestions were used to improve the model.

Findings and Discussion

The findings can be summarised as follows:

Current Conditions of Continuing Education at STOU

The agencies which currently provide CE or support services for CE at STOU are as follows:

- i. Office of Continuing Education which is divided into six centres and is directly responsible for the CE curricula
- ii. Office of Educational Technology which organises or supports social services for CE through the radio, television, and the Internet
- iii. Ten RDECs which are a network of local agencies located in all regions of the country. The RDECs support CE through Achievement Certificate courses provided by the Office of Continuing Education. They also conduct academic service projects for society with a budget provided by the Division of Planning, and those of STOU schools which receive the national budget from the Division of Planning as well and organise courses at RDECs. An RDEC director stated that he employed several methods to make public relations of CE programmes reach the local area.
- iv. The Office of Documentation and Information is a source of knowledge for learners and the public as it provides library services to support RDECs
- v. The academic service courses for the society of STOU Schools with the national budget allocated through the Division of Planning.

The Continuing Education Office is directly responsible for providing and supporting CE. In the future, the Office may change its name to the Office of Lifelong Education, resulting from the meeting of the Education Reform Committee of STOU with the concept that the Office of Continuing Education is responsible for non-degree courses providing education to the public apart from the training courses offered as in-house, public courses, and electronic training (e-training) to the target groups of the public with both specific group (elderly) and the Achievement Certificate learners. The Achievement Certificate has been a project offering courses at both bachelor and graduate levels by the Office of Continuing Education for the public. RDECs have public relations for provinces under their responsibility. The evaluation of learners in the Achievement Certificate courses is under the responsibility of the Office of Registration and Evaluation. At present there are about 400 Achievement Certificate courses and over 50 short training courses.

The Office of Educational Technology supports CE by providing knowledge as social services through radio and television, learning object metadata, massive open online courseware or MOOC, and also produces books for the visually impaired, distributed in many ways to the public. Service media were evaluated through feedback received for each CE course through various channels, and summarised once a year. The Office of Documentation and Information is a source of knowledge providing services to learners and the public at the university location. Various Schools provide academic services to society with the national budget for the central and provincial areas. RDECs are a source of public relations for various CE courses to the target groups and as places to provide their training courses. Apart from those, some courses are organised by the RDECs as well.

Desirable Conditions of Continuing Education Management at STOU

Desirable state of continuing education at STOU according to experts

Most of the 10 experts agreed that STOU should have a CE committee at the university level with a department responsible for CE. The department personnel should be directly defined and responsible for preparing Modular Coursework which have to be presented through the Academic Council and then the University Council. The department should comprise a CE centre leader, a staff as academic personnel who is directly responsible for providing only CE, programmers who organise the system, search method, confer the Achievement Certificate, compare and transfer the Achievement Certificate credits, and seek learners. The STOU Schools level should have staff responsible for CE. RDECs may also have staff who are continuing educators or counsellors. The Office of Lifelong Education must have both short-term and long-term action plans.

Policies should be specifically established for CE by a CE committee. The STOU President should be the head of the committee followed by external expert, representatives from the Schools and the relevant organisations. The Director of the Office of Continuing Education should serve as a member and the secretary. National experts and learners should be invited to brainstorm on the needs of the people in order to respond to learners of all ages regardless of their educational background. The policy should be consistent with the university's vision and strategy which focus on promoting education and lifelong learning. The policies and directions for the administration of CE should be established in compliance with the National Education Act 1999 (revised in 2002 and 2008), focusing on non-formal and informal education.

The goals of STOU-CE should focus on what learners need, and on the general public. CE courses should focus on working skills. The research results in this section are consistent with Jarungkiatkul (2015) who interviewed experts and had a group discussion with experts about the management of lifelong education. The result appeared to be a learning process affecting the lifelong learning of individuals and the community. Likewise, Jitjarat et al. (2017) who interviewed and held a panel discussion with personnel involved in education management at Silpakorn University and individuals in the national non-formal and informal education networks found that they would like to continue their education for their career. Boonwatanakul (2016) inquired the opinions of experts through group discussions and examined the effectiveness of informal and informal education management through the seminar to certify the guidelines of non-formal and informal education for Thailand among field workers. It was found that the provision of non-formal and informal education in Thailand and abroad was consistent with the environment, lifestyle, and needs of the target group for lifelong learning.

The experts emphasised that CE courses must be able to transfer learning experience. The results were consistent with the National Education Act 1999, Section 15, paragraph 3, which clearly stated that “it is able to transfer the grades accumulated by the learners between the same or different forms regardless of grades from the same educational institution, informal learning, vocational training, or work experience”. The results of this research also suggested that the courses should focus on learning for searching or developing their own career classified by age group. The courses should be blended learning in a modular system which were consistent with those of the STOU subcommittee meeting on problem solving and developing distance education systems that focuses on Blended Learning activities as group activities where learners had the opportunity to work together, reflected learning results, and created relationship groups starting at RDECs.

Methods for organising CE courses may start from the STOU Schools developing them and the Office of Continuing Education acting as a cloud-based resource for learners

to actually use or coordinate with other sources through an MOU so that STOU need not produce them but link with other sources. The knowledge could be grouped into any courses later with emphasis on practical skills and provide options for people with or without much time.

The courses should be provided through blended learning which comprises: 1) face-to-face learning (depending on the course objectives), 2) online distance education for learners before the face-to-face learning, and (3) interactive online sessions followed by face-to-face learning. All three options must include face-to-face learning. If it is a skill-oriented course, it must focus on practice by using multimedia, information technology, mobile phone, and some publications. All courses may be counted as credit or may cooperate with external professional agencies or important national agencies in terms of joint arrangements or diploma contribution. Most of the experts suggested that the goal of CE should change from focusing on service providers (supply side) to learners' needs (demand side) as the University for People.

The Office of Continuing Education must have both short-term and long-term action plans. The University Council should formulate a policy for STOU Schools through the Academic Council. The University Council must establish the CE strategy. The Office of Continuing Education has to propose the plans to the Academic Council for recommendations and monitoring. The STOU-CE committee should monitor and evaluate the CE at the School level. An independent CE management system should be implemented through collaboration with STOU Schools.

The experts were of the opinion that CE evaluation should assess the satisfaction of learners and their agencies, emphasising the application of knowledge and follow-up by online evaluation. The online evaluation should focus on learners' satisfaction, enquiring about learners' agencies, knowledge utilisation, monitoring, pre-test and post-test. The evaluation of CE course success should be done by the number of learners, course content, course goals, and objectives by the organisers and learners. Periodic evaluation may use internal and external quality assessment principles, output, and impact of utilisation. The evaluation should correspond with the National Education Act 1999 defining the standard and the assessment method which must balance between standardisation and CE opportunities without destroying confidence, causing discouragement and despair among learners.

Desirable conditions of continuing education at STOU according to learners

Most of the learners who attended CE courses needed new knowledge for their current career development or daily life. They attended courses with a combination of face-to-face and self-learning. Most of them were satisfied and able to develop their work and apply the knowledge acquired in their daily life. The results of this research are consistent with those of Sungsi et al. (2010) who developed guidelines to increase educational opportunities for people outside the school system who were aged 15 to 59 years. The most desirable course was the one with knowledge for use in their career. Sungsi et al (2009) conducted research to develop workers through distance education and found that most workers wanted to learn through both the media and speakers. The learning from speakers was consistent with Jitjaras et al. (2017) who found that individuals needed classes provided on Saturday and Sunday for 1 to 2 weeks, 3 hours each. Learning resources and networks were education within the community, while teaching and learning occur through study visits, and hands-on experience.

The learners suggested that the target groups of CE should cover people in every age group, particularly working people. Interesting STOU-CE courses should be available online and applicable to work or daily life. They should be provided through the media at

night twice a week for not more than an hour. The face-to-face courses should be for 3 days while the media and face-to-face courses should be for 2 days. Most of the learners were of the opinion that pre-test and post-test and direct contact with the organisers through online submission were preferable. In addition, the learners stated that the knowledge transfer should be through means which are easily accessible and convenient, such as the media and communication channels. Most students stated that face-to-face sessions were still needed and suggested the use of alumni or community local wisdom to transfer knowledge.

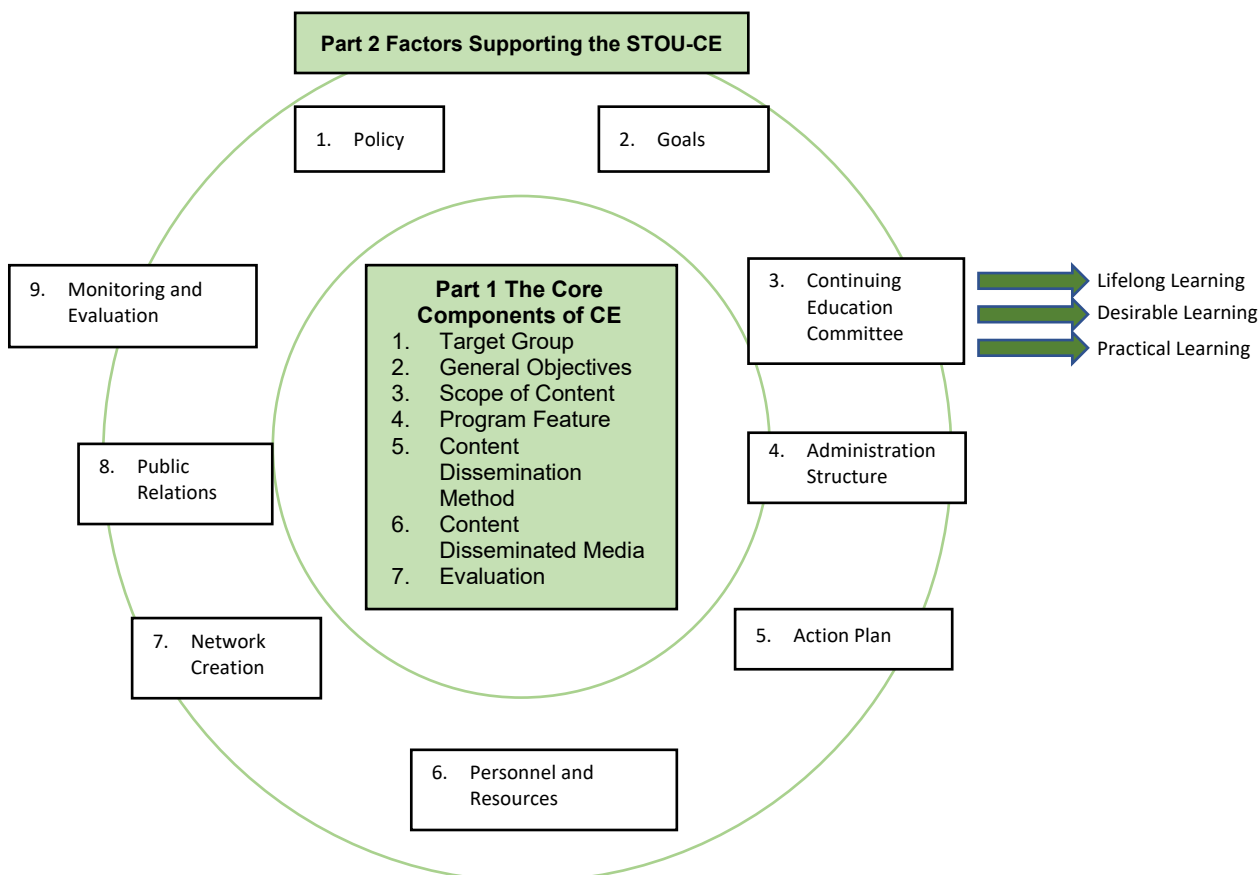
The in-depth interviews also found that most of the learners agreed with the experts that CE courses should develop work professional skills, and emphasise practical skills and daily applications. The target groups of CE should be working people and it should be self-study through online media but still emphasise face-to-face education. Assessment of learners and success of CE courses should focus on application of knowledge after training.

STOU Model of Continuing Education to Promote Lifelong Learning in Society

All the information from the first two phases were synthesised to create a STOU-CE model using the distance education system. Focus group discussion was conducted with six external experts, five STOU administrators, and five personnel relevant to CE and distance education to obtain suggestions for the model. The model consisted of Part 1 (Core components of CE) and Part 2 (Factors supporting STOU-CE), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Model of continuing education at STOU to promote lifelong learning



From the focus group discussion, the model of continuing education for STOU was summarised into two parts: core components and factors promoting CE.

Core Components of Continuing Education

- i. **Target Group:** STOU-CE should cover all people regardless of age and educational background. The target groups' needs should be analysed as a whole. Their needs in each area of service of RDECs are in accordance with the National Education Plan 2017-2036 (Office of the Secretariat of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, 2017) which states that all Thai people must receive quality education and learning throughout their lives.
- ii. **General Objectives:** To give the target groups the opportunity to study matters that meet their interests or needs, and be able to apply the knowledge in their profession and lifestyle. This is consistent with the National Education Act 1999, Jarungkiatkul (2015); Jitjaras et al. (2017); and Boonwattanakul (2016).
- iii. **Scope of Content:** It should come from studying the needs of each target group age, and each area. This is consistent with Boonwattanakul (2016) who stated that the management of non-formal and informal education must be in accordance with the environment, lifestyle, and the target groups' need for lifelong learning.
- iv. **Program Feature:** The course should be made up of modules consisting of sub-topics or short course contents, but not degree courses. The target groups can select to study only subjects of interest, study with cumulative credits transferred to the diploma level or a university degree in accordance with the National Education Act 1999.
- v. **Content Dissemination Method:** This depends on the course nature. It must focus on practical training for skill courses as blended learning through the media and speakers. The results are consistent with the principles of distance education management that distance education may use a variety of media and some personal media (Sungsri, 2006). The best time for comfortable learning from the media is at night, followed by evening in short durations. Face-to-face study should have a 3-day period, and the combined media and face-to-face study should have a 2-day interval.
- vi. **Content Disseminated Media:** The content is mostly conveyed through online media. The majority of respondents who were under the age of 36 studied online before listening to the speakers. Courses focusing on skills or practice, require sessions with the speaker. Smartphones have to be improved for presentation style while radio and television must be improved in terms of presentation format and broadcasting time.
- vii. **Evaluation:** CE courses should be assessed in terms of learners' and their agencies' satisfaction, and knowledge application by online evaluation. The success evaluation of CE courses was assessed through number of learners, course content, and course goals and objectives. It should be evaluated by both the organisers and learners. The results of learners' assessment should emphasise the application of knowledge in accordance with Sungsi (2012), who studied a lifelong education management model for target groups of agricultural groups in Thai society.

Factors promoting provision of STOU continuing education

- i. **Policy:** The CE policy should be established according to the university's vision and strategy. The CE should promote lifelong learning for individuals of all genders and ages as per the National Education Plan 2017-2036 (Office of the Secretariat of Education Council, Ministry of Education, 2017), which state that all Thai people must receive quality education and learning throughout their lives, consistent with the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy and Change of the World in the 21st Century.
- ii. **Goals:** CE should focus on what the public needs (demand side), especially practical learning according to the National Education Act 1999, Jarungkiatkul (2015); Jitjaras et al. (2017); and Boonwattanakul (2016).
- iii. **Continuing Education Committee:** It is important to define management goals and directions of CE. The committee will provide operational advice, supervision, and monitoring. The committee should be chaired by the STOU President with members of internal and external experts, internal representatives of all organisations involved in CE

- management, School representatives, and the Director of the Office of Continuing Education as a member and secretary. This must be consistent with Chapter 4 Educational Management Guidelines of the National Education Act 1999.
- iv. **Administration Structure:** The University should have the Office of Lifelong Education in accordance with the STOU Reform Plan and related organisations to co-organise CE. The main responsible organisation should have independence, transparency, and good governance.
 - v. **Action Plan:** The Office of Lifelong Education must have three-year and five-year action plans and annual operational plans. The action plans must be consistent with the changing conditions of society, people's need for knowledge, National Education Policy, government policy, university vision, and policy. They must be consistent with Chapter 4 Educational Management Guidelines of the National Education Act 1999.
 - vi. **Personnel and Resources:** The Office of Lifelong Education should have academic personnel responsible for only CE and support for development and always provide new CE courses. RDECs should have staff directly responsible for CE as well as for coordinating public relations and implementing CE management. This must be consistent with Chapter 4 Educational Management Guidelines of the National Education Act 1999.
 - vii. **Network Creation:** The Office of Lifelong Education should create a network with internal and external organisations involved in providing CE only in order to obtain up-to-date information in CE management. CE coordination covers the preparation of courses, speakers, and organising activities, dissemination of activities or knowledge, course announcement, and seeking target groups. The research results are consistent with the theme of the National Education Plan 2017-2036 (Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, 2017), which states that all sectors of the society should participate, organise, and support CE.
 - viii. **Public Relations:** The university must have an agency responsible for public relations, receiving feedback from learners, proactive strategy, providing information about the course, responding to relevant issues from learners of all courses, course and media information or social service projects. Interested learners must be able to search by linking to the organisations which are responsible or have up-to-date information.
 - ix. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The results of CE activities or courses should be evaluated of each activity and overall operations. Evaluation of the performance is based on the target or purpose. Evaluation of outcomes and impacts is needed for improving operational results, policy formulation, and operating guidelines thereafter.

Conclusion

The Office of Continuing Education is the main organisation responsible for CE at STOU. Approximately 400 Achievement Certificate courses and over 50 short training courses are provided by the Office to people regardless of age and gender. There are 10 RDECs providing Achievement Certificate courses. CE experts believe that STOU should have a CE committee at the university level to formulate a CE policy for the School and RDEC levels. CE learners suggested that the courses be made applicable to daily life or work, available online, and be provided through easily accessible and convenient means. Input from experts and learners was used to draft a CE model for STOU. A focus group discussion was conducted with CE experts, administrators, and personnel to improve the model, which has two parts, components and factors promoting CE.

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