

## Continuing Education for Promotion of Lifelong Learning in the Four Open Universities in the Southeast Asian Region

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### Abstract

*The main purpose of an open university is to provide continuing education which people need after obtaining formal education at education institutes. This study was conducted to: 1) investigate existing provisions and 2) determine the desirable continuing education programmes from the four open universities in the Southeast Asian region. The research instruments used were questionnaires and in-depth interview forms. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analysed through content analysis. The findings of the study revealed that: 1) Hanoi Open University provides multi-disciplinary and multi-level training programmes and contributes to learning society and lifelong learning in nearly 80 training centres, 2) Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University's Office of Continuing Education is directly responsible for providing continuing education training courses and an Achievement Certificate Programme, 3) continuing education programmes at the University of the Philippines Open University is coordinated by the Faculty of Management and Development Studies under the supervision of the Dean and is currently offering 10 non-formal courses grouped into three clusters, and 4) Universitas Terbuka has a Community Service Centre and offers continuing education programmes publicly and online through 12 Massive Online Open Courses and set a target to develop 116 more. The desirable continuing*

*education programmes among the four universities were determined by the experts and learners. The findings would be used to improve continuing education programmes depending on each university context in terms of the target group, objective, scope of content, course feature, content dissemination method, content dissemination media, and evaluation. These desirable continuing education programmes will lead to the creation of models for the provision of continuing education by the four open universities.*

**Keywords:** *continuing education, lifelong learning, open universities, Southeast Asian region, continuing education provision, desirable continuing education*

## Introduction

In present society, lifelong learning is vital for people in every age group. People live in knowledge-based societies wherein the economic, social, and environmental situations are rapidly changing. Moreover, they have to face climate crisis, technological advancements, and demographic changes. People need to learn in order to adjust well to these situations. Therefore, knowledge and learning are necessary not only for schoolchildren but also individuals in all other age groups (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). For example, adults and the elderly who are working require more knowledge to do better at their occupations and adapt to changing living situations and societal conditions. Education that people obtain after receiving formal education in schools and universities is called continuing education (CE). It can be in the form of non-formal education such as lectures, training, or workshops in various fields of knowledge. In addition, it can be in the form of informal education such as knowledge disseminated through various media or different types of learning resource centres (Jarvis, 1995).

Open universities are educational institutions with the main purpose of extending higher education opportunities to people who do not have the chance to attend conventional universities, with no restrictions on age, educational background, and social background by utilising a distance learning system. A significant number of learners at open universities are working adults. Most open universities follow a lifelong education philosophy. Apart from providing formal higher education in the form of degree programmes, they also provide educational opportunities for the general public in the form of short courses in various fields of study, which are called CE programmes. These CE programmes are available for people across the country. The open universities in Southeast Asia include Open University Malaysia; Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia; Hanoi Open University (HOU) in Vietnam; Indira Gandhi Open University in India, Open University of Sri Lanka, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand, University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), and Korean National Open University. They have provided CE in various courses and forms for many years. The learners are individuals in every age group from school-age children to elderly people (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2019).

Given the rapid and complicated changes in society and the environment at present, CE seems to be a more appropriate and responsible programme to address the needs of the general public. This is because anyone can enrol in any course, it does not take much time to finish a course, and people can immediately apply the knowledge learnt in their work or living situation. However, to make CE responsive to learners' needs, useful to target groups, and suitable for the social situation, economic condition, and environment of present society, open universities need to review and adjust their CE programmes so that these can promote

lifelong education for all. Therefore, this study was carried out to obtain the appropriate format of CE in four open universities, which are HOU, STOU, UPOU, and UT.

## Literature Review

CE is a means to gain knowledge and improve skills that will help people keep up with the changing world. Whether it is formal, non-formal, vocational, or informal learning, CE leads to the development of academic and personal skills. The term encompasses post-secondary learning activities and programmes, and it is synonymous with professional development and lifelong learning (Laal et al., 2014).

With more and more advancement in technology, the demand for CE and training for industry workers is also increasing. This will result in a well-trained workforce competitive in the fast-paced global economy and will promote lifelong learning. This implies that a flexible learning framework must be developed to cater to diverse groups of learners who seek further professional development (Laal, 2011). In other words, workers become capable of maintaining their employability despite shifts in industry requirements if effective learning models are in place (Billett et al., 2012). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Hamid and Soroya (2017), the authors concluded that CE programmes had positive effects on participants' professional and personal lives. The results revealed that CE programmes improved librarians' professional knowledge about digital resources, library automation, and management systems, searching techniques, library management, and skills regarding teamwork. The effect on their personal lives was also noticeable: the programmes helped the participants to build confidence, increased their personal interaction, and developed their research abilities, leadership, communication, and managerial skills.

Billett et al. (2012) recognised the importance of countries having an established approach to CE and training. In line with this, they set out to examine how a well-organised tertiary education and training system can help in this endeavour. Specifically, they determined the preferred model of learning of Australian professionals in two industries: community services and health, and transport and logistics. Results showed that for both groups, practice-based learning in a work environment combined with co-worker guidance was the most preferred and common model for CE. Examples of this model or strategy are shadowing or mentoring.

Other models that satisfied the needs of workers and managers included opportunity-based experiences (permission to attend work-related events) and practice-based experiences with educational interventions (project work, action research, and action learning). Practice-based learning could be strengthened by four pedagogical practices – experience at the workplace, colleagues who provided direct support, individualised learning support, and learner engagement. In 2014, Billett et al. conducted another study and came up with a more nuanced approach for successful CE initiatives. Their results showed that workers' preference for a CE model was contingent upon their purpose. To be precise, workers who wished to remain in their current line of work preferred practice-based models to keep up with current practices, implement innovations, or advance in their careers. Alternatively, those who have yet to secure employment or wish to shift career paths were more inclined towards institution-based models.

The same group of authors further expounded on main points in implementing CE initiatives, as well as key imperatives for successful CE and training. Emerging issues included the dilemma of either training to gain immediate skills or obtaining accredited qualifications; the necessity of accredited training in workforce development; and the effect of funding constraints on the mode of training despite having more effective options. Meanwhile, some precedents for implementing a successful CE system include a

widespread learning culture, policy support, employer involvement, and positive worker engagement (Billett et al., 2015).

This is where Open and Distance eLearning comes as a cost-efficient method for democratising education. Its flexibility and ability to reach a wide audience despite time and geographical constraints opens up more learning opportunities for all (Inoue, 2007). Furthermore, it gives students the freedom to acquire institutional-based accredited qualifications and at the same time, experience practice-based learning at the workplace. As such, it is considered as the future of continuing professional development (Southernwood, 2008). Through Open and Distance eLearning, adult learners can increase access to learning opportunities; teaching and learning are individualised; learners are free to select their own learning environment; and take responsibility for their own learning at their own pace. Learners have a duty to take greater responsibility to ensure that their own skills and needs are met (Mahlangu, 2017).

It is clear that having a unified national strategy for CE can be beneficial. Even if models for the successful implementation of CE vary, common themes are underpinning them all – consideration for the stakeholders' profile being the foremost concern. Other factors that contributed to an effective CE model were external elements such as government and industry support, which encompassed policy, funding, training, and learning opportunities. As articulated by Ramos and Gopinathan (2016) in their study comparing continuing professional development in Singapore with that of the Philippines, approaches to the implementation of technical and vocational education and training should consider a country's level of economic development and its geopolitical context.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. Investigate the existing provision of CE programmes by the four open universities.
- ii. Determine the desirable CE programmes provided by the four open universities.

## **Research Method**

This study is a collaboration project among four open universities: HOU, STOU, UPOU, and UT. They employed the same research design and instruments. The sample size varied depending on the population of each university. Each university conducted the study on its own. The results obtained were then presented and shared among the four. Researchers at the four open universities: 1) developed a research plan and defined scope of the study; 2) designed the study samples and research instruments; 3) drafted the research instruments; 4) considered and adjusted the research instruments; 5) translated the research instruments into their own language and pilot tested them before data collection; 6) drew the research samples and collected data; 7) performed data analysis for both quantitative and qualitative data; and 8) organised a meeting among the four open universities to present and share their results and ideas.

### **The samples of the study**

The study samples consisted of three groups of people: 1) providers of CE programmes (administrators and staff), 2) experts in CE and distance education, and 3) learners in CE programmes. The sample size varied depending on the population of each university. The providers were purposively selected from administrators and staff involved in

CE programmes at each university. The experts in CE and distance education were also purposively selected. Meanwhile, the learners were randomly selected from among the learners of all CE programmes in every region of each country. The three sample groups from each university are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Number of CE Providers, Experts and Learners from Each University*

University	CE Providers	Experts	Learners
HOU	13	11	121
STOU	14	16	595
UPOU	1	2	110
UT	3	4	60

## Research Instruments

The research instruments comprised: 1) an interview form for the providers of CE programmes; 2) an interview form for the experts in CE and distance education; and 3) a questionnaire and an in-depth interview form for the learners in CE programmes. The interview form for the providers was designed to obtain information about the existing provision of CE programmes at each university. The interview form for experts was aimed at obtaining their ideas and suggestions about desirable CE programmes. The questionnaire for students was designed to determine their opinions about the desirable CE programmes. The in-depth interview was employed to gain additional information from students about their needs for CE programmes. All of the research instruments were verified by three experts and tried out before being used to collect data from the real samples.

## Data Collection

Each university conducted data collection on its own. The questionnaire was sent to the learners through their addresses or given to them when they attended CE programmes. An appointment for an in-depth interview was made with some learners. The providers were also interviewed, while the experts were interviewed or invited to participate in a focus group seminar.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire underwent descriptive analysis (frequency and percentages) while qualitative data underwent content analysis.

## Findings

### Existing Provision of CE Programmes in the Four Open Universities

A summary of the existing CE programmes among the four open universities are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Existing CE Programmes Provided by Each University*

Detail	HOU	STOU	UPOU	UT
Responsible Organisation	HOU is a multi-disciplinary and multi-level institution with a wide range of training programmes. These include formal training, on-the-job training, in-service training, and distance training. Through the distance learning method, the university has brought learning opportunities to many people across the country, even to people with special difficulties and disabilities. HOU contributes to the goal of building a learning society and lifelong learning through nearly 80 training centres in more than 40 provinces and cities from the north to the south of Vietnam.	The offices which currently support STOU-CE comprise the: 1) Office of Continuing Education (directly responsible for CE courses); 2) Office of Educational Technology (supports social services on CE through the Internet, radio, and television); 3) Regional Distance Education Centres or RDECs (a network of 10 offices located in all regions of the country which support the Achievement Certificate Programme of the Office of Continuing Education and STOU academic service projects for the society which receive state budget allocation from the Division of Planning); 4) Office of Documentation and Information (provides library services to support RDECs), and; 5) STOU schools/faculties (provide CE programmes for the general public in various fields).	UPOU's Continuing Education Programme (CEP) of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies is coordinated by a Programme Development Associate (PDA) with assistance from a project staff under supervision by the Dean. The CEP through Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) employs UPOU policies and procedures in the development of the course following the contract for resource-based course wrap-around course materials. Following the resource-based learning principles, wrap-around materials are course materials that come in the form of study guides/ module study guides and that are developed around an existing book (e.g., a seminal work) or even a set of resources, preferably open educational resources. Course coordinators facilitate course delivery. They are appointed by the faculty dean with recommendation from the PDA prior to the announcement of	UT has a Community Service Centre which manages continuing programmes. It offers a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for Community Service to the public through socialisation and promotion activities, leaflets, and announcements on the university website. UT also offers MOOC for Recognition of Past Learning to the public through collaboration with institutions that need the programmes. It uses an asynchronous learning environment with an eight-week learning period.

Detail	HOU	STOU	UPOU	UT
			course offerings. They are expected to review course materials, prepare a course guide (using the UPOU course guide template) and a complete set of assignments (using assignment guides), create an online course site or virtual classroom in UPOU's MyPortal, check course requirements, and compute learners' final marks.	
CE Programmes Provided	Three CE programmes are relating to learning by doing, distance online, and remote traditional, short courses. It is practiced by Centre for Foreign Languages, Information Technology, and Short Courses Training are the providers of CE programmes for HOU.	CE programmes are in the form of achievement certificate programmes of undergraduate and graduate degree programmes offered to the public and short training courses in various fields to serve different target groups offered by the Office of Continuing Education. Moreover, the University provides knowledge as a service to the public through various media.	Ten non-formal CE courses are grouped into 3 clusters namely, (1) Health and Social Development Cluster, (2) Environmental Cluster, and (3) Entrepreneurship Cluster. The courses run for 12 to 16 weeks and are offered bi-annually on a regular basis every January to May and July to November.	MOOCs are offered publicly and online. Until November 2019, there are 12 MOOC programmes at UT which are available online at <a href="http://moocs.ut.ac.id/">http://moocs.ut.ac.id/</a> . In 2020, UT set a target to develop 116 more MOOC programmes; a combination of MOOC for Recognition of Past Learning and MOOC for Community Service.

It was found out that all of the four universities have similar CE programmes in the form of short courses in various fields of studies provided for the general public across age groups.

### **Desirable State of Continuing Education in the Open Universities According to Experts**

#### ***Hanoi Open University***

The Centre for Foreign Languages, Information Technology, and Short Courses Training are the providers of CE programmes at HOU. Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training and the University work together to implement policies on CE, create opportunities, and encourage learning to build a learning society. HOU's strategies (goal, planning, and implementation) for providing CE should be: 1) Developing HOU for a public education,

contributing to the cause of industrialisation and modernisation of the country, creating fairness, equality, and democracy in accessing education and mechanics; 2) Developing HOU for creating conditions for people with studying skills, working skills, and lifelong learning skills to develop creative and adaptive capacity in modern society; 3) Successfully building the first Virtual University model in Vietnam; 4) Developing a large electronic information volume with audio, images, text, and homework system, through which students can actively practise and test their learning results; 5) Improving the distance learning curriculum pursuant to the distance training standards of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Regional Open Learning Centre known as SEAMOLEC; 6) Building a modern infrastructure system for online training including electronic materials and instructional materials for distance self-study; and 7) Confirming the role and position of HOU as a key university in the national education system of distance learning.

### ***Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University***

STOU should have a special department and a committee responsible for CE at the university level. The department's personnel should be responsible for preparing modular course works and act as continuing educators and programmers to organise the system and design a system of credit transfer and comparison and seek learners. STOU Schools and RDECs should have staff as continuing educators or counsellors. The CE policy should be specific and in accordance with the university's vision and strategy which focuses on promoting CE by the CE committee chaired by the President. The university council should set a CE policy for STOU Schools through the Academic Council and establish a CE strategy. Invited national experts and learners should brainstorm mainly on the needs of learners of all ages who need more knowledge regardless of educational background. The STOU Schools may develop courses by compiling practical knowledge linked to other organisations through a memorandum of understanding. The university should not produce all courses but coordinate with other organisations instead. The courses should be offered through blended learning, possibly with face-to-face and online classes. Skill-oriented courses must focus on practice by using multimedia, information technology, mobile phones, and some publications, and this can be adapted in the workplace. All courses should be counted as credit. STOU must realise the demand size to organise CE programmes. The university council should set up a CE strategic plan. The Office of Continuing Education should formulate both short-term and long-term action plans and propose them to the academic council. An STOU committee should be established to follow up and evaluate CE programmes. The evaluation should focus on knowledge application and learner satisfaction.

### ***University of the Philippines Open University***

Based on the opinion of the former and current unit heads of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies administering CE programme at UPOU as part of their supervision, the desirable practice of the CE programme of the university was summarised. The programme is in line with one of the stated objectives in the resolution establishing UPOU, which is to provide opportunities for alternative access to quality higher education by offering baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate degree programmes and non-formal courses by distance education. The development and delivery of non-formal CE courses at the UPOU should aim to institutionalise a CE system to sustain professional growth and promote lifelong learning, especially for those who cannot leave their job or home for full-time studies. The programme should adopt, to some extent, the tried and tested course development and delivery of UPOU's formal or degree courses. It needs to sustain a programme development associate and a project staff to oversee and provide - assistance respectively in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the programme. The programme should maintain the CE committee to review and recommend policies and procedures for the development and delivery of non-formal CE courses and to

review and recommend non-formal CE courses for development and delivery. It must make available resources such as personnel and infrastructure in support of the programme.

### ***Universitas Terbuka***

To manage CE programmes, UT should have a specific department appointed by the Rector to focus on coordinating the programmes with internal and external partners. The department should consist of the head of department, a team of information and technology experts, a user data manager, a multimedia team, a video shooting team, and a team of pedagogists. The department should invite experts who are masters in the intended field of science, who are able to work with the team and have a good public reputation. Meanwhile, the head of the department should master the management of the programme starting from the preparation to the implementation and evaluation stages. The CE programmes should be based and adjusted to the needs of targeted users. UT may then provide several learning programmes. The goal of the programmes should be massive and open. To achieve this goal, UT should have short-term and long-term plans. Bringing the policy and goal into action requires a solid team and full support from the leaders (UT and the government). It may blend both asynchronous and synchronous online classroom interaction. In evaluating learners' learning achievement, UT needs to consider the number of learners registered in each course. Tutors may evaluate the learners' learning achievement by giving relevant tests/tasks which fit each course's characteristics. Students' satisfaction should be evaluated at the end of a programme period by giving a set of questionnaires to know whether the programme was successful.

### **Desirable Conditions of Continuing Education in the Open Universities According to Learners**

The learners provided suggestions for more desirable CE programmes in the following aspects:

#### ***Target Group***

The learners suggested that all four open universities focus on similar target groups. In addition, STOU, UPOU, and UT should respond to mature, independent, and responsible learners of all ages who need more knowledge regardless of gender, educational and social background, occupation, sector, economic status, and civil status.

#### ***Objective***

All HOU-CE should focus on knowledge provision and training in various short courses (non-degree programmes) provided or not provided by HOU. STOU should generally aim to extend opportunities for target groups to study what they are interested in or need and become capable of applying the knowledge acquired in their career and lifestyle. Apart from that, each course should have its own specific objectives. UPOU should focus on career development, career change, finances, and promotions. UT should provide opportunities for society in general and professionals in particular to develop competencies related to their career and personal development.

#### ***Scope of Content***

The scope of the HOU-CE content should be determined through Open and Distance Learning. STOU-CE course contents should be analysed according to need, age, and area. The scope of the content proposed by learners should enhance various professional skills and information technology. UPOU-CE's scope of content should provide learners with essential knowledge to meet their needs. The knowledge and skills gained may be used in

both their professional and personal lives. UT-CE content should be based and adjusted to learner's needs, and it should be evaluated periodically. As shown in Table 3 below, the most common content required by learners from the four open universities were lifelong learning skills and teamwork skills.

**Table 3**

*Scope of Content Required by Learners*

Scope of content required by learners*respondents were allowed more than 1 answer	Number of learners (percentage)			
	HOU	STOU	UPOU	UT
Information technology	29 (23.96)	188 (9.5)	40 (36.4)	24 (40.0)
Lifelong learning skills	49 (40.49)	161(8.1)	72 (65.5)	16 (26.7)
Language	47 (38.84)	156 (7.9)	50 (45.5)	21 (35.0)
Analytical thinking	0	151(7.6)	60 (54.5)	34 (56.7)
Health	0	144(7.3)	2 (1.8)	---
Problem solving	0	143(7.2)	72 (65.5)	16 (26.7)
Effective communication	0	140(7.1)	72 (65.5)	16 (26.7)
Technical skills	36 (29.75)	132(6.7)	49 (44.5)	11 (18.3)
Innovation	0	133(6.7)	60 (54.5)	34 (56.7)
Organisational development	0	127(6.4)	---	34 (56.7)
Natural resources and environment	0	124(6.3)	---	---
Teamwork	84 (69.42)	101(5.1)	60 (54.5)	34 (56.7)
Research and	0	95(4.8)	1 (0.9)	---
Marketing	0	88(4.4)	---	16 (26.7)
New entrepreneur	39 (32.23)	86(4.3)	50 (45.5)	27 (45.0)
Others (finance, law, basic courses)	38 (31.4)	14(2.7)	13 (11.8)	4 (6.7)
Total	121 (100.0)	524(100.0)	110 (100.0)	60 (100.0)

**Course Features**

HOU course features should embrace Information Technology skills, technical skills, working skills (teamwork, critical thinking, innovation), start-up skills, lifelong learning skills, and other skills. STOU courses should be provided as a modular system which is online learning for one to three credits and designed into a series or short courses. The learners can select and accumulate course credits for transfer to diploma, undergraduate, and

graduate levels. The courses should be: 1) co-organised with external potential organisations based on target group needs; 2) done by collaborating with organisations such as the professional council, association, and club; 3) able to provide socially responsible courses with high potential course developers; and 4) offered through coordination with other organisations and using common media and courses. The majority of UPOU-CE learners took the courses fully online. The learners utilised the learning management system used by UPOU, which is MyPortal. More than half the learners were very satisfied with the course they completed. The majority needed the course to develop new knowledge and skills. UT-CE courses should be enriched with additional features, i.e., video conference (for synchronous sessions) and social media (WhatsApp groups) to encourage learners to communicate more intensively with tutors and other learners.

### ***Content Dissemination Method***

Most HOU-CE learners chose Information Technology skills, followed by lifelong learning skills, and language skills. They enjoyed online learning courses and blended programmes. They preferred studying in the evening once a week, followed by two-month courses with each lesson lasting just 30 minutes.

STOU-CE courses should be delivered through blended learning, possibly with 1) face-to-face classes and 2) online education before face-to-face classes. Some courses may present options for interactive online learning, followed by face-to-face classes. If it is a skill-oriented course, it must focus on practice by using multimedia, information technology, mobile phones, and some publications. The media should be broadcast at night twice a week, with the duration depending on the content. Studying through the radio, television, and the Internet should not be more than 1 hour. The course duration for face-to-face sessions should be 3 days and for media mixed with face-to-face sessions should be 2 days. Evaluation should use pre-and post-test at most.

UPOU-CE courses should be provided with a duration of 3 months. More than half of the learners preferred a 30-minute duration for each lesson. For UPOU-CEP learners, the evening is the most convenient time for them to study as most of them have full-time jobs during the day. One-third of the learners prefer studying twice a week.

UT-CE learners prefer the fully online learning mode for MOOC programmes. These should blend both asynchronous and synchronous online classroom interaction with no more than one-hour duration per learning session. In disseminating content, they may also utilise popular social media such as WhatsApp. Social media can be used to create groups of learners and remind them about learning schedules, tasks, etc. Social media can also be used by tutors to guide and motivate students to stay active. This is because learners have different learning frequencies and learning times in a week. They also have different reasons to join the programme.

### ***Content Dissemination Media***

HOU has applied research, implemented training via two-way television, combined with the Voice of Vietnam and Central Television Station through online training technology, learning materials for self-study, and CDs for printed and published subjects. Electronic information volume with audio, images, text, and homework systems is being developed.

All STOU media should be designed to cover various learning environments: 1) distance learning including a study guide, e-book, audiobook, video, e-tutorial, interactive learning, etc.; 2) virtual learning including e-learning, MOOCs, Facebook, Line, etc., and 3) learning activity through face-to-face classes with experts or lecturers.

UPOU-CE learners use various open education resources such as video lectures, e-books, study guides, course guides, and other printed materials/modules.

UT-CE learners prefer to use various easy-to-use electronic learning media in a single learning platform in the form of text (PowerPoint, e-book, e-paper, e-magazine, etc.), audio, video (YouTube, self-created video, etc.), images (infographic, photo, etc.), links, and so on.

### **Evaluation**

Most HOU-CE learners expect to take a multiple-choice test after each lesson, followed by a group report/assignment after the programme while some want to be evaluated by practice test after each lesson, followed by an essay test after the programme. The least chosen evaluation methods are graded discussions during the lesson and the final mark based on the cumulative scores for all class activities. Most learners voted for feedback via email while feedback in written form accounts for the least. STOU-CE courses should be evaluated online by their learners and their organisations in terms of satisfaction. Periodically evaluation may use internal and external quality assessment principles, output, and impact of utilisation. The majority of UPOU-CE learners preferred practice/application as the best learner's assessment tool. The preferred method of giving feedback by the course coordinator/facilitator is online. More than half the learners were very satisfied with the course they completed. They planned to enrol in another CEP course and would recommend the programme they had taken to others. To evaluate learners' learning achievement, UT-CE learners are open to any kind of assessment such as online assignment, quiz, project, and test.

### **Discussion**

The study found that the four open universities offered CE programmes both online and face to face, with varying organisational structures, policies, and fields of study. For example, HOU provides CE for multi-disciplinary and multi-level training programmes and contributes to a learning society and lifelong learning through 80 training centres in more than 40 provinces and cities. STOU has an Office of Continuing Education which is directly responsible for CE. The programmes are in the form of short training courses and a multi-disciplinary Achievement Certificate Programme. At UPOU, the CE programme is coordinated by the Faculty of Management and Development Studies under the supervision of the Dean. Currently, 10 non-formal courses grouped into 3 clusters are offered. Meanwhile, UT has a Community Service Centre which offers CE programmes publicly and online through 12 MOOCs. According to results on the organisational structure, each university has different agencies responsible for CE programmes as it depends on the administration context of each university. However, each university has tried to bring CE programmes to target groups in every part of the country through local training centres or learning centres. The CE programmes available are quite similar. They are provided in various fields of study and made available in the form of short training courses offered both online and face to face. This is because each university would like its CE programmes to serve the needs of target groups as much as possible. They also tried to provide flexible learning methods, both online and face to face, to the target groups. From the findings, it is evident that the existing CE programmes of the four open universities are part of open and distance e-learning that cater to a wide range of learners in order to serve lifelong learning (Inoue, 2007).

For the desirable state of CE in all four universities, it was found that ideas and suggestions from the experts were quite similar. The needs and desirable ideas of the learners were found to be related to those of the experts in various aspects. The experts

proposed that each university have a special agency or department to take care of CE programmes with the policy of promoting lifelong learning for people in all age groups. This finding aligned with the study of Billett et al. (2015) which found that a successful CE system included a few factors, one of which is policy support. It is also related to the study by Jitcharat (2017) on guidelines for organising CE in higher education institutions in Thailand which proposed that higher education should provide special policy, plan, agency, and personnel for organising CE programmes in order to promote lifelong learning for all.

For the goal and objectives of CE programmes, the experts suggested that CE programmes should empower people with studying, working, and lifelong learning skills for application in their work and life in modern society. This is similar to the ideas of the learners who proposed that the objectives of CE programmes should meet the needs of the target groups and develop competencies related to their career and personal development. Course content should be multidisciplinary to serve the needs and interests of the target groups. STOU learners added suggestions about credit accumulation and transfer to a diploma or degree programme. This finding is in line with the study of Laal (2011) who found that the demand for CE and training for industry workers was increasing. The labour market required a well-trained workforce to be competitive in the fast-paced global economy. This implies that a flexible learning framework must be developed to cater to diverse groups of learners who seek further professional development. This finding is also related to the study of Jitcharat (2017) which suggested identifying needs and organising CE programmes to serve the needs of the target groups.

The learners and experts provided similar suggestions that CE programmes should be made available in the form of short courses through both face-to-face and online learning methods in order to serve the needs and convenience of target groups. For online learning, various types of media such as e-books, audiobooks, videos, e-tutorials, e-learning, MOOCs, Facebook, video conferences, etc. were suggested as both the experts and learners realised the progress and advantages of modern media. This finding is related to Inoue (2007) who stated that open and distance learning is a cost-efficient method for democratising education. Its flexibility and ability to reach a wide audience despite time and geographical constraints is capable of opening up more learning opportunities for all. Southernwood (2008) added that open and distance learning gave students the freedom to acquire institutional-based accredited qualifications. It was considered the future of continuing professional development.

The first recommendation from this study is that each university should consider input from experts and students regarding its CE programmes so as to create better CE programmes in the future. Second, to serve the philosophy of lifelong learning, each university should provide a CE programme to serve the needs of every age group, especially working adults and the elderly. Third, each university should provide active public relations in order to have the CE programme recognised by all target groups. Lastly, a summary evaluation of CE courses should be conducted and monitored. The lessons learned and information exchanged will benefit the four open universities and other similar institutions.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that CE programmes at the four universities (HOU, STOU, UPOU, and UT) are provided both online and face to face with varying organisational structures and policies. HOU provides CE in multi-disciplinary and multi-level training programmes and contributes to learning society and lifelong learning in 80 training centres in more than 40 provinces and cities. STOU has an Office of Continuing Education which is directly responsible for CE training courses and the Achievement Certificate Programme. At

UPOU, the CE programme is coordinated by the Faculty of Management and Development Studies and offers 10 non-formal courses grouped into 3 clusters. UT has a Community Service Centre that offers CE programmes publicly and online through 12 MOOCs and is set to develop 116 more. For desirable CE programmes, the experts suggested having a policy, plan, and agency for CE programmes in order to provide lifelong learning for all. Learners made suggestions on various aspects such as target groups, programme objectives, scope of content, content dissemination method, etc. The suggestions of both experts and learners are valuable for the improvement of CE programme provision at each university. These are constructive in creating models for the provision of CE programmes by the OU4.

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