

The Dropout Rate, Retention and Increased Enrollment of Graduate Students:

A Case Study of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand

Associate Professor Dr. Boonsri Prommapun
School of Educational Studies ◆ STOU, Thailand ◆ boonsri.pro@stou.ac.th

ABSTRACT

The purposes of this research were (1) to study the causes of graduate student dropout at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand, (2) to study the strategies for retention of graduate students in the graduate program, and (3) to find strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students at STOU.

The research sample consisted of 50 STOU graduate faculty members, 100 graduate students who registered during the academic years 2002-2006, and 50 dropout graduate students. Quota sampling was applied and the total sample was 200. The research instruments were an interview structure, and a questionnaire. Statistical procedures for data analysis were percentage, mean, standard deviation, and content analysis.

Research findings were as follows: (1) Causes of the STOU graduate students dropout were the students' knowledge and learning competence, the university services, the distance learning system, student dissatisfaction with being STOU students, economic reasons, the readiness to learn, and personal characteristics. (2) The strategies for graduate student retention in the graduate programs were to develop advice and guidance services; to establish a Contact Center, "Home pages" and a "Hot line"; and to allow expired or retired students to come to study again. (3) The strategies to increase the number of graduate students at STOU were to implement direct invitations to specific target groups; to establish a public relations network; to launch or implement a "road show" for public relations; to provide more teaching facilities for instructors and thesis advisors; to adjust the recruitment and screening system to be more effective; and to implement motivation and candidate attraction.

INTRODUCTION

The graduate programs at STOU have been cultivated in a distance learning system enabling students to study by themselves under the supervision of the advisors according to the appointments between them. The students are also meant to participate in orientation, seminars, and thesis or independent study workshops. Moreover, the students have to be able to take control of their own intellectual development by choosing from a variety of instructional activities through integrated media comprising textbooks, workbooks, audio and visual materials, supplementary reading materials, radio and television programs, computer-assisted instruction and e-learning (Office of Graduate Studies, 2004: 20).

From the database of the Office of Graduate Studies (2006: 2), it was found that in 2005 there were approximately 2,076 new students who enrolled in the Master courses in the academic year 1/2005. In 2006 the number of the students decreased, and in academic year 1/2006 there were 1,992. The study also found that the School of Management Science had the highest student enrollment that year; the second was the School of Educational Studies and then the School of Political Science. For the dropout data of graduate students, the Office of President in Planning made the record of the graduate student dropout data, in the middle of the year, between 2000 and 1/2007. The record showed that the number of dropout graduate students were 359. There were 136 students from the School of Educational Studies, 66 students from the School of Political Science and 30 students from the School of Communication Arts.

The tendency of student numbers to decrease in some schools and drop out in every school had several causal factors, including the capability of the students, the inconvenience of the university distance learning system and services (Boonsri Prommapun 1995: 80). Besides that, there is a lot of competition among the universities in Thailand. They also have campaigns to increase the number of students. They have policies to open campuses to teach in different regions. At the same time, private universities have adopted other tactics; for example, decreasing the tuition fees for students who have persuaded their friends to enroll in the university, or giving scholarships to the students who have special talents such as athletic scholarships (Kirk University 2007: 2). These tactics might have affected graduate student enrollment at STOU.

Therefore the university should study the dropout graduate students statistical data, the retention of graduate student data, and increasing numbers of graduate students data to apply it with planning strategies to decrease the resignation or dropping out of the students and also to make a campaign to increase enrollment of new students at STOU.

OBJECTIVES OF PAPER

1. To study the causes of graduate student dropout at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand;
2. To study the strategies for retention of graduate students in the graduate program.
3. To find strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students at STOU.

Limitations of the Study

1. The researcher has studied only student drop out between 2002–2006 and the master degree students in the academic years 2002–2006
2. The researcher has studied only 10 graduate courses in the following schools: the School of Liberal Arts, the School of Educational Studies, the School of Management Science, the School of Health Science, the School of Economics, the School of Communication Arts, the School of Political Science, the School of Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives, the School of Human Ecology, and the School of Nursing.

Benefits of the Study

1. To decrease graduate student drop out at STOU.
2. To design strategies to retain the students in the programs.
3. The relevant departments which deal with the number of the students would be able to use the data to make plans to increase the enrollment of students.

Research Methodologies

Samplings were divided into 3 groups:

1. Selected purposively, 50 faculty members, 5 members from each school.
2. 100 graduate students selected by quota sampling who registered during the academic years 2002–2006 from a total of 4,604 graduate students.
3. 50 dropout graduate students selected from each school.

Therefore, the total samples were 200.

The research instruments were questionnaires and an interview form. The questionnaires in the study were divided into 2 types:

1. Dropout graduate student questionnaires which were closed questions with 5 ranked answers and open question type.
2. Graduate student questionnaires which were closed questions with 5 ranked answers and open question type.

Method of Collecting Data

The researcher applied the interviews, surveys and focus groups methodologies in the study as follows:

1. Interviewed 50 STOU school members from 1–15 March, 2007.
2. Sent the questionnaires via registered mail for the 100 graduate students who studied at STOU in the academic years 2002–2006 and the 50 dropout graduate students. The data collection was made from 1–30 March, 2007.
3. The focus groups. The samples were 50 graduate students who studied in STOU in the academic years 2002–2006 and 50 dropout students. The focus group discussions were held from 1–30 April, 2007 in four regions: northern, southern, north eastern, and central.

Data Analysis

Statistical procedures for data analysis were percentage, mean, standard deviation, and content analysis.

RESEARCH FINDING

1. The dropped out sample from the university were mostly male (62.0%) majoring in management science (28.0%). STOU graduate faculty members were mostly female (72.0%), associate professor (88.0%), from 10 schools (10.0%), and had worked for STOU for more than 20 years (48.0%). The master degree graduate students were mostly female (59.0 %), in the age range of 41 – 50 (44.0%), majoring in management science (30.0%), and living in Bangkok and its vicinity and in the north eastern region (18.0%). They enrolled in the master degree course in 2004 (22.0%).
2. Causes of the drop out of STOU graduate students

The dropped out sample of the graduate students were at the medium rate ($\bar{X} = 2.39$). The causes of drop out with a medium rate were students' knowledge and learning competence ($\bar{X} = 2.70$), the university services ($\bar{X} = 2.69$), the distance learning system ($\bar{X} = 2.58$); while the causes of drop out with a low rate were student dissatisfaction with being STOU students ($\bar{X} = 2.33$), economic reasons ($\bar{X} = 2.27$), the readiness to learn ($\bar{X} = 2.26$), and personal characteristics ($\bar{X} = 1.87$).

Personal characteristics reasons with a low rate were hometown, and the reasons with a very low rate were age connected. The economic reason with a medium rate was identical income after graduation, while economic reason with a low rate was the fare for transportation to the university. Students' knowledge and learning competence reasons with a medium rate was personal study skill, and with a low rate was failing the exams. Readiness to learn reasons with a

medium rate was the workload, and the reason with a low rate was boredom. The reasons with a very low rate were health problems, no computers, and no internet access. Distance learning system reasons with a medium rate were less integrated media, and reasons with a low rate were no STOU campus in their hometown, difficult comprehensive exam, disqualified teachers in teaching and giving the knowledge to the students, and the internet system of the university. The university service with a high rate was the mailing system of the distance learning packages. The university service with a medium rate was the library system, and the university service with a low rate was the enrollment process. Student dissatisfaction with being STOU students was the slow process of receiving the learning packages with a medium rate, and with a low rate was students had no commitment to the university.

3. Strategies for graduate student retention in the graduate programs

In the advice and guidance services aspect, the university should help students to develop motivation to learn in a distance learning system and to advise graduate students in planning to learn effectively. The university should also establish a Contact Center to follow up on the graduate students. Each school should provide a "Home page" giving students news and updated information and make easy access to both it and the "hot line" for the students in case they have any enquiries. They could leave messages for the teachers to contact them later. In the aspect of allowing expired or retired students to come back to study in a graduate program, the university should create motivation for expired students to return and continue their study, or allow re-enrollment in some special circumstances, and possibly to transfer former courses into the current program of study.

The university should provide the graduate students with tutoring before giving them the comprehensive exam (Plan B); each school should provide a "Home page" giving students news and updated information and easy access to it; allow those students who haven't done or finished their thesis or independent study to maintain their student status for two more semesters.

4. Strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students at STOU

Strategies for reaching the target groups should be implemented directly by giving invitations to specific target groups in work units, organizations, institutions, and enterprises. Public relations should be implemented by establishing a public relations network through both state and private work units, organizations, and agencies. Graduate student enrollment campaign projects should be implemented by launching a "road show" for public relations. The competence in graduate student enrollment should be implemented by providing more teaching facilities for instructors and an increase in the number of instructors and thesis advisors. Screening systems for graduate students should be practiced by adjusting the recruitment and screening system to make it more effective. Recruitment should also be posted earlier to let candidates decide to apply to study at STOU. Motivation and candidate attraction in school application should be implemented to emphasize that learning and working can be done simultaneously without sabbatical leave; and comparing STOU learning expenses with other universities to show the lower rate.

Strategies for reaching the target groups should be implemented by establishing cooperation projects between STOU and state units and private agencies in order to select prospective learners as a target group. Public relations should be implemented by utilizing various types of public relations media. Graduate student enrollment campaigns and projects should be implemented by launching STOU mobile units to reach prospective target groups in organizations and agencies in communities and business areas. The competence in graduate student enrollment should be implemented by encouraging the thesis advisors to follow up their advisees' work and getting them to finish up in time. Screening systems for graduate students should be practiced by adjusting the recruitment and screening system to make it more effective. Motivation and candidate attraction in school application should be implemented by emphasizing that learning and working can be done simultaneously without sabbatical leave.

DISCUSSION

1. Causes of graduate student drop out with a medium rate were the students' knowledge and learning competence, the university services, and the distance learning system, while the causes of graduate student drop out with a low rate were student dissatisfaction with being STOU students, economic reasons, the readiness to learn, and personal characteristics. This is because the university has some problems especially in the system of textbook production; it does not always go according to plan. Students often receive textbooks later than the due date. Another reason is that STOU graduate students are mostly in the working-age group, and they have responsibilities for both family and work; therefore they have less time to study the textbooks and workbooks which comprise 15 chapters per subject. They have to study at least one chapter per week, so that they will understand the content in the textbooks. As a result, their time has to be managed appropriately; otherwise, they might not take the exams. This might apply even though they have joined the seminars, even if some students might not even participate in them. Boredom and dropping out of the program might be the end result. This is in line with Kember's theory and drop out model from distance education in Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Great Britain (Kember, 1989: 196–211). The longitudinal model of David Kember is developed from Tinto's model (Tinto, 1975). Issues inherent in testing the model are discussed and applied to use with distance learning. The main reasons are from background characteristics, social integration, work, and family relations.
2. Strategies of graduate student retention in the graduate programs
 - 2.1 Advice and guidance services: Developing the motivation to learn in a distance system was the most important. The university had to help advise graduate students in planning to learn in a distance learning system effectively, and also to overcome problems or obstacles while studying. Instructors should provide them with tutoring before giving the comprehensive exam (Plan B) and giving guidelines to do the exam. This is necessary because the distance learning system is different from other systems which the graduates may well have used to gain their bachelor

degree. They might feel estranged from their advisors although they have joined seminars. Besides that, studying alone without friends can cause a lack of study motivation especially when doing the thesis. Most students who pass Thesis 1 might have some difficulties if they have to go back to work. It might be very hard to continue their thesis. This is related to data from the Office of President of Planning and International Affairs unit, which analyzed the graduation and drop out data in Bachelor degree students at STOU in the years 1980–1989. It was found that the students who studied in a short-term program would have a higher potential to stay in the program and graduate than students who studied in a long-term program: 2-year, 3-year, and 4-year programs. The percentages of graduation in a long-term program were 42.98, 16.23 and 13.13, and the percentages of drop out were 57.02, 83.88 and 87.19 respectively.

This is related to the study of Sasithorn Chutinantakul (1997), which concerns graduation and retention rates of students in the program per year. It was found that students from each academic year graduated at the rate of 24.1 percent.

- 2.2 Establishing a Contact Center to follow the graduate students. The activities and services of the center should be done at a high level. Each school should provide a “Home page” giving students news and updated information and easy access to it. There should be a “Hot line” for those who face problems to ask questions or leave messages. They could be contacted later on. There should be lecture notes to summarize the whole textbook and it should be posted on the internet along with a chat room set up to answer questions. As the university implemented the distance learning system for the students, the university has to provide media and online facilities, especially the internet network system, for student access. Each school should utilize the internet system as much as possible, and take the most advantage of it for study. Possible internet activities are using the chat room, teaching through the internet network and answering any enquiries through school web pages. They might use the phone system as a “hot line” to leave messages and they can be called back later to answer those questions. An online system can help students access outside sources easily and quickly such as libraries and museums. Moreover, the internet will help instructors and students in exchanging information in a short amount of time, and also decrease the factors that can affect the attention of the students in classrooms such as noise or things that might distract them. Instructors and students can contact each other effectively to give more study advantages.
- 2.3 Allowing expired or retired students to return to study in a graduate program. The following activities should also be conducted at a high level: creating motivation for expired students to return and continue their study, or allowing some to re-enroll in some special circumstances. Lots of graduate students drop out because of the obstacles during the thesis or independent study. There are many reasons. The first one is that when the students finish Thesis 1, they normally return to their work and neglect their thesis. So when they have to continue they lack the motivation. Another reason is that the duration of the study is quite long. There might be some

changes in the student's life such as a family condition, work or health, so they have to adjust themselves. The university should help by allowing expired or retired students to return to study in a graduate program. This is related to Holly Ann Eckles's study (2004) which concerned seven young women who impacted their decision to drop out of high school, graduate, and/or pursue a higher education. The study found that the factors that impacted the decision of remaining in the study program were being enthusiastic to study, managing the study environment to emphasise the potential to study, and choosing subjects that match their capability and interest. Moreover, the university should be confident that it is accepted, sincere to the students, and suitable for their study needs

3. Strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students at STOU

- 3.1 Strategies for reaching target groups should be implemented at a high level in the following matters: implementing direct invitations to specific target groups in work units, organizations, institutions, and enterprises; establishing cooperation projects between STOU and state and private agencies to select prospective learners as a target group.

There are many target groups in work units, organizations, institutions, and enterprises, and if the employees of those places intend to further their study to a master degree according to the office policy, inviting them might be a good choice. Therefore, if the university establishes cooperation projects with them, the university can increase enrollment of graduate students. For example, there are many organizations, ranging from education, nursing, and business administration to agriculture and so on, that need their employees to further their study, and lots of them choose STOU because the university fits their needs. Reaching a target group is also useful to the students themselves. If the organization supports their employees to study at STOU, they normally pay for the tuition fees and arrange study places for their own employees. So the employees do not have to go to study at the STOU campus. According to STOU service rules for the convenience of the students, if there are more than 15 students per group, an instructor will be able to go to teach students in the arranged place that the students provide.

- 3.2 Public relations should be implemented at a high level as follows: establishing a public relations network through both state and private work units, organizations and agencies; and utilizing various types of public relations media for the benefits of the distance learning system.

Public relations are a good way to send updated news and information and create a good image for the organization. PR can also help popularity growth for products and services with pros and cons concerning issues. However, profit is not the main objective of STOU management. The university is doing it for cooperative social responsibility instead, and tends to pass on the benefits to people in society. Therefore, utilizing various types of public relations media with work units and organizations will help the university spread information, and the opportunities of the distance learning system. This is related to the study of Raweewan Malaiwan (1999)

which concerned increasing enrollment of students in the School of Economics at STOU. The objective of the study was to figure out a method to increase the number of students. The study found that the methods to increase enrollment were to publicize the school along with improving the university, publicizing through various types of public relations media to target groups, growing popularity, improving the relationship between instructors and students, systems, and instructional media.

- 3.3 Graduate student enrollment campaign projects should be implemented at a high level as follows: launching or implementing STOU mobile registration reaching work units, organizations and agencies of prospective specific target groups in communities and business areas; to publicize and provide a stop-service of enrollment. Graduate student enrollment campaign projects implemented for specific target groups in communities and business areas are convenient for the students. They could ask for information or make enquiries. Currently, STOU is implementing graduate student enrollment campaign projects both in Bangkok and upcountry, especially at the 10 Regional Distance Education centers. In the Bangkok metropolis they should expand the space of places and publicize more. The more publicity, the more popularity the university will attract. As public relations is an important tool to support students in participation at university activities, especially publicizing news and information, growing a good image and popularity will be a big plus. Making profit is not the main objective of the university. They are more concerned about the pros and cons for people, and they try not to censor messages in publication.
- 3.4 The competence in graduate student enrollment should be implemented at the highest level as follows: the university has to provide more teaching facilities for schools, instructors and thesis advisors. The thesis advisors should follow up advisees' work closely, so they will be able to graduate.
- 3.5 Screening systems for graduate students should be practiced at the highest level as follows: adjusting the recruitment and screening systems to be more effective and recruitment posted earlier to let the candidate decide to apply to study with STOU. Moreover, it should be practiced at a high level as follows: they should set up committees for each major to consider the students' qualifications according to the university standard requirement.

This is because the faster the announcement comes out the faster the students could make a decision to come to study with STOU. There are many higher education institutes nowadays, and they do not limit the number of students enrolling each year. Students can have many choices of educational institutes in their hometowns.

- 3.6 Motivation and candidate attraction in school application should be implemented at the highest level as follows: emphasizing that learning and working can be done simultaneously without sabbatical leave; and comparing STOU learning expenses with other universities to show the lower rate.

Moreover, motivation and candidate attraction in school application should be implemented at a high level in getting a promotion after graduation. In addition the university should provide a Student Loan Fund for the students, so they will have study motivation. STOU is a famous university and STOU students will have knowledge and competence to be accepted.

In a distance learning system, students do not have to come to study every day. Mostly they study at home, which does not affect their working time. However, they have to meet their advisor on the weekends, 4–8 days per semester. Therefore, studying at STOU is convenient for the students. They do not have to take any sabbatical leave, or pay expensive tuition fees when compared with some universities. Besides that, after graduating from STOU students will be able to get a promotion and more income according to the degree. The advisors also take care of the students effectively and systematically as they have to make appointments, and arrange the places and teaching facilities before the meeting. The student who graduates from STOU will be a capable and qualified person, and other organizations will gladly accept them to work and be well-known in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. The recommendations for applying the results of this study

1. It was found that the university services were the main reason of student dropout, and that was at a high level. The university services are as follows: sending learning packages, producing and managing the subject, producing the supplements, and printing the documents. Therefore, the related departments such as the Office of the University Press, the Office of Educational Technology, the Office of Computer Services and the Office of Educational Services should make the process possible for sending learning packages.
2. The strategies of graduate student retention in the graduate program should involve every related department ranging from the Schools and the Information Technology Service Center to the Office of Graduate Studies in giving students guidance and advice and following up on their study.
3. The strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students at STOU should involve the 10 Regional Distance Education centers, the Office of Graduate Studies and the schools who should invite target groups to study with STOU. The Information Technology Center should publicize by implementing mobile units to reach the prospective target groups in communities and business areas.
4. The university should accept students from other universities who would like to transfer the former courses into the program of study at STOU.

B. Recommendations for further studies

1. The development of the appropriate types of advice and guidance and the follow up student study and advice should be studied using the dropout graduate student information from STOU.
2. Factors affecting the retention of graduate students in the graduate programs and the dropout data of STOU graduate students should be studied.
3. Development of the distance learning system type for improving the graduate students should be studied.
4. Strategies to increase enrollment of graduate students for each school at STOU should be studied.
5. The development of desirable STOU Regional Distance Education center types should be studied.

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