

An ODL University in Transition

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University administrators could have lived much happier had their working environment remained as it is. Alas, such scenario exists only in human fantasy. Buddha was completely right when he said that the world and its surrounding had always undergone perpetual change. Keeping this divine truth in mind, the university leaders must keep themselves prepared for whatever change that may affect their realms of responsibility. They must also respond properly to such change.

The ever changing nature of social, economic, and technological environment always has its impact upon human life. Human learning and knowledge delivery modes are no exception. The Open and Distance Learning of an institute of higher education such as Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University is a good example.

Since its inception in the year 1978, STOU has relied mainly on already available materials and instruments applied to its ODL nature. Printed texts, television and radio broadcasting were the university's principle learning instruments supplemented by occasional tutorial sessions. In addition, video and audio cassettes were used as supplementary tools. Thirty years ago, these media were convenient tools for distance learning. At present, these media still retain their attractive distance qualities and exert strong impact upon the audience.

They are cost saving easily available and accessible to the general audience. Understandably, other developing countries share the same experience with Thailand. Thirty years ago as it is now, television and radio broadcasts remain ones of the most efficient and economical media for educational purpose. For the countries whose education responsibility rests within the realm of government which controls radio and television stations, such media facilitation is appropriately available for open distance learning universities.

On the contrary, once the media belong to commercialized enterprises whose financial profits are given higher priority to education objectives, the universities will be, no doubt, suffering. In other words, without clear mandate and specific arrangement which allocate television and radio facilities for education purposes at minimum costs, the open universities are left to the mercy of the profit makers.

Within the span of less than twenty years, though the availability still remains, in Thailand, the costs of these broadcasting programs and materials have steadily been on a climb. Television and radio broadcasting have fallen prey to commercialized consumerism. With strong demands for air time by companies and enterprises competing to sell their products and services, television and radio stations enjoy profits and stronger bargaining position.

Their air time (when and how long) has become valuable asset. Public stations were no exemption. Thus STOU has been increasingly burdened by the continual increase in the fare for broadcasting. To survive with limited budget, the university decided to reduce its television broadcast consecutively from 11 hours to 9 hours and presently down to 7 hours a week. The airtime was recently moved

from 6–7 a.m. to 5–6 a.m. Fortunately radio broadcasting is still available. The Department of Public Relations at present generously allocates 47 hours of its radio broadcasting time weekly for STOU without charge. Rumor has it that the Department will soon charge the university radio broadcasting fees.

Print-based materials which have been, and still are the university's main media, pose similar problem. While private print shops are always available and the university has its own print shop, the printing production costs are rising. The costs of all materials used for printing become more expensive. Furthermore, mail delivery services, though more efficient and reliable, also increase in prices.

At the same time, technological change has its impact on distance learning. Some learning materials such as cassette or video tapes have become something of the past being replaced by DVD, CD, MP3 and other technological innovations. The use of computer and all its applications, in particular, when linked with telecommunication lines (internet, video on demand, video conference, web-casting etc.) offer potential and powerful venues for distance education. The public at large, begins to familiarize themselves with these new instruments. Access is much more convenient and prices become more attractive. For STOU undergraduate students whose income is mostly limited, education expenses are a significant matter of their concern.

The introduction of new telecommunication technology comes against the demise of some technology as well. Though a few tapes are still produced and delivered to satisfy a few leftover users, students normally complain that they do not possess such video and audio cassettes players any more. The cassettes producing machines will

soon be kept in the university museum. The university, then, has to supply students with VCDs and soon DVDs and MP3.

University policy makers must take heed of the existing reality or else it will be no more than working with day dream. It seems that distance education students in most developing countries share similar characteristics. They belong to medium or low income categories, missed the chance to earn degrees during their school age, need to educate themselves in order to develop their work skills, and are mostly employed. Some well to do students or students who hold other degrees are a minority who seek to enrich their individual competencies through additional field of study. The students' profile also changes from middle-aged working adults to that of a much younger generation.

For instance, the average age of most STOU students during its initial phase used to be over 40. At present, most students are younger than 40. This means that the university must redesign its recruitment campaigns and strategies to satisfy the needs of this young generation. Open universities in other countries may not be affected by such change. This is not the case for STOU which receives approximately 20 percent of its income from the government budget. Its survival and further development remains on its ability to attract larger number of students while retain its academic quality.

STOU thus must struggle to adapt itself to such rapid change. Its policy is thus reshaped. With the help of e-Learning mode and materials already available, the university is increasingly relying on web-casting, video-on-demand, on-line and off-line electronic materials such as e-Books or CDs. Meanwhile, the university is exploring

other devices which can better serve its distance learning objectives with less cost yet with stronger power to impart effectively its learning content suitable to the needs of its students.

At present, STOU is moving away from its traditional mode of education delivery to that of e-Learning type. This is considered a new endeavor since the university staff for so long get themselves accustomed to the traditional delivery mode. Thus far any innovation in the direction of e-Learning is always difficult to come by. Tightly cling to the traditional material production such as printed texts, radio and television programs, with the addition of occasional tutorial sessions; the staffs (in both academic and supporting units) in general do not feel threatened by the social, economic, and technological change. It is a real challenge for the university managers to induce change to a stable environment where people enjoy their readily established routine work procedures, decent welfare, fringe benefits, and job security (as government employees).

Realizing that resistance to change is eminent, the managers are left with only two alternatives: they can leave things as they are and let future leaders face the consequences, or they can pave ground for the future. The latter requires strong and clear policy for well defined future. The policy must also be supported by good workable long term and short term strategies. STOU is taking the second alternative. An initial strategy aims primarily at the graduate programs. Graduate students are better equipped than their undergraduate colleagues in many ways. They are financially better off. Most of them live in urban cities and towns with all the modern equipments available.

They have access to tele-communication network and

internet facilities. They are STOU primary target for e-Learning.

The university issues a policy which calls for all graduate students to acquaint themselves with on-line e-Learning, while undergraduates are encouraged to rely more on off-line e-Learning materials which are less technical and financial demanding. Electronic infrastructure is being put in place for future learning and management utilization. The university intends to supply all future students with CD-roms, MP3, and other narrative CDs supplemented by video on demand tutorial programs. Printed texts will not be delivered, yet they will be available in the open market. Television programs will be mostly replaced by web-casting and satellite facilities. At the same time, upcoming technological innovations are closely observed.

Such transition has never been easy. More financial and material expenses have to be secured and invested on. Any major wrong decision creates havoc (destruction). Thought careful decisions have to be made. They must be made promptly and in time to reap their benefits. This situation naturally causes dilemma. The decision makers must take risks which affect themselves personally, their university, and the future generation. Also university policy makers must do their best to break resistance from academic staffs who are so accustomed to the existing learning mode and supporting staff who still cling steadily to the traditional production procedures.

Without much choice, STOU must proceed on with its transition strategy. Once succeeded, the university can hopefully rest assured, at least for a time being, that it can provide quality education via ODL more efficiently with better value-for-money arrangement. Finally, what are

lessons learned. There certainly is a few to offer.

- *Firstly*, university managers must stay in full alert to the changing technological environment and be prepared to adapt policy and strategy to cope efficiently with such change.
- *Secondly*, the managers must carefully observe the nature of their staff (work habits, competencies, inclinations, change resistance, etc.) and do their best to change their organization into a changing and learning organization.
- *Thirdly*, the managers must ensure that they have sufficient information to make careful and effective decision which will affect the university future. In particular, they must pave solid infrastructure (technologically, functionally, and culturally) to serve demands for future education services.

Failing to perform the afore-mentioned requirements, the university board must take quick action to replace the managers or face worst consequences in the immediate future.