

MANAGEMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT GRADUATE LEVEL OF SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY, THAILAND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*Sumalee Sungsi, Darunee Jumpatong, Niranart Saensa,
Koolchalee Chongcharoen,
Sita Yiemkuntitavorn and Wanaprapa Suksawas**

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Abstract: *As the only one Open University of Thailand, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) has provided quality education to a significant number of disadvantaged people including people who would like to further their studies to graduate level in order to improve their academic profession. STOU has successfully has provided distance education through mixed media for decades. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused both unprecedented disruptions and massive changes to education in many aspects. Even though STOU is a distance education university, some adjustment in the system has to be implemented to suit the current situation. In doing so, the full scale of online distance education has been developed. This paper will present the adjusted practices to online system in the areas of teaching and learning, thesis/dissertation supervision, evaluation, and student support by focusing on the graduate level. Some feedback from the learners and the challenge issues were also included.*

Keywords: *Distance Education, Management, Graduate Level, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, COVID-19 Pandemic.*

I. Introduction

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), the only one Open University in Thailand, was established as the 11st state university in the year 1979. It follows lifelong education philosophy.

The main objective of the university is to extend higher education opportunity to all who have no chance to enter conventional universities regardless of age, sex, occupation and living location. The target groups of the university are varied in age and occupations. With the distance

* School of Educational Studies, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

education system of STOU, a number of working people in every province across the country can reach higher education to upgrade their profession. These people usually have no opportunity to study in conventional universities because of their work and family responsibility.

Distance education system of STOU is in a form of mixed media which compose of main and supplementary media. However, at the first start, it relied on printed-based as the main media which were text-books. Then there were supplementary media ranging from radio program, television program, and cassette tape to face to face tutoring activity. Later on, with the progress of media and technology, computer assisted instruction and different forms of e-learning and online learning were introduced respectively. That made STOU distance education system covers both printed-based and computer-based. For computer-based, text-book is a supplementary media. STOU's students can study at any place and any time on their own convenience. Face to face tutoring activity, seminars and examination are usually organized at students' home towns or nearby provinces. However during the coronavirus pandemic situation, all types of face-to-face activities have suspended and the university has adopted the strategy of online education instead. Besides, in order to fully serve their local students, the university also has another ten regional centres spreading out in every part of the country apart from the main campus (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2021)

There are lots of study programs available at STOU. At the first period, STOU provided only bachelor's degree programs in three schools: School of Management Science, School of Liberal Arts and School of Educational Studies. Later on another eight schools were set up. They were School of Economics, School of Law, School of Political Science, School of Human Ecology, School of Health Science, School of Communication Arts, School of Science and Technology and School of Nursing. At present, there are various kinds of study programs including certificate program, bachelor's degree program, master's degree program and doctoral degree program and they are in various fields of the study. Moreover, the university also provide short course certificate which is called certificate of achievement for the general public.

At the beginning of the year 2019, the COVID-19 virus had spread out all over the world. The pandemic has impacted every aspect of life: economics, health, social interaction, travelling, and education in every country. In Thailand, the strong impact COVID-19 cases started in December 2019. People have to strongly follow hygiene regulations of the government and most of them have to work from home. For education sector, all schools, universities and educational institutions have to operate teaching and learning online or distance education. Actually, it is the huge shifts in the way of life of teachers, students and parents being introduced to 100 percent online learning as part of the fight against

Covid-19. For STOU, it is not quite abig change since the university employs distance education from the first start. However, there are some activities which are in the form of face to face contact such as face to face tutoring, seminar, dissertation advising, professional experience intensive training program and final examination have to be adjusted into online approach. This paper will present the management of each aspect within distance education system of STOU during the pandemic by focusing on postgraduate education level.

II. Graduate programs in STOU

For the objective of the graduate programs, the graduates are expected to acquire increased professional experience over the course of their graduate programs, so that they can be prepared for a successful career through their coursework, and demonstrate their professional practice skills through the research project development.

At graduate level in STOU, all schools offer Master and Doctoral programs in various fields. Some Master Degree offer in the fields of Information Science, Curriculum and Instruction, Laws, Economics, Political Sciences, Communication Arts, etc. Some schools offer Doctoral Degree in the areas of Educational Administration, Political Sciences, Information Science, Agricultural Extension and Development, Business Administration, etc. Each field of study has its own program, depending on the specifics of that field of study,

for example, the programs in School of Educational Studies are as follows:

The School of Education Studies offers graduate programs which focus on developing in-service educational personnel who wish to increase their pedagogical content knowledge, academic knowledge and professional ethics. The programs aim to promote research development in the fields of teacher education and educational studies, provide academic services to educational personnel and other interested parties, and contribute to the preservation and maintenance of national arts and culture (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2022a).

The programs prepare graduate students for careers in teaching, leadership, and expert positions in educational fields that promote equity and excellence in the education of diverse social changes.

The school has three graduate programs, the doctoral program, the master program, and the graduate diploma program. The doctoral program typically runs three years; while it takes two years for the master degree and one year for graduate diploma program. Those programs may cover the subjects of teaching, lecturing, seminar, skills development and professional experiences to the learners of all ages and abilities. Instruction in school is centered on curriculum and instruction, educational administration, educational measurement and evaluation, guidance and psychological counseling, nonformal

and informal education, educational technology and communications.

The School of Educational Studies offers several doctoral and masterdegrees, and a graduate diploma program follows (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2022b). For the doctoral programs, five programs have been offered; Doctor of Philosophy Program in Curriculum and Instruction; Doctor of Philosophy Program in Educational Administration; Doctor of Philosophy Program in Educational Measurement and Evaluation; Doctor of Philosophy Program in Guidance and Psychological Counseling; and Doctor of Philosophy Program in Educational Technology and Communications.

For the master programs, seven programs have been proposed; Master of Education Program in Curriculum and Instruction; Master of Education Program in Educational Administration; Master of Education Program in Educational Measurement and Evaluation; Master of Education Program in Guidance and Psychological Counseling; Master of Education Program in Nonformal and Informal Education; Master of Education Program in Educational Technology and Communications; and Master of Education Program in Science Education. And the graduate diploma program in curriculum and instruction has been advised for those learner who desire to fulfill their knowledge in curriculum and instruction.

III. Teaching and Learning

It is noted that Covid-19 Pandemic has immensely changed the teaching and learning approaches of STOU in. Prior to the pandemic, STOU normally provides distance education in graduate level mainly by printed-based in parallel with the face-to-face seminars and also applying E-learning, and Video on Demand in variety of courses (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2016) For the face-to-face seminars, students need to travel in order to attend the classes at STOU Regional Centres which located in different provinces throughout the country. But during the outbreak, STOU has intensely introduced online distance learning in parallel with printed-based practice. This needs to be implemented in accordance with the Government policy and the University regulations in order to prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19. In doing so, all classes has been conducted online through Microsoft Teams.

In a general course, the self-learning packages are developed. This includes the fifteen chapter text-book, a work-book with 2 pieces of assignments, and study guide. The teaching and learning practices are normally divided into two supplementary seminars mainly for the delivery of academic content and interaction between learners and instructors.

The first supplementary seminar is supposedly for learners and instructors discussion about the main content of chapter 1-7 along with the presentation of the first students' assignment which

is basically in accordance with the content of those chapters. The learning activities may be filled with inquiries, comments and corrections. The similar activities is also executed in the second supplementary seminar which is usually organized in a few months later. The second seminar is for analyzing the main content of chapter 8-15 along with the presentation of the second students' work. In each seminar, students' performance will be assessed about 20 percent of the total scores of the course. This means 40 percent for two seminars, and the left of 60 percent is for the final exam. In many courses, E-learning may be structured and employed to substitute for the first or the second seminar, or both depending on the consideration of the course teams.

Moreover, there are two core courses which provide intensive seminars at the main campus apart from those two supplementary ones. This is aiming to wrap up the main content of the whole courses through various activities including discussion on the additional assignment. As well, the students' performance will be assessed and counted about 20 percent for this intensive one.

After completing the courses, students are required to participate in Professional Experience Activities. It is a five-day seminar held at the main STOU campus. The activities are designed and arranged by each program of study in order to help equip students with readiness to enter their chosen professions. The seminar is usually on

the theme of trends and current issues or challenges in global situation related to their field, and offers practical guidance on applying the knowledge they have acquired. Besides, the activities give students a chance to spend time with their fellow classmates whom they have hardly met for some period of time. Finally, to be graduated, all the required course blocks must be accomplished within a time frame specified by the program.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic crisis, it is noted that all those learning activities are executed mainly on the online basis by using Microsoft Teams. In doing so, the online learning can be accessed by a variety of smart devices (responsive web design) such as laptops, tablets, smart phones, etc., assisting the students to access the learning content easily with the least restriction of the display on the learning devices.

IV. Conducting dissertation

For master's degree students, there are two tracks of the study program for them to choose. The first one is studying 4 of 6 credits courses and conducting 12 credits thesis or dissertation. The second track is studying 5 of the 6 credits courses and conducting 6 credits independent study. For doctoral degree program, every student have to conduct dissertation. They study 3 of 6 credits course work and conducting 36 credits dissertation (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2019).

There are about 3 main phases for both master's degree and doctoral

degree students to conduct dissertation. The first phase is to develop research proposal, the second phase is to develop research instruments and the third phase is to do the data collection and analysis and then write a research report. For the first phase, developing research proposal, students are assigned to study a number of dissertations and search for information related to their interested topics until they have insight idea to develop their own proposal. For the second phase, students will follow the plan in their research proposal. They have to develop research instruments, try them out and adjust them to be ready for data collection. The third phase, students will contact with the research samples and related people in order to operate their data collection as designed. Then they will run data analysis and interpretation and write up a research report respectively. In each phase, thesis advisors will meet their own advisees onsite at the university about 2 days on the weekend to get the concept paper and have some discussion. After that they communicate continuously through different channels, such as telephone, line meeting or even informal face to face meeting, until they reach the goal of each phase. But as a result of the pandemic, universities are forced to migrate all communication processes between thesis advisor and advisees from face-to-face delivery to online modality

For dissertation examination, it is usually run by face to face meeting. Students will present their research process and research results to the

research committee. After that they will answer questions and obtain suggestions from the research committee. But for the beginning of pandemic situation 2019, thesis examination has to be in the form of online examination through Microsoft Teams or other applications. The process of the examination is still the same but students and research committee are at different places. It is found that, it worked quite well. Some problems faced were the stability of internet and voice clearness of each participant.

V. Online Examination

Under normal circumstances without the pandemic of COVID-19, STOU has the policy to provide exam venues for graduate students to facilitate and help students so that the students do not have to abandon their job duties during the exam. The place where students take the exam is called “exam venues” The university provides exam venues in all provinces throughout Thailand. In addition, the university also provides services to students who need to travel abroad and are unable to return to Thailand for examinations. The university provides overseas examination services at the embassy or consulate that is ready to be a national examination venue. The university stipulates examinations on Saturday and Sunday and completes the exam within 2 days. The Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation will inform students of the examination schedule on the university’s website and send students e-mail individually

approximately 10 - 20 days before the exam.

However, in the event of the COVID-19 outbreak, the university has realized the danger of spreading the disease. Therefore, the Office of Graduate Studies was assigned to be responsible for conducting the examination for graduate students with the following action guidelines (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2021b):

5.1. Designing an online exam management system

The Office of Graduate Studies has adjusted the exam format from onsite exam venues to an online exam through Microsoft Teams. The exams are still organized on Saturday and Sunday. On each exam day, the exam sessions will be divided into two periods, which are the morning session from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00, and the afternoon session from 13:00 - 16:00. In each exam period, the exam room is divided into sub-rooms according to the subject. In each sub-room, there are 2 proctors per 20 students. Furthermore, there is one technician supervising the exam so as to ensure the success of the online examination. For exam items, each course team member write exam items and at the end of the exam the same course team member will check the exam items once again. The exams are in the form of subjective exams which emphasize the analytical thinking ability of students. Some courses allow students to open textbooks during the exam while there are

some courses students are not allowed to open textbooks at all.

5.2. Exam rehearsal

Exam rehearsal is the preparation of the proctors and students to be able to conduct the examination effectively by providing a rehearsal about one week before the actual exam date. During the rehearsal, proctors and students will have the opportunity to rehearse conducting the exams. The proctors in each exam room will ask students to verify their identity before taking the exam. After that, students have the opportunity to practice opening exam questions from the online system and submitting exam papers online by using Microsoft Teams program. The rehearsal helps prevent and solve problems that may occur on the actual exam day such as students' incompetence having online exams, crashes of Microsoft Teams program command menus, or Internet network disruptions, etc.

5.3. The examination

In each exam, both morning and afternoon exam sessions on Saturday and Sunday, the online exam room will be opened approximately one hour before the actual test time to allow the proctors and students to prepare and conduct the exam by having the important steps as follows:

- 1) The proctors inform the students of the rules and regulations of the examination and verify students' identity before taking the exam.

- 2) Students take the exam at the specified time interval. The proctors are to

monitor students' examination behavior in accordance with the established rules and regulations.

3) Students submit exam papers online at the end of the exam.

5.4. Checking exam papers

When students have submitted exams in the online system, the course team will check the exam items that each team member is responsible for in the online system. The scores given to each student are later combined with other scores to determine the outcome of examinations.

In other words, the COVID-19 outbreak has forced the university to shift the exam format from physical exams to online exams. This is a new measurement and evaluation innovation that requires careful action in order to provide a standardized examination, build trust in honesty, transparency and accountability.

VI. Interactions and supports

Interactions and supports for graduate students aim to help students adjust to their studies happily and graduate with quality with the distance education system organized by the university.

In normal situation Interaction and support activities for graduate students normally occur in a face-to-face interaction, but with the spread of COVID-19, interaction and support activities for graduate students have shifted to online platform (Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, 2022b). The official first activity was the orientation for new students. On

that day, students will learn how to practice distance learning, meet fellow students who will help each other throughout their studies, and meet with teachers in the subjects students are affiliated with. Each student will have an academic advisor who will give advice and help in studying each set of subjects until all subjects are completed. After that, when students enrolled their thesis or independent study courses, they will have a thesis advisor or independent study advisor giving advices, supporting and helping until the students complete their studies.

Throughout the study, students and teachers have multiple communication channels for discussion, which include both face to face and online interaction such as Line Group, Facebook Messenger, E-mail, and Microsoft Teams and etc. These communication channels allow students and teachers to communicate and ask questions until students complete their studies and achieve the goals.

VII. Concluding Remarks

After applying the fully scale of online distance education for almost two years during the pandemic, positive results could be revealed. It is noted that STOU online education has become innovative and practical as it is relatively flexible in time and space of working and learning, easier to access, responsive to lifelong education and student needs. Most students have acquired better digital skills, and are satisfied on cost and time saving as they do not need to travel to the Regional Center or to the main campus.

However, challenges are also observed and need to be mentioned. As some courses, students need to do activities in person or face-to-face conduction. Moreover, some students in remote areas may face difficulty about internet access. Besides, students who study on their own at home may need closer supervision and support particularly the encouragement for stronger intention, and self-disciplined. In addition, the university regulations need to be revised in order to accommodate students learning online, in particular, in this economic hardship. Otherwise, this may lead to easily increase dropout rate in the long run. Thus, measures to overcome those challenges are urgently required.

Even though STOU is quite familiar with distance education, but it is recognized that Covid-19 has dramatically changed the practices of STOU in major activities: teaching and learning, thesis/dissertation supervision, evaluation, and student support. It is the shift for every staff from normally working at the office to working online at home. Therefore, all those activities have been revised, adjusted, and restructured to be systemic, practical and certainly applicable to the computer-based system. As learning online at home, all students and university staff need to adjust themselves and attend several online trainings, rehearsals, and workshops in order to use those applications effectively. This aims to maintain all learning activities for students, meet the standard of execution, and achieve the vision of

the university. To sum up, STOU is an open university that uses technology and distance education innovations to create lifelong self-learning opportunities for all.

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Author address: School of Educational Studies, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

Email: djumpatong@hotmail.com

