Open Learning: The Dominant Quality Innovation for Current Alternative Education Systems of Thailand

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ABSTRACT

During the recent decades, the global society is propelled by an economy indisputably driven by knowledge, information and technology. Education is recognized as an essential portion of the society's infrastructure. Thus the education has expanded phenomenally in order to response to the ever-increasing demand for lifelong learning and job-related skills. While a part has been accomplished, but the majority remains to be done.

The concept of providing learners the choices regarding media, place of study, support mechanism as well as entry and exit points has been implemented in Thailand for decades. However, these methods of transferring education to Thais were accepted and limited only for some groups of people, particularly those who had no chance to pursue the conventional education.

"Open learning" is now a dominant practical solution among the Thai alternative education systems. According to the Thai Education Act 1999, promulgated in agreement with the Constitution of the Kingdom 1997, the government has to provide a basic education for all Thais as well as to enhance a higher education along with a special education, thoroughly, quantitatively and qualitatively. Hence, all alternative education systems providing new dimensions in Thai education at all levels are nationwide accepted and fostered appropriately by law.

In this paper, the innovative open learning systems provided in Thailand at all levels are identified and discussed. The key points are focused on how the open learning accomplishes the mechanism for transferring the effective education for development the Thai society. Besides, the details and case studies regarding how the open learning in Thailand becoming recognized both at the national as well as the international are analyzed and discussed.

Introduction

Up to the 21st century, it has been proved true that the various disciplines in science studies along with information and technology studies dominate the global society. Thus the pace of change in people's education, as in almost every other facet of human life, has continued to accelerate at an ever-faster rate. Academic programs and research methods that were accepted innovative a few years ago have quickly become obsolete or not appropriate anymore. The global development has dramatically increased the pressure on the education system to deliver everywhere around the world in the direction that a nation could augment its "human capital" to better complete in the global economy. In the new economy, all enterprises based on information technology are becoming smaller, as their sustainability on the high level of knowledge and skills from all employees. Consequently, the education has expanded phenomenally in order to response to the ever-increasing demand for lifelong learning and job-related skills.

Under such circumstances, it has been brought a growing realization around the world particularly in Thailand that the traditional education provision is now not sufficient to meet the society's needs.

The traditional primary challenge to all their education providers, particularly universities, of producing well-educated young graduates from a large school-leaver cohort is changing to one of equipping a significantly diverse; both in term of age and other criteria, cross-section of people with knowledge and job-related skills to accomplish their potential in the knowledge base and information society.

Thailand's Education Reform Condition

Due to the first education reform in Thailand a hundred years age, the school-based education system started. From there, the "chalk and talk" pattern of teaching, rote learning teachers as the center of teaching-learning process has been established. Hence, Thailand's education was somewhat restrained only in the classroom (Kaewdang, 2001).

Not until the year 1999, the National Education Act 1999 was promulgated in agreement with the Constitution of the Kingdom 1997. The Act is expected by all concerned to bring the appropriation of education reform for a better Thailand.

The National Education Act 1999, the 1st Education Act of the country, comprises 9 chapters. According to the Act, all Thai citizens, of all age groups, all social and economic statuses, the underprivileged, and people with special talents, would receive an appropriate education as well as relevant skills, training and development. In order to achieve this goal, the law requires that the state has to provide a qualitative basic

education (up to grade - 12) for all Thais as well as to promote a higher education along with a special education thoroughly, quantitatively and qualitatively. Education must aim at cultivating within students, the skills of searching knowledge through self-learning, so that they can learn continually at any time and any places throughout lives (http://thaiedreform.onec.go.th).

Lifelong Learning and the Learners-centered

The principles of education provision according to the National Education Act 1999 are based on (1) being "lifelong learning" for all Thais, (2) opening to all society's stakeholders to corporate education provision and (3) integrating of subject matters and learning process continually (http://thaiedreform.onec.go.th). In order to implement the "lifelong learning," the formal, non-formal, and informal approaches are all accepted by law. Knowledge, morality as well as the learning process of education shall be emphasized. Furthermore, the learners are regarded as being most important. The teaching process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality. It is accepted that each individual has potentiality for learning and is regarded as "the center of teaching-learning process." Instructors have to change their traditional role from a "teller" to a "facilitator", while the learners can learn by themselves, provided that they are assisted by instructors the best way to learn, to get information and to make use of what they have learned (Kaewdang, 2001).

Thailand's Era of the Alternative Education

As the Thai society changing to the new knowledge society immersing fostered by the Education Act 1999, the growth of the number of secondary students and secondary graduates will certainly highly increase. Hence, the number of those who want to pursue the higher education baccalaureate degrees will dramatically increase. Learning would no longer be the monopoly of the under 25 age group nor can it be limited solely to full-time study.

In fact, the inadequacy of access to formal education particularly at the secondary school and higher education levels in Thailand has been occurred for decades. This makes it all the more imperative that the quality innovation of providing the knowledge and life skills, which should lead to income generation for the needy, is provided. It might be expected that the majority of an increasing number of students are part-time, employed, all age and making a late entry to higher education. In addition to these, a

large number of today's non-participants in education will need to be brought into the fold if we are at all serious about offering all people equal opportunity as indicated by the Education Act. They will be as much contributions to the learning as they will be the knowledge receivers (Dhanarajan, 2000). Hence, the Thai society will change to knowledge society completely and everyone will participate throughout life in education and training through formal or alternative education approaches. The alternative education systems might be in form of non-formal or informal. Either formal, non-formal or informal educations are all accepted by the Education Act 1999 (http://thaidereform.go.th).

Alternative Education Systems Facilities

According to the Thailand's Education Act 1999, Education Institutions are authorized to provide any one or all of the three types of education: formal, nonformal and informal. In addition, the state shall promote the running and establishment of all types of lifelong learning resources, such as public libraries, museums, art galleries, zoological gardens, public parks, botanical gardens, science and technology park, sport and recreation centers, data bases and other source of learning (Kaewdang, 2001).

The emergence of modern information and communication technology (ICT) basing on the application of computers and multimedia, digital compression and satellites, fiber optics and wireless networks, as well as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, shall dramatically widen our options for engaging in the alternative education systems at the individual, community and societal levels. From now on, the opportunities are also emerging for making the better application of the previously technologies that under-utilized in supporting the learning process, i.e. radio, television, blackboard and prints (Dighe and Reddi, 1999)

The today ICT for supporting the learning mechanism in Thailand is somewhat very cost effective. It is the government policy in providing the above facilities to promote the education reform. It is necessary to reduce the gap between those who are already privileged and who are not.

Thailand's Experience Regarding the Open Learning

Actually the concept of providing learners the choice regarding media, place of study, support mechanism as well as entry and exit points has been implemented in Thailand for decades. It might be able to state that much has recently been made of open learning in Thailand, but what do we mean by the term. To some it means distance

delivery, to others it means flexible access. In addition, the term is probably synonymous with a way to teaching that meets the needs of the learner, i.e. open and flexible (Fraser, 1997). According to the commonwealth of learning's glossary of open and distance learning terms (http://www.col.drg/ODLIntro), "Open Learning is defined as an educational philosophy that also emphasizes giving learners choices, about media, place of study, pace of study, support mechanism and entry and exit points. In addition, any learning that take place with the instructor and student geographically remote from each other is now recognized as "Distance Learning" (http://www.geteducated.com).

Up to now, there are a number of education providers in Thailand that offer certificates or degrees through open and/or distance learning systems. These providers can be categorized into two levels as the followings (Wongsothon, 2001):

1. School Level

1.1 Non-Formal Education Department (NFED), Ministry of Education.

NFED has been at the forefront in organizing distance education since 1977. The NFED students are well used to the mode of self-studying and distance education they already used: texts, audio and video tapes, radio and television programs as instructional media.

1.2 Klaikangwon Distance Education Program

The Distance Education via Satellite Foundation was established in 1996. The foundation has been entrusted by the Ministry of Education of Thailand to conduct live secondary education broadcast via satellite (UK band and direct to home DTH system) and optic fiber to a number of the destination schools throughout Thailand via 6 UBC channels.

2. University Level

To date, there are two open universities in Thailand that offers degree programs. These are Ramkhamhaeng University (RU) and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU).

RU was established as the 1st Open University in Thailand. This university is probably the Dual-mode University since it provides both on and off-campus studies. Nowadays, the university offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

On the other hand, STOU, which was established as an Open University in 1978, operated by only means of distance education. STOU also offers both undergraduate and graduate studies. STOU is now recognized as the first and the only one university in Thailand that established an outstanding "Open and Distance Education

(ODE)" system that seeks to expand educational opportunities fairly and to the greatest extent possible (Suttiprasit, 2001b).

The Case of STOU as an Outstanding Open and Distance Learning Provider

Since the new role of the instructors is to be the "facilitator" as stated earlier, i.e. the focus is on the students' learning, not on the instructors' teaching. Learners-centered learning processes that foster deep learning require qualitative-innovative assessment strategies. STOU provides open and distance learning to Thai students in their work place around the country and in some other countries. To convey knowledge and experiences to students around the country either in town or urban areas, STOU provides students with qualitatively integrating modern multimedia, i.e. print media and electronic media, which enable students to study effectively. The electronic media comprise instructional video and cassette tapes, radio and television program, as well as the modern technologies such as computer-assisted instruction, distance education via satellite, and an on-line learning via Internet.

STOU still provide multimedia with print media as core media to students. Multimedia-integrated for students' study are mainly divided into two groups as the followings (Suttiprasit, 2001b):

1. Multimedia with print media as core media, and
2. Multimedia with computer media as core media.

The two groups of multimedia are used appropriately concerning the society pros and cons regarding advantages and disadvantages of the on-line computer media. The computer media are instructional self–learning packages offering as virtual teaching programs. The STOU Virtual University Project has already begun. Students can access into STOU Virtual University programs using their own ID numbers and passwords to get the lessons start. In the future, students who have more chance to study with computer media can design the own way of using multimedia supporting with computer media as core ones. The other students still can study through multimedia with print media as core ones equally.

Students can decide and manage their choices regarding media, place of study, pace of study, STOU learning facilities as well as the entry and exit points. In order to assure the high standard of academic evaluation system, all STOU students can learn distantly in asynchronous mode but all of them have to take the examination in synchronous mode at one of STOU academic centers located in each province around the country as well as in some foreign countries (Suttiprasit, 2001b).

Immersing Role of Conventional Education Providers

Until now, a number of conventional education providers, particularly universities, have been offering some types of short courses and programs for people by mean of open learning via some types of electronic media such as radio and television programs as well as distance learning via satellite including on-line learning. Delivering materials on-line in form of Internet is the dominant method. The contents are considerable variation including professional development and non-degree such as computer application, health clinic, languages, and art and culture. This new educational innovation becomes important tool to open up extraordinary prospect for learning and for the diversification of knowledge. It is the challenge that more schools and universities in Thailand adapt themselves to the new approach of providing education for all and to community-based for improving the quality of alternative education.

The Challenge and the Best Practice

The degrees and certificates awarded for those who are qualified for the open and/or distance learning programs of the school level and the university level agencies stated in the earlier topic are all somewhat nationwide recognized. On the other hand, short courses and professional courses for working people without the formal examinations are generally still not accepted for transferring credits to the formal education programs. However, in the future the evaluation of credit might be based on evidence of learning achieved through experience (APL) or on the acceptance of credits issued by other organizations as the Education Act 1999 allows. The volume of APL credit being accepted by an institution towards its qualifications might depends largely on its assessment of the institution that has awarded the credit.

Conventional education system defines a strict boundary between levels of education and different tracks of learning such as academic, vocational or technical. Knowledge is compartmentalized and learning is conceived primarily as a “transmission model” where the “empty” learner is forced to fill up with facts and skills (Dighe and Reddi, 1999).

The concept of learning according to the Thailand’s Education Act 1999 is understood as a very broad and multi-dimensional one. This concept is really the same as the concept of UNESCO’S Learning Without Frontiers. The UNESCO concept deals with how people seek for, acquire, analyze, synthesize, use and share information and skills from a variety of media and resources; how they perceive themselves, reflect on

their condition and environment: and even how they construct meaning and evolve their consciousness (Faccini and Jain, 1997).

It is most likely to state that it is the challenge of open learning to be the quality innovation for the current alternative education systems in which officially accepted by law in Thailand. The crucial is that all of the open learning providers whether schools, universities, or other organizations should concern about the best practice. “Best practice” might be defined as that combination of structure, educational technology and the content of a learning opportunity, which in certain contexts and for particular groups of learners, is most likely to achieve the purposes of the main stakeholders (Calder, 2000). In addition to Calder’s idea regarding the best practice, the major texts on practice, also draw attention to the issue of leaner support (Simpson, 2000) (Tait and mills, 1990) and to the institutional context and management of the provision (Robinson, 2000) (Rumble, 1996).

According to Calder (2000), it is clear from reports of actual practice that the providers those are new to the field are often unaware of the literature and the knowledge resources available to them. One thing to be kept in mind is that different groups of stakeholders perceive success in very different ways. For example, providers might concentrate on the net profits, client satisfaction ratings or relation’s rankings of their organization by peer groups. In addition to the provider’s reputation, students might concern about the quality, cost of study as well as the popularity of the study program they seek for.

One of valuable guidelines for the best practice is that based on a part of the UNESCO document which is listed as the followings (Dighe and Reddi, 1999):

1. Two-way communications is essential for effective distance learning of disadvantaged groups.

2. Use of multimedia is normally more effective than that relies only on a single medium.

3. A sound organizational structure is required for the efficiency.

4. Face-to-face tutoring and learning resource centers can be important contributions.

5. Good instructional design, involving careful planning and adequate formative evaluation, based on learner feedback, is a key to quality achievement.

Another key point that regards to is an application of the modem technology. There still be the concern regarding the assumption that “the latest technology is the necessity as the best one to use” since there are a number of questions to figure out

whether the modern information and communication technology can be widely accessed. Questions that need to be asked including the quality and the cost of the access along with the readiness of the learners to use as well as of the providers to offer the adequate technical support (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999).

Concluding Remarks

Much has recently been made of open learning in Thailand. A number of education providers both of at school level and university level have been offering certificate and/or degree programs through the open learning mechanism for more than a decade. The open learning has continually been crucial alternative solution for those who have no chance to attend the formal education. According to Thailand's National Education Act 1999, the concept of lifelong learning shall be officially implemented nationwide. Hence, the traditional linear education sequence of mandatory schooling to higher education to work will no longer be the dominant model. On the other hand, the Thai education has to be worthwhile for all Thais that should seek for knowledge and skills continually at any time and any places through out lives.

Today and from now on, the open learning is recognized as the dominant quality innovation for Thailand's alternative education that is being more and more important for Thailand. It is the challenge for all education institutions that have the adequate capacity, to provide the high quality open learning to all that need education and training. In order to accomplish this challenge, it is necessary that all open learning providers have to be extremely aware of what should be the best practice in order to assure the quality of the open learning. All processes of providing open learning, particularly the course evaluation process, have to be under controlled using the acceptable standard level. Each provider should benchmark what it has been implementing with another ones in order to raise the high expectations and prohibit a tendency to be self–serving and status quo-preserving.

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