

Distance Higher Education and The Rise of a Middle Class in Thailand: The Case of STOU

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Introduction

Sukhothai Thamatirat Open University (STOU, for short) was established in 1981 as Thailand's first national university providing higher education through distance education as a main method. STOU, like many other distance education institutions in Southeast Asia, is characterized by the following features: providing mass or "popular" higher education, with an open admission policy, based on national or governmental sponsorship, and using "module" and "distance" methods. STOU uses printed materials mailed to students as a main medium, with supplementary Radio and TV broadcasting and tutorial sessions in local study centers.

Through its characteristics as a distance learning institution, STOU has set as its main purpose the opening of educational opportunities for people who couldn't otherwise have the chance to learn at university. That is, STOU aims at offering education for people who live far from "campus," who have not time to commute to it, and/or who faced economic or other difficulties that prevented them from going to college when they were young. In sum, STOU was established to provide higher education beyond "distance" in terms not only of geography, but also of time, age, and social class backgrounds.

To what degree are these aims achieved by STOU? How does STOU expand higher educational opportunities in Thailand? How does this distance education institution contribute to equalizing educational opportunities beyond geographical distance, age difference, and the social and educational backgrounds of learners? To what extent does its expanded educational opportunities give students and graduates chances to climb social ladders to reach the middle class? By analyzing both interview

and statistical material from STOU students and graduates¹, this paper will investigate how STOU gives Thai people dreams of becoming middle class and whether their dreams come true.

In the first section of this paper, we will examine how STOU has expanded educational opportunities. Then the second section will reveal what students and graduates expect from STOU and how much their expectations are realized. Based on findings from the data analyses, the third section will discuss what impact distance higher education has had on the syndrome of "diploma disease" in Thailand.

1. STOU and Expanded Educational Opportunities

Before the 1970's most universities in Thailand were located in the Bangkok metropolitan area. As a result, people living far from the Bangkok area had difficulties of learning at university: they had to come to and stay in Bangkok for four years of higher education. Time-settings of "traditional," regular higher education institutions also restricted educational opportunities to only people who could study on a full-time basis. Thus, working adults were eliminated from higher education once they entered the workplace.

STOU, the first higher education institution relying completely on distance education methods in Thailand, was intended to overcome these difficulties and expand opportunities of university level education, especially to those who lost the chance to go to university when they were young or who lived outside the Bangkok area.

In this first section, to examine to what degree these aims of STOU are attained, we will investigate STOU students' compositions of a)age, b)occupations, c)residential areas, and d)educational backgrounds in comparison with non-distance education institutions in Thailand.

1.1 Age distribution of STOU students

As a "life long education" institution, STOU aims to provide a "second chance" to people who did not have a chance to go to university when they were young. In other words, many of STOU's potential students are working adults.

As Table 1 indicates, most students in STOU are, in fact, over 23 years old. Students aged between 17 and 22 -- whose ages are same as those in regular universities -- constitute less than one fourth. On the other hand, students over 26

¹ Sets of survey data we use in this paper are from NIME (1989, 1991) and STOU (1986). Details of the data sources are given at the end.

make up half of all students. As was purposed, STOU successfully enrolls older students than 'traditional,' 'closed' higher education institutions.

Since the latest statistics available to us cover only incoming students and the way of categorization of age ranges differs from the previous data, it is difficult to follow the trend of students' age distribution up to recent years. However, Table 1 shows a gradual shift of students' age composition from old to younger students. In 1982 only 28% of STOU students were under 25, but the percentage increased to 49% in 1984. In 1988 over 50% of incoming students were younger than 26 years old. The age of current STOU students tends to be younger. However this change does not necessarily mean that new students of STOU are fresh high school graduates. Instead, young working adults (aged between 22-25) have become a majority of newly enrolled students in STOU, as shown in Table 1.

1.2 Students' Occupations

Most STOU students are working adults. While only 11% of students have no jobs, over 80% are employed or own their business. As hoped for, a great number of working adults have been enrolled in STOU. Table 2 shows the majority of STOU students have been public employees for years. This may be natural because for the earlier years after its establishment, STOU provided mainly teacher training and public administration programs for teachers and public officers. However, recently the number of private business workers has increased as STOU has provided more varied educational programs like communication arts and economics.

1.3 Regional distribution of STOU students

Another important role expected to be played by STOU is to expand higher education opportunities to people living outside the Bangkok metropolitan area. Does STOU succeed in attaining this purpose?

Table 3 shows a regional composition of STOU students' residence with a comparison with non-distance higher education institutions. For the purpose of comparison, a "selectivity index" is calculated.² Using this index, we can compare student regional distribution between STOU and non-distance universities.

² Let ∂ be the percentage of students from one region to all students, and β the percentage of population in the same region to the whole population of Thailand; then $Y(\text{the selectivity index}) = \partial/\beta$. For example, 1.00 in the selectivity index means the number of students from a region is equally distributed relative to its regional population. When Y is more than 1.00, the number of students from the region is overrepresented relative to its population, and when Y is less than 1.00, students from the region are underrepresented.

A clear-cut finding from this comparison is that both STOU and non-distance 'closed' universities show a selectivity index higher than 1.00 for the Bangkok area. However, the STOU's index is smaller than the others (2.49 vs. 3.83). These findings mean first that more students come from the Bangkok area than other areas into both STOU and other universities. But, secondly, they suggest that Bangkok students are overrepresented more in non-distance education universities than in STOU. On the other hand, although students from such distant regions as the north and northeast are underrepresented both in STOU and other universities, STOU's selectivity indices for these two regions are smaller than the 'closed' universities. STOU enrolls more students from those regions than the other non-distance education universities.

Thus, as a distance education institution, STOU successfully expands higher education provision to distant areas and contributes to equalizing educational opportunities among different regions.

1.4 Educational Background of STOU students

Through distance education methods, STOU can provide a second chance to people who could not go to college when they were young. To examine how successfully this goal is attained, we compare students' secondary education backgrounds between STOU and regular universities.

Table 4 indicates that while academic secondary school graduates are overwhelmingly enrolled in non-distance education institutions, more than half of STOU students graduated from vocational programs.

Due to severe competition in entrance examinations and high selectivity among non-distance education universities, we assume that vocational school graduates must face difficulties to enter traditional universities which require severely academic-oriented entrance examinations. Stuck into a dead-end 'vocational' branch of secondary education, those graduates were eliminated from higher education probably because of difficulties in passing the entrance examinations. With an open admission policy, STOU can now make it easier for them to study at university.

Or, perhaps the vocational school graduates intentionally chose their programs. They knew that they couldn't enter college after secondary education. If they decided not to go to college, they may have thought that vocational schools would give them better occupational chances after graduation. STOU opens its doors to lead back to school people who otherwise would have been excluded from higher education forever.

2. A Road to the Middle Class through Distance Education

The previous section revealed that STOU successfully attains its goal of extending higher education opportunities to people who would otherwise have difficulties in receiving higher education. In this section, we examine what students and graduates of STOU seek for and how and to what extent their expectations are realized.

As shown above, most STOU students are working adults, and were not given chance to go to university when they were young. What leads those people back to higher education? What do they expect STOU to offer? What reasons do they have for attending STOU? Analyses of our interview data with 140 students and graduates of STOU depict that their main motives to enter STOU are career-related.

2.1 Motives to be enrolled in STOU

46% of our interviewees answered that they decided to enter STOU for knowledge and skills relevant to their jobs. Many students expect STOU to provide useful knowledge and vocational skills to enhance their business chances. A law program graduate of STOU, who runs his own business in a southern region, told us that the legal knowledge learned at STOU helped his business a lot, especially in such financial contract issues as loans and tax arrangements. He also emphasized the importance and usefulness of his legal knowledge when his company would become a joint-stock company. The more modernized business becomes, the more legal issues enter the picture. Therefore, up-to-date knowledge and ways of thought in law can help business people like him expand their business chances and improve management.

A middle-aged flight attendant of Thai International Airways decided to study at STOU not only for her second BA but for the content of the education itself. To improve her job skills as a flight attendant, she learned home economics at STOU. According to her what she learned about human relations in her courses helped improve her services and understand passengers better than before.

A medical doctor who is an associate professor at a national university began his study in an administration program of STOU when he was appointed dean in his university. For university administration, he thought, STOU's public administration program gave him useful knowledge, which he couldn't learn at his medical school.

As shown by those cases, in an inexpensive way, STOU offers modern knowledge and skills useful in public and private administrations, business and service. Developing countries usually lack the infrastructure to diffuse modern knowledge in their rapidly changing administrative and economic structures. All the textbooks and other instruction materials of STOU are written in Thai, so that such knowledge is diffused in readable and understandable ways to ordinary Thai people. STOU can also

transmit such knowledge widely and easily to the countryside through its distance education methods. Thus STOU contributes to the modernization of the nation by providing knowledge and information, which many students in a changing society need more and more in their jobs.

A chance to enhance career advancement is another expected outcome from STOU. 27% of respondents said that they expected STOU to provide degrees and/or knowledge for promotion in the workplace. 23% responded that they wanted higher educational credentials. Thus, while one third of our interviewees mentioned that they attended STOU for their own cultivation and self-fulfilment, the majority of them also emphasized career-oriented motives.

Our interview cases provide clear examples of these motives. A middle-aged male public officer, who finished an agricultural course at STOU, told us that he decided to start the STOU program to enhance his promotion chances. A young male public employee working at a national fisheries experimental station said that he planned to change jobs with the help of the STOU degree. His current job, according to him, was dead-end. He hoped to move to a new job, which would be more relevant to his speciality in his BA of home economics. A young female STOU student, a part-time clerk at the same fisheries experimental station office explained that after she finished her education at STOU, she hoped to have a full-time job, which would offer more career advancement. Like these two STOU students, young workers in that national fisheries experimental station office regarded learning at STOU as a ladder to improve their occupational careers.

The promotion system in public offices in Thailand partly explains the motives of STOU students. In many public offices, bachelor's degrees are set as a pre-requisite for promotion in the workplace. Although bachelor's degrees do not necessarily guarantee automatic promotion, they provide eligibility to take examinations for career advancement.

A middle rank male public officer working for a national TV station started a communication course in STOU to obtain eligibility to take promotion examinations. Without the BA from STOU, he mentioned, he would not have been given the chance to be promoted. His learning at STOU also helped him prepare for the examination. Following his success, his wife, who also worked at the same station, was persuaded to begin learning at STOU. She expected, too, to be given a chance for promotion after she finished her STOU program. As shown, especially for students who are public employees, STOU is seen as a good instrument to acquire eligibility for career upgrade.

Not only eligibility for promotion, but social reputation and prestige are enhanced by higher educational credentials from STOU. A middle-aged employee working at a public office told us his success story. Before he finished his education at STOU, his secondary education certificate limited his activities in his workplace. Even if he attempted to assert his opinion at a meeting, few paid attention to him because of

his lower diploma. However, after he obtained his bachelor's degree from STOU, he was more respected and his ideas became listened to with more attention by others, even if what he said was not so different from before. With improved authority and reputation in his workplace, the interviewee also increased his self-confidence. This case clearly shows that social reputation enhanced by a higher educational credential from STOU increases a graduate's social influence in the work place.

STOU's degrees also extend graduates' social networks and sociability. The president of an STOU alumni group in a northern region told us that his motive to start a STOU program was to get a bachelor's degree, which most people in his business circle already had. After he received the degree, he felt more comfortable to meet people with college education.

Out of STOU graduates we interviewed, two thirds answered that they felt positive changes in others' views of them, and 26% said that their power and authority in the work place were increased after they got BAs from STOU. 43% responded that they had more self-confidence after they finished STOU programs. Not only does STOU give eligibility for promotion, but social reputation and self-respect are also enhanced by completion of STOU degrees.

2.2 From lower-middle to middle-middle class

As described before, most STOU students are those who lost a chance to get college education when they were young. Not a few interviewees commented that they came from poor families so that they couldn't afford higher education when they finished secondary education. But an analysis of their social background shows that even before they were enrolled in STOU, they had already moved from a working-class family background to the lower middle class.

Table 5 indicates a cross-tabulation between incoming STOU incoming students' occupations and those of their fathers. Obviously those who have public officers as their fathers tend to become public officers themselves as well. However, even from farming families, most STOU students (70%) had already become public officers before they finished STOU programs. Public officers are, in general, seen as prestigious in Thailand. They are also clearly stratified by their rank and titles in bureaucratic organizations. Educational credentials are regarded as one of the crucial determinants for promotion. Thus, many from farming families first became public officers, then, to pursue a higher social status, they began STOU programs.

We can calculate a "selectivity index" of STOU students from a farming background and compare it with those in non-distance universities. While traditional on-campus institutions still close their doors to farmers' offspring (the selectivity index is 0.04), STOU, on the other hand, welcomes them much more (the index is 0.63 though still below 1.00). Compared with non-distance education institutions, STOU in

fact opens its doors to people from lower family backgrounds.

2.3 Realization of Students' Plans

Although many graduates regard STOU as an instrument to climb up the career ladder, it is still questionable whether their expectations are realized. If so, how and to what extent?

According to a survey of STOU graduates, only 2.7% changed their jobs after they completed STOU programs. Although the percentage of graduates who changed jobs is low, it varies among different programs. While graduates from educational studies (1.4%), agricultural extension and co-operatives (0.8%), law (0.8%), and health science (0.2%) rarely changed their jobs after finishing STOU, those from communication arts (14.8%), economics (11.0%), home economics (6.1%), and political science (5.6%) more often changed their jobs after getting STOU degrees. Unfortunately we have no direct information about the extent to which promotion within the same work place happens. But our interviews show that as far as public officers are concerned, upgraded educational credentials by STOU seem to help its graduates' chances to be promoted. At least higher degrees give eligibility to take examinations for promotion in many public offices. Indirect evidence supports this interpretation. Among STOU graduates, 84% answered in a questionnaire survey done by STOU that they were satisfied with their current jobs. If many of STOU graduates were frustrated with a gap between their expectations to be promoted and actual promotion chances, one would assume that more STOU graduates would be dissatisfied with their current jobs.

3. Distance Higher Education and Problems of the "Diploma Disease"

The establishment of distance higher education institutions with an open admissions policy has expanded educational opportunities greatly. Accompanying Ramkamaehng University, another open admission -- but not distance education -- university, STOU has increased the number of bachelor's degree holders produced in Thailand. For the five years between 1967 and 1971, about 43,000 people received bachelor's degrees from traditional, "closed" universities. But in 1987 alone, the number of new graduates increased to 58,131. In 1987, while 55% of new college graduates came from regular, "closed" universities, 32% were from Ramkamaehng, and another 13% from STOU (see Table 6). By only these two open admission universities, 45% of bachelor's degrees were produced.

Social critics warn that rapid expansion of educational opportunities could cause a serious problem in developing countries such as high unemployment among

highly educated people. Rapid expansion of higher education could bring about mismatches in the labor market unless the demand for college graduates expands at the same pace. Over-supply of college graduates could cause high unemployment among holders of new bachelors' degrees. This in practice happens in Thailand. Graduates from Ramkamaeheng University suffered unemployment even after they received college degrees. In 1986-87, 42% of Ramkamaeheng graduates couldn't find a job after completion of their college programs, and another 21% kept the same jobs they had while they studied at the university. Increased numbers of higher degrees caused mismatches in the labor market.

On the contrary, STOU, as a distance higher education institution, seems able to escape the problem. STOU graduates do not suffer from being unemployed as severely as those from Ramkamaeheng. Not surprisingly, less than 2% of STOU graduates couldn't find a job upon their graduation. Since most STOU students had jobs when they started STOU programs, they didn't have to seek for jobs. 96% of STOU graduates kept the same jobs as they had at STOU when they finished their educational programs. STOU's case suggests that by providing education to already-working adults, upgraded educational credentials do not necessarily lead to an oversupply of college educated labor force in the market.

Since we have no information about promotion chances among STOU graduates in the same work place, it is difficult to prove how much a distance learning institution can avoid problems of diploma disease such as a mismatch between supply and demand for college graduates. One could argue that a mismatch may take place not in the external labor market, but in the internal market. Although unemployment may not emerge in the external market, in the internal market -- that is, within the same work place -- frustration may accumulate among STOU graduates. Given a higher educational degree after long anxiety for it, it is natural that STOU graduates should strongly expect to be promoted. But for various reasons, they must still be in a queue to wait for promotion. There are not a few STOU graduates who are now eligible to take examinations for promotion but have not yet done so. Those people may have higher aspirations for promotion than before. A gap between their expectations and reality may cause frustrations but may not emerge as unemployment because those people stay in the same jobs. In contrast to the external labor market, mismatches between expectations and reality do not appear so clearly. Besides, such mismatches can often appear in a shape of individuals' frustrations. They are less visible than unemployment, which is regarded as a serious social and economic problem. Instead, those mismatches may be solved or suppressed by each individual and concealed rather than emerging as organizational or structural shortcomings.

In so far as these frustrations don't appear explicitly and are solved individually, one would predict that a distance higher education institution can attract more people to learn and seek for higher credentials for promotion chances. In that way, the distance

learning institution can mitigate the diploma disease, while functioning to diffuse modern knowledge widely and, thereby, improve the human resources of the nation. One could contend that distance higher education is a great invention capable of minimizing the symptoms of diploma disease and maximizing educational functions.

But in case those frustrations give away to clear disappointment, people's dreams of becoming a member of middle class may be destroyed. It is too early for us to make judgement about STOU's success in resolving diploma disease. This innovative institution is still challenging, changing, and enchanting people in Thailand. Will STOU create more dreams or more frustrations for the Thai people? Through pursuing an answer to this question, we can learn a lot about distance education in the future.

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Table-1 Age Distribution of STOU Students(%)

Age	Year	1980/81	1982	1983	1984	1988*
17-22		5.4	8.4	20.1	23.7	11.0
23-25		25.5	19.6	24.1	25.7	39.4
26-30		35.4	28.7	24.5	25.3	24.4
31-35		16.1	20.1	13.1	12.1	13.0
36-40		9.1	12.3	8.1	6.6	6.7
41-50		6.1	7.1	6.2	4.7	4.5
51-60		0.9	0.9	0.9	0.6	0.6
Over 60		0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
N.A.		1.3	2.8	2.9	1.2	0.4
Number		76,730	69,561	50,112	85,041	49,420

Data: Wichit 1986 for 1980/81-1984, 1988

New Enrollments STOU Academic Year 1988 for 1988

Note: The data for 1988 include only incoming students, and this year's statistics use different categories of ages "17-22" is "under 21", and "23-25" is "21-25".

Table-2 Occupations of STOU Students (%)

	1980/81	1982	1983	1984	1988*
Government Service	84.0	69.7	59.4	55.2	49.8
State Enterprise	1.2	7.8	5.9	5.6	5.8
Private Sector Employment	8.0	13.9	14.1	15.2	21.3
Private Business	0.3	2.1	4.4	4.1	4.9
Agriculture	0.1	0.1	1.1	1.1	2.0
Others	0.1	1.3	3.2	5.8	3.8
No employment	6.4	5.1	8.5	10.4	11.0
No response	-	-	3.4	2.6	1.5
Total Number	82,139	69,561	50,112	85,041	50,748

Data: Wichit 1986 for 1980/81-1984,

New Enrollments STOU Academic Year 1988 for 1988.

The data of 1988 include only incoming students.

Table 3-1 Residential Distributions of New enrollments of Non-Distance Education Universities in

Student Residential Distribution	Bangkok	Central	Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western	Northeastern	Total
New enrollments	16,013	3,052	4,079	4,150	3,463	3,694	6,038	40,489
N.E. Composition	39.5%	7.5%	10.1%	10.2%	8.6%	9.1%	14.9%	100.0%
Population(1987)	5,468,915	3,651,234	10,490,201	6,607,877	4,107,390	4,091,480	18,552,107	52,969,204
Pop. Composition	10.3%	6.9%	19.8%	12.5%	7.8%	7.7%	35.0%	100.0%
Selectivity	3.83	1.09	0.51	0.82	1.10	1.18	0.43	1.00

Data: Report on The Joint Higher Education Entrance Examination Academic Year 1986
Ministry of University Affairs, Thailand, Statistical YearBook 1987-88

Table 3-2 Residential Distributions of New enrollments and Graduates of STOU in 1986

Student Residential Distribution	Bangkok	Central	Northern	Southern	Eastern	Western	Northeastern	Total
New enrollments	14,248	5,101	7,438	6,152	4,079	3,556	10,174	50,748
Graduates	2,386	850	1,622	969	594	697	2,156	9,274
N.E. Composition	28.1%	10.1%	14.7%	12.1%	8.0%	7.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Grad. Composition	25.7%	9.2%	17.5%	10.4%	6.4%	7.5%	23.2%	100.0%
Population(1987)	5,468,915	3,651,234	10,490,201	6,607,877	4,107,390	4,091,480	18,552,107	52,969,204
Pop. Composition	10.3%	6.9%	19.8%	12.5%	7.8%	7.7%	35.0%	100.0%
Selectivity	2.49	1.33	0.88	0.84	0.83	0.97	0.66	1.00

Data: New Enrollments, STOU 1988, and Survey of Graduates, 1988.

Table-4 Students' Secondary Education Background
(STOU&Traditional National Universities)

	Academic	Vocational	Else
Traditional Univ.	97.6%	1.4%	0.9%
STOU	27.6%	58.3%	14.1%

Data: Reports on the Joint Higher Entrance Examination(1986)
and New Enrollments STOU(1988)

Table-5 Incoming STOU Students' and their Fathers' Occupations in 1988.
(%)

Students' Fathers'	Students'				Total	N.
	Public Sector	Private Sector	Self-employed	Agriculture		
Public Sector	71.4	20.9	3.6	4.1	100.0	8278
Private Sector	40.6	51.2	4.3	4.0	100.0	1832
Self-employed	50.7	30.4	14.4	4.6	100.0	9111
Agriculture	70.2	18.7	2.7	8.4	100.0	17793

Data: Shimizu 1991, the Original data from New Enrollments STOU Academic Year 1988.

Table-6 Compositions of Students and Graduates
among Different Types of Higher Education Institutions

	Students Composition		Graduates Composition	
National Univ.	92,181	13.0%	23,339	40.1%
Private Univ.	53,397	7.5%	8,417	14.5%
STOU	165,617	23.4%	7,805	13.4%
Ramkhamheng	397,516	56.1%	18,570	31.9%
Total	708,711	100.0%	58,131	100.0%

Data: Statistical Yearbook Thailand, 1987-88(1987)