

Library networks for distance education

A case study of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand

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Introduction

Distance education has had a significant impact, and its importance is being realised by educators and policy makers all over the world because of its usefulness and potential in providing greater access to higher education. The distance education approach is an innovative and flexible system that provides equal opportunities and a second chance for people who may have been deprived of earlier educational opportunities. Today distance education places emphasis not only on the printed medium but also on the multimedia approach which has become a cornerstone of the distance education system.

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was founded on 5 September 1978, as the 11th state university and the largest distance education university in Thailand; it has a current enrolment of 268,865 students. Its unique teaching method enables working people to improve their quality of life and upgrade their qualifications through academic courses that do not conflict with their work schedules. The University offers Certificate, Bachelor and Master's degree programmes. In the 1996 academic year 12,971 students successfully completed their studies to become STOU's 14th group of graduates. STOU is internationally recognised and has received numerous awards including the 1995 COL-ICDE Award of Excellence from the Commonwealth of Learning and the International Council for Distance Education, and the 1992 Asian Management Award in Development Management from the Asian Institute of Management.

Library and educational media services

STOU provides library and educational media services at central, regional and provincial levels. This is a valuable aspect of providing services to students and is unique to STOU.

The Office of Documentation and Information provides central library and educational media services for faculty members, university personnel and students. This office is also responsible for the acquisition of books and other educational materials in accordance with the needs of the University's local and

provincial branch libraries and the area resource centres. The Office of Documentation and Information caters to the needs and requirements of faculty members, course teams, course writers, editors, media technologists and personnel involved in course production and development. To standardise computerised library operations and networking, organisation and acquisition are conducted at the central libraries.

At the regional level STOU has established area resource centres and graduate educational resource centres to provide library and educational media services. The first Area Resource Centre was opened in 1993, and by the end of 1998 there will be centres in the following locations across the entire country: Lampang, Sukhothai and Nakhon Sawan in the north; Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani in the northeast; Nakhon Noyok, Phetchaburi and Chanthaburi in the central region; Nakhorn Srithammarat and Yala in the south. The area resource centres are responsible for offering a wide variety of educational and information services to STOU students as well as services and activities that help improve the quality of life of the Thai people. Area resource centres serve as local STOU branch offices that provide library and information services, and educational media through modern communication technologies.

The graduate educational resource centres were established in 1993 in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to provide various services, particularly reference services to STOU graduate students to aid them in their academic research. The graduate educational resource centres are located across the country, with four in the following National Library branches: Rajamungkhalapisak Library in Chanthaburi Province (central region), Rajamungkhalapisak Library in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province (also central region), Rajamungkhalapisak Library in Chiang Mai Province (north) and King Rama IX Honorary Library in Nakhon Ratchasima Province (northeast). Other centres are located in the Tinasulanonda Library at Mahawachirawut School in Songkhla and in Nakhon Srithammarat (both in the south), and the Suan Lumpini Public Library in Bangkok.

At the provincial level 80 "STOU corners" were established in every provincial public library throughout the country, including the following four provincial public libraries in Bangkok: Suan Lumpini Public Library, Soi Phra Nang Public Library, Phasi Chareon Public Library and Bangkhaen Public Library. STOU corners were established as repositories and service centres for educational media acquired and prepared by the Office of Documentation and Information to serve the needs of STOU students and the general public.

Library networks

With the establishment of open universities all over the world, a large segment of the population is pursuing academic studies through the distance education system. Distance education institutions need library and information services as much as their counterparts, the conventional universities. Libraries must focus on fulfilling the needs and requirements of independent learners by

exploring modern information technologies and developing library networks. It is only through cooperation that efficient and effective information services can be realised.

Library networks are a form of cooperation aimed at providing better services for the benefit of users. Most of the distance teaching universities operate through a three-tier system consisting of the main university, regional centres and study centres. STOU has joined and formed various national and international library networks to promote distance education.

STOULINET

STOU offers library and information services through the STOU library network (STOULINET), which is linked to the STOU computer network (STOULINET) and other national and international networks.

The Office of Documentation and Information provides various library and information services and has developed seven database reference systems including the thesis abstract database, science and technology database, distance education database, printing technology database, telecommunication database on Their Majesties King Rama VII and Queen Rambhai Barni.

The STOU automated library system VTLS was introduced in 1991 to facilitate, expand and provide more convenient and improved services and information access to users. VTLS offers a range of integrated features which can interface in the Thai language, including an online public access cataloguing system.

THAILINET

The STOU automated library system VTLS is linked to STOUNET and the wider national network Thai Academic Library Network (THAILINET) and other international networks.

THAILINET is a forum for exchanging resources between libraries and national and international institutions of higher learning. Through computers and telecommunications, this network helps to develop the potential and increase the efficiency of the libraries of government universities and institutes of higher learning. As Thailand's main academic library network, THAILINET has the following objectives:

- (1) to computerise university libraries and automate library systems in order to develop the full potential and efficiency of library services;
- (2) to develop networks through computers and telecommunications that will enhance information services and maximise the potential of human and material resources;
- (3) to link central and provincial university library networks into an effective system that is able to link with other national and international library networks;

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- (4) to develop human and library resources, information technologies, and Library networks to serve users' needs. for distance education

THAILINET comprises two networks: the Thai Academic Library Network (Metropolitan) – THAILINET (M) and the Provincial University Library Network – PULINET.

THAILINET (M) has a membership of 12 state university libraries in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and the Office of the Permanent Secretary of University Affairs: Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University, King Mongkut Institute of Technology Chaokhun Taharn Lad Krabang, King Mongkut Institute of Technology North Bangkok, King Mongkut Institute of Technology Thonburi, Mahidol University, National Institute of Development Administration, Office of the Permanent Secretary of University Affairs, Ramkhamhaeng University, Silpakorn University, Thapra Palace Campus, Srinakharinwirot University, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University and Thammasat University. Through support from the Bureau of Budget, the project was launched in 1995 and is coordinated by the Office of the Permanent Secretary. PULINET has a membership of 11 regional state university libraries throughout the country: Chiang Mai University, Maejo University, Naresuan University, Khon Kaen University, Maharakam University, Ubon Ratchathani University, Suranaree University of Technology, Silpakorn University, Burapha University, University of the South, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai and Pattani campuses. PULINET began operating in 1993 with the main objective of providing access to the member libraries. Initially Chiang Mai University Library played a leading role in coordinating the network; subsequently each university member alternated every two years as leader of the network.

At present university libraries use the same standard MARC format for cataloguing and are at the stage of creating their own databases. It is expected that by the year 2000 all automated university libraries in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area and in the provinces will be linked, thus achieving their objective to develop the full potential and efficiency of Thai library and information services.

THAISARN

THAISARN (Thai social, scientific, academic and research network) or THAISARN-Internet was established in 1992. The main objective of the network is to promote and support academic work, research and development. THAISARN is linked to computer systems of many universities and government institutions including STOU. Through THAISARN members can access the Internet, the most extensive information network in the world. STOU users can access the Internet through NECTEC (national electronics and computer technology) as the gateway, and access information from major university libraries, information centres and research institutes around the world including the Library of Congress, Harvard University, University of California at Los Angeles, OCLC and other Internet members.

Discussion

In the era of globalisation people are more likely to be affected by international events. Distance education is a promising and innovative area of education which has something to offer people at all levels of society. The role of the library in distance education is evolving. Normally students in distance learning institutions cannot be provided with the same library services that are available at institutions with on-campus facilities. However, STOU's automated library will provide and create a new information infrastructure that will give students universal access to all recorded knowledge that was previously only available at traditional libraries through printed materials. Because our students are not on campus, the use of information technology holds great potential to meet the challenge of bridging the gap between the library and the students at home or in the workplace.

The challenge is to find technology for our students that is both universally accessible and relatively inexpensive. The introduction of the online public access catalogue (OPAC) provides librarians with the greatest opportunity to bridge the gap between the library and student users. OPAC can be accessed by students from area resource centres and graduate educational resource centres. This will eventually provide distance learners with even more independence. Complementing these trends are advances in communication technology which will facilitate access to library materials, resources and services. The student will be able to prepare his/her own bibliography; check whether specific titles are available in the library or simply scan the subject catalogue to gain some idea of the library's holdings. Wherever cooperative networking exists and compatible systems are in place, students will be able to access other library catalogues as well. The challenge for librarians will be to educate students about these new technologies. They will also need to provide sufficient bibliographic instruction to enable students to use the technology in their local communities to locate references and information not only in the central library but in all other university libraries linked to the network.

Libraries are trying to meet the growing needs and demands of students in remote areas through a variety of services. One solution to provide efficient education services to distance students is to develop library networks. STOU recognises the importance of collaboration with other institutions through joint library networks: STOULINET, THAILINET and THAISARN-Internet. Even in remote areas students can get better access to library and information services through quick and easy communication systems. Even if such access cannot be made available to all students, its availability through regional offices and cooperating institutions would be a step closer to reaching the students on their own ground. Library services play an important role in servicing the distance education needs of not only STOU students, professors and instructors, but also other universities, the academic community and the general public.

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