

**WAWASAN OPEN UNIVERSITY FIRST SPECIAL CONVOCATION  
29<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2008, PENANG, MALAYSIA**

**DOCTOR OF LETTERS, *honoris causa***

**CITATION: PROFESSOR DR WICHIT SRISA-AN**

Tun Chancellor,

Promotion of life long learning and the expansion of educational opportunities for the working adults are issues central to the mission of the Wawasan Open University. The same issues have also consumed the lifelong working efforts of Professor Dr Wichit Srisa-an, who is widely acknowledged in his native Thailand as ‘the father of distance education’.

Born to a farming family in rural Thailand in December 1934, Wichit obtained his Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees from the prestigious Chulalongkorn University before being sent for post-graduate studies at the University of Minnesota, USA, where he completed his MA in 1964 and PhD in Educational Administration in 1967. Dr Wichit subsequently returned to his homeland, where over the next four decades he served his country with great distinction as a scholar, educator, and educational administrator *par excellence*.

During the early 1970’s while lecturing in Chulalongkorn University, Dr Wichit was attracted by the potential of the then emerging practice

of distance education for addressing the problem of equality of educational opportunity, an issue that was very close to his heart. Consumed by this new passion he created a blueprint for the development of distance education for Thailand and subsequently played a pivotal role in setting up the country's only dedicated open university, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), which he served as founding Rector for 10 years from 1978. STOU has since its establishment produced almost 400,000 graduates from amongst the country's workforce. Currently, more than 145,000 adult students from all over Thailand are studying with this university using the open and distance learning mode of delivery.

A unique feature of Professor Wichit's distinguished career is the fact that he served as Rector of five universities while concurrently holding senior positions in the civil service. Between 1974 and 1994, while employed as Deputy Permanent Secretary and then Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of University Affairs, Professor Wichit also held office as Rector of Thammasat University in Bangkok (1977), Rector of Khon Kaen University (1978), Founding Rector of STOU (1978-1987), Founding Rector of Suranaree University of Technology (1990-2000) and Founding Rector of Walailak University (1992-1998). It is a rare honour for any academic to rise to the position of Rector or Vice-Chancellor of a university. To have held this leadership position in five different institutions including three that he

founded is simply quite extraordinary! During the same period, despite a busy work schedule, Professor Wichit still found time to produce 5 major research reports on higher education and education reform in Thailand, 10 text books and more than 60 articles in local and international journals. As though all these activities were not demanding enough, Professor Wichit also served as Senator from 1988 to 2000 and then as elected Member of the Thai Parliament from 2001 to 2004. Clearly, this outstanding example of the human species has been practicing 'multi-tasking' long before the term became the current day mantra of our corporate world. He confessed that he went into politics in order to promote a more rapid adoption of distance education among the country's political decision-makers.

This is a perfect illustration of how Professor Wichit was and still is always willing to 'walk the extra mile' in order to turn vision into reality. His political crusade to promote distance education and life long learning reached a high point when he was appointed Minister of Education in the Royal Government of Thailand from 2006 to 2008. During this period, he implemented many significant reforms to promote life long learning to ensure that the Thai people are better prepared to face the challenges that the knowledge-based economy brings.

From the late 1980's onwards, driven by a bigger dream of making access to borderless internationalized education available to as many

Asian communities as possible, Professor Wichit played a major role in establishing a number of regional bodies including the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) in 1987 and the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific (AUAP) in the mid-1990s, in both of which he served as Founding President. He has also held office as President of the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET), Chairman for the UNESCO sponsored Consortium on Innovations in Higher Education for Asia and Pacific and Chairman of the Regional Institute for Higher Education Development (RIHED).

Currently, Professor Wichit serves as the Chairman of STOU's Council. In addition, he also chairs the Council of four other Universities namely Suranaree University of Technology, Walailak University, Rajabhat Rajanakarin University and Rajabhat Thepsatri University. All these he does in addition to being the executive Vice-President of the renown Chulabhorn Research Institute..... not bad going for a youthful professor who will be celebrating his 74<sup>th</sup> birthday in a few weeks time!

For his distinguished services to education and country, Professor Wichit has received numerous awards from the Thai Government, including the nation's highest honour: *The Knight Grand Cordon (Special Class) of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant*.

His outstanding contribution to education has also been recognized regionally and internationally through numerous prestigious awards including the Distinguished Fellow Award of the International Council on Education for Teaching in 1984; Outstanding Achievement Award, University of Minnesota (1986); Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Educational Innovation, UNESCO (1996); the Grand Decoration of Honour in Gold with Star (Austria); and the AAOU Meritorious Service Award (2002).

In addition, he has been conferred honorary doctorates from 9 universities including Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand (1981); the UK Open University (1986), Andhra Pradesh Open University, India (1991); Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand (2003) and the Open University of Hong Kong ( 2005) to name a few.

Tun Chancellor, to honour his distinguished leadership and outstanding contributions to education in general and distance education in particular, it is with great pleasure that I present Professor Dr Wichit Srisa-an for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Citation prepared and read by Professor Wong Tat Meng  
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