

*“Although volunteering has long been a way of life in Thailand, fewer than a quarter of the adult population are currently involved in any kind of voluntary work. This article describes the one-year diploma course set up by Thammasat University to encourage young graduates to learn about rural society through volunteering. By taking part in development projects to benefit poor people, young people can acquire valuable practical experience. This is a service-learning programme unique in Thailand; it helps the students to see their service in the larger context of social justice and social policy rather than simply charity.”*

# Service-learning through Volunteering: The Graduate Volunteer Programme of Thammasat University, Thailand

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## **1. Introduction**

Volunteering has long been a way of life in Thailand. It is rooted in the beliefs of Buddhism and in Thai culture, which stresses the virtues of caring for each other. About 9.7 million adults (22.5 per cent of the adult population of Thailand) are involved in volunteering, either in governmental or non-governmental organisations, or both. However, this number is less than it should be in a Buddhist country.

Compared with the past, young people are less interested in voluntary social service. The Graduate Volunteer Program has been set up to encourage young graduates to learn about rural society through volunteering. By helping the rural poor in specific development projects, young people can acquire useful experience. This approach is summarised by the slogan: *I serve you in order that I may learn from you. You accept my service in order that you may teach me.*

The Graduate Volunteer Centre (GVC) of Thammasat University offers a one-year course entitled the Graduate Volunteer Diploma Program. This is a service-learning programme unique in Thailand; it helps the students or volunteers to see their service in the larger context of social justice and social policy rather than simply charity.

Although the GVC is a university faculty, it is not solely concerned with academic research. It strives to make an active contribution to volunteering and rural development. The graduate volunteers have to study in the classroom for one semester and then spend seven months in a development project in a rural community. After returning from the village, they have to write a minithesis based on their community service. Through supporting people, the young graduates can learn about social and rural problems and become part of

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the solution by having a stint as development volunteers. In the thirty-three years since its establishment, GVC has already produced more than a thousand highly motivated volunteers. All our graduates are now working in various professions and are still possessed with the spirit of volunteerism.

GVC's Graduate Volunteer Program is now used by some government ministries to tackle the unemployment problem among new graduates during a period of economic slump; the new programmes offer 70,000 new graduates a scholarship to work as development volunteers to monitor government projects. If they complete the programme, they should learn something about volunteering and good citizenship.

## 2. Defining service-learning

Service-learning joins two complex concepts: community action – the 'service' – and efforts to learn from that action and connect one's learning with existing knowledge – the 'learning'.

Service-learning was first defined as 'the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth', in the publications of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in 1969. This was concerned with developing learning opportunities for students that were related to community service, community development and social change. A good service-learning programme helps participating students to see their service in the larger context of social justice and social policy rather than charity. For example, service-learning programmes should not just recruit students for soup kitchens – they should also ask them why people are hungry. Literacy volunteers should be asked to consider why there are so many illiterate people in an 'advanced' society.



Advocates of service-learning question whether experience alone will help communities and develop civic consciousness in students. They call for structured opportunities to reflect on one's service so that students can better understand the causes of social injustice and take action to eliminate them. Service-learning is also at the 'enabling' and 'empowering' end of the service- social change continuum, emphasising support for people who seek to meet their own needs rather than having things



done for them. This fits in with the three principles of service-learning<sup>1</sup> proposed by Robert Sigmon<sup>1</sup> :

1. Those being served control the service (s) provided.
2. Those being served become better able to serve and be served by their own actions.
3. Those who serve are also learners and have significant control over what is expected to be learned.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy K. Stanton and others, Service Learning : A movement's Pioneers, Reflection Its origins, Practice, and Future (San Francisco : Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), p.3.

In accordance with these three principles, service-learning brings about reciprocity between server and served. This exchange goes far beyond the traditionally paternalistic, one-way approach to service, in which one group or person has resources which they share charitably or voluntarily with a person or group that lacks resources. In service-learning, those being served control the service<sup>2</sup>. The needs of the community, rather than those of the academic institution, determine the nature of the service provided.

### 3. The Graduate Volunteer Diploma Program (GVDP)

The Graduate Volunteer Program was originated by Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, former president of Thammasat University, as an experimental programme of the Faculty of Economics. In 1969 it was officially approved as the Graduate Volunteer Diploma Program by the Council of Thammasat University and the Board of National Education. In the following year, the Office of Civil Service Board recognised the standard of those who have



fulfilled the GVDP. In 1975, the GVDP was separated from the Faculty of Economics and was taken over by a new faculty of Thammasat University named the Graduate Volunteer Centre (GVC).

The Graduate Volunteer Centre has been operating for over thirty years, based on a philosophy of volunteerism and service-learning (in the rural communities). Besides the GVDP, the Centre has now expanded to offer two more master's degree programmes: Rural Studies and Development, and Women's Studies. The GVC has more than thirty-five permanent staff members – professors, field supervisors and administrative personnel – to service those programmes. The GVC also offers an opportunity for professors from other faculties to volunteer to act as academic advisers for the graduate volunteers. Thus they can learn about rural issues and volunteerism along with the graduate volunteers.



The stated purpose of the GVDP is 'to learn and serve Thai rural communities on the basis of volunteerism, and explore concepts in rural development as well'. Its objectives are:

- To produce graduates in the Graduate Volunteer Diploma who understand the concepts of learning methodology and rural community development, and can apply their knowledge and cooperate with other stakeholders.
- To encourage graduates to be aware of volunteerism, citizenship and social responsibility.

Graduates in any discipline from any educational institution whose academic status is recognised by the Thammasat University's Council can apply. Selection is through written

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.3.

and oral examination according to GVC guidelines. About thirty successful candidates can be accepted annually to study for the GVDP.

The GVDP is a full-time study programme. The students are expected to study together and to share all kinds of learning activities during the first semester (seventeen weeks) at the GVC training centre. At the centre, the students will study the core subjects, which are further used in their field study-service (twenty-seven weeks). After completion of the first semester, all students have to choose a specific development project and learn the techniques for implementing it. The chosen project will then be matched with a rural village. When students return to the centre, they are expected to work with their academic supervisors to write a mini-thesis on what they have learned, based on their own experience of serving the villagers.

The GVDP curriculum is composed of the following subjects:

- GV 510: Community Volunteer Service
- GV 520: Introduction to Social Research
- GV 521: Techniques in Rural Development
- GV 530: Review of Thai Society
- GV 531: Change in the Rural Thailand
- GV 540: Field Studies (Field-Service)
- GV 550: Independent Studies

The development projects affiliated to the field-service are:

- Non-Formal Education (Ministry of Education)
- Nutrition Promotion (Ministry of Public Health)
- Land Settlement Co-operative (Ministry of Agriculture)
- National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC)
- Sub-District Administrative Organisation (Ministry of Interior)
- Non-Government Organisations:
  - Foundation for Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM)
  - Foundation for Child Development
  - Community Forestry Organisation
  - International Child Support (ICS)
- Other Organisations/ Projects

No tuition fee is charged for this one-year course. Instead, Thammasat University gives each volunteer a living allowance of 4,000 Baht a month. The GVC tells the graduate volunteers that this money comes from the Thai people (that is, the government budget), who therefore expect them to be a good volunteer. The university spends about 80,000 Baht on each graduate volunteer.

Graduates from GVDP are expected to have a sense of dedication and responsibility, and to be equipped with initiative, ideas, skills, humanity and a better understanding of rural society. After a written test and an interview to examine their attitudes towards social problems, around thirty applicants enter each year's programme. They receive a scholarship for all tuition fees and other university services.

They are expected to study and live in the GVC training centre, which has dormitory accommodation. Here, the volunteers are taught via a framework of social sciences and development theories for almost four months. They study subjects such as social psychology, rural development and research methodology. The training is student-centred:

we treat them like adults. Various participatory learning techniques are employed. Finally they have to pass a written exam.

The volunteers now learn about the project assigned to them. A schedule is prepared jointly by GVC and the host organisation, and the volunteers spend ten days learning from the demonstration project site. They learn techniques for working through the project activities with all stakeholders. However, these are not infallible formulae that volunteers can apply in every circumstance. They have to learn from real situations.

Now it's time to get away from the city. The volunteers are sent to study and serve in the rural community. Each volunteer has to live separately from his or her classmates in a village assigned by the Graduate Volunteer Centre. They stay with a local host family and participate in daily activities as if they were members of the community and the household. Their work ranges from household chores to farming.

Apart from the villagers, the graduate volunteers also have to work with local government officials and/or NGO staff to ensure the success of their projects. Each volunteer enters the host community with one small development project to work on. For example, it could be about soil improvement, non-formal education or nutrition. The GVC does not emphasise results: it thinks that how the volunteers conduct the project and what they learn from it are more meaningful.

During the seven months of field study and service, the GVC organises five workshop days for all graduate volunteers. This gives them a chance to get together again and to discuss their learning experiences, the village's socio-economic background, the problems encountered, etc. All field supervisors, academic staff and other supporting personnel take part in the workshop to give practical advice. The graduate volunteers themselves can also discuss shared or individual experiences with their peers. They also present the research proposal that arose from their learning experience in the field.

Besides the workshop, GVC sends the field supervisor and the academic adviser to visit the graduate volunteer on site at least twice during the seven months. Of course, the advisors and the supervisors will contact the graduate volunteers via mail and phone periodically to keep in touch.

The experience learned from the field service will be used as the basis for an independent study. The graduate volunteers will integrate the knowledge gained from the classroom with their field experience, to show how learning occurs. The results may be very valuable to the villagers, the GVC and the volunteers themselves.

**What the volunteers say:** The graduate volunteers say that they find the GVDP programme new, amazing, exotic and challenging. More importantly, it makes them feel more mature. They have inside knowledge about how rural society works. Samroenge Chueychuenjit<sup>3</sup>, an exgraduate volunteer who used to work at Nong Meg Village, Kalasin Province, says: *I've learned a lot from these villagers. Their wisdom is amazing.*

Like several of his peers, living in a village has given Samroeng a clearer picture of rural society and its complex problems.

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<sup>3</sup> Bangkok Post, February 10, 1988, "Seeds of Hope".

On a personal level, many graduate volunteers have found themselves developing emotionally and mentally. As a city child raised in a well-to-do family, journalism graduate Wandee Santivuthimaetee<sup>4</sup> was used to being pampered by parents and servants. But after spending seven months as a Thammasat graduate volunteer at Saw-O, a small Karen village near the Thai-Burmese border, the twenty-four-year-old woman acquired a better understanding of the reality of rural life: *In the past, rustic life was in my perception romanticised, beautifully painted with green pastures and naive villagers.*

Up in the hill-tribe village, however, Wandee witnessed the misery brought upon rural people by industrialisation and economic growth. She has come to realise that rural development is not about the powers-that-be patronising ‘little people’ – it’s about giving rural people respect and treating them as equal human beings.

After experiencing tough living on the GVDP, many graduate volunteers feel more self-confident. Samchai Srisan<sup>5</sup>, who now works as the lecturer of GVC, said: *The last day before departing from the Graduate Volunteer Centre, I felt so confident that I was ready to walk through the storm with my stronger legs. Experience of being a volunteer here has been so precious for me.*

Chaisri Trirat<sup>6</sup>, who is now working in a bank, said: *I told myself that, after completing my service-learning as a graduate volunteer, I could face the toughest of jobs. Nothing can discourage me from working for people because I am now aware of what volunteering is.* Wandee also confirmed that she had been helped to achieve emotional maturity: *“With an open heart, I accepted whatever happened to me, good or bad, as a lesson. Finally I overcame my confusion”.*



The Graduate Volunteer Diploma Program is admired by many as a way of encouraging young graduates to dedicate themselves to their rural compatriots. Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, founder of GVDP, was popular with all the groups. The programme was running very well during his time. Each year, before leaving for their field-service, all graduate volunteers got the opportunity to meet His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej, or his representative, and to hear a speech. On one occasion the King said: *Whether in the development of the country or of yourself, it’s necessary to co-operate. Because you cannot specialise in everything, you need to share knowledge and information. Also, you should not work alone in caring for people.*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> GVC’s leaflet of GVDP.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

**A new use for the GVDP** During the time of the economic boom in Thailand (1989-1996), the number of applicants for the GVDP dramatically decreased. It did not mean that young people were becoming more selfish than in the past. But the mainstream social trends, which emphasised careers and material success, had forced them to care more about themselves than others. The ensuing economic crisis and the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) 2001 have possibly stimulated greater interest in being a graduate volunteer.

The past economic downturn has also made hundreds of thousands of graduates unemployed. The government has used the GVDP as a solution: the new programme offers 70,000 new graduates a scholarship to study and work as development volunteers to monitor government projects.

The GVDP principle: *I serve you in order that I may learn from you*, the Graduate Volunteer Centre does not expect its volunteers to change the world or to improve the livelihood of rural villagers during their short stay. However, its programme gives the younger generation more awareness of – and concern for – their less fortunate compatriots. This makes sustainable development possible. The GVC is the place that will give graduates this valuable opportunity if he or she has the generosity to help others and the will to learn.