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A Strategic Planning of Thailand Vocational Education Management

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To identify the relevant factors that have significant influences on the vocational education system of Thailand and to propose an approach for future development and/or improvement of the system's strategic plan.

Design/methodology/approach – To identify and study the major factors that have significant influences on the development of strategic plan, three rounds of surveys using Delphi Technique on **17** individuals comprising students, teachers, administrators, and professionals and 9 well-known experts in the field of vocational education of Thailand were conducted. The approach for strategic plan development was obtained by conducting a group discussion for the 9 experts using Focus Group Technique. The experts then contributed their ideas, which finally led to the approach for the strategic plan development.

Findings – Seven major factors to be considered in development of the strategic plan for vocational education of Thailand are politics, economy, society, culture, environment, technology and management and administration. The experts contributed their opinions on how these factors should be directed so that their positive influences on the education system can be guaranteed.

Practical implications – The finding of this research provides guideline for educational administrators and policy makers on how the future vocational education of Thailand can be improved. The methodology can also be applied to future researches with minimal modification.

Originality/value – The research is recognized as a rigorous effort to reveal and emphasize the problems in Thailand's vocational education and also to provide recommendations for their remedial approaches. It demonstrates how two different survey techniques can be mutually applied.

INTRODUCTION

While moving along with rapid development of the world, Thailand society has gradually shifted from agriculture-based to industry-based in the past half decade and is now entering information technology era. Since the changes have been taking place in relatively fast pace compared to the nature and characteristics of Thai people, there have been concerns that the change may bring along some adverse effects which will harm the society in the long run due to lack of experiences and readiness of the society. To ensure the nation is capable of coping with vigorous changes in its society, the National Economic and Social Development Plan No.10 (2007-2011) by **Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB)** was aimed to develop and/or strengthen social and economic capitals, natural resources and most importantly human resources. The goals were to improve living standards of the people by eradicating poverty and to make Thailand a knowledge-based and intellectual society. In order to achieve these ambitious goals, however, education of the country, in terms of quality, quantity and management system, needs to be sufficiently provided.

As one of the major education systems of Thailand, vocational education established its importance by preparing skilled workforces for the industrial sectors for years; unfortunately, it's rather significant

role has not been greatly appreciated and often overlooked by Thai society. In fact, the vocational education system of Thailand has been plagued with a number of problems, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as presented in the study of Soranin, B. and Others **(2005)** pointed out that there has not been any clear directions in vocational education while its system keeps expanding without adequate resources and supports provided for the schools; the teaching personnel are heavily overloaded as they are short in number compared to the students; the students do not have sufficient basic knowledge due to their weak academic background. Moreover, cooperative activities between the institutions and the industrial sector are very minimal, while standards for several professions have not been established. According to a study by **NESDB** in 2005, the workforces produced in Thailand vocational education system could not match the demand of the country, as many students decided to move on to study in higher education level. This is because remunerations are rather small and hence unsatisfactory for vocational college graduates due to the fact that their quality does not meet the requirements of the employers. With regard to curriculum and management system, it was found that the present curriculum seems to be lacking balance between theory and practice. This is certainly one of the factors undermining the quality of vocational college graduates.

From the management and education points of view, it is obvious that the entire system of Thailand's vocational education has been very problematic and urgently needs serious attention of the society and the government. Considering the nature and scale of the problems, it is necessary that whole picture of the system needs to be investigated and an integrated remedial measure must be implemented. As an educationist who has been involved in Thailand's vocational education for years, the author was very keen to take part in tackling this challenging problem in the field of education. Thus, in this research study the author has conducted a study using direct interview, Delphi and Focus Group techniques on three different populations. The main objectives of this research are to identify the factors that have significant influences on the management of vocational education of Thailand and to develop a strategy for the future planning of this vital part of Thailand's education system. Since this study procedurally comprises 3 distinctive stages, it will be presented in 3 sequential phases. The methods and results of each phase will be presented sequentially as well.

IDENTIFICATION OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

The initial phase of this research study was to identify the factors having significant influences on the vocational education of Thailand.

Methods

Fifteen voluntary individuals comprising 12 students randomly sampled from different vocational colleges, an instructor from public vocational college, an instructor from private vocational college and an academic from Office of Vocational Education Commission, Ministry of Education, were invited to participate in open-question interviews. In the interviews, all participants answered the questions and expressed their view on Thailand's vocational education. The interviews were audio-taped and subsequently synthesized and analysed together with supporting data from relevant research studies. After about one month of extensive works, qualitative data for major influential factors in vocational education of Thailand were obtained.

Results

Following the data syntheses and analyses conducted by the author, six factors were identified as they were believed to have strong influences in today's vocational education. Therefore, they were selected for the major influential factors to be studied in development of the strategic plan for vocational education of Thailand. These six factors are politics, economy, society, culture, technology and management, and administration. This conclusive result was then utilized as the guideline for developing the questionnaires for the preceding phase of analysis.

DELPHI ANALYSIS OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

In the second phase, a combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of the six influential factors identified from the study in Phase 1 was performed using Delphi Technique. The objective of this phase of the study is to gather the views and opinions of professionals in the field of vocational education on the influential factors identified in the previous phase of study. Each influential factor was examined in detail and the results were carried over to the following preceding phase of study and used as the foundation for development of the strategic plan. 17 of 35 initially selected participants, who are professionals from different vocational institutions and industrial sector and experts from the Ministry of Education, have thoroughly participated in this 3-month survey.

Methods

Step 1: The participants were requested to fill in a questionnaire with questions for open-end response, which was developed based on findings from interviewing the participants in Phase 1. Five weeks had been spent in distributing and collecting the questionnaire forms.

Step 2: After studying the answers of the participants obtained from Step 1, the author constructed another questionnaire comprising 45 questions of 6-rating-scale type for the participants to fill in. The quantitative results of these second-round answers were statistically analysed and the values of mode, median and interquartile range were obtained. This step also took about five weeks to complete.

Step 3: With the statistical data from Step 2 results showing the median and inter quartile range for each question and the ranks of their answers given to them in advance, the participants were asked to review their previous answers. In case their answers were not within the inter quartile range, the participants needed to provide the reasons why they selected such answers. Finally the participants were requested to fill in again the same questionnaire they had answered in Step 2 in order to confirm or to change their opinions. A statistical analysis was again performed on the results obtained from this step and the values of mode, median and inter quartile range were calculated.

Results

In summary, the participants agreed that the six factors identified from the beginning phase are the factors that have significant impacts on Thailand's vocational education. Their further opinions about these factors contributed to this phase of study. Their suggestions are as follows:

From the political point of view, Thailand needs to decentralize the power and authority in management of its vocational education system so that the local authorities can be more involved in decision makings. Political stability of the country is essential as it will ensure a clearer direction, hence more effectiveness and continuity for execution of the government's policy on vocational education. Moreover, policy and law makers should be aware of vocational education's important role in development of the nation and should therefore consider providing it a long-term and sustainable development plan.

Considering the critical role of vocational education in generating work forces to fulfil the industrial sector's demand, which has been increasing considerably following rapid growth of the country's economy, a high increase in demand for personnel in vocational education, especially those with managerial expertise in vocational education system, can be anticipated. It was suggested that a network system for vocational education management be created among the parties involved so that the future demand in workforces can be accurately forecasted. In addition, more efficient quality-control measures for vocational education system need to be established in order to ensure that the graduates meet the employers' requirements.

As an agriculture-based society, it was suggested that Thailand's future system for vocational education be emphasized on supporting local agriculture-based industries as much as possible, in order to create jobs for the local people and hence keeping them happy in their hometown. This will give major relief to the Thai society that has been plagued by social problems caused by increasing population in the major cities. Another major problem that needs to be resolved urgently is long-time negative social impression on vocational students and institutions as violent incidents due to conflicts between students from different vocational colleges have taken place for a few decades. To resolve this sensitive issue, strong supports from the whole society are necessary; nevertheless, willingness of students, and school staff to change their image needs to come forward.

Ethics, morality and social values in Thai society were found to be declining rapidly in the past few decades due to adoption of capitalism and overwhelming invasion of some inappropriate foreign tradition and/or cultures. As a result, the society is vulnerable to losing its entity and values. It was recommended that sustainable development of local intelligence and culture need to be promoted and introduced into vocational education curriculum, as this will be part of the foundation for building up individuals with high morality and strong value in the future.

To ensure that the graduates can keep up with rapid development in the world's advanced technologies, more science-related subjects should be included in the curriculum. In addition, ability to apply knowledge can be developed by allowing the students to experience modern equipment in practicing courses and workshops as much as possible. Hopefully this can help create or strengthen the habit of continual self-development for the students after their graduations.

From the management and administration points of view, it was recommended that the vocational curriculum should be developed based on the industrial-sector needs. The personnel in vocational education system, particularly teachers and administrators, must be qualified and experienced professionals who are willing to take part in developing high-quality graduates that meet requirements of the industrial sector.

Following the findings presented above, the author created a draft strategic plan for vocational education management of Thailand, which would then be revised and/or refined in the following phases of study before being finalized as the strategic plan.

FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

The third phase of this research study was to have the draft strategic plan created at the end of the previous phase reviewed by senior experts, who are very well-known in Thailand's vocational education. Nine well-known experts in the field of vocational education comprising Deputy Secretary General for Office of Vocational Education Commission, Ministry of Education, Chairman Industry Council, 5 high-level administrators and academics from vocational institutions, and 2 academics from **NESBD** were invited to participate in this survey, for which Focus Group Technique was employed. The objective of this phase of study was to acquire the experts' views, through their comments and recommendations, on the draft strategic plan previously developed.

Methods

The following three steps took place in this 3-hour discussion using the Focus Group Technique:

- The draft strategic plan and the analytical data obtained from Delphi Analysis were first presented to the experts by the author for their review, comments and recommendations.
- The experts were then given 10 minutes each to present their comments on the draft strategic plan.

- After presenting his comments and viewing comments of the other participants, each expert was given 5 minutes to add his recommendations to the draft strategic plan.

In addition to contributing their comments and recommendations, some of the experts went on to assist the author in concluding the results of this Focus Group meeting.

Results

With regard to the political factor, it was agreed that there is a need for a clear and convincing plan for development of the nation's human resources, which should include the strategic plan for vocational education management. On the other end, the students and vocational institutions need to respond by providing information regarding their needs for the local authorities and politicians.

Economically, more efficient quality-control measures for vocational education systems need to be established. The government should also consider increasing the per-head subsidizing budget to suit the actual cost of vocational college study. The country's economy development plan should take into consideration the strategic plan for vocational education management.

The vocational institutes need to strengthen coordination and cooperation with the industrial sector, especially in the local society, so that the workforce demand can be better estimated. This can prevent problems of oversupply or undersupply in the workforces produced by the vocational institutes. In addition, strong public relations will help create awareness of true image and values of vocational education for the society so that better social support to the students and the institutions can be the result.

The experts agreed that morality and ethics should be increasingly inculcated into vocational students. Besides, the vocational education management should pay particular attention to the cultures that are fundamentals of life.

The experts' opinion regarding the technology factor was that a technology-integrated teaching system should be implemented in vocational education, as it may enable the students to develop technology for themselves in the future. Moreover, the national policy should be strongly emphasized on sustainable development of science and technology.

Similar to the finding from Delphi Analysis, the experts stressed that the vocational curriculum should be developed based on the needs of industrial sector. Short courses and trainings should be available for present workforces to ensure their self-development. Group study could also be a good alternative, as internal relations within the group and inter-relations between different groups will enhance exchange in knowledge and experiences between the learners and instructors. The managers and administrators should be knowledgeable and up-to-date in modern technology so that the management and operation systems can be most cost-effective.

DEVELOPMENT OF STRATEGIC PLAN

By incorporating the expert's comments and recommendations obtained from the phases of Focus Group Analyses and some supporting data from the Strategic Plan for Human Resources Development prepared by **NESDB** (2005), the author subsequently revised the draft plan created at the completion of Delphi Analysis and the final results were proposed as the strategic plan for management of Thailand's vocational education, which is summarized as follows:

Sub-strategy 1

Create public awareness of how important vocational education system is for the development of the nation among all parties involved in vocational education management. Decentralize the power in

vocational education management based on Five-Main-Tasks Scheme proposed by **Office of Vocational Education Commission (Siripan Choomnoom, 2008)** in order to promote more involvement of the local authorities. In the school level, decentralization can be achieved by school-based management in academic, personnel, budget and management. The political sector must assure that the needs of the educational sector, industrial sector and the local society are fulfilled. This certainly requires good cooperative efforts from the top-level management to the operation level. In addition, it is necessary that the politicians with good knowledge and understanding in vocational education be assigned the tasks in developing education policies.

Sub-strategy 2

Take in consideration the nation's economic and social development plan in vocational education planning and management in order to ensure that quantity and quality of the workforces suit the country's demand. Provide adequate the per-head subsidy budget so the parents and students do not have to shoulder excessively high education cost; this may be in the form of government education loans. Utilize Integrating Model – Learning Package composed of knowledge, skill, good attitude and teamwork **(Siripan Choomnoom, 2008)**

Sub-strategy 3

Develop a vocational education network between the government sector and the private sector in producing the workforces, especially in the occupations which are highly demanded. Strengthen the industrial sector by creating a cooperative network among the industries that are similar in nature.

Sub-strategy 4

Develop and/or upgrade technological skills and teamwork attitude of the present workforces in the industries by providing short courses and on-job training programs and promoting self-study through long-distance education.

Sub-strategy 5

Develop the curriculum for vocational education following the direction given by the nation's economic and social development plan, so that the production capacity of the workforces can be optimized. Implement co-operative education, which is more emphasized on on-job training.

Sub-strategy 6

Improve the social image and value of vocational education by enhancing public relation. To improve the skill and overall quality of the new graduates, the private sector needs to be involved in providing more supports to vocational students, especially in practical training, while the government sector can help motivate the private sector by implementing measures like tax exemption. Furthermore, reasonable salary structures and career advancement need to be provided for the vocational graduates who have been proved to be qualified for their jobs.

DISCUSSION

As it is necessary that influential factors be identified by those who are closest to the problems and most directly affected by its management system, the vast majority of population for this phase of study are vocational college students, with two instructors and one academic included. To ensure that variety of the population covered Thailand's diverse society, the students were selected from different programs of vocational colleges located in different parts of the country. Therefore, the results should be reliable to a certain degree. This has been well supported in the following phase of study (Delphi

Analysis) as all participants, who are professionals of various work experiences in the field of vocational education, generally agreed with the proposed six influential factors.

In the phase of Delphi Analysis, the participants spent about 3 months of their time during the three rounds of surveys; therefore, the results are very informative and considered sufficiently satisfactory by the author. By being allowed to review their answers and the statistical data after the second round survey, the participants developed broader understanding and became more confident in giving their final answers. It was unfortunate that 18 participants were unable to continue going through the entire process; otherwise, more comprehensive results could probably be obtained. Nevertheless, with sufficient amount of time given, Delphi Technique was proved to be a suitable tool for this phase of study.

As time available was limited due to the busy schedules of the experts participating in the Focus Group discussion, the comments and recommendations contributed were not very extensive; however, these comments and recommendations were considered valuable for the development of strategic plan, as they were given from different point of view from the ones from which the strategic plan was drafted. For future studies, different survey technique may be considered in the situations when time restraint is anticipated.

In conclusion, the proposed strategic plan developed in this research study should provide some fundamental ideas of how the future vocational education of Thailand may be planned and structured. Implementing the proposed strategic plan means changing the entire system, which probably needs a major reform and is definitely time-consuming. However, such major reforms may be inevitable if vocational education is to continue its significant role in Thailand's education, as **Siripan Choomnoom (2008)** forecasts that future trends of Thailand's vocational education training are competency-based learning, open entry/open exit, flexibility, partnership-dual program, validation of experiences, accumulative credit bank system, self-learning/e-learning, IT application, and sufficient economy and sustainable development. Nevertheless, the author hopes that part of the finding of this study be applicable as remedial measures to some problems in vocational education of Thailand at the present time. Finally, it is suggested that further study should take into consideration other influential factors that have not been covered in this study.

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