Upgrading Education of the Labour-Force in Thailand by Distance Education System: The Case of Unskilled-Workers

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Abstract: *In Thailand, approximately 70 percent of workers have only secondary education or lower. The government is anxious to solve this problem as shown in the short and long term policies. With the advantages of distance education, the author believes that another approach to solve this problem should be adopted. As a result, this study was carried out to identify opportunity, problems and needs of unskilled workers in order to develop a curriculum and distance learning packages for upgrading their education .The research sample consisted of 1000 unskilled workers from 20 factories across the country, 100 factory administrators and 100 personnel of 5 related organizations. Research instruments were questionnaires, interview forms and an achievement test. The main findings showed that the unskilled workers expressed needs at the high level to obtain more knowledge and skills. The five distance learning packages developed were successful in upgrading knowledge and skills of these workers.*

Keywords: Unskilled workers in Thailand, Distance education

Introduction

In Thailand, the National Education Act promulgated in 1999 has proposed lifelong education as the principle of organizing the whole education system of the country. The National Education Development Plan 2009-2016 (Office of the National Education Commission, 2009) also focuses on lifelong learning for all. Moreover, the National Social and Economic Development Plan since 2002 has focused on human resource development. According to the above mentioned acts and plans, human resource development through lifelong learning is the main goal. The labour force is one of the main target groups of human resource who strongly need development. This is because the labour force has direct impacts upon economic development of the country.

The number of workers has increased year by year. For example: in 2007, there were about 37 million workers out of a total population of 65.9 million; in 2010, there were about 38.6 million workers out of the total population of 67.2 million; and 2012, there were about 39.4 million workers out of a total population of 68.1 million. (Office of National Statistics, 2007, 2010, 2012). But most of them still had a low educational background. For example approximately 70 percent of them still have only lower secondary education or lower in the year 2010 and it decreased to 69.8 percent in the year 2011(Office of National Statistics, 2010,2011). Moreover, a number of them did not have any vocational knowledge background before entering the labour market. Once they entered the labour market, they had little opportunity to attend any kind of vocational training or obtain any kind of education because of their tight work schedules. The research on "Guidelines for preparing young women to enter the labour market" by Sungsri and Piratchapan (2000) has found that about 77 percent of women workers had no vocational background before entering the labour market. These young women showed a high demand to obtain related knowledge both before and during work in the labour market. They stated that related knowledge could help people

who were about to enter labour market to get good jobs and could help those who were already in the labour market to get better positions and earn more incomes. This means that low education and no vocational knowledge background were found in both groups, those before entering and those who are already in the labour market. The number of low educational background workers appears to increase year after year. The study of Nakeerak (2006) on "The needs of industries in Surat-Thani province for workforce development" found that all of the industry administrators in Surat-Thani province expressed high demand for upgrading knowledge and skill of their workers. Moreover, the study of Thailand Development Research Institute (2011) on "The readiness of Thai manpower for entering the free trade period under the ASEAN Economic Community framework" found that Thailand still lacked qualified manpower. Apart from that, new workers entered the labour market without working skill and foreign language skill which was necessary for communication in their work.

The government is very concerned about this situation as reflected in the short and long term National Plans and Policies. For example, the government policy which was issued in 2005 has one item which related to the labour force (Office of the Prime Minister, 2005). It was stated that in the year 2008, approximately 50 percent of the workers should have at least secondary education. Moreover, the 9th National Economic and Social Development Plan 2002-2006 and the 10th National Economic and Social Development Plan 2007-2011 have continuously focused on human development which includes upgrading knowledge and skills of the labour force. (Office of the National Social and Economic Development Commission, 2006, 2007).

According to these policies, all related government and non-government agencies including universities are encouraged to take part in solving this problem. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, as one of the higher education institutions, would like to take part in solving this problem. The university employs distance education system to provide education for all throughout the country. Distance education allows people from every part of the country, regardless of age, gender and occupations to receive equal educational opportunity. (Nanda, 1998). It allows people who do not have time to travel and to study in classroom to have chance for education. (Holmberg, 1986). Learners are free to study by themselves through various kinds of media at any time and any place that suit their convenience. (Keegan, 1990; Mantyle & Gividen, 1997). With the advantages of distance education system, especially in the aspect of being able to provide educational opportunity to the mass and allowing individual study at any time and place which suit his/her convenience, it should be another alternative to solve this problem. Through the distance education system, the workers throughout the country can upgrade their knowledge and skills without having to leave their jobs. Therefore, this study was carried out in order to identify appropriate distance learning packages to upgrade the knowledge and skills of these unskilled workers.

Objectives of the study

This study has the following objectives:

1) To study the opportunity, problems faced and needs of the unskilled workers for upgrading their knowledge and skills;

2) To develop the curriculum and the distance learning packages for upgrading knowledge and skills of the unskilled workers; and

3) To evaluate the developed learning packages.

Method of the study

The study was carried out in 3 steps.

Step 1. Studying the opportunity, problems faced and needs of the unskilled workers for upgrading knowledge and skills.

The sample comprised 3 groups of people. They were the unskilled workers, the factory administrators and staff of concerned agencies as follows: 1) 1,000 unskilled workers who were randomly selected from 20 factories in 10 provinces across the country. Two factories were randomly selected from each province and then 50 unskilled workers were randomly selected from each factory; 2) 100 factory administrators who were randomly selected from the 20 factories, 5 samples from each factory; and 3) 100 staff who were purposively selected from 10 concerned agencies,10 from each, in the 10 provinces throughout the country. (These concerned agencies responsible for providing different kinds of support to the workers such as knowledge and skills training, social welfare, etc.). The research instruments were questionnaires for the unskilled workers and the interview forms for the factory administrators and for staff of the concerned agencies. Quantitative data obtained were analyzed by frequency, percentage, mean, and the qualitative data were analyzed by content analysis.

Step 2. Developing the curriculum and developing the distance learning packages for upgrading knowledge and skills of the unskilled workers.

For the curriculum, the data obtained from every group of the sample in step 1 were analyzed and then synthesized to construct a draft of the curriculum which was composed of 8 subjects. Then the curriculum was proposed to a group of 20 purposively selected experts in the field of labour and distance education in a seminar for comments and suggestions. For the distance learning packages, after the curriculum was revised according to suggestions of the experts, 5 out of 8 subjects in the curriculum were selected for developing 5 distance learning packages. Then the 5 learning packages were proposed to the 20 experts through a seminar again for comments and suggestions. Each learning package was composed of a text book and a VCD.

Step 3. Evaluating the learning packages.

The sample. The researcher deliberately selected two factories out of the twenty sampled factories. Then 90 and 60 of unskilled workers were randomly selected from the first and the second factory respectively in order to organize them with equal numbers into five groups, 30 each. Group 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were assigned to study the 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 learning packages respectively. Before studying, each sample in every group was assigned to do the pre-test. After that, each of them was given the text of the subject in his/her learning package to study on his/her own for approximately 1 month. Then the participants came back in five groups again. Each group was assigned to watch the VCD of their learning package. At the end, they were assigned to do the post-test. The pre-test and the post-test of each subject were composed of twenty multiple choice test items to assess knowledge and understanding of the learners about that subject. Apart from the post-test, each sample in each group was also given a questionnaire to assess their opinions towards both kind of media, the printed media (the text) and the VCD in their learning package.

Data analysis**.** The results of the pre and post test were compared by using t-test. The opinions of the sample towards the two kinds of media were analysed by frequency, percentage, mean, and content analysis.

Results of the Study

The main findings of the study were as follows:

1. Opportunity and problems faced by the unskilled workers in upgrading knowledge and skills.

The unskilled workers stated that they had very limited chance to gain more knowledge and skills. The main reason that most of them mentioned was tightly work schedules (74%) followed by family responsibility (20%). They used to obtain knowledge about safety at work from their factories.

The factory administrators stated that they provided about one to three times training per year for their workers. The content focused mostly on safety at work, knowledge and skills for work, and health care for work.

Staff of concerned agencies stated that their agencies provided both general knowledge and vocational knowledge to different groups of workers mostly in the form of short course training. The problems faced included: training time not matching the workers free time; the workers having tight work schedules; and the factories not providing them flexible time.

2. Needs for upgrading knowledge and skills of the unskilled workers.

High percentage of the unskilled workers (43.9%) expressed high level of need while 39.1% of them expressed highest level of need to gain more knowledge and skills. The reasons they gave for acquiring more knowledge and skills were: getting more pay (43.8%); furthering education (18.5%); and changing job (13.4%).Types of knowledge and skills required were in 3 main groups:

(1) knowledge and skills about occupations. They included home economics (49.9%), computer (44.3%), languages (31.2%) and industrial work (30.8%);

(2) knowledge and skills useful for work. They included safety in work (48%) and self- development (44%);

(3) knowledge and skills for quality of life development. These included living by following the principle of sufficiency economy (45%). For method of obtaining knowledge, they preferred self-study through media together with teaching by teachers sometimes. For media, they preferred mixed media most (46.7%), followed by television, VCD and printed media respectively. Place preferred for study most was their own factories. Period of time most convenient for study was the week-end (44.9%) and in the evening of the week-day (24.2%). Supports required from their factories were allowing workers to attend training (66.5%) and making work schedules more flexible (49%).

The factory administrators agreed that the unskilled workers need to be upgraded their knowledge and skills with the following reasons: to have knowledge and skills matched with the present jobs (84.7%) and to obtain more knowledge and experience (80.5%). They suggested that knowledge and skills which should be provided for the unskilled workers most was industrial work (57.1%). Next were: computer skill (44.2%), languages (39%), home economic and commerce respectively. For knowledge and skills useful for work, the administrators proposed safety in work (71.4%), health for work (62.3%), skill for using modern instruments (59.7%), human relationship and self development. For knowledge and skills for quality of life development, most of them suggested living by following the principle of sufficiency economy (83.1%).

The staff of the concerned agencies suggested to propose knowledge about how to work effectively in the labour market most. Next was knowledge and skills required by each type of occupation. They also suggested that the method of transferring knowledge and skills to workers should be in the form of self-study through media most (58.1%).

3. The developed curriculum and distance learning packages.

For the curriculum, after synthesizing all data obtained from the unskilled workers, the factory administrators and the staff of the concerned agencies, a draft of the curriculum for upgrading knowledge and skills of the unskilled workers was constructed. Then it was revised according to comments and suggestions of the twenty experts through a seminar. The final version of the curriculum was composed of eight subjects. They were : sufficiency economy for workers; safety and health in work; self development for progress in work; computer skill; worker's rights and roles and social welfare for workers; communication and computing skills for work; foreign languages (English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean); and knowledge and skill for using modern instruments. In the curriculum, each subject had the followings details: objectives, course description, scope of contents, learning activities, learning media, period of study (30-35 hours), and evaluation activities.

For the learning packages, 5 subjects, the contents of which were highly required and rarely found available in any form of media, were selected to develop as 5 distance learning packages. They were:

(1) sufficiency economy for workers;
(2) safety and health in work;
(3) self development for progress in work;
(4) worker's rights and roles and social welfare for workers; and
(5) communication and computing skills for work.

Each distance learning package was composed of (1) a manual for using the package, (2) a pre-test and a post-test, (3) a textbook which contains complete contents of that subject, and (4) a VCD which contains three of ten minutes play series for fulfilling additional experiences related to the contents for the learners.

4. Evaluation of the learning packages. The study showed that after studying by using the distance learning packages, the post-test scores of the workers in every group were significantly higher than the pre-test scores. Moreover, most of them agreed that the contents, the presentation style, exercise activities of each topic and the format of the textbook and the VCD in every learning package were at the high satisfaction level.

Conclusion and Implication for the Future

Upgrading educational background and competency of the unskilled workers is a challenging task for the departments responsible for the labour-force in Thailand. A large number of the unskilled workers still have a low educational background. It is quite difficult for them to upgrade their education by classroom learning because their work schedules is too tight. Therefore, the number of workers who have higher educational background increased quite slowly year by year. This study was aimed at making use of the advantages of distance education for upgrading knowledge and skills of the unskilled workers. This is because distance education allows the unskilled workers who have no free time to study in classroom to obtain educational opportunity without having to leave their jobs. They can study on their own anywhere and anytime. Moreover, a large number of them can upgrade their knowledge at the same time. According to this study, five distance learning packages containing

knowledge and skills required by the unskilled workers were developed. The result of evaluating the learning packages with the 150 unskilled workers showed that the learning packages were successful in upgrading knowledge and skills of these workers. This means that distance education is another approach which can be employed for upgrading education of low qualified workers. The researcher believes that with appropriately employed these learning packages, they could significantly help the unskilled workers throughout the country to have adequate knowledge and skills suitable for their jobs. Moreover, the results of this study can be used as a guideline for the provision of education to upgrade knowledge and skills of the other groups of workers who were already in the labour market. It can also help to prepare the new workers to have suitable knowledge and skills before entering the labour market. It allows the workers to have lifelong learning opportunity without having to leave their jobs. It will also in the long run contribute to the economic development of the country as a whole.

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