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The Role of Community Colleges in Northeastern Thailand in Supporting and Creating Vocational Networks in Communities

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Abstract

Thailand has about 63.4 million populations as of 2009. The northeastern part of Thailand occupies the largest land area of Thailand with approximately 21.2 million populations which is nearly one third of the total population of Thailand. Many people, especially the youngsters, fled from the area because of the arid land and poor economy to struggle for jobs in other parts of Thailand and send money back to support the elders and young children they left behind. This situation breaks thousands of families apart. Hence, this region is the largest pool of labor to businesses and factories throughout the country. The downward trend of the current economic condition results in shrinkage of many industries. A lot of labor forces are laid off and have no choice but return to their home towns where there are limited numbers of employments. They need to develop self-employed careers for living. These workforces need training for such purpose. The Thai government has established community colleges to provide knowledge and trainings with the emphasis on the development of vocations for people in local communities. These community colleges have an important role in providing short courses to offer knowledge in making professions. The aim of this research project was to investigate the role of community colleges in supporting and creating vocations' networks within and among communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with directors of community colleges in northeastern part of Thailand together with administrators of vocational programs as well as leaders in communities. Data were content analyzed and inductively interpreted. Results suggested that communities are keen in building network with other communities but they need community colleges' assistance in linking to organizations.

Introduction and Background of the Study

The Institute for Population and Social Research of Mahidol University (2009) reported that the total population of Thailand as of 2009 was estimated at 63.4 million. Out of this, northeastern region housed the largest number of population, 21.2m compared to 6.7m in Bangkok, 15.3m in the central, 11.7m in the northern, and 8.4m in the southern regions. The northeastern region of Thailand consists of nineteen provinces which covers one third of the area of Thailand. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's world factbook (2009) reported that Thailand's GDP per capita was USD 8,500 in the year 2008 while the per capita income in 2008 was USD 4,125 (U.S. Department of State, 2009). The northeastern region occupies the largest land area but has the lowest income among all regions (Bank of Thailand, 2009; National Statistical Office, 2009; Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2009). Many people, especially the youngsters, have to migrate from the area because of the arid land and poor economy to struggle for employment in other parts of Thailand and send money back to support the elders and young children they left behind. The poverty situation breaks thousands of families apart.

Community College

The Thai government tries to cope with poverty situation by distributing aids and introducing vocational training courses through several agencies. Community colleges are higher education institutions that manage learning and offer certificates and diplomas to adults. The Bureau of Community College Administration (2008) reported that, as of 2008, there were 19 community colleges in all regions of Thailand. The purposes of community college were to offer formal degree education and vocational training. Formal degree education is offered so as to provide opportunity for those who could not attain education during their childhood. Holzer & Lerman (2007) argued that community colleges in the US have an important part in training workers for businesses. The situation is similar in Thailand. Furthermore, students could use the degree granted to pursue further study in the higher level. The objective of vocational training courses, which is the focus of this research project, is to assist local people to learn skills to start their own vocations and become entrepreneurs.

The community colleges are governed by the Bureau of Community College Administration. Each college appoints a board of trustee composing of academicians and community members. The role of

the college is to analyze vocational needs in the local area and create courses to satisfy those needs. Most participants requested for courses that teach skills to make handicraft products and services. Many participants earn their living through selling of handicraft products and they want knowledge to produce other products so they request the college to organize courses for them. Participants form a group of approximately 20 people and request the college to open vocational courses they need. Some participants become trainers for other communities. They have the same vocations and make similar products, hence, it is very likely that they form network among themselves. The objective of this research project was to examine the role of community college in supporting and creating vocational networks among members in communities. (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008).

The target group was adults who incorporate their personal goals and vocational proficiency in their learning (Kegan, 1994). It is important that the planning of adult education should incorporate more direct and practical vocational knowledge rather than only theories. Training programs are flexible and adapted to each locality's needs. Community college was established on the belief that everybody has potentials and should receive proper guidance to unleash these potentials. The focus of education was on practical knowledge so that people could build their vocations (Nong Bua Lampoo Community College, 2008).

History

The first community college in Thailand was established in 1977 in the Phuket campus of the Prince of Songkla University. The college was reverted back to the university in 1984 due to the educational reformation during the period. In 1994, 77 specific-purpose educational institutions throughout Thailand such as agricultural college (governed by the Ministry of Agriculture), art college (governed by the Ministry of Culture), and other colleges were combined into the umbrella of community college authority. Again, the process failed and the schools were returned to the original authorities in 1996. That ended the early attempt to establish community college in Thailand (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008).

In the year 2002, the Thai government revived the community college idea and established 10 colleges in all regions of Thailand. By the year 2009, 19 community colleges were established; four of these were in the northeastern region (Bureau of Community College Administration, 2008). The aims of community colleges were to provide low cost education to assist poor people in local communities to start their own occupations and provide formal degree for those who lacked opportunity to study in the childhood. Community members' opinions are surveyed in order to plan for curriculum and design appropriate teaching programs. The participation could lead to innovation and proper utilization of the community's potentials (White, Nair, & Ascroft, 1994). One of the strategies of community college was to create network with members in the community, i.e., business organizations and other government authorities such as the Local Development Authority, The Water Authority, and others to find assistance in facilitating the participants' vocations.

Networking

King Rama IX of Thailand had introduced the sufficiency theory that promotes self-contentment and the creation of networks among members in and among communities. The sufficiency network could create strength for Thailand and help to reduce the vulnerability of dependency upon other economies (Subcommittee on Sufficiency Economy, 2005).

Network is characterized as having several nodes connecting individual and group to each other. Inter-organizational networking can increase competitiveness of organizations and the group (Morris, Bessant & Barnes, 2006). Porter (1998) suggested that network can be categorized along the value chain into horizontal network among firms in the same level of value chain and vertical network among firms in different level of value chain. Gould & Campbell (1987) reported that Japanese firms normally do networking with each other to increase their competitive advantages. Exchange of information, or networking, is a popular practice among Japanese companies (Nonaka, 1990). Networking of firms can create clusters of industries which can enhance and create collective strength among members.

Thai society is characterized as a collective society (Hofstede, 2001). Although, the urbanization may drive people to be more individualistic but people in the provinces are still collectivistic. With such characteristic, networking behaviors are likely to occur, especially in less urbanized areas. Iacobucci and Zerrillo (1996) explained that network occur in the individual, dyadic, or group relationship where members connect to others. Individuals are motivated to get into relationship with each other in order to obtain needed resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1992). Members within the same community with similar vocations are likely to establish network with others. Individuals and organizations in a network would exchange information for the common purpose of the network through both formal and informal communication for the benefits of the professions and societal development (Kemmer & Close, 1995). Modern businesses need to pool knowledge and expertise from others (Mankin and Cohen, 2003). Clarke (2006) suggested that commitment in the network was an important contributor to overall performance of members in the network. Martin (2009) suggested that interpersonal communication is an important element for entrepreneurial success. Social network among entrepreneurs provides opportunities for social support (Hogg & Adamic, 2004). The communicative and transformational learning approaches for adult learning enhance the intimacy among members and results in strong network.

Johanson and Mattsson (1992) explained two levels in network as the network of exchange relationship and the network of production system. The network of exchange relationship refers to the resource exchange process among members while the network of production system refers to the collaboration among members for the production of goods and/or services. Members in a network possess something of value and exchange those with each other in a reciprocal manner. Blankenburg et al., (1999) argued that the exchange process would bring about the development of knowledge among members. Trust could be developed along with the exchange (Hallen & Johanson, 2004). The longer the history of exchange, the more solid the trust became. The collaboration could combine complementary skills which could enhance the effectiveness and efficiency among network members (Powell et al., 1996). Chiu (2009) supported that network competence resulted in innovation performance.

A developmental network aims to improve career growth and members' learning (Higgins and Kram, 2001; Lankau and Scandura, 2002). This type of network draws relationship from various individuals and groups. Whitley et al. (1991) reported that developmental network played an important role in the enhancement of individual's career advancement.

According to the Subcommittee on Education System Structure and Knowledge Network (1990), network has 4 components:

1. the transfer, exchange and dissemination of modern knowledge and local wisdom to apply and create new knowledge relating to each community.
2. the stimulation of intelligence, spirit to develop the community and participation in community development.
3. the exchange of information relating to developmental projects of private and public sectors to keep members abreast of each other's activities.
4. the co-ordination of resources, materials and equipment, facilities and budgets among various units.

Methodology

This research was designed as an exploratory research to gain an in-depth understanding of the roles of community colleges in the creation of vocational network among members of communities. The northeastern region of Thailand was selected as the location for this study. There were four community colleges in the region at the time of study.

The researcher applied for approval from the central authority, the Bureau of Community College Administration, to conduct the study. The Bureau approved and gave names and contact numbers of the directors in the four community colleges in the northeastern region. The directors were informed by the Bureau about this study. The researcher made appointments with directors to conduct in-depth interviews with director of each college. In-dept interviews were also performed with personnel who were responsible for the vocational training short-courses in each college. These personnel were the main link between the colleges and community members. They mingled with the locals to study their needs and design programs

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