

ADDRESSING THE SKILLS GAP BETWEEN THAI EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY IN THE FACE OF COVID-19 AND LIFELONG LEARNING*

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Abstract

The disruptive effects of Covid-19 on education and industry have increased, the urgency of aligning these sectors is essential to solve the current skills' gap in terms of the change in demographics and industry trends. However, there are pitfalls which must be overcome even as future trends suggest pioneering a new approach to close the gap between education and industry resulting in a common culture of lifelong learning for all Thais. This article presented the key factors which have contributed to the widening gap between education and the Thai workforce compounded by the effects of Covid-19. Skills shortages in the rapidly changing labor market and the inability of Thai education to respond to these changes had resulted in unbalanced development. To establish an encompassing framework, several global trends were explored, including the urgent need for lifelong learning, career guidance, a new approach to vocational training, wider use of re-skilling and upskilling, and implementation of a nationwide credit bank system. The development of a

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nationwide policy to support lifelong learning would have far-reaching consequences on the nation's economic prosperity, global competitiveness and social cohesion including job satisfaction, education and quality of work, which transforming Thailand from a developing country into full membership in the 21st century global economy.

Keywords : Labor Market, Skills Gap, Unbalanced Development, Education, Workforce Demographics, Thailand

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to address several serious issues in Thailand which have far-reaching consequences on the nation's economic prosperity, global competitiveness and social cohesion including job satisfaction, education, and quality of work. There is a general consensus that the Thai education sector has difficulty in monitoring labour market trends, and without a timely response to labour market needs, the school subjects and skills being taught are increasingly out of touch with the demands of the labour market (UNICEF Thailand, 2021, p. 4).

Furthermore, as labor development training focuses mainly on technical knowledge to meet current labor market needs, these practices are not building agile, high-quality labor, or guiding Thais to incorporate the future skills needed to earn long-term sustainable living. Additionally COVID-19 has now affected and altered future trends (Foresight Research Team, 2021, p. 9). The bottom line is that Thai workers lack the skills that employers need. Significant labor shortages hindering the Thai economy were previously documented in 2014. According to Economic Intelligence Center (2015), a 2014 survey by EIC found that over 50% of companies were unable to fill vacancies within a period of three months and that openings for vocational-school graduates were the most difficult to fill (p. 8). This trend continues today. Thai schools turn out too few

engineers, technicians and scientists. The resulting labor shortfall is a major factor in Thailand's sluggish economic growth and decline in international competitiveness.

Issues Impacting Thai Education and Industry

A total of seven significant issues were identified from a study of the available research which are impeding progress during these times of rapid change as the country moves towards achieving Thailand 4.0 objectives in an increasingly competitive and global technological economy. Awareness of the factors in this section will contribute to a healthy mindset adjustment and the ability to embrace the changing future trends and recommendations suggested in the final chapter.

1. Less Reliance on University Degrees

Industry is beginning to place less reliance on university education due to an ongoing trend of a weakened value of degrees. As hard as it seems to believe, future trends indicate that the reputation of universities and their respective degrees and qualifications will be less of a recruiting factor in the future for hiring Thai employees. Relevant skills and intrinsic capabilities will have prioritized value (Foresight Research Team, 2021, p. 9-10). The younger generation of students is now prioritising skills over degrees as this allows them to choose programs in line with their interests rather than conforming to the possibly inaccurate and out-of-date expectations of society (Workpoint Today, 2021, para. 14-15).

The main concern for the current generation of students is the struggle for a better future amidst economic disparity and educational inequality for the marginalized population. In 2018, 49% of Thailand's 7,357,814 students were underprivileged or disabled (Foresight Research Team, 2021, p. 8). Awareness of the strong connection between Lifelong Learning and Educational Reform has yet to be fully realised and implemented successfully in Thai society.

2. Non-Linear Career Pathways

The merits of lifelong learning will continue to shape ongoing educational reform towards new and alternate forms of learning encompassing all age groups. Apart from formal and continual learning, this will include intermittent, non-formal and informal learning (OECD, 2021b, p. 20). With an already established trend in non-linear career pathways, along with ongoing changes in the employment landscape accelerated by the pandemic, and the increasing practicality of a gig economy, a widely accepted culture of lifelong learners is imminent.

Piecemeal and fragmented efforts to achieve this, no matter how sound, are not likely to be widely adopted by Thai society as a whole to establish a nationwide culture of lifelong learners. A more inclusive and encompassing concept is needed, one which is already being established in European countries. This is the concept of a sustainable learning society for education at all levels, particularly in vocational skills training.

A sustainable learning society in harmony with lifelong learning will help balance the country's economic, social, natural and environmental aspects and resources of society. This represents the potential to transform the Thai people into responsible citizens and knowledge workers with the capability to develop suitable and relevant needed manpower. This in turn would lead to achievement of a more sustainable level of satisfaction in society rather than adhering to current standards (Charunkaittikul & Henschke, 2014, p. 499).

We hear the term lifelong learning as a catch-all solution but what does it mean? When the Thai education system is able to rapidly provide relevant training aligned with current and forecasted industry needs, Thailand will be able to successfully compete in the global job market, despite facing an increasing shortage of skilled workers who are growing older (Vandeweyer, Espinoza, Reznikova, Lee & Herabat, 2020, pp. 36-40).

3. Mismatches between Job and Education

Education may be deemed as an increasingly wasted opportunity and expenditure of resources if graduates work in fields unrelated to their degree. According to UK-based market research agency Boonbandit (2019) YouGov found that 52 percent of Thai bachelor and above degree graduates work in jobs unrelated to their degrees, especially those with degrees in the humanities (67percent), contrasted with only 24 percent of those in healthcare or welfare (para. 2). This in essence contributes to the current imbalance of skilled workers and lack of qualified skills where labor needs them.

Further signaling that field of study choice is mismatched with labor market needs, participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects at the tertiary level is currently at a low of 22% (OECD, 2021b, p.35). This is in contrast to the high demand for STEM graduates by industry, while there is disproportionately an oversupply of tertiary-educated workers in non-related career fields.

4. Lack of Career Guidance

One factor which significantly impacts the imbalance of ready graduates appropriate for industry is the inaccessibility of career guidance offered to youths of all ages and levels of education. This results in a lack of up-to-date labor market information, career aptitude testing, identification of growth pathways and consolidated planning, including the critical and much touted area of entrepreneurship (UNICEF Thailand, 2021, p. 5). According to OECD (2021b, p. 36) fewer than 30% of students at both advantaged and disadvantaged schools have access to a guidance counsellor.

Graduates are increasingly less focused on a traditional, linear career path and a single job for life. Although stable employment is a high priority, this can be achieved through continual upskilling and reskilling as employment trends and technologies continually change and evolve. This suggests that career guidance needs to be re-invented with an emphasis on the gig economy, supporting youth to gain the skill sets that will enable them to transition smoothly between jobs (UNICEF Thailand, 2021, p. 5).

Those most likely to fall through the gap and at high risk of being left behind are NEET youth (young people who are not in employment, dropped out of formal education or training). It is critical that they are provided with opportunities to re-engage with education and the job market (UNICEF Thailand, 2021, p. 5). According to Workpoint Today (2021, para. 17), there are approximately 1.4 million NEETS aged 15 to 24 in Thailand who constitute a hidden workforce which is much needed in an aging society if only programs of social reintegration and vocational training is supported.

5. The Effects of Job Automation and the Impact of Technology

One misconception among the uninformed is that automation will replace workers and contribute to massive unemployment. This is quite far from the truth. While certain jobs may disappear, others will emerge and a sharp decline in overall employment is unlikely. Job automation could contribute large benefits to the economy such as higher productivity and improved working conditions. It could also overcome labor shortages in the face of an aging population (OECD, 2021b, pp. 14-15).

However, there are certain occupations at risk of job automation replacement and a strategy is required to offset an impending imbalance. The risk of automation replacement is high among low-skilled workers, women, and workers at low-wage occupations. According to OECD (2020, Chapter 2.2, para. 2) these include Thai shop sales assistants, food service counter attendants, cooks, office clerks and accounting associate professionals. Insurance against such risk is critically dependent on prioritising skills sets which cannot be replicated easily in machines, such as communicating effectively with foreigners and people of different ages. COVID-19 has increased the demand for specialized ICT and healthcare skills, as well as application of technology in education.

To improve their readiness for overall work efficiency, workers must embrace the digital era and all it has to offer in the way of productivity enhancement in automating and digitizing certain procedures. There is an increase in technology adoption among sales staff, customer service representatives, admin staff, delivery drivers, and production workers (Workpoint Today, 2021, para. 1, 10), and this trend is becoming much more widespread.

6. Technology and Innovation

Some say that technology and automation represents a magic bullet for the Thai economy. There are indeed large benefits such as higher productivity and improved working conditions. It can also help overcome labour shortages due to an ageing population, for technology and automation to be successful, To be successful in technology and automation, it is essential to provide people with adequate re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities. Generally, the pace of change will be quick, and people usually dislike change. Digital skills are still essential for economic survival. Unfortunately, youth and adults in Thailand have weaker digital skills than on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2020, Chapter 2.2, para. 7). This is where priority should be focused, incorporating regular and essential use of digital skills within the education IT curriculum at all levels to ensure standard competency.

7. Covid-19 has accelerated the Need for Digital Competence

The growing demand for digital skills has increased in direct response to the COVID-19 crisis. Safe distancing measures have made remote ‘work from home’ (WFH) and ‘home-based learning’ (HBL) mandatory. Each of these is dependent on readily available and stable platforms in work and daily life, for example, video conferencing, internet banking, online courses, and teleworking. The importance and demand for technological skills and digital competence in their use cannot be understated, and will accelerate in the post-pandemic era (OECD, 2020, Chapter 2.2, para. 7).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Acceptance of a “multi-stage lifestyle” is becoming a future trend, meaning that at various points in a person’s life, they will be managing different responsibilities, education and jobs. This represents a continuous spectrum as opposed to a linear progression of school, typically: first job, second job, followed by retirement. The aforementioned concept of the gig economy means that education must go through a thorough overhaul, to make it more timely and responsive to not only industry’s needs but those of a person assembling an evolving skill set and making a living using diverse means (Workpoint Today, 2021, para. 14-15). Understanding the following five concepts will help bring Thailand fully into the era of bridging the skills gap between Thai Education and Industry in the face of Covid-19 and embracing the concept of lifelong learning in a nationwide mindset of becoming a sustainable learning community.

1. High Quality Career Guidance

Thailand should support the provision of continuous high-quality career guidance services at post-secondary and tertiary education levels so that students can better understand different education options and their value in the labour market. PISA results from 2018 revealed that less than ten percent of all Thai students had access to a dedicated school counsellor, and that most counselling is done by teachers. Therefore, effective career guidance needs to be provided by specialised, well-trained and resourced education counsellors. This will enable students to choose courses and qualifications which are in sufficient demand by the labour market and also suited to the students’ aptitude, interests and skills, both theoretical and practical. Thailand should especially attempt to provide appropriate resources to students as they near the end of their studies in order to facilitate a smooth and timely transition to the labor market (OECD, 2020, Chapter 2.3, para. 28)

2. Vocational Training

Vocational training is an important policy tool to increase human capital, improve individual welfare and increase career development opportunities. However, the effectiveness of Thailand's vocational training system is inconclusive. Furthermore, it seems to suffer from a misaligned and delayed approach in responding to current and projected industry demands. A 2018 study of the impact of vocational training on economic and social mobility in the short, medium and long term found that vocational training fails to move participants upward both in terms of earning and employment (Chongcharoentanawat, Gassmann, & Mohnen, 2018, pp. 16-17).

There is an urgent need to increase the availability of vocational training in the workplace, particularly in relation to digitalization and new technologies. Acquiring digital skills can help older people to remain active in the workforce longer and maintain a healthy lifestyle and reduces the risk of social isolation (Ogg, 2021, p.1).

3. Re-skilling and Up-skilling

Most people upskill or reskill to differentiate themselves from the competition. Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the rise of the digital economy. Therefore, re-skilling/upskilling has become vital to current and future job security for workers of all ages. It is crucial to the economy of Thailand to identify appropriate candidates, thus building in an important level of job security. In the growth/decline cycle of the economy, reskilling is required because digital transformation will mean new roles and jobs will be created while old ones will be made obsolete. As of 2018, McKinsey & Company had identified up to 7 million Thai employees who will need to be reskilled in order for companies, particularly in the Eastern Economic Corridor, to digitally transform (Limviphuwat, 2018, para. 3).

4. The Credit Bank System

A nationwide credit bank system should be established in Thailand to provide a system of recognition of prior learning which can help to certify

employee skills obtained via formal, informal and intermittent learning make them more visible to employers. When looking at the field of study rather than the level of education, 37% of Thai workers were mismatched and 42% of Thai workers were considered over-qualified for their jobs, which is also categorized under ‘skills mismatch’ (OECD, 2021b, p. 33).

Within the category of under-qualification, this suggests that employers are frequently unable to hire workers with a correspondingly ‘certified’ qualification level and thereby resort to hiring ‘less qualified’ workers. This does not mean that an under-qualified worker (according to certifiable results) is under-skilled for their jobs, as often workers acquire skills informally. Therefore, a system of recognition for prior learning and certification will make them more visible to employers (OECD, 2021b, 33-35).

According to the National Institute for Lifelong Education (2000a, para. 1), the nationwide recognized Academic Credit Bank System in South Korea guarantees each learner's right to access learning, any time and any place, through a variety of methods, means, and media. It will assist in the realization of a lifelong learning society by recognizing individuals' diverse prior learning experience.

5. Re-conceptualising Universities

All Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) should place emphasis on modular approaches (not degrees), which are especially helpful in providing adult learners with greater flexibility on their learning path. A modular approach, sometimes in the form of a certificate or specialist certification, allows adult learners develop appropriate skills they lack. Furthermore, such flexible modules can be combined at convenient intervals to gain a full formal qualification, particularly for disadvantaged groups, geographically and economically (OECD, 2020, Chapter 2.5, para. 8).

Strengthening the responsiveness of the education system to labor market needs will alleviate the current imbalances and is a pivotal step to progress. Research by Chongcharoentanawat et al. (2018, p. 19) suggests that

training is most effective when sponsored by employers. The Thai government should incentivize companies to support employee funding of training and additionally provide pathways for job promotion based on such training, which implies the creation of a nationally recognized credit bank.

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