

# Vocational and Technical Education and Training Initiatives in the Southeast Asia Region: Its Socio-Cultural Pitfalls

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## *Abstract*

*Numerous initiatives on Vocational and Technical Education and Training (VTET) have been undertaken in the Southeast Asia region. The initiatives rest on the assumption that they are a panacea for modernising a country's economy and achieving higher levels of per capita income. Great diversity of organisation, financing and delivery modes have been in place to promote such initiatives. In fact, not many countries in the region have been able to make their initiatives more relevant to the world of work and increase its effectiveness. Whereas, other countries tend to have placed too much burden on this single policy instrument to address very complex issues and too much weight on intuitive logic rather than consulting the reconciliation between national directives and local aspirations, as well as between donor and recipient requirement/needs. Future initiatives, therefore should ensure the balance between identification and ownership through the maximisation of participation.*

## **Introduction**

The success of Vocational and Technical Education and Training (VTET) initiatives depends on a broad range of circumstances in the country concerned. Successful initiatives need an enabling environment in which vocational and technical education and training can thrive. For its success, some of the policies and actions required are beyond the legitimate range of intervention by the usual decision-makers in this area.

As is common knowledge, many a new policy including in the VTET area, may encounter obstacles when it comes to implementation. If initiatives fail to achieve their aim this could be because there was something wrong from the start with either the policy itself or its objectives. It could also be a consequence of certain constraints that manifest themselves, often unexpectedly, during implementation; or it could be the result of a combination of these factors.

The actual implementation of such initiatives, however carefully formulated, is likely to suffer from a variety of constraints, notably with regard to resources, i.e. the people, the information and the money needed to do what must be done. Moreover, the time actually required for substantive initiative to take root is commonly underestimated. Additional constraints,

not directly related to resource requirements, may be implied in prevailing administrative arrangements and current regulation.

## **Paper Objectives**

The importance of VTET in the Southeast Asia region varies considerably from country to country, as well as between different regions within a country. This variety is largely due to historical and socio-cultural factors. Also, it may be supported that it reflects differing policies as regards the development of education and vocational training.

Throughout the paper, the analysis on socio-cultural pitfalls will be viewed from contextual issues, social challenges and cultural perceptions. Contextual issues takes into account the long-debate on VTET and the mismatch of supply and demand in this area. Social challenges examines decision-making and political inferences process in VTET as well as its financing. Cultural perception meanwhile focuses on human resource credibility and commitment, and the image of VTET.

The role of SEAMEO VOTTECH, a regional centre for Vocational and Technical Education and Training under the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation will be briefly presented in the last part

of the paper. The role assumes a training provider for countries in the region where the training programmes offered aims to address issues and alternative solutions relating to those socio-cultural pitfalls.

### **Data Collection Methodology**

Data for this paper is obtained from primary and secondary sources as well as formal and informal interactions with many stakeholders. These sources provided the opportunity for the author to gather and confirm certain information for the development of the paper.

Based on these sources of information, meta-analysis was used as it translates results from different studies or findings to a common metric (Bangert-Drwons and Rudner, 1991) and it provides a way of co-ordinating results drawn from many studies without having to co-ordinate the studies themselves (Cohen et al, 2000).

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Contextual Issues**

*Vocational and Technical Education and Training as the debated subject*

Vocational and Technical Education and Training (VTET) has been in the past, is today, and will remain in the future one of the hottest debated subjects in all countries of the world (Psacharopoulos, 1997) including in the Southeast Asia region. Although there are several reasons for this phenomenon, the close intuitive link between VTET and technology is perceived as substantial. As further contended by Psacharopoulos, "if technology is seen as a panacea for modernising a country's economy and achieving higher levels of per capita income, the next logical step is to instil into the labour force the 'necessary skills' for such higher technology to be applied and further developed.

The recurrent popularity of VTET in policy discussions may have resulted from common perceptions that this type of education is to be of excellence and amenable to social engineering. It is assumed that through the provision of VTET a country can presumably prosper economically and reap more easily the benefits of economic growth.

Another belief is that VTET is a possible policy instrument for diverse problems. This type of education is perceived as enabling unemployed youths out of city streets to find useful employment, a mean to raising the income of poor segments of the population, as a viable option to those who are being judged unable to pursue academic studies so that they will have acquired a useful skill when moving to adult life.

Within the Southeast Asia context, especially during the recent economy crisis this belief was partly true. This sector has often been regarded as a tool to combat unemployment. Unfortunately, there was no tangible evidence that training alone creates jobs. Of course, jobs are created when all requisite factors come together, and not merely by offering training.

#### *Vocational and Technical Education and Training in the Southeast Asia region*

In the context of Southeast Asia countries including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR (People of Democratic Republic), Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, VTET has been historically well-recognised. Each government is dedicated to this particular educational sector through the provision of financial resources and facilities. This is due to the fact that VTET is a capital-intensive investment, which relies on strong support and intervention from the government.

Currently, some reforms have been initiated in each system for its effectiveness and efficiency. For example, in Lao PDR a promulgation of the regulation defines the institutional structure, the management and the control, as well as the standard and the policy on development of vocational and technical education (Boupha, 2002). In Thailand, the reform on VTE provides a national framework for restructuring, reorganising and refinancing VTE through the 1997 Constitution and the National Education Act of B.E. 2542 issued in 1999 (Jantrasurin, 2002)." Vietnam is still in the process of reconstruction through the education law No.11/1998/QH10 which defines all regulations on the national education and training system (Van Tien, 2002). The establishment of the National Training Body (NTB) indicates the reform in Cambodia as this body carries out the mandate of revitalising the education and training system in the country to meet the challenges of an improved market economy (Chanta, 2002).

Many line ministries/departments are involved in the overall planning and implementation of VTET policies. In Malaysia, for example, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Human Resources, the Ministry of Youth & Sport and the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development are actively involved in this sector. In Brunei Darussalam, the Ministry of Education through the Department of Technical Education, the Ministry of Industry & Primary Resources and the Ministry of Culture, Youth & Sport offer particular programmes in this area.

This inter-ministerial co-ordination in a number of countries (i.e. Indonesia and Vietnam) is relatively weak, which often results in fragmented policy and strategy development, divergent provision of training and dissipation of resources. As observed, many line ministries/departments and statutory institutions have been charged with redundant powers and functions related to VTET (Adiviso, 2002).

#### *Mismatches between supply and demand*

Although initiatives have been undertaken from time to time, it seems that not many VTET systems in the region have successfully equipped the students or learners with skills that are of value by employers. In general, the mismatch between supply and demand has been in place and this has been one of the critical issues in the region for a long time.

It was the main reason Indonesia introduced "Link and Match", a basic policy which is intentionally designed to improve the quality and relevancy of the VTET system as a whole, including the improvement of implementation strategy, management system and graduates (Yulmarino, 2002). This policy indicates that: (1) the improvement of VTET system is not solely the responsibility of the government but also the society, including industries and other relevant institutions; and (2) the organisation and conduct of VTET shall be done by schools and workplaces with the hope that this can force schools to match their programmes to valued skills and knowledge that are commonly required by workplaces to their employees.

The Philippines has utilised the same philosophy for their best Industry-Institution (I-I) linkage (Alto, 2002). This policy has adhered to the legal basis principle that provides the basic legal framework. This approach is aimed as a strategic alliance between the educational system and the private sector. This is to match the needs and core competencies of the educational system on one hand, and that of the employment system on the other, to take advantage of strengths and opportunities and minimise the effects of the weaknesses and threats to the two systems or turn such effects into opportunities instead.

Brunei Darussalam has anticipated this potential problem at an early stage although they currently do not face it significantly. Thus, in line with the 8<sup>th</sup> National Development Plan (NDP) of Brunei Darussalam, the Department of Technical Education (DTE) has set one of their strategic goals to increase the involvement of industry and the community (Yee, 2002). One of the main priorities is to encour-

age the private sector to co-operate and be actively involved in areas such as management, planning and curriculum development for VTET and in providing on-the-job (OJT) as well as in job opportunities. As a result, it is hoped that training providers or institutions would be able to produce ready to work employees.

#### **Social Challenges**

##### *Decision-Making and Political Interference*

Decentralising public provision and to give various stakeholders a greater say in matters that concerns them, a process of decentralisation at the regional and institutional levels is underway in some countries in the region. This process may ensure that more decisions are made on the spot at regional and local levels, where companies' needs can be assessed more easily, where school-leavers are entering the job market and where dialogue and negotiation with the social partners are easier to organise.

This movement towards decentralisation of VTET practices in some respective countries in the region belongs together with that of education as a whole, driven by evolution of the political context towards democracy and by the strong desire for greater participation. As a result, there are countries in the region where important decisions, such as those on curricula, are taken at the level of institutions with the participation of local employers and others represented on advisory or management boards.

Few countries still practice where decisions are made at the central office without taking into account the opinion from the end-users that is employers. Few others also practice central office authority but they still listen to the voice up by the end-users. Brunei Darussalam, for example, has established the BDTVEC (Brunei Darussalam Technical and Vocational Education Council) established in May 1991 where the members are drawn from the public and private sectors. BDTVEC has been the only body responsible for the certification and accreditation as well as validation of VTET programmes. It works towards providing acceptable national standards whilst at the same time serving the needs of industry, commerce, government and professional organisations in Brunei Darussalam (Haji Mustafa, 2002).

In Indonesia, the decentralisation seems to aim at increasing the autonomy of establishments. The point is to turn the directors of individual institutions into genuine managers, capable of mobilising resources, of talking with companies to identify their training needs, of arranging work experience for



students, and of forming new relations with the local community. However, in reality this has resulted in dilemmas. Many of the political forces that have impacted on secondary vocational education have done so in not a very positive fashion. As observed, instead of being concerned with the employment needs of the people and the skills they need to be employable, emphasis has been given for anyone needing or wishing to have it. VTET policies in this country in many ways have redirected its attention away from high quality programmes toward the special needs of the community. Therefore, the provision of vocational and technical education in this country tends to be a mean of preventing or reducing social exclusion and inequity.

#### *Financing of VTET Institutions and Initiatives*

VTET implementation and practices cannot be funded solely by the private sector or companies or from the payments made by trainees. On the other hand, the government itself lacks funds. Therefore in some countries in the region, the conduct of VTET providers is financed by general taxation or by means of an education tax levied on companies if they do not offer training directly themselves, and equivalent to a certain percentage of their overall wage bill.

In the Philippines, for example, the finance issue becomes another bottleneck. From both the government and the private sector, there are very limited resources poured into VTET institutions for implementation of their initiatives and programmes.

It is revealed that among the three educational institutions, the VTET sector shares a measly 10% of the overall public investment on the education sector (Flores, 2002). It is therefore, the government enacted Republic Act No.7686 that includes the incorporation of tax incentive provisions designed to encourage the greater participation of industry—dual system expenses of companies are in effect 150% deductible, while donations for the system are 100% deductible (Alto, 2002).

Although the payroll tax has been a common means of financing VTET in a number of countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, new styles in public finance resist funding mechanisms that tie revenues to uses. It is therefore, the financial resources and facilities for VTET provision that is generally sourced out through multilateral and bilateral assistance schemes. The more prominent sources of loan assistance for VTET development in some developing countries in the region (i.e. Indonesia and Vietnam) are the Asian Development

Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. Bilateral assistance has also been extended by the international assistance agencies of donor countries such as Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), German Gesellschaft Fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and Japan International Co-operation Agency.

The utilisation of the financial assistance however, seems not to be so effective and efficient. This has assumingly resulted from the fact that the sustainability of any VTET initiatives using loan assistance seems not to be a big concern in so far as ensuring the continuing role of the government as the main provider and investor in VTET initiatives. For example, the strategic thrusts to expand and upgrade the physical facilities include site acquisition, civil works and equipment procurement has been made possible through the international assistance agency of AusAID in Indonesia. A number of vocational training institutions have been established for increased access to VTET. Unfortunately, the condition of the physical facilities and equipment is far from being good especially after the donors have terminated their assistance. It was revealed that no national budget was allocated for the maintenance cost.

Another critical observation relates to the fact that there was no reconciliation between donor and recipient requirement/needs. A good example is where the procurement of equipment in VTET institutions has not fitted the scope of teaching and learning process. The equipment, in fact, is more appropriate for the use in industry rather than in school-scale. As a result, these high-end and expensive equipment have been left unutilised. It was revealed that the central officers as well as the project manager had not informed people at school level before the procurement of the equipment.

These few examples may indicate that reliable information is hard to come by or non-existent, particularly information about the costs and benefits of current efforts or initiatives and of possible alternatives. This information is indeed an essential ingredient in justifying and in implementing such initiatives. This then contributes to misguided training ventures and feeds the scepticism that is typical of financiers.

#### **Cultural Perceptions**

##### *Human Resources Credibility and Commitment*

In a few countries in the region, policy implementation is held up by the fact that people with expertise,

experience and commitment are not available in sufficient numbers. It is not unusual, for example, to find that a significant proportion of trainers and their managers, in public as well as private institutions, lack proper qualifications. Information constraints are to some extent embodied in staff who are less than qualified.

Industries seem to be less willing to build manpower capability for the economic development of the country. Small and medium sized industries simply do not have the extra room to provide that kind of training. In Cambodia, for example, the industries were reluctant to be involved in close working relationships with VTET institutions as it may impede their freedom to employ workers of their own choice. This may have resulted from the fact that key players in this arena lack shared vision about the benefits of partnerships where schools may benefit from the generosity of their business partners by receiving up-to-date equipment, incentives for student attendance and scholarship, and opportunities for students to learn about the real-world application of knowledge and skill. Businesses' involvement in this partnerships is typical philanthropically inspired, but it can also be attached to long-term goals that reflect self-interest—a better prepared entry-level workforce that would reduce training costs, increase productivity, and improve products and services (Lankard, 1995).

There are cultural biases affecting the promotion of VTET initiatives in such countries in the region as a human resource development strategy. The more affluent countries in the region i.e. Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Thailand are investing time and money to counteract this social stigma through massive information campaigns, attractive incentives and social marketing of VTET. Whereas the rest have been struggling as their deprived situation would not support for the marketing efforts (Adiviso, 2002).

#### *Image of Vocational and Technical Education and Training*

This type of education often invokes an automatic negative response. Perhaps the most enduring belief about VTET is that it is only for the non-college bound, the potential drop-outs, or other students with special needs. This belief is not confined to students and their parents. Other educators and policymakers often share it. Indeed, there is a widespread belief among parents in the region (i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam) that VTET is inferior

to academic programmes. Parents believe that a four-year college degree will guarantee their children a place in the middle class rather than a VTET qualification.

The Philippines society has low regard for VTET as they associate it with dirty, dangerous and low paying jobs in the market. Public policies are also biased towards white-collar jobs. Companies prefer hiring baccalaureate degree graduates than two-year non-degree graduates (Flores, 2002). The low absorption level of VTET graduates into the mainstream employment is an indication that the country's education and training system is not producing the kind of workers needed by the market.

It was revealed that the majority of students in VTET institutions are poor or come from low income family background and are not as bright as those who are on academic streamline as was found in Indonesia (Surtantini, 2002) and the Philippines (Flores, 2002). Their parents send them to this type of education with the hope that they can find jobs after graduation and be another breadwinner in the family.

Up to this time, almost all countries in this region have been striving to change the mindset of the public on the matter. Brunei Darussalam, for example, for the improvement of this image have planned and implemented various strategies. The strategies include improving program articulation between lower and higher level programmes with the hope that this could increase the value students attach to vocational and technical education (Mohd Jamil, 2002).

#### **Role of SEAMEO VOCTECH as one of VTET Training Providers in the Region**

SEAMEO VOCTECH is one of fifteen regional centres under the umbrella of Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO). It was established in 1990 and is hosted by the Government of Brunei Darussalam. The Centre plays an important role in the development of human resources in this region. It is mandated by the Council of Ministers of Education of SEAMEO Member Countries to identify and help solve common problems in the field of vocational and technical education.

As a catalyst and innovator the Centre conducts training courses for teachers, curriculum developers, evaluators and other personnel involved in planning, implementing and supervising vocational and technical programmes; upgrading the skills of both vocational and technical administrators and trainers in Research and Development and in Management Information Systems, and updating and encouraging the exchange of ideas and experiences through

seminars, workshops and symposia on vocational and technical themes and problem areas. So far, it should be said that the training courses offered by the Centre have addressed pertinent and critical issues in the region including the socio-critical pitfalls mentioned at the earlier part of this paper.

As a resource centre, SEAMEO VOTTECH provides consultative services in vocational and technical requirements and problems; undertakes research projects, e.g., evaluation of vocational and technical programmes, and creates and develops new ideas and approaches in education and training for vocational and technical teachers and other relevant personnel (see: <http://www.vottech.org.bn>).

The Centre provides training programmes to its clients which consist of VTET government officers as well as officers from the private sector. Its training programmes are classified into regular, in-country, customised and special programmes. It also conducts regular seminars, forums, conferences and workshops besides the above programmes. The nature of each type of training programmes can be seen below.

#### **Regular Programmes:**

- Regular training programmes involve participants from all SEAMEO member countries. The Centre provides a scholarship for one participant each from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, and two participants each from Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.
- The participants are nominated by the respective governments and consist of directors, lecturers, principals, heads of department, teachers and senior education officers. The presence of different nationalities ensures that the participants not only learn from the resource persons but also among themselves.
- The programmes range from two weeks to one month. They are specially packaged to increase and hasten their multiplier effect.

#### **In-country Programmes:**

In this strategy, which was initiated only in 1998, the venue of the training programme is located at the requesting country. In-country programmes allow participants from the same country to interact with one another, thus allowing for easier communication and dissemination.

#### **Customised Programmes:**

These programmes are fee-paying and offered to the public. In other words, programmes are specially tailored and packaged for specific clients, from the government departments or private organisations.

#### **Special Programmes:**

Special programmes are programmes conducted upon specific arrangements made with the requesting organisation. The costs are usually borne by the requesting organisation.

With its mandate, the Centre welcomes industries in the region to collaborate in various projects aiming at increasing the value of VTET initiatives so that many more people will accept that vocational and technical education and training is as good as academic education and not a second grade education. It must be aware that the success of each initiative in VTET area depending on the extent to which industries be taken hand-in-hand for the overall planning and implementation of the initiative.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Conclusions**

1. As other sectors, it is difficult to separate political forces from all others in the implementation of various initiatives within VTET sector. However, it seems that public officials have their own agendas and the government is involved in everything in this sector. As a result, not many government in the region have been able to create a good partnership with employers, professional associations, industries, the local community and non-government organisations (NGOs);
2. There seems to be a misconception in a number of countries in the region that VTET is considered as an employment creation rather than a commodity that improves productivity and competitiveness, and hence contributing to the growth of the economy to the extent of creating jobs and making a substantial contribution to job creation. This indirect and powerful potential impact on growth in fact, has been confused with the immediate impact of VTET programmes on employment;
3. The token presence of business and other relevant stakeholders in the region has not seem to be in place particularly for VTET decision-making policy as they have been rarely involved. In many countries, their less involvement has resulted in considerably low support for initiatives or efforts taken by the government;
4. As most VTET initiatives by nature come from the government, the initiatives seem to be far from the reconciliation between national directives and



local aspirations as well as between donor and recipient requirement/needs. This nature results in some unsustainable projects on post donor assistance period.

### Recommendations

For future success of VTET initiatives in the region, comprehensive collaboration must be in place. Comprehensive collaboration must be understood as “represented on the continuum (of school-community partnerships) as the most sophisticated and fully

developed partnership”. As this collaborative involves multiple organisations, it requires long-term institutional commitment. Therefore, there should be a commonly shared vision, goals and objectives developed through consensus, shared authority and decision making, new roles and relationships for the various players, integrated delivery of multiple services and cross-institutional activities. This maximum participation may ensure the balance between identification and ownership.

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