

Human Resource Development through Industry-focused Executive Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implementation of educational programs leading to certified qualifications for unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The paper describes executive diploma programs developed and implemented at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. How the programs were designed and delivered using a team of academics and industrial practitioners had been described. An exploratory study was conducted using surveys involving sampled graduates who had completed the executive diploma programs. Perceptions among executive diploma graduates about the executive program had been shared. The qualification through executive program has helped in their career advancement as well as improved their life-long learning skills. Findings from the exploratory survey had supported the suggestion on the mode of education suited for improving competencies and sub-professional skills among the existing unskilled and semi-skilled Malaysian labor force. The study concludes that the executive education does provide an alternative path towards improving qualification and career advancement. This exploratory study however functions as a case study, but a real example of providing alternative access to higher education for working adults. A wider survey will have to be conducted. In this survey a description of the use of Recognized Prior Learning in student selection shall be included and attributes such as 'Enhancement of Soft Skills'; 'Self-Confidence', 'Inculcation of Professional Ethics' would be given priority.

Keywords: Executive Education, Lifelong Learning, Industry-focused Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian's New Economic Model (NEM) has identified several challenges which may hinder Malaysia's quest to become a high-income and developed nation by year 2020. Among the main issues highlighted include high percentage of unskilled labor; over-dependence on foreign workers; and low wages. Currently, unskilled and semi-skilled labor make up 73% of the Malaysian registered labor force (NEAC, 2010). To address these challenges, the Malaysian's National Transformation Policy (NTP) has introduced the Human Capital Development Strategic Reform Initiative (HCD SRI). The HCD SRI supports and enhances initiatives on training and development to produce a more flexible labor force as well as upgrade competencies of the existing semi- skilled and unskilled workers.

Report from The Department of Statistics (NEAC, 2010) revealed that 80% of the Malaysia's workforce obtained only secondary education up to *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), equivalent to the O-level certificate in the UK. The figure showed that many school leavers did not pursue tertiary education. The lack of skilled workers and the exodus of talents were also identified as factors that could impede Malaysia's economic progress. However, the present Malaysian Qualification Framework has prepared pathways for various formal lifelong learning education and executive programs to be accredited and certified (MQF, 2010). Sub-professionals can now enroll in various executive programs to upgrade their knowledge and competencies. Upon completion they could obtain recognized certification which could be used for career upward mobility and to further education to the next level. As of May 2010, more than 100,000 life-long learners were enrolled in various private and public universities on various diploma, degree and masters programs (Blueprint On Enculturation Of *Lifelong Learning For Malaysia*). The life-long education and executive programs are more popular since they were offered on a part-time basis, mostly in modular format and delivered during weekends. This paper will highlight the executive education program which is more industry focused and implemented at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. An exploratory study of graduates' perceptions of the program was carried out, of which findings shall be discussed in the later section.

Focus of Executive Education

The state of competency among the employees was provided by a survey conducted by the Malaysian Employers Federation (Shamsuddin, 2012), in which various issues from the employers' perspectives, had been addressed. The Survey pointed to three main critical skills found lacking among executives who were in the Malaysian work force. They include: *Planning & Organizing*, *Communication* and *Problem Solving*. And also, the most required critical skills for executives are *Critical Thinking*, *Problem Solving* and *Technical Competency*. The survey also discovered three most required critical skills among non executives are *Communication* (Written & Oral), *Team Working* and *Technical Competency* (MEF, 2011). In addition, the survey found that more than 90% of employers had conducted On-the-Job Training in various competencies. However, upon

completion trainees were still classified as SPM holders since specific knowledge and skills newly obtained, end up with no certification.

The executive education is also designed to correct the mismatch between industry demands and the current capabilities of existing workers. Technical industry-focused programs were developed to address the need to enhance competencies of middle level executives. These programs are conducted during weekends, thus departmental tasks during week days were not affected. An important consequence will be the improvement of upward mobility of workers. In some executive programs, strategic collaborations between institutions of higher learning and the industrial sector were developed, expertise and facilities from these institutions were shared to strengthen the delivery of quality and learner-centered education.

DESCRIPTIONS OF UTM's EXECUTIVE PROGRAM

UTM Razak School started its Executive Diploma program in 2004. The Executive Development and Regeneration Program (EDGE) unit was set-up to handle the operation of the program. The programs were initially modeled after the University of Warwick's executive program. Since then, more than 1500 students had been conferred with executive diploma in various fields of study and a sizable number had received certificates of attendance for some of the modules offered within the program. The executive programs were developed solely for working executives and delivered in modular format during the weekends. This program provides an alternative path of education for working sub-professional from various industries (such as electrical and electronics, mechanical, construction and logistics) who might not have had the opportunity to pursue tertiary education before embarking on their career. It serves to develop and update their skills and knowledge as well as provide a boost for their career enhancement. The executive program is aimed to tackle industry's specific issue and urgent manpower needs not addressed through conventional formal education.

A key feature of the executive diploma program is that entry requirements are based on certain percentage of work experience or Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) together with an SPM level certificate bearing credits in approved subjects. The applicant must be at least 21 years of age and possess at least two years of work experience in a relevant field. Candidates requesting entry using RPL are required to submit all relevant certificates and detailed work experience endorsed by the employer. A panel of evaluators, chaired by the Head of the Executive Programme unit will vet through these to ensure relevancy to the program needs. Candidates may also be called for an interview if the panel requires further assurance on the suitability of the candidate. With the relevant RPL, the applicants could be given credit exemption to a maximum of 30 credit hours. This is to ensure the candidates are equipped with tacit knowledge via prior experiential learning that could be translated into explicit knowledge.

Executive Diploma Program Structure

As mentioned earlier, UTM Razak School had run its executive programs for a number of years. As part of its continuous effort to upgrade its programs and ensuring compliance to accrediting bodies, UTM Razak School had taken the lead to get its executive programs accredited. Hence it became the first institution in Malaysia to offer Executive Diploma Programs which comply to requirements stipulated in the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF). Programs are designed to meet the MQA accreditation requirements, featuring 3600 hours Student Learning Time (SLT).

This part-time program was structured to comprise 18 courses and one industry-based project. It runs on a 14-week three semesters system per year. A breakdown of the credits is given in Table 1. Students are only required to complete 60 credits instead of the normal 90 credits (equivalent to 3600 SLT) since only qualified candidates are accepted and given an RPL of 30 credits upon entry into the program.

Table 1. Components of the UTM Executive Diploma Program

Classification of Modules		Credits	Percentage
1.	University Requirements	15	25 %
2.	Project 1 & 2	2 + 4 = 6	10 %
3.	Program Core	24	40 %
4.	Program Elective	15	25 %
TOTAL		60	100 %

Source: Razak School, UTM, Executive Diploma Programme, 2010

At present, UTM Razak School offers six executive diploma programs: Executive Diploma in Engineering Business Management (EDEBM); Executive Diploma in Retail Business Management (EDRBM); Executive Diploma in Facilities Management (EDFM); Executive Diploma in Manufacturing Technology (EDMT), Executive Diploma in Occupational Safety and Health (EDOSH) and Executive Diploma in Manufacturing System (EDMS). These programs were developed based on feedbacks from graduate surveys and comments from members of Board of Studies comprising of academicians and industrial practitioners. Programs such as EDRBM and EDOSH receive continues support and feedbacks from experts of the respective industry.

The programs are run during weekends at UTM Razak School or at other approved lecture/ seminar rooms. The modules are delivered by both qualified academic lecturers and industrial practitioners. The program maintains an almost equal participation of academicians and practitioners in module delivery to ensure a well balanced approach to subject matters, from both the academic and practical point of reference. This has proven to be a most suitable and appreciated feature of the program. Assessments of students are carried out both in class as well as take home assignments. Students are required to complete a post module assignment (PMA) within a specified time period. At the end of the semester the grades are

compiled and brought to the university senate for endorsement. The whole program takes seven semesters to complete.

THE STUDY AND RESULTS

This study reveals the perceptions among executive diploma graduates about the executive programs. An exploratory survey had been conducted via mails and emails to sampled graduates of the executive diploma offered by UTM Razak School, UTM. Sixty five graduates of classes 2007 to 2010 had responded. Areas investigated include: 'Career Advancement', 'Technical / Professional Knowledge Gained' and 'Generic Skills Acquired'. More than half (55.4%) of the respondents were Executive Diploma Graduates in Engineering Business Management (EDEBM); considered to be the most popular program offered by the school. Another 26.2% graduated from the Executive Diploma in Occupational Safety and Health (EDOSH) and the rest were graduates from other programs. Seventy-five percent were males. The respondents ranged in age between 24 to 67 years with an average age of 42 years old. In terms of funding to support their studies, the highest percentage (67%) had withdrawn their savings from the Employees Provident Fund, 6.7% received sponsorship from their employers and the rest were self-sponsored.

Embarking on a part-time study requires self determination and sacrifice. As such the study had included questions on the reasons why the respondents had joined the program. Figure 1 portrays the result. 'Updating skills and Knowledge' ranked highest, followed by 'Career Advancement'. About 40% of the respondents is of the opinion that the program had excellently prepared them for their 'Present Career' in which 62.3% respondents had received increase in salary and 70% had been upgraded to a 'Higher Position'.

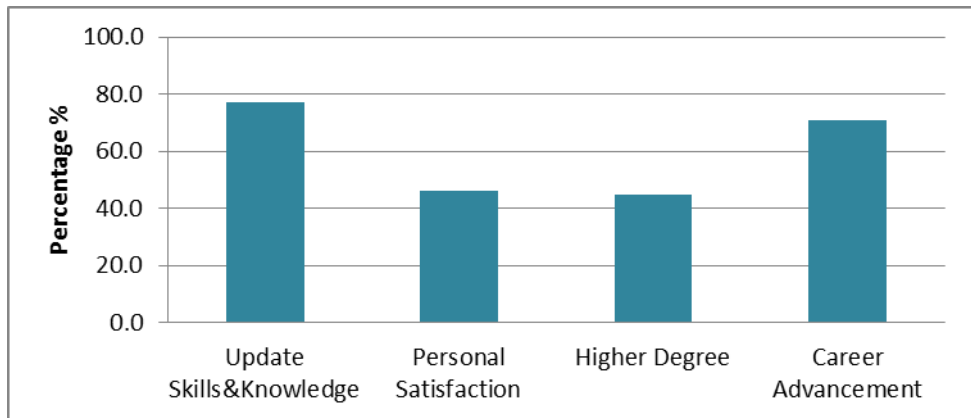


Figure 1. Response on Reasons for joining the Executive Diploma Programs.

Source : UTM Executive Diploma Programs Survey, 2011

To ensure the program had addressed graduate attributes as outlined by UTM, the respondents were asked to rate how well these attributes were attended to in the programs. The results are shown in Figure 2. Positive feedbacks were derived from “Good” and “Excellent” ratings to find which attributes could be considered as the highest contributors to their capabilities and job enhancement. As can be seen in Figure 3, attributes such as ‘Self Confidence and Ethics’ were rated highest followed by ‘Teamwork’. With respect to communication skills, ‘Writing and Oral Skills’ are rated the highest.

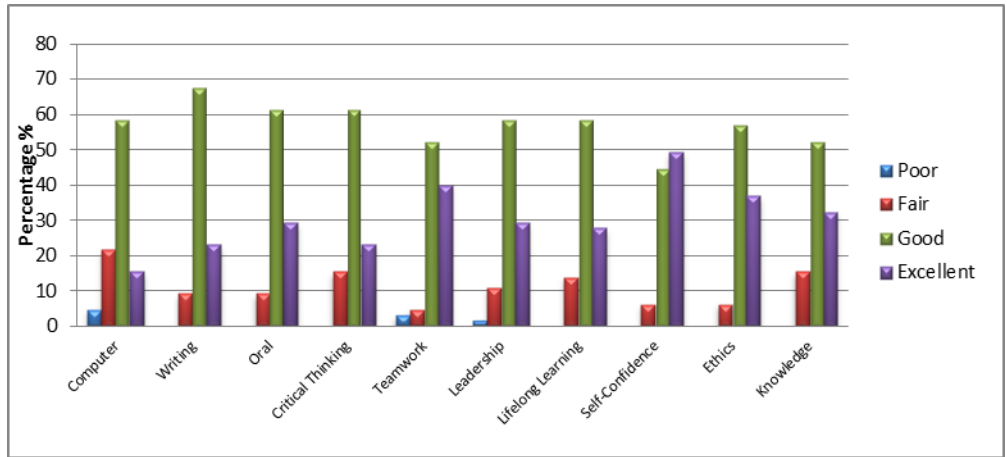


Figure 2. Respondents' rating on the graduate attributes addressed by the programs.

Source : UTM Executive Diploma Programs Survey, 2011

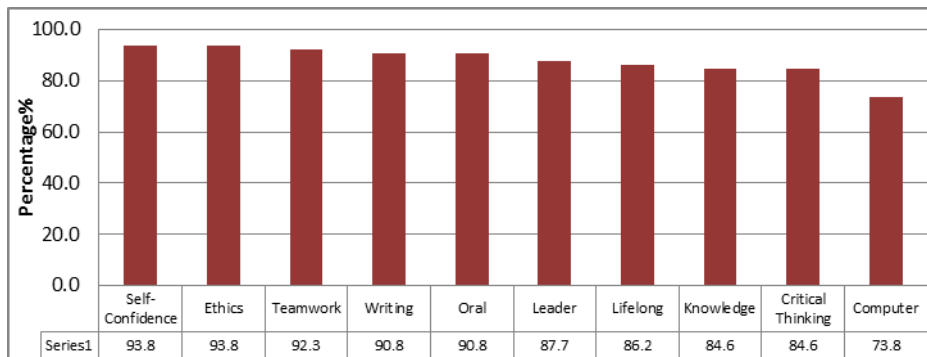


Figure 3. Ratings on Skills Acquired

Source : UTM Executive Diploma Programs Survey, 2011

DISCUSSION

Malaysia's talent base must be improved. The education system should be reviewed and the educational approach from 'Rote Learning' should be shifted to 'Creative and Critical Thinking'. Conger and Xin (2000) noted that numerous forces are causing a transformation in not only the delivery but also the purpose of executive education in the 21st century. A quality education system which nurtures skills, inquisitiveness, and innovativeness among students should be pursued in order to drive labor productivity upward and to sustain the economic growth. As reported in the New Economic Model (NEM), the bottom 40% of Malaysian households still earned less than RM1,500 (~USD 300) a month. Malaysia is targeting for USD 15000 -20000 per caput income by year 2020 (Idris Jala, 2010). This target income could only be derived from quality workforce through upgrading skills among the bottom segment of the Malaysian labor force. Trainings and re-trainings through life-long learning and executive education are the alternative mode of education. From the results of the study conducted, issues raised from the survey conducted by the Malaysian Employers Federation (Shamsuddin, 2012) depicting the three most required critical skills among non executives which are *Communication* (Written & Oral), *Team Working* and *Technical Competency* are duly addressed by the executive program developed and run by UTM Razak School (see Fig.3). Even though knowledge is ranked a little lower than the generic skills (84.6%), the survey had also revealed that almost 40% of the respondents is of the opinion that the program had excellently prepared them for their current career whilst a further 60% agree the preparation was adequate.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a real example of providing alternative access to higher education and training. Findings from the exploratory survey had supported the suggestion on the mode of education suited to be offered to the existing semi-skilled and unskilled Malaysian labor force. Attributes such as 'Enhancement of Soft Skills'; 'Self-Confidence', 'Inculcation of Professional Ethics' should be given priority in executive programs. The structure and implementation of the executive programs should also be highly flexible, relevant to support life-long learning education and take into account working experience. It is recommended that a wider survey covering majority of executive programs conducted in Malaysia be undertaken.

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