Restructuring vocational education in Hong Kong

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Keywords
Hong Kong, Vocational training, Change, Education

Abstract
The reversion of Hong Kong to Mainland China has led to swift and major changes in the economic base, and a consequent change in the vocational education and training needed to support economic prosperity. To meet the requirements of the new environment, the Vocational Training Council is leading a restructuring of the seven technical institutes and two technical colleges of Hong Kong to become a new invigorated single organisation, the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE), consisting of the nine relevant organisations will be restructured into three groups or nexuses, each having their own vice principal. The curriculum is also to be developed. This “modernization programme” (VTC, 1997, p. 2) will involve reshaping the physical and human resources, with the reduction in size and/or relocation of some departments and improvements to accommodation and facilities. The endpoint of the changes will be a revitalised and newly named single academic organisation, the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE), consisting of the three nexuses.

The aim of the restructuring is to achieve a system which is both more effective and more efficient. The goals of the new institution are:
• IVE to become recognized as the premier institution of vocational education and training In Hong Kong;
• each nexus to become a centre of excellence;
• students of IVE to be adequately equipped with broad-based, as well as industry specific, technical knowledge and skills;
• develop a corporate culture of positive attitude towards work, eagerness for professionalism and aspiration for self-actualization;
• the graduates of IVE will meet the changing needs of Hong Kong’s economy;
• the resources of IVE will be used efficiently and effectively;
• produce robust and flexible links with customers and stakeholders (VTC, 1997, p. 6).

As Fullan (1992, p. 109) asserts “educational change is technically simple and socially complex”. Whatever the plans on paper, the process of leading people through change on such a scale presents challenges which require micropolitical as well as pedagogic skills.

This article draws on interviews with the principals of each of the six technical institutes (one of the seven technical institutes becomes a technical college in the new IVE structure) and reports their perceptions of what has driven change, the intended benefits, the difficulties, and their leadership role. The author acknowledges that the view of events may be different for those working at a different level, whether
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The existing structure of vocational education was unable to respond speedily enough. Principal six felt that the government had previously been reluctant to compete with private trainers who offered training in service based areas which demanded less investment to establish. The VTC had taken the role of providing the much more investment-heavy areas of manufacturing and crafts. With the demise of much of the manufacturing base, this mission was in need of reconsideration. Additionally, the actual management structure was seen as insufficiently responsive:

The previous system was bureaucratic. Change was resisted, and incremental, if any (Principal two).

The previous management was very much headquarters driven. Everything got referred back to headquarters who might make comment on your returns or require an explanation for this or for that. It was a very inefficient system as well as a very frustrating one (Principal four).

The pressures for change

Internationally, social and economic change is seen as increasing in velocity. However, change in Hong Kong received an additional thrust to its momentum when it became a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997. The resulting changes to the economy were a culmination of the process which commenced when Shenzen became a special economic zone in 1985, but are perceived as relatively sudden. One principal described the changes as having a feel of almost happening overnight:

Hong Kong industry has always relied very much on the colleges and institutes to produce skilled labour. However, during the last ten years there has been a changing pattern in industry with many sectors uprooted and replaced in mainland China. We were taken by surprise. Previously, colleges could follow the change fairly easily as change was relatively moderate. However, now what is taking place is an industrial revolution. Suddenly all of the big factories, or at least most of them, have disappeared. There was no period of transition. They just disappeared from Hong Kong (Principal two).

Once again, the VTC, are presented as having particular significance. To preserve anonymity, each principal is referred to by a number only.

Identifying markets and customer needs

Marketing as a philosophy applied to education centres on a systematic process of identifying stakeholders and listening to these groups to identify the learning opportunities that are required to meet the needs of individuals, the economy and society. As Hatton and Sedgemore (1992) point out, the adoption of marketing in education is challenging because it implies moving from an approach based on promoting what lecturers and institutes want to teaching the learning that students and employers want.

Embedding marketing requires a transition from a product-centred to a customer-centred...
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The technical institutes are aware of the product-centred approach which has dominated to date and are determined to make the difficult transition to becoming customer centred:

- Previously courses have been sustained to match the staff that were available so you do not change the courses because you would then have a staff problem. Now we are saying that's wrong. We should be doing what's needed, what's justified both from the perspective of industry and of society and of the student and various stakeholders. If courses are not needed then we should stop them or cut them back (Principal four).

However, establishing exactly what is needed is complex. Need has been assessed using both the input demand of requests for places and the output demand of employers’ estimates of their need for trained personnel. Hung (1998, p. 55) refers to the policy formulating “harmony of the triple alliance”, of business, social and political stakeholders. This harmony has been achieved by negotiation. All the principals believe that employers exaggerate their needs. An overt challenge to employer’s figures is not seen as appropriate. Rather a path has been steered through conflicting sets of figures, employers’ estimate of need for trained personnel, the numbers of applicants, the labour market surveys of the institutes themselves and government figures on general trends. Just as employers may have a vested interest in inflating figures, so lecturers may wish to keep figures of estimated need higher than justified:

- We are in a devolving situation where more of the planning will be undertaken by each discipline rather than centrally, but in doing so, we may encounter inflated demands of individual disciplines because they have a conflict of interest. If there is decreasing demand it is very difficult to rely on the discipline to make appropriate adjustments (Principal six).

Arriving at agreed estimates for numbers of places within each vocational area is consequently difficult and likely to become more so as the pace of change in the economy increases. The IVE plans to offer training to increase the labour market analysis capacity of all institutes.

- Allied to the difficulty in estimating the need for places is the problem of image. Foskett (1992, p. 159) points out that every organisation “may have as many images as there are audiences” but in the case of vocational education, the image seems rather negative for most. Kennedy (1997, p. 1) sadly concludes that “the role played by further education is the least understood and celebrated part of the learning tapestry” in the UK. Imrie (1995, p. 283) notes that even in the pragmatic society of Taiwan “vocational education still bears the implication of ‘less than worthy’”. The principals themselves were very aware of this problem in promoting the service, the image being:

- Even staff within the institutes are seen as not having a clear vision:

    - If you ask teachers who have been teaching in technical institutes for five to six years what technical institutes are for, they cannot tell you. They can tell you how many classes they have and what the classes are, but they cannot tell you what the whole thing is for (Principal three).

    - Faced with confusion and negative impressions among employers, parents and potential applicants, the VTC (1997, p. 4) has decided to vigorously market the new single academic institution of the IVE as an “alternative route” which is credible and attractive. It is acknowledged by the VTC that improving quality is the critical foundation of revitalising the image of vocational education and plans to restructure management and the curriculum reflect a determination to achieve a quantum leap in improvement.

    - Real adoption of the marketing concept is unquestionably a tough route which will take time (Hatton and Sedgemore, 1992, p. v).

    - The principals themselves concurred in viewing the planned changes as not a quick fix. Marketing was not interpreted, as in so many colleges throughout the world, as synonymous with promotion. Rather the priority to build promotion on a bedrock of quality was axiomatic to the principals.

### Changes in structure

The VTC recognises the importance of structure:

- The most important aspect of any company is its management structure and the management style or culture which will determine the corporate ethics of the whole organisation (VTC, 1997, p. 9).

- The overall aim is to establish a credible and attractive “alternative route to employment and prosperity” (VTC, 1997, p. 1), a unified
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The widening participation in vocational education has led to the belief that, in the words of Principal six:
There is no alternative but to redesign the curriculum.

There has been a review of the balance of vocationally specific and generic skills. In the context of a need for lifelong learning, a greater importance is being placed on continuing professional education. The emphasis is still on equipping students to contribute to their work, as employers: expect people to be able to contribute as soon as they are employed. They do not consider themselves a charity and those they employ are not there to learn, so you have to be able to contribute immediately (Principal three).

However, the principals recognise that meeting the short-term needs of employers is only part of their aim:
We aim to meet the needs of the industrialists but we also have other objectives. Our main objective is to teach the student how to learn so they are more adaptable to the changing needs of the environment (Principal six).

The curriculum has been changed in a number of ways to meet the needs of this double agenda and to be attractive to the more diverse group of entrants. A unified entry is planned so that students enter a discipline, not a particular course. Diploma and Higher Diploma students will undertake a common first year, the division by level coming at the end of the first year. The amount of material that must be covered has been cut and the time to study extended over a further year where appropriate. There is investment in new technology, not to reduce contact hours or staff, but to aid staff in improving learning and teaching.

Vocationally-specific teaching has been cut to give more time for the development of generic skills, particularly communication, and smaller groups are timetabled for the latter. The overall number of courses has been cut:
Previously there were approximately 90 courses. It has now dropped to about 50...
The move to offering fewer courses will have advantages to students and to managers. The common entry allows students to take more time to make choices and to do so in a more informed way having experienced the first year. Administratively, it is much simpler. Teaching quality may also be improved, as teachers will have fewer courses to prepare and are also able to incorporate more modern pedagogy using ICT particularly (Principal one).

The foundation of general skills will be followed by a more vocationally-specific curriculum in the year preceding exit, though the assumption is that further vocational training may be needed and provided either by the employer and/or by the IVE through continuous professional development. Overall, the curriculum is planned to become broader, more integrated, and more responsive to the learning needs of the range of students.

Changes in the curriculum
The widening participation in vocational education has led to the belief that, in the words of Principal four:
The horizontal axis is the discipline leader. The vertical axis is the principal. The relationship between these two in the new structure is not yet defined. The principal looks after resources. The discipline leader is in charge of academic affairs. The DL is chosen by the IVE top management, maybe on a rotational basis.

In this way, the leadership of developing the curriculum is partly given to the heads of department concerned. The intention is to give as much independence as is feasible within a co-ordinated system:
All the course boards, assessment and validation would be controlled within each nexus and consequently each nexus would be fairly independent within the structure of the IVE. The IVE would have an Academic Board, management committees and so on, but the courses would be run from each nexus fairly independently within guidelines, so the process is one of decentralising from the previous system (Principal four).

The plans amount to an intended transformation of culture which will underpin changes in the curriculum and in marketing the new unified system.
Leading change

As Fullan (1992, p. 127) notes in managing change, “the implementation process is complex and dilemma ridden”. The literature abounds with examples of change which was unsuccessful or quickly reverted to the previous state, or where the unintended negative effects were more significant than the intended positives (Marriss, 1993; O’Donoghue, 1995; Pfeffer, 1993). Given the pressure of an urgent need to restructure, the temptation for senior managers is to feel that they have no choice but to introduce an imposed system top down (Bull, 1994). However great the urgency for change, the principals have resisted the lure of swiftly imposed change and have adopted a leadership style which identifies with the concerns of the staff and supports them. This is not to abandon the role of leading. Rather it reflects a vision of leadership which is both pragmatic and humane; pragmatic because the principals recognised that a demoralised and anxious staff would be unlikely to offer a quality service to students, and humane because there was real concern for the welfare of individuals. The need to align with the academic concerns of staff was expressed strongly by one principal:

I do not see myself as an administrator, more a mixture of a leader and manager and lastly an administrator. I do consider myself an academic and whenever I get an opportunity to do something academic I enjoy it. It’s credibility, and understanding what they need, and from that background you are better able to look ahead (Principal four).

The need for communication was stressed by all the principals, both between the principal and staff, within each department, and between each institute and the VTC:

One of the key issues is communication, especially letting staff know what is happening, keeping them in touch with change and allowing them to feel that they can put their views and their views will be taken seriously and passed along (Principal four).

The possible consequences of not providing adequate information were well understood:

My role is “information provider”, keeping staff informed of what is happening. If staff do not know what is happening, they may begin to think negatively and perform badly. My role is to reassure them (Principal six).

The process was not just one of providing information, but aiding adjustment to change. Principal six described the range of attitudes and how he responded:

Some staff are very positive. Some less so. In the latter case I use persuasion by talking to them, putting it aside for a while and at the next opportunity, talk to them again.

The pace of change was also not allowed to overwhelm. The planning process was described as iterative, with loopbacks to allow consultation as plans progressed.

There was also recognition of the need for staff to foresee arrival at a period of stability, not a permanent state of flux:

We have tried to project over two to three years because we don’t want staff to be moved yearly, unnecessarily. We have tried to look towards some sort of steady state. We can accept perturbation for a couple of years, but then we must arrive at some sort of steady state (Principal four).

The leadership provided by the principals was both from in front and from behind; in front in foreseeing and supporting the need for large scale reform, and behind in establishing a pace and process of change which has the potential for retaining all staff without losing some to anger or cynicism.

Pressure and support

Ansoff and McDonnell (1990, p. 416) posit the belief that:

Resistance to change is proportional to the size of the discontinuities introduced into culture and power, and inversely proportional to the speed of introduction.

Given the scale of change, the threat posed to individuals by reductions in size and relocation of departments, the likelihood of resistance is very high. Fullan (1992) believes that research into the management of change has led to the insight that both “pressure and support” are critical. A good deal of support has been offered by substantial investment in staff development, allowing those in curriculum areas which are contracting to retrain in computing or Putonghua. More clerical support has been offered to release staff to work on planning and implementing curriculum changes. All principals were clear that discipline leaders had an important leadership role in this process, and therefore ownership of the change was built by dispersed leadership. The dedication of staff was recognised by the principals and by the VTC and the need:

to ensure that their dedication is not hampered by this change because without them I can’t do anything. It is my job to help them get through it and adjust themselves to the new environment (Principal five).

In this, principals were helped by the existing culture of co-operation:
We are fortunate that people are co-operative, unlike the UK, even in such a drastic retrenchment. Although we hear a few voices on the staff side, there is no call for industrial action (Principal five).

The tradition of harmony is longstanding, overriding the potential conflict of vested interests among all stakeholders (Hung, 1998). Even though the Director of the VTC has spoken to staff in the institutes, building ownership of the change, there are negative consequences for some staff who fear that their own specialised area may be downgraded or that long term, they may be made redundant. Reassurance has been given as far as possible. A cast iron permanent promise that no staff will be made redundant long term is not possible, but in the short term, every effort is being made to retain staff:

The change has been planned and managed amicably but now as we look at the student number estimates, we have to consider what this means in terms of staffing estimates for particular departments. It is clearly showing in some disciplines that after three years we are going to have too many staff. In a moment of passion, the Executive Director stated that there would be no redundancies but of course that doesn’t mean forever. He said there would be no redundancies unless there was no other alternative. He prefers to redeploy and retrain. In an organisation which employs four thousand people there are many opportunities for movement. So what we may achieve is not round pegs in round holes but perhaps elliptical pegs in round holes (Principal four).

Principals are key in this process, faced with the task of deploying staff to best advantage: As far as I am concerned the new system gives me greater flexibility. Some teachers are good teachers and will be asked to teach for more periods. Some are less good at teaching but might be very good administrators. Others have skills such as the ability to relate to students or they know everybody and can network well. The new system will allow me to use these skills in different ways (Principal three).

The framework of security provided by this attitude and use of staff retraining has resulted in a large measure of the support advocated by Fullan (1992). Pressure is also a part of the context. The union is largely supportive of the change, partly, as perceived by Principal five, because of the political context, where the public, themselves the subject of insecurity through climbing unemployment figures and a changing industrial and business base, may not be sympathetic to public sector workers benefiting from a protection not open to all: Resistance will be negligible because staff are aware of the situation. They know that if they dispute with the management openly they could get an even worse deal than before. It would be difficult for staff to communicate openly to the public how they feel, as private sector staff can be laid off if business is bad and the public may feel consequently that staff are being over-protected by the IVE. Public opinion may even press the IVE to do things more drastically (Principal five).

The sagacious mix of pressure and support, pragmatism and concern has so far resulted in a change process where “ugly and destructive confrontation” (Hung, 1998, p. 55) has been avoided. The underlying Chinese culture of co-operation and the tradition of harmony have undoubtedly provided a foundation which is not available to all societies, but even so, the management beliefs and practice which have been adopted may provide lessons to some countries, such as the UK, where confrontation between senior managers and staff and competition between vocational education organisations has been destructive (Kennedy, 1997).

Benefits of restructuring

Already the restructuring is seen as bringing benefits. Responsiveness has increased. Principal four cited a course that was set up for a thousand unemployed adults, some of them with low levels of educational achievement, over a period of six weeks:

This was very impressive and unbelievable compared to the previous typical two years to develop a new course.

Principal two confirmed this trend:

Previously it took 18 months to plan a new course which then ran for two years, so there were three years between idea and output. Now planning could be reduced to 2-6 months.

Resources are being rationalised and an audit system established to measure resource effectiveness. The rationalisation process offers the opportunity for each institute to present itself as a centre of excellence within one or more vocational field. Ensuring more of lecturers’ time is spent on teaching rather than administration not only makes better use of an expensive resource but is also designed to increase teaching quality. A revised method of calculating funding, based on the number of students rather than the number of classes, has given principals more flexibility to plan the curriculum. The more flexible progression routes, allied to the greater quality of teaching, will benefit students. Overall, there is a sense of liberation and optimism amongst the
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Conclusion

As Principal one emphasised “We are not even at the beginning yet”. The plans have yet to be fully implemented from the academic year 1999-2000. Relationships within the new structure have to be developed and curriculum development monitored and evaluated. Further major change lies ahead, the VTC envisaging the possibility of a national qualifications framework and entry into sub-degree level work. Difficulties also lie ahead with a planned reduction in expenditure in technical institutes of 5 per cent over three years.

The future can be approached with some degree of confidence. Cultural change is perceived as already happening. From a history where all institutes had to conform, now there is a renewed vigour and belief that growth can be less trammeled and that even a degree of competition may be healthy. Self-confidence is growing. Speaking of the new system:

I think it will induce some competition and I think that is healthy. When I first came here I was looking at the goals of some of the technical institutes and one of them in summary was “to be average”. It said “not to be worse than” and it meant “conform”. We all had to conform. Now people are even beginning to talk about areas of excellence which is perhaps a little early, but also not a bad thing to talk about, to make people believe, staff in particular, that what we do make a difference that can be recognised by the community and also internationally. So there is a whole cultural change which has been quite remarkable really and I would say that most staff are working much harder and rising to the task. There are a few resisters of course, as there always are, who do not see the need for change but we need to promote the idea that survival is not compulsory. It is a very competitive world (Principal four).

Such optimism was echoed by all the principals who looked forward to the future with real determination to face the challenges and succeed. As Principal three stated, “I am sure there will be problems but we will face them as they come along and we will solve them”. It will be interesting for all those with a stake in vocational education to follow the progress of Hong Kong and learn from its difficulties and achievements. A future review of Hong Kong’s headway in restructuring vocational education is likely to offer a rich seam of experience with relevance to many countries.

References


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