

AN EVALUATION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A 9-MONTH INTENSIVE FULL-TIME PROGRAM FOR THE UNEMPLOYED

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Index: Evaluation, Effectiveness, Training Program for Unemployed

Abstract: In September 1998, the Vocational Training Council (VTC) and the Employees' Retraining Board (ERB) jointly conducted a 9-month intensive full-time course in various training institutions for the unemployed persons who were adults of 30 years of age or above and had attended Secondary 3 education. The aim of this course was to provide employable skills so as to enable them to be better equipped when they rejoined the work force in the service sector. The title of the course was Certificate of Skills Training (Service Industries) (CST (SI)).

This paper tries to evaluate the *effectiveness* and *usefulness* of the course in the following aspects:

- a) meeting the needs of employers
- b) providing suitable retraining to the unemployed
- c) developing a life-long learning attitude towards the unemployed
- d) giving career counseling

Finally, this paper will also highlight the role of the VTC in the retraining sector in Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the rising unemployment in 1998, the Certificate of Skills Training (Service Industries) Course was introduced as one of the measures to tackle the problem. The course was designed to cater for 1,000 unemployed persons with the aim of provision of broad-based generic and transferable skills in order to assist them to re-enter the job market.

The curriculum of the course was thus focused on the generic and transferable skills immediately applicable to the work place. The course was conducted on modular basis at three different levels i.e. basic, intermediate and higher level. Students might take one module at basic level and another at intermediate/higher level provided he/she had sufficient achievement in the module concerned.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF EMPLOYERS

Before the course commenced in September 1998, the VTC conducted a postal survey together with a consultation meeting with major employers in Hong Kong in July 1998 with the aim to assess the real needs of employers. For the postal survey, 8 out of 13 trade associations completed and returned the questionnaires and indicated that the program was comprehensive enough to cover basic skills for

a junior clerk in service industries. Although it might be argued the size of postal survey was small, it should be noted that the trade associations selected were very representative, reflecting over 200,000 employers' views. For the consultation meeting on 21 July 1998, 5 out of the 22 major companies had sent representatives to attend and their responses were favourable. Most of the others had already given either verbal or written favourable comments.

Based on the postal survey and the consultation meeting, the course curriculum would then be focussed on the (a) commercial and business knowledge; (b) language and communication skills; (c) computer knowledge; and (d) soft skills.

A survey on employers who took on the graduate retrainees had been conducted in August 1999. Among 53 employers interviewed, 89% of them opined that the retrainees' performance was "acceptable" or "satisfactory". The employers were very impressed by the working attitude and interpersonal skills of the graduate retrainees as 69% of them rated their working attitude as "good". Besides the employers considered that the skills level in areas like job skills, computer techniques and English language skills was average to good. Less than 20% of them opined that the retrainees needed to put more effort to upgrade their skills level. Judging from the result of the survey, it could be concluded that the course would provide responsible persons with good working attitude and up-to-standard job skills and language ability and the needs of employers were met.

PROVIDING SUITABLE RETRAINING TO THE UNEMPLOYED

As most retrainees were unemployed and displaced from various sectors for less than one year before taking the CST (SI) course, the retraining program should provide suitable skills training, knowledge and skills in bookkeeping, retailing, office practices and customer service required in the job market.

The success of the program depends on the probability of re-employment of the retrainees and the positive feedbacks from retrainees and employers. Data for analysis was gathered from mail and telephone surveys conducted in December 1999 and June 2000.

Table 1 below indicates that 89% of the retrainees held positive view and found the knowledge and skills they learnt from the course were "very useful" or "useful".

Knowledge & Skills learnt from the course	No. of graduates	Percentage
Very useful	248	46.0%
Useful	233	43.0%
Not useful	57	10.6%
No comment	2	0.4%
Total	540	100.0%

Table 1 Feedback of Graduates on the course¹

According to the survey conducted in June 2000, 81% of the retrainees found the skills gained from the module of Computer Application were very useful. For placement rate, 75% of the retrainees from the CST (SI) course were seconded for employment. It was a higher rate when compared with 70% placement target for all retraining courses (ERB Annual Report 1999).

¹ First Report on Employment of Graduates of CST (SI), ERB, December 1999.

From table 2 below, 363 graduates out of 540 still stayed with the first job after graduating from the course at the time of the survey in December 1999. The overall success rate, measured in terms of retention rates, was 67%.

Employment	No of graduates	Percentage
Employed and stayed with job	363	67%
Employed but changed job	44	8%
Subtotal	407	75%
Without work	133	25%
Total	540	100%

Table 2 No. of Graduates stayed with the job¹

For those graduates without work (133), 94% (125) indicated that they intended to search for a job. Table 3 below shows such an intention.

Continue to search for a job	No. of graduates	Percentage
Yes	125	94%
No	8	6%
Total	133	100%

Table 3 Intention to find a job¹

Judging from the encouraging placement rate (75%) and retention rate (67%), it could be concluded that the CST (SI) course was successful in providing suitable retraining to the unemployed in Hong Kong.

DEVELOPING THE LIFE-LONG LEARNING ATTITUDE

Mr. Tung Chee Hwa, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR Government, put forward the "life-long learning" concept at his 1998 Policy Address. One of the objectives of the CST (SI) course was to satisfy the above mission i.e. to develop the life-long learning attitude so that the retrainees could attain the new skills required for our modern society.

Previously, retrainees did not consider the concept of "life-long learning" significant. Maybe "Fond memories of school learning are rare and in most people's minds knowledge acquisition seems to stop when they leave school. It is no surprise that life-long learning is usually not part of our mindset." (Prashing, 1998).

Now after studying the course, the learning attitude of the retrainees was changed. They believed that only by keeping their continued learning attitude right they could take up new skills or develop their existing skills needed in this competitive job market.

A Certificate in Vocational Studies evening course started last year at the IVE (LWL Campus) which allowed the graduate retrainees of the CST (SI) course to enroll in its second year. This was a further training opportunity arranged for those whose knowledge and working skills needed improvement. It was well perceived by the retrainees that the course was to improve their vocational skills and to lead them to attain higher qualifications, while working in the daytime.

¹ First Report on Employment of Graduates of CST (SI), ERB, December 1999.

In order not to have the unpleasant experience of losing job, the life-long learning was definitely in the retrainees' mind now as Mr. Tung's 1999 Policy Address pointed out that everyone should embrace life-long learning to face a knowledge-based economy in the information age (Policy Address 1999).

GIVING CAREER COUNSELING

At the start of the course, each of the five IVE campuses appointed at least one placement officer to provide career counseling to the retrainees. These placement officers were all involved in teaching duties throughout the course so that they could develop rapport with the retrainees and get to know them better. When the program was completed in September 1999, the placement officers stayed centrally in the CST (SI) Placement Office in Kwun Tong campus and continued to offer post-course placement and counseling services for the graduate retrainees for a further period of nine months. In order to enhance the retrainees' employability and encourage them to use the career counseling service after their graduation, the placement officers designed, promoted and conducted Powerpoint courses, DacEasy (for accounting) courses, Interview Skills seminars, Labour Ordinance seminars and the like. This proved to be successful as 182 (headcount) graduates attended the above activities in the Kwun Tong Campus. Moreover, all these efforts resulted that at least 30% of those unemployed graduates visited the CST (SI) Placement Office and used its service² each month. The main duties of the placement officers were described as follows:

1. *Studying the individuals and providing encouragement* - The placement officers had been helping retrainees to change goals and directions to meet the challenges of changes in the future workplace.
2. *Providing advice on resume writing and interviewing techniques* – Apart from assisting the retrainees to produce highly readable and presentable resumes, the placement officers had been arranging and conducting mock interviews with each retrainee. Accordingly, 60% of the graduate retrainees successfully secured a job within the first three interviews³.
3. *Surveying occupations and matching them with the individuals* - The placement officers had been studying the nature of the job vacancies through telephone conversation with the employers and selecting potential candidates for job interviews. Some employers told the placement officers that the job matching service in the VTC was more efficient and effective as the referrals of relevant candidates were done within a very short period of time.
4. *Providing on-going support* - For every three months, the placement officers had to telephone all retrainees to conduct an employment survey. The placement officers gathered information from both employed and unemployed retrainees and developed further action plans to assist them.

All the above helped the retrainees (i) feel valued and appreciated, (ii) change their perceptions, (iii) restore confidence, and (iv) show more initiative and effort in job searching. Their change in attitude and the rise in morale had resulted in VTC achieving a placement rate of 80% as at 31 May 2000. Of the 506 retrainees who graduated in the program, a total of 404 had been placed into employment. Therefore it could be said that the placement officers had been playing a very supportive role and monitoring the retrainees' job search process with great success.

² CST (SI) Placement Office Monthly Report.

³ CST(SI) Placement Record

CONCLUSION

Since the CST(SI) course was a pilot course of unusual scale in terms of the number of retrainees enrolled and its long duration, it was obvious that the course would encounter quite a number of comments. The comments, which the writers believed to be acute, were listed as follows:

1. *On course content.*

Although the course was in general regarded as useful, contents in different subject areas were criticized for being overlapping. However, this problem was resolved as various subject panel meetings across different campuses were held throughout the academic term.

2. *On course delivery.*

It turned out that a lot of retrainees were overqualified and thus it caused difficulties in course delivery because of the great diversities in education background. As an attempt to handling this problem, most lecturers worked very hard in preparing supplementary training materials for those overqualified students in order to meet their genuine needs.

3. *On publicity.*

It was complained by some applicants that they missed the advertisements on the course. The application period should be lengthened and more widely publicized so that every one who was interested in the course could apply on time.

4. *On course duration.*

The 9-month full-time course was often regarded as too long. This was a reason why quite a number of retrainees dropped out from the course for placement purpose. One suggestion put forward was to set up a part-time evening modular program.

It had to be emphasized here again that this was a pilot course for ERB, and thus ERB had to critically evaluate the costs and benefits of the course before it could make a conclusion to re-run the course again or not. Based on its recommendation in the review report conducted by the ERB in October 1999, it was suggested to restructure the 9-month full-time course in the following two ways:

1. A modified mode of delivery i.e. a 2 to 3 month intensive full-time training program plus part-time follow-up modules to meet the objectives of the course.
2. A genuine modular structure i.e. upon completion of each module, a modular certificate would be awarded. Accumulation of a required number of modular certificates would lead to certain vocational qualification.

Although the course was short-lived i.e. lasting for only a year and subject to the above comments, the 9-month intensive full-time CST (SI) program was still considered effective in providing valuable training opportunities to the unemployed and in enhancing their employability and confidence in the job market.

The roles that the VTC had played were highlighted as follows:

1. *As a course provider.*

The provision of retraining programs in the IVE campuses was popular with retrainees as the facilities such as mass lecture hall, self-access learning centre, library, students' canteen and computer room etc. were abundant.

2. *As an administrator.*

The VTC had developed a functional mechanism such as the holding of numerous subject panel

meetings, the conducting of the train-the-trainers workshops and the designing of a standardized teaching package for course coordinators in delivering their lectures.

3. *As an accrediting body.*

The 9-month CST (SI) course was accredited by the VTC. It was hoped that the VTC would establish a framework for vocational qualification, which would provide retrainees with official recognition of vocational training. This could be expanded to the accreditation of all kinds of retraining programs whether they were in full-time or part-time manner, in day-time or part-time evening mode, and on modular or stage-based basis.

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