

Chapter 9

The Challenges of Strategic HRM Programs in Thai Higher Education Sector

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Abstract This article demonstrates strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) programs and practices in the higher education sector in Thailand. The aim of the paper is to identify the relationship between HRM strategy, policies and practices and organization strategy in Thai higher education system. This is a large and growing sector of Thai economy, yet there is an absence of systematic research on the HRM policies and practices within the sector. The research will compare selected private and public sector universities and seeks to: identify and classify the HRM programs in place; examine the application of these programs; examine the impact and relevance of the programs for employees; discuss measures to improve the design and application of HRM programs within the sector. Data collection will draw on multiple sources including documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with key strategic managers and officials and intensive interviews with employees in each of the case study organizations.

Keywords Case studies • Strategic human resource management • Tertiary education • Thailand

9.1 Introduction

The higher education sector has developed rapidly in Asia over the past three decades. economic growth, advances in communications technology, an emerging middle class and integration with the world economy has created a growing demand for graduates with technical, managerial, and administrative skills across all countries of the region. Consequently, capacity development and strengthening higher education has become a priority in almost all countries of Asia (Chapman 2009). Given these

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rapid changes and growing competition in the higher education sector as it itself is internationalized, the need for universities to take a strategic approach to planning and resource management becomes ever more important. Universities are being required by the funding councils to have a short term and long term strategic plans in place. These plan includes organization goals, strategic statements, and key performance indicators (Rolfe 2003). Thus, Holmes and McElwee (1995) suggest HRM is the managerial strategic driven which strive for quality to ensuring, maintaining and enhancing quality. This article identifies the relationship between HRM strategy, policies and practices, and organization strategy in Thai higher education system.

Thai higher education system consists of four subsystems: (1) universities specializing in research and postgraduate studies, (2) polytechnic institutions specializing in science and technology, (3) universities specializing in undergraduate studies (referred to in Thailand as 4-year universities and liberal arts colleges), and (4) community colleges promoting community-based lifelong learning based on local culture and traditions (Commission on Higher Education 2012). At present, there are 172 higher education institutions in Thailand, comprised of 80 public institutions (65 public universities and 15 autonomous universities) and 92 private institutions (40 private universities, 22 private colleges, 21 community colleges, and nine institutes) (Commission on Higher Education 2013). There are over two million undergraduate and graduate students in Thai higher education system, the majority of whom (1,735,352 students) are in public universities. Most students are undergraduate students, accounting for 86 % of public university enrolments and 92 % of private university enrolments (Commission on Higher Education 2008b).

All higher education institutions are under the jurisdiction of the office of the Higher Education Commission, the Ministry of Education (UNESCO 2012). Moreover, the Ministry of Education established the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) to certify educational standards and assess the quality of institutions in 2006. The Commission on Higher Education established the mandatory National Education Standards guidelines for universities. Universities use these guidelines to develop and implement policies employing standards for practices and performance (Commission on Higher Education 2008a).

HRM systems have an important role to play in ensuring that these standards are met. The government regulations mainly advises on the systems, criteria, and procedures for internal quality assurance of ministerial regulations in the government gazette which are issued by Thai Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2014). All higher education institutions must accept the guidelines set out in the statute. Universities have the responsibility to implement government regulations though organization strategic planning (Armstrong 2011). The role of HRM in this system is to formulate and accomplish organization goals and objectives though HRM programs which includes strategy, policies, and practices.

There are several problems facing Thai higher education sector linked to uncertainty and environment change. There is a changing environment and increasing pressure from governments and global markets (Taylor 2006; Gordon and Whitchurch 2007). Higher education institutions are subject to increasing market pressures forcing them to achieve efficiency gains (Decramer et al. 2012). However, in Thai context,

whereas many government policies have placed pressure on all such institutions to compete more effectively in the higher education market and adjust to environmental change (Witte 2000). Under these circumstances, HRM systems in higher education institutions are forced to develop resources and capabilities to be a potential source of competitive advantage for individual universities (Rukspollmuang 2010; Evans and Chun 2012). HRMM strategy is also required to meet the challenges of an uncertain environment and to address internal organizational problems such as financial pressure and insufficient resources (Kirtikara 2001; Liefner and Schiller 2008).

However, HRM practices in Thai higher education focus on human resource development, which is a mono function of HRM. Thai government believes that universities can play a major role in human resource development and in particular in developing people with high levels of skills and flexibility, as well as providing academic knowledge to develop skills and competencies across the economy (Phinaitrup 2000; Brewer and Kristen 2010). Unfortunately, most universities currently perform below the standards set by the government; and although there are 172 higher education institutes in Thailand (Commission on Higher Education 2013), only five universities are listed in the 2008 QS world university rankings (QS 2012a). There are challenges for HRM to enhance HRM skills, capabilities, and competences to take the actions in ensuring organization strategies and quality standards are met. In this context it is worthwhile to identify and classify how strategic HRM program are organized within the university sector to meet the emerging challenges facing the sector (Armstrong 2011).

9.2 Developing Strategic HRM Practices

Strategic HRMM is about systematically linking people with organizational objectives (Schuler and Jackson 2007). Strategic HRM is defined as “the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals” (Wright and McMahan 1992, p. 298). HRM strategies are very much concerned with developing the organization and the people within it. The context of strategic in this article can be viewed as concerning a systematic process of thought, action, formulation and then implementation in response to an evolving situation (Mintzberg 1987). Strategic HRM is about a systematic approach that should be adopted to planning and implementing HRM strategies (Armstrong 2011). To achieve competitive advantage through HRMM, it is necessary that activities be managed from a strategic perspective and that HRM be considered as the way to gain an improved competitive position (Porter 1985; Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall 1988; Armstrong 2011). The impact of both external and internal environmental requests, organizational structure and HRM systems should be managed in a way that is congruent with organizational strategy (Hendry and Pettigrew 1986) and it should systematically link people with the organization (Schuler and Jackson 2007). Thus, these people can drive and reinforce the strategic objectives of the organization (Fombrun et al. 1984).

There are two challenges facing strategic HRM in the university sector based on the findings from previous research. First, there is an unclear relationship between HRM and firm performance (Becker and Huselid 2006). The vague explanation may be because of a lack of obvious identification of how HRM achieves organizational performance within a strategic approach and a lack of clarity in classifying strategic HRM approaches in research. There are also different perspectives on how HRM can help to obtain competitive advantage (Porter 1985) and a variety to approaches to matching HRM to an organization's business strategy (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall 1988). Second, there is an absence of systematic research on the HRM policies and practices within higher education sector, and especially within a Thai context.

Wright and Boswell (2002) suggest three recommendations for identifying differences between HRM policies and practices. First, from a macro perspective it is necessary to access the actual practices rather than the state policies (Huselid and Becker 2000) and ask respondents to indicate the practices rather the policies. This implies that it is valid to ask employees about such practices rather than HRM executives because employees can only give responses on actual practices rather than policies. Second, there is a need to ask questions to expose gaps between the formulation and implementation of HRM practices to establish why policies and practices do not converge. Third, a distinction should be made between the macro measures of HRM practices and micro level research to support the specification of the most effective HRM practices from a technical point of view.

9.3 Micro and Macro Domains from the Strategic HRMM Perspective

Strategic HRM explanations are based on the integration of micro and macro levels of theory and analysis (Huselid and Becker 2011; Aguinis et al. 2011). Wright and Boswell (2002) consider that macro level research can benefit from micro level methodology. In contrast, micro level HRM research can learn from the overarching goals of macro level research. In the same way as macro level research, macro level HRM research also generally seeks to understand the HRM system as a goal rather than individual practices. Micro level HRM research focuses on individual HRM practices. Therefore, applying macro goals to micro level research entails expanding the focus from individual practices to HRM systems. Similarly, Becker and Huselid (2006) argue that strategic HRM is more about how the firm's resources are spent and a focus on the HRM system rather than individual HRM practices. Consequently, this chapter will focus on multiple HRM practices or the HRM system as a whole and on developing an explanation based on bridging the micro and macro perspectives (Felin and Foss 2005; Abell et al. 2008; Aguinis et al. 2011; Huselid and Becker 2011).

Aguinis et al. (2011) insist that the critical challenges faced by management scholars require the integration of micro and macro research methods and theories. Furthermore, Huselid and Becker (2011) assert that the workforce differentiation

construct represents a significant opportunity for scholars to integrate micro and macro domains and the underlying processes linking investments in HRM systems and firm performance. Therefore, an integrative focus across various areas of HRM would accurately distinguish between strategic and non-strategic practices and consider the interface between micro and macro areas in terms of how those areas can contribute to one another (Wright and Boswell 2002). Abell et al. (2008) assert that micro level foundations have become an important emergent theme in strategic management. Strategy needs to build clearly on foundations at the individual level to generate a firm-level phenomenon. Consequently, an explanation of the theoretical mechanism of a strategic foundation will be incomplete if the micro level of individual actions and strategic interactions are not considered. Therefore, the bridging of the micro and macro domains is a specific and key challenge for the field of strategic management methods and theories.

9.4 Strategic HRM Programs

The state of knowledge of HRM program is defined as the set of formal HRM activities used in organization (Arthur and Boyles 2007). HRM programs provide the boundaries of the HRM system that enables HRM strategies, policies and practices to be implemented according to a plan (Armstrong 2011). In this chapter the focus is on core concept of HRM program within strategic purpose, HRM policies, HRM practices, HRM programs, and HRM challenge. This idea is used to identify and classify HRM programs in Thai higher education sector. The key words: strategic purpose, HRM policies, HRM practices, HRM programs and HRM challenges require explanation.

First, strategic purpose is what the organization wants to achieve. Strategic purpose is presented in the context of input, process, and output. The strategic performance flow in Thai higher education phenomena is from government regulations as the guidelines to be followed by HRM department in each faculty. The strategic HRMM programs enhance the HRM functions and HRM systems contribution to the strategic objective of the faculty (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall 1988). In general, the faculty's strategies are planned to achieve both of organization goal and quality standards. Strategic purpose used in the context of suggestion of what strategic HRM should be from key informants. This point of view is obviously separate from strategic that already exist.

Second, HRM policies present an organization's stated intention. Strategic HRM policies are expected to integrate HRM planning with organizational strategy and provide a view on how strategic policies should be implemented and formulated in the field of HRMM (Armstrong 2011). The HRM policies implementation define as to convert strategic plan into action and then into result (Armstrong 2011). Moreover, HRM policy formulation is described as a rational process of deliberate calculation (Armstrong 2011) and demonstrated organizational goals or objectives for managing HRM (Arthur and Boyles 2007).

Third, HRM practices focus on what are they really do or what are exactly happening in real. The role of HRM practitioners in a strategic context is to achieve a balance between strategic and transactional activities. Transactional activities consist of the service delivery aspect of HRM, such as recruitment, training, addressing people issues, legal compliance, and employee services. Strategic HRM activities support the achievement of the organization's goals and involve the development and implementation of forward-looking HRM strategies that are integrated and aligned towards business objectives (Armstrong 2011).

Fourth, HRM program provides a notion of boundaries of the HRM system that enables HRM strategies, policies and practices to be implemented according to plan (Armstrong 2011) and the set of formal HRM activities used in the organization (Arthur and Boyles 2007).

Finally, the Thai, higher education sector is facing an uncertain environment. HRM challenge is viewed within the context to cope with threats from external environment such as when the organization has to manage change (Wright and McMahan 1992). Therefore, the context of obstruct from external environment of HRM challenge based on border of micro and macro domains, which delineate administrative barriers such as external environment of faculty (micro domain) and external environment of university (macro domain).

9.5 Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research methodology and takes an inductive approach to the generation of theories in relation to the research questions. The research employs collective or multiple case studies (Stake 1995) because case study research can capture the process under study in a very detailed and exact way (Flick 2009). The type of case focuses on representative or typical cases, thus exemplifying every situation or form of organization (Bryman and Bell 2011). In addition, comparative design of the multiple case studies allows comparison and contrast of the findings derived from the private and public universities (Bryman and Bell 2011).

Generalization requires the selection of representative cases from different perspectives for inclusion in the qualitative study (Creswell 1998). The sampling in this research is purposive and entails two case studies: a public university and a private university in Thai higher education sector. There are three criteria determining inclusion or exclusion for case study selection: (1) external approval on all indicators for external quality assurance standards (self-assessment report for the years 2006–2010; (ONESQA 2013), or (2) the university is ranked among the top 300 in the Asian university ranking in 2012 (QS 2012b), or (3) the university is ranked among the top 500 of the QS world university rankings in 2008–2012 (QS 2012a). Based on these criteria, the sample was narrowed down to a top faculty which was selected on the basis of their internal quality assurance scores focused on the management perspective component of the internal quality assurance indicators (Commission on Higher Education 2008a).

Data collection involves interview data from targeted participants. The interview strategy involves semi-structured interviews in which the interview process, although following an interview guide, is flexible and allows further questions to be asked in response to significant replies (Bryman and Bell 2011). The lists of questions are based on the research questions and objectives to be covered.

The level of analysis encompasses an integrative view of both micro and macro levels of research. This research focuses on both the macro and micro aspects of HRM, concerning HRM officers in faculties at the micro level and university presidents and HRM directors at the macro university level (Wright and Boswell 2002). In collecting the case study data, there is an emphasis on detail and the use of multiple sources to facilitate understanding of the complex work organizations as cultural entities (Bryman and Bell 2011). This approach also requires the identification and participation of key informants in the context of conducting an ethnographic study. The key informants or interviewees are those who can direct the researcher to situations or social settings, important events and individuals likely to be helpful in undertaking the investigation (Bryman and Bell 2011). Consequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six key university informants: (1) two presidents of public and private universities as key to driving organizational strategy, (2) two HRM directors from the main offices of public and private universities to aid in understanding key HRM practices at the university level, and (3) two faculty HRM officers to identify key HRM practices or HRM functions at the faculty level (Bryman and Bell 2011).

In terms of reliability and validity, the criterion for internal validity in evaluating this qualitative study is trustworthiness which concerns the credibility of the research findings, i.e. the extent to which they are believable and acceptable (Bryman and Bell 2011). Denzin (1989) suggests a multiple triangulation strategy as a suitable technique to increase the probability of credible results; furthermore, such a strategy increases the validity and reduces the potential bias of research by using different sources of data and methods. Moreover, Flick (1992) suggests reflexive triangulation in which data produced by different techniques are compared and assimilated in order to generate a detailed understanding of the process being investigated. This research employs triangulation through a combination of methods which examine different sources of data and informants within the universities for the purpose of validating information (Bryman and Bell 2011).

9.6 Findings and Discussion

Case Study A: (Public University)

Case study A is a publicly funded university. This is a highly rated institution that was established in 1917 and is located in Bangkok. This university has 42 faculties, colleges, and institutes. Currently, there are over 35,000 students of undergraduate and postgraduate students and over 8,000 staff. The key informants were

the president, organizational HRM director and a faculty HRM director. Table 9.1 sets out their perceptions of the details of the HRM process, programs and challenges. It divides the assessments into hard policies (performance linked) and soft policies (developmental linked); and to macro and micro policies.

In terms of the strategic purpose of HRM, the informants largely discussed soft programs around participation, information sharing and network development. Only the President suggested hard options around performance appraisal and the use of performance metrics. With respect to HRM practices the President emphasized hard policies while the faculty HRM officer suggested soft programs around training and employee development. HRM policies required further explanation and dissemination across the organization, and they were seen to require clearer operational guidelines. HRM programs were seen to require linking to government, organization and faculty strategic plans. The HRM challenges were seen to include staff turnover, the complexity of dealing with multiple systems and employee attraction. In terms of the views on the HRM systems those involved in strategic decision-making (the President) tended to adopt a macro view and suggest harder HRM policies. In contrast, those involved in operational HRM at the workplace (faculty HRM officers) took the micro view and considered soft HRM programs linked to staff development and information sharing.

Case Study B: (Private University)

This institution was established in 1984 and is located near Bangkok. This university has 39 faculties, colleges, and institutes. Currently there are over 20,000 students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and it employs over 2,000 staff. The same informants as case study A and the same framework for presenting their views regarding HRM are presented in Table 9.2.

The preliminary findings in case study B were that macro level perspectives on HRM purpose and functions was prominent at the president level while the micro level, and more operational, processes linked to HRM were found at the faculty level. In contrast with institution A the senior executive tended to stress soft HRM programs, the hard HRM programs were espoused by the HRM director. As with university A there was an emphasis on staff recruitment and retention, improving staff qualifications and improving the ranking and standing of the university. Operational HRM challenges were linked to coordination of HRM across the university, developing workable staff load and performance evaluation, supporting employee development and rewarding high performing staff.

9.7 Conclusion

Despite drawing on 2 case studies the HRM challenges were similar. The assimilation of HRM policies and programs with organizational strategy was seen as important; that is providing a strategic purpose for HRM was identified as a challenge. Attracting, retaining and developing staff were the key HRM challenges for

Table 9.1 The features and application of the HRM programs of case study A (public university)

| | Strategic purpose | HRM practices | HRM policies | HRM programs | HRM challenges | |
|-------|-------------------|--|--|---|---|---|
| Macro | Hard | Attract high performance staff, accurate performance appraisal, identify output and outcome indicators | Modernize knowledge and skills, adjust salary structure, and determine productivity | Relied on university's strategic plan, formulate clear policies system though develop core value, and consider criteria | Implement core value to a subunit of the organization, determine drive within output and outcome of productivities, link productivities with organization's targets | Recruit the most suitable candidates—link to organizational goals |
| | | Soft | Employee participation | Training, and intensive orientation programs | Develop core competencies | Develop networks of employees to share knowledge and practices |
| Micro | Hard | Organize, develop, and harmonize HRM programs | Systematic criteria to rank and grade academics, and develop systematic career paths | Establish clear HRM policy guidelines and develop policy packages | Adapt imposed government sector systems to the university | Include grades, ranks in the employment contract |
| | | Soft | Develop network systems across the organization | Recruit independently by faculty | Systematic HRM policies disseminated through a booklet and in the website | Dealing with multiple HRM systems—internal and external |
| | Soft | Organize flexible regulation for practices, encourage contributing, helping and taking action, and establish devoted to work and passionate toward their job in organization, and building employee commitment and loyalty | Recruit from faculty demand, and employees able to request training needs, networking loop., inspire and enabling employee self-development | Perceive HRM policies through circular letters of intra organization system | Implemented according to faculty's strategic plan | Monitor employee exits to other universities |
| | | Hard | Organize flexible regulation for practices, encourage contributing, helping and taking action, and establish devoted to work and passionate toward their job in organization, and building employee commitment and loyalty | Recruit from faculty demand, and employees able to request training needs, networking loop., inspire and enabling employee self-development | Explain performance appraisal policies to each of faculty members to make it clear and eliminate doubt | Provide system for network loop |

Table 9.2 The feature and application of the HRMM programs of case study B

| Macro | President | Hard | Strategic purpose | HRM practices | HRM policies | HRM programs | HRM challenge |
|-------|--------------|------|---|--|---|---|---|
| | | | Adjust HRM criterion to be consistent with existing circumstances | Support fund for scholarships, launch self-develop program for employees, establish committee to develop career path plans, develop strategic HRMM practices through committee systems | Develop HRM and HRMD plan linked to president's strategic plan and roadmap, develop policies to support employee to gain higher academic rank | HRM program disseminated through committee system | Increase share of employees in higher academic ranks, encourage more staff to obtain PhDs |
| | | Soft | Support career development, further career path plan, develop teamwork, support commitment to the organization | Interact with faculty for recruitment to meet faculty's requirements and needs | Support self-development plans linked to employee needs | The responsibility of HRM is to be supportive and to develop mentoring mechanisms | Support employee career development |
| | HRM director | Hard | Organized information sharing within HRM system, conduct career development and competencies to identify employee development needs, organize structure between divisions of HRM system, increase numbers of senior academics | Problem solving and decision making within committee format, recruit high achiever candidates, offer support for high performing academics | Drive individual development plans, approved policies through board of university executive director | More than one division within HRM systems, activates implemented through committee systems and mechanisms | Recruit new employees; improve quality of employees recruited |
| | | Soft | Develop effective leadership skills, improve employee well being | Support high achievers, develop networks, facilitate employee development | Conduct policy to motivate and develop employees to develop career paths, flexible HRM systems to meet faculty policies and criterion | The role of HRMM is coordination between faculty and president level | Adjust and properly design pay structure to meet internal and external equity |

(continued)

Table 9.2 (continued)

| Strategic purpose | | HRM practices | HRM policies | HRM programs | HRM challenge |
|-------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| Micro | Clearly identify factors relevant to performance appraisal | Identify job description workload and criteria, develop guidelines for workloads use job description provides criterion for performance appraisal, recruitment to meet different criteria across faculties, use mentor systems to integrate new employee | Formulate faculty's strategic plan using the university strategic plan and government criteria, specify HRM projects within faculty's strategic plan | Meeting mechanism and action through the projects, strategy, plan, action, and implementation within faculty committees | Implement competency plans, provide clear channel of bottom-up feedback communications |
| | Awareness of performance responsibilities, effective communication system, effective learning, supporting high performance | Improve employee involvement and participation with the university faculty and social, provide employees feedback and results of performance appraisal, discuss performance appraisal reviews for agreement on the assessed ratings, provide reward from university to stimulus accomplishment, support teamwork, build informal relationship in teams | | | Working together, flexible criteria for performance appraisal and competency development |

both institutions. Hard HRM programs were supported by the President in case study A and by the HRM director in case study 2. Supporting teamwork, consultation and employee commitment was also identified as being important in both institutions. Coordination and assimilation of HRM programs across the institutions was seen as a challenge as was aligning pay and performance systems to institutional goals (Armstrong 2011).

In terms of Wright and Boswell's (2002) suggestions regarding HRM programs, the interviews revealed that although there was awareness of the need for strategic alignment and policy coordination, in both cases there was no indication of any systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of existing HRM programs. Those responsible for HRM policy formulation (Presidents and HRM directors) generally considered the macro domain and assumed that HRM practice followed this. In both cases there was less consideration given to the implementation and effectiveness of programs.

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