

An Operational Model of Managing Vocational Training for Persons with Visual Impairment and Blindness

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Abstract— Vocational training is a key means of strengthening employability of all including those with visual impairment and blindness. Although Sri Lanka too invests significantly on providing vocational training for people with disabilities there is a serious gap in finding productive employment for persons with visual impairment and blindness. This research is aimed at developing and validating a plausible model for strengthening the vocational training provision to visually impaired and blind community in Sri Lanka. Using case study method, three purposely selected leading vocational training centres representing the main forms in existence were examined to analyse their strengths and weaknesses, and the challenges encountered by the trained persons in finding jobs. A model aiming at strengthening the management, efficiency and overall quality of vocational training provision was developed first. This was revised by a number of management experts and stakeholders, both local and international, to arrive at the final model. This model portrays the key determinants and associated processes that could be adopted by the centres for making necessary improvements. Furthermore, an integrated approach linking the government, training centres and the industry responsible for providing employment is incorporated into the model implementation process. The proposed model would broaden the perspectives of policymakers, governmental institutions, and respective stakeholders aiming to empower persons with visual impairment and blindness.

Keywords— *vocational training, employment, persons with visual impairment and blindness*

I. METHODOLOGY

A mix methodology combining case study and expert opinion reviews through in-depth

interviews have been used as the main research approach. The methodology could be described under two phases, namely case study segment and the review. In the case study segment, three vocational training centers, with in-situ observations, interviews with a number of managers, trainers and some passed out trainees were examined. Then the results were analyzed to determine their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

As the second phase, a parsimonious model was developed combining the results of the case study phase with past literature, first. Next, the draft model was reviewed with experts and people of importance who are closely associated with training and development of persons with VI&B. Finally, with a number of iterations and deliberations, the resulting model was arrived at.

The three case study centers examined were identified as,

- a) Rajagiriya Center: Specialized Training and Disability Resource Centre of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon at Rajagiriya, Colombo District (Employer's Federation of Ceylon, 2021).
- b) Seeduwa Center: Vocational Training for Persons with Disabilities at Seeduwa, Gampaha District of Social services Department (Department of Social Services, 2021).
- c) Kaithady Centre: Home for Visually Handicapped and Industrial Centre – Kaithady, Jaffna District (Jaffna Association for the Visually Handicapped People, 2020)

II. RESULTS

Securing a job with a regular income or engaging in productive employment were echoed as the key

desires for trainees through discussions with almost all stakeholders. The following seven pitfalls related to vocational training were identified through qualitative interviews and observations.

A. *Securing Productive Employment*

One of the main challenges experienced by those who have completed training in most centers is the difficulty in securing productive employment. A blind freelance masseur who was trained in Seeduwa Center six years ago, said:

"I am thankful to Seeduwa training center for providing a life skill that allowed me to get a good income. I completed a one-year course in 2013. However, I struggled a lot to find a job was jobless for over three years. There was no proper mechanism for passed out trainees to find jobs. Since I am living in a costal tourist area and with the support of my friends, I managed to develop my own freelance work.

"Three of us competed this training. All were like this. About 12 were trained on cane weaving. They could not get a job and some of them are casual works in some places."

A senior manager of Seeduwa center also said:

"It was observed that in Seeduwa and most our centers we offer training on mostly traditional crafts such as handloom weaving, broom making, making coir products and cane weaving. These people find it difficult to find a job. Even self-employment is not practical for them."

It can be observed that not only most training courses offered are outdated but there appears to be no streamlined mechanism to get the people who got the training into productive employment. It is a common seen, and is unfortunate, that such people walk from door-to-door (e.g. Cane weavers, incense sticks or hand-woven carpets) looking for casual jobs. There is ample evidence to confirm that the skills imparted at training centers are not fitting and updated to meet the market demands. Thus, the need for updating training curricula along with employing expert trainers are imperative.

B. *Shortage of In-house expert trainers.*

The professional standing, qualifications, experience, and exposure to industry of the trainer fraternity plays a major role in producing quality trained personnel. In this respect the trainers need to be equipped with knowledge and skills of trades that are in demand in the industry. Also they must be able to foresee the market trends. In this respect the Manager of Rajagiriya center is seen to a well-qualified person who can act as role model for the young trainees, but this state of affairs is not found in most other centers.

"She is an International Trainer in CISCO qualifications and a Supported Employment Officer qualified from the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment. She has followed courses in Information and Communication Technology from the Tokyo Computer School for the Blind – Japan and All India Confederation of the Blind – India. She has also followed programmes on Training of Trainers in Information and Communication Technology for Vision Impaired Persons of the Asia Pacific Development Centre on Disability, Thailand, JAVA Application Development from the University of Colombo, School of Computing and Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura." (Employer's Federation of Ceylon, 2021).

This person herself is blind. Her visual impairment has been caused as a tragic bomb blast accident. Undoubtedly this person-in-charge cum the trainer is a great asset to the center. However, the fact that the center runs mostly as a 'one-man-show' could be a major pitfall as far as the leadership succession is concerned.

The situation in Seeduwa Center is quite different:

"We practically run about eleven courses. For each course there is one dedicated trainer. Most of them have been here for the last 65 years." A senior manager proclaimed.

Our observation was that most of the trainers themselves were also persons with several impairments. For example, the trainer looking after the blind persons is also blind. Though accommodating persons with disabilities is a means of providing employment to this community, our observation is that the trainer capacity need to augment to enhance the quality of training.

“we are not hiring new trainers. It’s the department (of Ministry of Social services) that send people here. Also, no provision to hire lecturers from outside”, was his reply to our inquiry.

In the Kaithady center too the situation does not differ much. The officer in-charge said, *“ We have a mix of both disabled and others to look after the people here. We do not recruit outsiders for training here. This is a home for blind people as well as a training center. For example there is one lady who is trained in poultry farming; she successfully looks after this poultry shed with 200 hens on her own”* .

It can be seen that the in-house trainer capacity is key component for the success of running a vocational training center.

C. Outdated Curriculum

Only the Rajagiriya center is seen to be focusing on computer applications and information technology. The activates in Kaithady Center include ‘paper plate making’ ‘poultry farming’ and few other minor trades. This situation may be justified since this is not a dedicated training center and is also a home for the blind people. However, the courses run for the blind persons, generally youth, appear to mostly depend on traditional trades such as broom making, handloom and cane weaving is not appropriate. Such trades do not have a mark value in the current context. Further, they may not fit even for productive self-employment ventures. Massage therapy is seen to be an appropriate trade for the blind persons. This is confirmed by the freelance masseuse who got trained in Seeduwa Centre.

On the other hand, the senior manager at Rajagiriya center said:

“My experience is that if we can produce people who are good in IT skills, they have a reasonable chance to get jobs in the private sector”.

Findings of Lund and Cmar (2019) supported this this assertion that training should be done in modern trades rather than sticking on with outdated training. Also, the grass-root level should be reached of establishing modernized equipment along with independent training. Even the trainees are keen to learn new trades and vocations. For example, one ‘inmate’ from Kaithady centre said:

“We do broom making, paper plate production and things like that. But we don’t have access to

computer training. We like IT and find a good job outside”

A senior manager of Seeduwa center pointed that:

“I am concerned that some courses we offer are outdated...But making changes to our systems is huge challenge to change, It is a long process....It is the department (of the Ministry of social services) make changes to curriculum, and we can’t change anything. After a long struggle, we recently introduced a computer course; other than that we have cane and coir making, massage therapy, carpentry, sewing like that.”

Thus, the outdated curricular and training that are not in demand in the industry today is a pitfall of vocational training centres. The fact that state run concerns like Seeduwa Centre is catering to people of different disabilities is also limits flexibility for tailoring the programmes fitting with market needs.

D. Management and leadership

Effective management and able leadership are two key elements for success of any organisation. The leadership quality of the manager Rajagiriya centre is clearly visible. The blind-friendly environment equipped with tact-tile flows, side railings, design of doors and corridors with voice activation and sound elevations in the centre are roused due to efforts of the leader.

“I had long struggle with the top management to get this place developed. Now it is in good shape. The trainers should be imparted with professional qualities, in addition to the trade they master.” Said the manager Rajagiriya Centre.

In contrast, a senior manager Seeduwa center said: *“It’s very difficult to manage the staff and the students because they come from different social backgrounds. There is a problem with them adapting to new situations. Therefore, it difficult to guide and control.”*

In the Seeduwa center the center manager is centrally appointed by the Ministry of Social Services, and hence the management succession appear to be not a major issue. However, it was observed that the center manager’s leadership skills are somewhat inadequate to run an organization of this nature.

E. Funding and Financial issues

Sufficient sources of funding is a mandatory requirement or any organization to survive and grow. The funding sources of the three vocational training centers examined were diverse. Seeduwa center is fully funded by the Sri Lankan Government whereas the Rajagiriya center is run under the preview of an Employers' trade union established in 1935. Although the aim of this organization is unification among Employer interests, with the expansion of its scope a disability training center has been established. Kaithady center is run by a charitable organization devoted for the blind community and the higher management comprises mostly of blind persons. Senior manager of Rajagiriya center echoing financial issues and difficulties in securing funds for expansion, said:

"It is mainly by the employers federation, but I have to go behind them to get sponsors...we get only a very little from sponsors. Volunteer support is lacking for the center."

A senior official from Kaithady center said:

"we can manage reasonably with our funding sources. Mostly we run with donations of the well wishes; both local and overseas. A good proportion of our regular expenses are covered with the money we generate within. For example, our poultry section gives a regular income. Government is also proving a small amount based on the number of inmates"

Seeduwa center appears to be running with financial difficulties, since the Government's provides a limited budget. This issue also a major pitfall toward making necessary expansions to introduce market-oriented courses.

F. Industry reluctance for hiring persons with disabilities and adverse social norms

It is observed that there a general reluctance to hire persons with disabilities including VI&B by the prospective employees. One HR manager of a medium scale company said:

"One concern is that we do not know whether they can perform the tasks assigned. On the other hand we may have to provide extra facilities, which we do not have and is an extra expense. In a way it is a risk"

However, it is worth mention here that a number of private sector organizations do hire such skilled workers. Another, feature is that some companies tend to hire persons with disabilities under their CSR (corporate social responsibility) schemes. The industry reluctance to hire such people may be seen as an extension of the undesirable social attitude and cultural practices. This problem is highlighted by many visually handicapped persons who have already completed training and their community leaders.

"Blind people are not generally welcomed in the society, so you have to earn that by our own behavior. One day when I was walking with the white cane in a street in a Colombo suburb, I head a lady rad side hawker selling fruit or vegetables saying to her companion- "look this is how the sins of last birth is manifested". I am sure they did not know that I was going for a free-lance appointment of massage therapy, for which I may earn their full daily income in an hour"

Said a free-lance a masseur trained in Seeduwa center.

Problems of this nature prevailed in traditional societies need to be addressed through awareness programs and state incentives. This is long standing process and even the developed nations have passed this era after many struggles. The developing countries like Sri Lanka with undesirable cultural behaviors has to learn much from the experience of the developed world.

G. Gaps in national policy

Interviews with two Japanese experts, one visually handicapped social worker and a sighted Japanese trainer in a center dedicated for this community reviewed that their National government plays a key role in empowering persons with visually impaired blind.

"we have a policy that all companies must allocated a quota of 2% jobs for the blind people. If a particular company does not abide by to the rule, it has to pay a fine of Japanese Yen 50,000 to the Government. On the other hand, for each employee absorbed in to the company, the Government is paying Japanese Yen 80,000 as an incentive and also to supplement the cost of employee accommodation."

In Sri Lanka, the entire process appeared to be left alone to the training centers and the respective trainees. Hence, a significant Government intervention is required to address most of these pitfalls in the vocational training of persons with visual disabilities.

III. PROPOSED MODEL

The underlying aim of the study is to make a proposition to uplift human capital with VI&B through productive employment. Considering the pitfalls, issues and problems identified within the training concerns and the environment in which the trained personnel are accommodated, the model presented in Figure I is proposed. The details of this framework are discussed in forthcoming sections.

This model could be used as a guide to make progressive improvements to the existing vocational training centres or to develop new centres that could successfully overcome the challenges, issues and problems encountered by the stakeholders of vocational training for persons with VI&B.

The model could be best-read from the centre to periphery. The pitfalls brought about through findings of this study can be comprehended under four basic managerial functions, namely, planning, organising, controlling, and leading. These four functionalities fall under formulation phase. Next outer layer is the implementation phase where respective activities are to be made visible on the ground in a timely and objective manner. The outermost ring is designed to highlight the importance of maintaining and continuous improvement of quality standards. This must be an integral part of all activities and processes. Another noteworthy feature of the model is that while this is designed for training of visually disabled community, it can be equally adopted by other training concerns with suitable modifications.

The next section details each component of the of the model in detail.

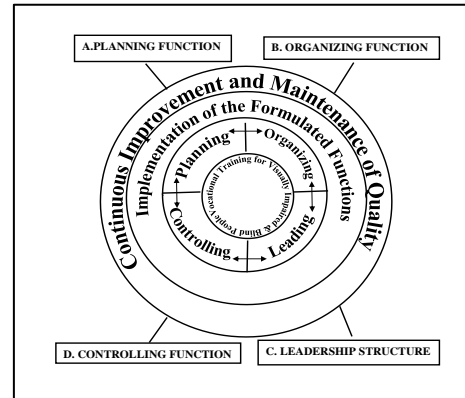


Figure 1: Proposed model

Source: AHEAD Project

A. Planning Function: Basically, training curriculum need to be redesigned focusing on two broad aspects;: The social and living skills need to be imparted on one side, and the trade/vocational skills on the other. In this prospect, the model proposes to review the social and industry needs, and trends to determine market demand in designing the training courses of the trades and vocations suitable for persons with VI&B. Curriculum design and development coupled with the market review findings and using the state-of-the-art training methods are proposed. Progressively reducing the focus on traditional trades like broom making and moving on to information technology and other modern technology resources could be the way forward.

Furthermore, planning for quality improvement needs to be strengthened to improve the quality of human resources in the training arena. It is observed that, in a way, employing the 'blind' persons as trainers is a positive sign since they may be able to deeply understand the trainee's requirements. However, combing them with sighted persons having the right attitude and aptitude could produce better results. Plans need to be in place for improving the quality of existing panel of trainers. This is proven with the developments observed in Rajagiriya Centre. Plans also need to be in place to supplement the in-house training panel with industry experts. As observed the Government vocational training centres are catering to a mix of persons with different impairments like deaf, blind, mentally retarded and people with physiological problems. This integration of 'disabilities' would tend to lose the

focus on providing a targeted quality training to a particular group. This situation also negatively influences the moral of trainees. This aspect was highlighted with the observation that the trainees in Jaffna and Rajagiriya centres appeared to be pleased and contained in comparison to Seeduwa centre.

It is also important to plan for incorporating industry exposure component in the training curriculum. Carrier support and job placement process also need to be planned especially through an establishment of a career guidance unit in each centre.

B. Organizing Function: The key activities of this function are organising the processes and resources including human capital, infrastructure, technology, and finances. This function is to deal with putting the plans into action. Since it was observed that there are weaknesses in management, setting up of an implementation and management unit is proposed. This team should comprise of a mix of personalities both blind and sighted communities. Otherwise, the management teams may not be able to truly understand the real issues. The buildings, infrastructure, training locations and walking pathways need to be designed to accommodate the needs of persons with VI&B. In this respect Rajagiriya centre is seen to be well organised whereas Seeduwa centre is somewhat weak. Since mobility and transport from long distances are intrinsic issues of blind people, the centres need to provide in-house accommodation along with a financial incentive as a motivational boost.

Organising the curriculum delivery that fits with the visually disabled trainees' needs special attention. In this respect, two broad areas of training, namely (a) mobility, orientation, and life skills on one hand and the (b) training on a vocation or a trade on the other need to be incorporated along with a setup of career guidance unit linked with employers.

C. Leading: Leadership is an integral part of any successful organisation. In this model a number of levels of leadership has been identified and are self-explanatory. The significant feature in these vocational training centres is that the personalities with VI&B need to be given responsibility in certain levels of hierarchy. Three very effective leaders who themselves are blind as

observed by researchers can be cited as examples. Three such personalities are (a) a well-qualified and experienced enthusiastic lady who is heading the Rajagiriya Center, (b) Chairman of Jaffna Association of the Visually Handicapped, a practicing attorney-at-law and (c) Chairman of "VAAZHVAHAM" – Centre for Development of Visually Disabled, Jaffna, NGO dedicated for blind children. The leadership structure need to set-aside appropriate positions for visually disabled accommodating with shared or full responsibility. On the other hand, positions such as chief financial officer need to be from sighted community

D. Controlling: Monitoring and controlling to make sure the organised activities are implemented as planned is a key component in any organisation. This area seems to be weak in most case study organisations. Hence new strategies need to be introduced in this sphere of activities.

E. Implementation: Implementation of the four managerial function in a timely, effective, and objective manner is the key to success of the entire process. This need to be done with the support of policy initiatives of the Government. Considering the Government is responsible for the welfare and development of all citizens of the country, the vocational training sector persons with VI&B need to be working closely with the state policy and industry. Creating a conducive environment for empowering the VI&B community, in a wide-ranging fashion need to be addressed through an intergraded agenda with all stakeholders including the Government, the implementing agencies and public and private sector of the country. Furthermore, the training centres need to be closely working with the job providing concerns to ascertain the market-oriented training courses.

In this respect many lessons could be learnt from the Japanese experience that was reviled through model review interviews. In Japan, the government set the threshold of number of persons with VI&B (or persons with disabilities as the case may be) by every company. Currently this proportion is set to be 2% of the full workforce of each company. Accordingly, the industry is bound to accommodate a stipulated quota for visually disabled persons. For each employed person with VI&B, the company is provided with a monetary incentive (currently 80,000 Japanese yen per person). These funds could be used by the company for providing

facilities to accommodate the blinded employee. On the other hand, the company has to pay back to the Government a sum of 50,000 Japanese yen for each vacant position of the VI&B quota, under the current standards. This reciprocal binding of the key stakeholders would facilitate empowering the VI&B community in employment without any barrier.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Outcomes of this study presents an advanced and comprehensive model developed with a purpose of strengthening the vocational training centres for the persons with VI&B. The model is featured with four managerial functions; planning, organising, leading and controlling. Each managerial function is elaborated in detail with specific activities and processes. The modalities of implementation of formulated functions are also detailed. An interwoven process of integrating the key stakeholders including the Government, industry and training centres is also proposed. Researchers could venture into specific aspects of training, market demand and social standing using this model as the basis for their future studies. This model could be further validated on ground by implementing the processes in one of the existing vocational training centres. The other option would be for an organisation like NAITA to proceed with this model as a new venture. Although this model is developed targeting vocational training centres for the visually disabled persons, this could be equally extended for training of persons with other disabilities.

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