

# Conceptual Framework for Developing Lifelong Learning Skills in Business Undergraduate Students

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of lifelong learning has become a key component of university's business curricula. According to rapidly changing economic, social, and technological environments, lifelong learning skills are essential to business administration students for continuing professional development throughout their lives. However, the challenge of curriculum design is how to identify lifelong learning skills of a particular program. This paper aims to create a conceptual framework for developing lifelong learning skills of the Bachelor of Business Administration Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus (a public university located in Southernmost Thailand). In this paper, a conceptual framework of lifelong learning skills is based on national policy on education, university's educational philosophy, international standards of education, and the needs of stakeholders (comprising core stakeholders and non-core stakeholders). The conceptual framework provides guidance for identifying lifelong learning skills of the Bachelor of Business Administration Program.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum design, educational philosophy, lifelong learning, sustainable education.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is a key to success for educational development. Government policies in many countries place a value on promoting lifelong learners who are able to continue professional development throughout their lives (Zuhairi, Hsueh, & Chiang, 2020). Similar to the developed countries such as the United Kingdom (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011), Spain (Corrales-Herrero & Rodríguez-Prado, 2018), and Sweden (Isaksson et al., 2015), Thailand (a developing country in Southeast Asia) promotes lifelong learners in order to strengthen their skills that make them remain productive citizens in the future (Office of the Education Council, 2017).

The vision of Thailand's national scheme of education (year 2017-2036) sheds light on providing Thai people with lifelong learning and 21st century skills (Office of the Education Council, 2017). In a similar vein, there has been a growing emphasis on lifelong learning by international standards of education such as the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA, 2020), and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2020). To achieve educational standards, the university's

curriculum design should explicitly reflect the development of lifelong learning skills (AUN-QA, 2020; AACSB, 2020).

Lifelong learning refers to a process of learning and development throughout one's life span (Deveci, 2015). This is in line with the concept of sustainable education whereby learners are expected to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for accomplishing their long-term benefits or sustainable living (Bordoloi, Das, & Das, 2020). Therefore, university's curriculum design has been increasingly focused on developing lifelong learning skills for students (e.g., problem-solving skills and communication skills) that allow them to perform a real-world task successfully (Deveci, 2018).

However, lifelong learning skills of a particular program (or a particular area) can differ from others (AACSB, 2020). Graduates who do not have essential lifelong learning skills may face failure in their career development and advancement. A framework for developing lifelong learning skills of a study program was rarely presented. The objective of this paper is to create a conceptual framework for developing lifelong learning skills of the Bachelor of Business

Administration (B.B.A.) Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University (PSU), Pattani Campus, located in Southernmost of Thailand. This conceptual framework is helpful for curriculum design of the B.B.A. Program to identify necessary lifelong learning skills. Consequently, B.B.A. students would be facilitated to achieve such skills. In this paper, a scoping review is adopted to screen the relevant literature.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A critical challenge of educational management in higher education is how to effectively integrate lifelong learning into a curriculum (Zuhairi, Hsueh, & Chiang, 2020). Human capital theory and Kolb's experiential learning theory are useful for identifying lifelong learning skills and learning styles.

### 2.1. Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory proposed by Becker viewed education as an investment that should aim at sustaining competitive advantage (Ahlgren & Engel, 2011). Hence, lifelong learning can be considered as an investment by which teaching and learning resources are used for the purpose of ensuring future returns (Corrales-Herrero & Rodriguez-Prado, 2018).

Human capital (including knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) of an individual) is necessary to reach career success (Law, 2010; Ando, 2021). This is because an individual's KSA enables him or her to increase productivity, which in turn leads to higher job status and compensation (Blanco, Sastre-Castillo, & Montoro-Sanchez, 2021). In line with the concept of sustainable education, developing students' KSA assists them to attain long-term success (Stubbs, 2013). Likewise, human capital helps the organization or employer to achieve competitive advantage (Song, Yu, & Xu, 2021).

Human capital can be divided into two types: general human capital and specific human capital (Ando, 2021). Whereas general human capital can be used in broader areas, specific human capital is applicable to the specific areas or contexts (Ando, 2021). Therefore, the notion of human capital can be applied to university's curriculum design in terms of developing appropriate students' lifelong learning skills.

### 2.2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, an individual prefers a certain learning style (Gemmell, 2017). Experiential learning theory highlights that the environment is important to an individual's learning. This theory places a higher value on the learning process through one's own experience than learning from books

or instructors (Sakurai, 2019). Four stages of learning include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Lattacher & Wdowiak, 2020).

Firstly, the concrete experience is involved in evaluating the existing abstract concepts or events (Lattacher & Wdowiak, 2020). Secondly, reflective observation (also referred to as reflection on the experience) aims to generalize concepts or theories that can be applied to new situations and then it will be interpreted back to the theory (Bell & Bell, 2020). Thirdly, in the stage of abstract conceptualization, abstract ideas or theories are formed by learners in order to be utilized for their future decisions or planning (Sakurai, 2019). Fourthly, the stage of active experimentation focuses on "doing" whereby learners demonstrate the ability to produce something or to influence others (Refai & Klapper, 2016).

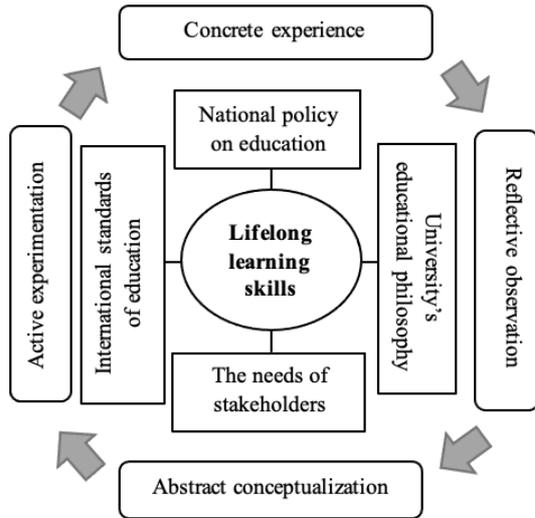
Experiential learning theory is applicable to developing B.B.A. students' lifelong learning skills. For instance, B.B.A. students are expected to be able to perform business management functions. To develop proper competencies (e.g. entrepreneurial skills), they must engage in business management practices in order to gain experiential knowledge (Bell & Bell, 2020).

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper used a scoping review for a preliminary literature search (Miller, Weir, & Gulati, 2018). The relevant studies from the Scopus and Google Scholar databases were selected. The keywords used for searching relevant studies are "lifelong learning" and "lifelong learning skills". This paper came up with a conceptual framework for developing lifelong learning skills in business undergraduate students, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, PSU, Pattani Campus. Based on a scoping review, lifelong learning skills in B.B.A. students are composed of four constructs including national policy on education, university's educational philosophy, international standards of education, and the needs of stakeholders.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Skill is "the largest unit of procedural knowledge that can be reused in different tasks" (Hoekstra, Martens, & Taatgen, 2020). Thus, the term "lifelong learning skills" is defined as the skills that can be developed and reused throughout one's life span (Deveci, 2015; Hoekstra, Martens, & Taatgen, 2020). Every country formulates and implements different lifelong learning concepts (Cheu & Liu, 2019). Likewise, lifelong learning at program level should be properly developed based on a certain framework (Nimmi, Zakkariya, & Rahul, 2021).



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework for developing lifelong learning skills of the B.B.A. Program.

Adapted from Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (Ramos-Mejía et al., 2019)

The objective of this paper is to create a conceptual framework that could be adopted to develop lifelong learning skills specifically for the B.B.A. Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus in Southernmost Thailand. As seen in Figure 1, In curriculum design, lifelong learning skills in B.B.A. students should be identified. Henceforth, B.B.A. students are expected to acquire lifelong learning skills through teaching and learning process (Priyaadharshini, NathaMayil, Dakshina, Sandhya, & Bettina, 2020).

Based on literature, the B.B.A. Program should develop students’ lifelong learning skills corresponding to national policy on education, university’s educational philosophy, international standards of education, and the needs of stakeholders (e.g. employers’ needs) (Office of the Education Council, 2017; AUN-QA, 2020; AACSB, 2020).

**4.1. National Policy on Education**

According to the vision of Thailand’s national scheme of education (year 2017-2036), Thai citizens need to be promoted to reach lifelong learning and the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Office of the Education Council, 2017). Consistently, the Higher Education Plan of Thailand (year 2021-2027) provides a framework for higher education institutions to facilitate lifelong learning (Office of National Higher Education Science Research and Innovation Policy Council, 2021).

Higher education institutions have to design their curricula in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Thailand (Ministry

of University Affairs, 2006). The framework categorizes the expected learning of students in all fields of study into five domains: 1) ethical and moral development, 2) knowledge, 3) cognitive skills, 4) interpersonal skills and responsibility, 5) analytical and communication skills (Ministry of University Affairs, 2006). Thus, all five domains are supposed to be included in curriculum design of the B.B.A. Program. However, the B.B.A. Program can also specify necessary skills as well as appropriate levels of skills (Ministry of University Affairs, 2006).

**4.2. University’s Educational Philosophy**

Good universities tend to provide a clear statement of educational philosophy that is used as a framework for designing the learning process (Curcher, 2011). Likewise, Prince of Songkla University (PSU) has a philosophy of education that is based on “progressivism, with the aim to develop students in all aspects and prepare them to thrive in their respective societies. This includes assisting them in adapting to unpredictable circumstances by using learning process methods. PSU aims to provide students with a lifelong learning approach” (Prince of Songkla University, 2021). PSU’s educational philosophy has become a guideline for curriculum design of the B.B.A. Program. Henceforth, lifelong learning skills of the B.B.A. Program should demonstrate congruence with PSU’s educational philosophy.

**4.3. International Standards of Education**

There are educational standards that are relevant to the development of lifelong learning skills in higher education. Thailand as a member of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) holds the principles of ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) that provides educational standards for achieving continuous improvement of academic quality of universities (ASEAN University Network, 2021). AUN-QA Version 4.0 focuses on fostering lifelong learning skills (AUN-QA, 2020).

Several global standards related to business administration programs have been widely accepted such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2020) and EFMD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) (accreditation for international business schools) (EFMD Quality Improvement System, 2021). Both AACSB and EQUIS support lifelong learning (AACSB, 2020; EFMD Quality Improvement System, 2021). To develop students’ lifelong learning skills, the B.B.A. Program is supposed to emphasize business accreditation standards in order to achieve a competitive advantage.

#### **4.4. The Needs of Stakeholders**

The establishment of the B.B.A. Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences aimed at serving the needs of stakeholders in Southernmost Thailand (Bachelor of Business Administration Program, 2020). Accordingly, stakeholders within Southernmost Thailand are core stakeholders while stakeholders outside Southernmost Thailand are non-core stakeholders. The needs of stakeholders should be considered when developing students' lifelong learning skills. This could enable students to effectively perform their real-world task corresponding to the requirements of stakeholders (Deveci, 2018).

On the other hand, AUN-QA Version 4.0 categorizes stakeholders into two groups: internal and external stakeholders (AUN-QA, 2020). It suggests that the study program should reflect the needs of stakeholders, especially external stakeholders (AUN-QA, 2020). Since there are various stakeholders' expectations, the proper methods need to be adopted for data collection and data analysis so that the requirements of stakeholders will be accurately established for developing students' lifelong learning skills (Sullanmaa, Pyhälto, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2019).

### **5. DISCUSSION**

Acquiring lifelong learning skills are important to students in higher education. A study by Nimmi, Zakkariya, and Rahul confirmed that there was a positive relationship between lifelong learning and perceived employability among graduates (Cheu & Liu, 2019). According to rapidly changing business environments, university's business curricula should prepare students to be ready to deal with this shift (Stubbs, 2013). University's traditional curricula that focus on knowledge-based education are inadequately preparing students to respond to future work (Stubbs, 2013).

PSU's educational philosophy is consistent with Kolb's experiential learning theory because PSU's educational philosophy is based on progressivism that believes in learning through real-life activities (Ju-Hsuan, Lo, Wu, & Wang, 2021). Since university's educational philosophy is used as a guideline for curriculum design and learning process, experiential learning theory can be applied to curriculum design of the B.B.A. Program in terms of providing an appropriate learning process (e.g. problem-based learning and project-based learning) to achieve expected learning outcomes. The philosophy of progressivism views education as "the reconstruction and transformation of experience", and in consequence, B.B.A. students would attain lifelong learning skills through "learning from experience" or "learning by doing" (Ju-Hsuan, Lo, Wu, & Wang, 2021).

Besides that, university curricula are responsible for carrying out national policy on education. This seems like lifelong learning and the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are highlighted by Thailand's national policy on education should be integrated into the B.B.A. Program (Office of the Education Council, 2017). The examples of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal communication skills, negotiation skills, and creativity skills (Mohammed, 2017). Additionally, students' lifelong learning skills are linked to the requirements of stakeholders of the B.B.A. Program should not be neglected. This is consistent with human capital theory that views individuals' KSA as human capital to strengthen them to achieve long-term success and increase productivity for their organization (Law, 2010; Ando, 2021; Song, Yu, & Xu, 2021).

To ensure that essential lifelong learning skills have developed through the learning process, educational standards (such as AUN-QA) can be used to verify that B.B.A. students acquire such skills at the required levels. The results of quality assessment could lead to continuous improvement of the B.B.A. Program, which in turn benefits students and stakeholders.

### **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper presented a conceptual framework for developing lifelong learning skills in business undergraduate students, PSU, Pattani Campus, in Southernmost Thailand. The framework is helpful for identifying essential lifelong learning skills for the B.B.A. Program. Four components of lifelong learning skills including national policy on education, university's educational philosophy, international standards of education, and the needs of stakeholders are probably applicable to other business curricula but there are differences in detail among different countries or areas. For example, the needs of stakeholders can differ among particular programs of study. In the same manner, there may be different policies on education among different countries. Future research should pay attention to the issue of formulating lifelong learning skills for other programs or for B.B.A. programs in other areas.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: reviewing the literature and preparing the manuscript: Phathara-on Wesarat; selecting relevant articles: Warrapojn Panrod, Rudsada Kaewsang-on, Parichard Benrit, Daranat Tansui, Nursahida Useng. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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