The Adaptation of Executive Education Programs in Thailand During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing the management of an executive education (EE) program in Thailand during COVID-19. The pandemic caused significant disruption, necessitating a rapid shift to online learning and curriculum reassessment. This case study focuses on the redesign of a Thai business school's EE program. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants and program managers. Key preliminary findings highlight the importance of C-level guest speakers, project-based learning, and a balance of practical and theoretical approaches. The study also underscores the value of online networking, strong alumni networks, and using COVID-19-related content as learning tools. The results suggest that business schools should integrate learning theories to foster innovation and adaptability, ensuring dynamic curricula and impactful research to meet the evolving global landscape.

Keywords: *Professional Training, Professional Education, Practical Training; Covid19, Thailand.*

Introduction

Executive education (EE) is a critical component of the business world, designed to develop leadership and management capabilities among executives and senior professionals. These programs are tailored to provide cutting-edge knowledge and practical skills that can be immediately applied in the workplace, offering a competitive advantage to individuals and organizations alike (Smith & Keaveney, 2017; Tiberius et al., 2021). Typically delivered through short-term, non-degree certificate courses, EE programs focus on continuous professional development, responding to the fast-evolving business landscape, technological advancements, and emerging trends in management practices. In recent years, the global market for executive education has seen tremendous growth, projected to reach over US$ 109.7 billion by 2031 (Future Market Insights, 2021), driven by demand for customized learning experiences, corporate universities, and upskilling programs.

In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, executive education is more important than ever. Executives are required to navigate rapid technological changes, shifting market dynamics, and global challenges such as sustainability and digital transformation. To remain relevant, business schools and EE providers must not only impart current business knowledge but also foster innovation, critical thinking, and adaptability in their participants. However, the learning and teaching practices within EE remain less defined and understood compared to traditional management education (Lepisto & Hytti, 2021), raising the need for continuous reevaluation of program content, delivery methods, and instructional strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, profoundly disrupted global economies, industries, and educational systems. Executive education programs were not immune to this impact. The pandemic imposed unprecedented challenges, forcing business schools to swiftly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to fully online or hybrid learning models. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and health concerns led to widespread cancellations and postponements of in-person programs, threatening the sustainability of EE offerings (Ng & Lo, 2022). For executive education providers, this period of uncertainty and disruption became a critical test of agility and adaptability.

While the pandemic presented numerous challenges, it also created an opportunity for executive education programs to innovate and transform. The sudden shift to digital platforms highlighted the need for business

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schools to integrate long-term, sustainable e-learning strategies, as demonstrated in studies of successful e-learning models (Tran, 2023). The transition required faculty to adapt to new technologies and online pedagogy, often revealing gaps in digital readiness and teaching methods (Hanneghan et al, 2022). Despite these hurdles, many institutions were able to capitalize on the shift, embracing digital tools, micro-credentials, and modular learning formats to meet the evolving needs of executives. The rise of shorter, more flexible programs offered new pathways for professionals seeking to upskill and reskill in an uncertain job market (Nuffic, 2022).

COVID-19 not only reshaped the mode of delivery for executive education but also altered the content and focus of these programs. The pandemic served as a catalyst for innovation in areas such as digital transformation, crisis management, and leadership in uncertain times. It also underscored the importance of networking and peer collaboration, with institutions introducing virtual networking opportunities and leveraging alumni networks to foster professional connections even in a remote environment. These shifts reflected a broader trend in business education: the need for programs that are adaptable (Pimpa, 2024), responsive to real-time global events, and capable of preparing leaders for an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world.

In the context of Thailand, executive education programs faced similar challenges as those experienced globally. The pandemic forced Thai business schools to rethink their approaches to curriculum design, program delivery, and student engagement. This case study seeks to investigate how EE programs in Thailand adapted to the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Specifically, the study examines the strategies employed by Thai business schools to adjust their teaching and learning methods, maintain program relevance, and meet the evolving needs of executives in a post-pandemic world.

In order to understand how EE providers cope with Covid-19 challenges and prolong the program, survive and thrive in the post-pandemic world, we explore experiences and strategies from the perspectives of various stakeholders in executive education programs in Thailand.

Method

This case study seeks to understand the factors that enhance the quality of teaching and learning strategies for executive education (EE) programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. A case study, as defined by Gerring (2004), is an intensive examination of a single unit to draw broader insights and generalize across similar phenomena. This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of EE program managers and participants, focusing on educational, networking, and social aspects (Silverman, 2013).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on accessibility, availability, and relevance to the research goals (Dornyei & Griffee, 2010). This method ensured the inclusion of individuals with diverse perspectives, aligning with the research objectives (Mason, 2017). Participants included both program managers and participants from various sectors, chosen using specific selection criteria.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with program managers and participants, along with focus group interviews for participants. Focus groups allowed for in-depth discussions, offering insights into group dynamics and shared experiences (Rabiee, 2004). Semi-structured interview questions were based on four themes from the literature: user expectations, organizational capability, resources, and program outcomes. Separate question sets were developed for managers and participants to address their unique perspectives on EE programs.

Interview Topics

*Program Managers***:** Questions explored management challenges, program strengths and weaknesses, participant expectations, resource utilization, and future trends in executive education.

Program Participants: Questions examined overall program experience, motivation to study, quality of learning and teaching, personal and professional development, and the application of learning to professional practice.

All interviews were conducted either in-person or online, based on participant preference, and lasted 45-60 minutes. Informed consent was obtained, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved several steps:

- Transcription and Coding: Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Open coding was initially used to identify broad themes, followed by axial coding to refine and relate these themes.

- Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis was performed to identify patterns and insights, focusing on commonalities and differences in the experiences of program managers and participants.

- Comparing and Contrasting Data: Data from individual interviews and focus groups were compared to highlight both personal insights and communal perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences in EE programs during the pandemic.

Results

The findings from this study reveal how executive education (EE) programs in Thailand adapted to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three key themes emerged from the analysis: mobility, teaching and learning strategies, and new skills acquisition. These themes highlight both the immediate impacts of the pandemic and the long-term shifts in executive education.

Theme 1: Mobility

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global travel and in-person interactions, which were core components of many EE programs, particularly those that involved international study tours or seminars. Mobility restrictions were one of the most significant challenges faced by EE programs, as executives traditionally relied on face-to-face learning environments to network and engage with peers and instructors.

Impact of COVID-19: At the onset of the pandemic, physical mobility was severely restricted due to travel bans and lockdowns. EE programs had to suspend international travel, including key components such as study abroad programs and international executive seminars. This disruption forced program managers to rapidly reconsider how to deliver meaningful learning experiences without the benefit of in-person interaction.

Adaptation: In response, EE providers shifted to online platforms as the primary means of delivering content. Virtual classrooms became the norm, and programs had to develop digital infrastructures that could support interactive and engaging online experiences. However, the transition was not seamless. Many executives, accustomed to on-site learning, were initially resistant to fully virtual experiences, and program managers had to address technical issues, such as ensuring stable internet connectivity and providing adequate technological support.

While the limitations on physical mobility were a challenge, the shift to digital platforms also opened new opportunities. By removing geographical barriers, EE programs expanded access to participants who may not have been able to attend in-person sessions due to travel costs or scheduling conflicts. Virtual mobility allowed for the inclusion of international guest speakers and participants, broadening the diversity of perspectives in the program. Additionally, EE programs began incorporating modules on digital transformation and remote team management, reflecting the growing importance of these skills in a world where physical mobility remained constrained.

Theme 2: Teaching and Learning Strategies

Teaching and learning strategies in EE programs underwent significant transformation during the pandemic. Traditionally, EE programs blend practical, hands-on learning with theoretical insights, often relying on in-person interaction for experiential learning activities such as workshops, case studies, and networking events. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, posed an immediate challenge to this format.

Impact of COVID-19: With the shift to online learning, EE programs had to reimagine their pedagogical approaches. The transition from in-person to online learning revealed gaps in digital preparedness, both in terms of the technological infrastructure of institutions and the digital literacy of faculty and participants. Instructors, many of whom were experienced in traditional classroom settings, faced challenges in engaging executives in virtual settings, where attention spans can be shorter, and interaction is limited.

Adaptation: Despite these challenges, some programs quickly embraced digital learning tools, integrating interactive platforms that allowed for real-time discussions, breakout groups, and personalized coaching sessions. A notable example from this study is the inclusion of U.S.-based professors in virtual coaching sessions, which blended research-based teaching with practical industry insights. This integration of international experts into the virtual environment provided participants with access to world-class instruction without the need for travel, enhancing the program's value during the pandemic.

Additionally, EE programs adapted their content to reflect the new realities of the pandemic. Courses on crisis management, resilience, and agile leadership were introduced to help executives navigate the uncertainties of the business environment during COVID-19. Theoretical frameworks were supplemented with practical examples from the pandemic, allowing participants to apply their learning to real-world challenges they were facing in their organizations.

The forced shift to online learning also accelerated the adoption of hybrid teaching models, where participants could engage in a mix of online and in-person learning when restrictions allowed. This approach provided greater flexibility and catered to executives' busy schedules, ensuring that they could continue their education while balancing professional commitments.

Theme 3: New Skills Acquisition

The COVID-19 pandemic did more than disrupt the delivery of executive education; it also transformed the kinds of skills that executives needed to succeed in an increasingly uncertain and digitally-driven world. The pandemic created an urgent need for skills related to digital literacy, remote management, and crisis leadership, all of which became central to EE programs during this time.

Impact of COVID-19: Before the pandemic, many executives were accustomed to managing teams and operations in traditional office settings. COVID-19, however, forced organizations to quickly adopt remote work models, requiring executives to develop new skills in managing virtual teams, using digital collaboration tools, and maintaining productivity in a remote environment. Moreover, the crisis exposed gaps in leaders' abilities to manage uncertainty and navigate sudden disruptions.

Adaptation: EE programs responded by incorporating new modules focused on digital transformation, leadership in times of crisis, and remote team management. These topics were critical as businesses faced

unprecedented challenges in maintaining operations, managing employee well-being, and staying competitive in a rapidly changing marketplace.

One of the most significant shifts during the pandemic was the emphasis on networking and collaboration through digital platforms. While traditional networking events and in-person collaborations were halted, EE programs facilitated virtual networking opportunities. These virtual environments allowed executives to connect with peers, faculty, and industry leaders from around the world, enriching their learning experience and expanding their professional networks. Participants noted that meeting top executives globally via virtual classrooms provided them with unique insights and experiences that would have been difficult to arrange in traditional settings.

The adoption of technology also enabled more personalized learning experiences. For instance, project-based learning, which had traditionally been a feature of in-person programs, was successfully adapted for virtual platforms. Participants worked on real-world business problems, applying their newly acquired skills to practical challenges. This experiential learning approach helped executives develop not only digital competencies but also strategic thinking and problem-solving skills, crucial for navigating the complexities of the pandemic and beyond.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally transformed executive education (EE) programs, necessitating a rapid adaptation to new learning environments and methodologies. One of the key strengths of the EE programs studied was their ability to leverage communication technology effectively, ensuring continued access to C-level executives and guest speakers despite travel restrictions. This transition aligns with the principles of constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of active engagement and real-world relevance in education. By incorporating project-based and practical learning approaches, these programs maintained participant engagement, leading to the development of new products, innovative teaching services, and strengthened client relationships (Alharbi et al., 2022).

The pandemic disrupted traditional learning modalities, particularly those reliant on international travel for seminars and networking. Executives, who typically thrived on face-to-face interactions, faced significant challenges as mobility restrictions curtailed in-person engagements. This necessitated a rethinking of delivery methods, prompting EE programs in Thailand to shift to virtual platforms. Although there was initial resistance from executives accustomed to on-site experiences, this transition ultimately expanded access to a broader audience, eliminating geographical barriers and allowing for the inclusion of international guest speakers who may have been previously excluded due to logistical constraints (Henderson et al., 2020). The shift to virtual environments not only maintained program continuity but also enriched the learning experience by introducing diverse perspectives, which is a core tenet of connectivism. This learning theory underscores the importance of networks and information flow in the digital age, facilitating collaborative learning and the sharing of diverse ideas (Mentsiev, 2023).

In response, EE programs in Thailand shifted to virtual platforms, creating digital infrastructures that enabled online learning. Although initial resistance was observed, particularly among executives accustomed to on-site experiences, the transition to virtual environments ultimately expanded access to a broader audience. By eliminating geographical barriers, programs could include participants and international guest speakers who previously may have been excluded due to travel costs or scheduling conflicts. Virtual mobility not only maintained program continuity but also introduced new perspectives, enriching the learning experience. Additionally, the inclusion of digital transformation and remote management modules reflected the new realities of constrained physical mobility and the growing importance of digital skills in global business operations.

The pandemic necessitated a radical shift in teaching and learning strategies within EE programs, moving from traditional, hands-on learning environments to fully digital platforms. This transition revealed significant gaps in digital preparedness among both institutions and participants. Faculty members, who were primarily experienced in face-to-face teaching, encountered challenges in engaging executives in virtual

classrooms, where shorter attention spans and reduced interaction were prevalent (Kira et al., 2021). However, programs quickly adapted by integrating interactive digital tools, such as real-time discussions and breakout sessions, which enhanced engagement and learning outcomes. The incorporation of international professors in virtual coaching sessions exemplified how technology could bridge gaps in expertise without the need for travel, thereby enriching the educational experience (Liaw et al., 2022).

Despite these initial hurdles, programs quickly adapted by integrating interactive digital tools, such as real-time discussions, breakout sessions, and personalized virtual coaching. A notable example was the incorporation of international professors in virtual coaching sessions, offering participants access to world-class expertise without the need for travel. Furthermore, content was adapted to reflect the challenges posed by the pandemic, with courses on crisis management, resilience, and agile leadership becoming integral to the curriculum.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced the types of skills that executives needed to navigate the increasingly uncertain and digitally driven business environment. Pre-pandemic, most executives managed teams within traditional office settings, but the sudden shift to remote work models exposed a critical need for skills in managing virtual teams, utilizing digital collaboration tools, and maintaining productivity in a remote setting.

In response, EE programs introduced new modules focused on digital transformation, crisis leadership, and remote team management. These additions were vital as businesses faced unprecedented challenges in sustaining operations and managing employee well-being. Moreover, the pandemic underscored the importance of leaders being able to manage uncertainty and respond effectively to sudden disruptions.

One of the most significant developments was the emphasis on digital networking and collaboration. While in-person networking events were suspended, virtual environments enabled executives to connect with global peers and industry leaders, expanding their professional networks in ways that would have been difficult in traditional settings. Furthermore, project-based learning, traditionally a hallmark of in-person programs, was successfully adapted for virtual platforms. This experiential learning approach allowed executives to apply newly acquired skills to real-world challenges, developing their digital competencies, strategic thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

Grounded in constructivist learning theory, the study emphasizes the value of experiential learning, where real-world challenges are integrated into the curriculum to make education more relevant and practical for executives. The blend of hands-on learning and technology allowed participants to actively engage with content and apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

The findings also draw on connectivism, a learning theory that highlights the importance of networks and information flow in the digital age. The study shows how EE participants benefited from technological connections, fostering collaborative learning and the sharing of diverse ideas. This aligns with the broader aim of business schools to promote transdisciplinary education and address global challenges through collective intelligence.

Additionally, the study underscores the importance of embedding sustainability and responsible management into EE curricula. Grounded in sociocultural theory, this approach ensures that future business leaders are equipped with the values of sustainability and collective responsibility. The study points to evidence that executive education positively impacts environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosures in organizations, reinforcing the need for sustainability-focused education.

In conclusion, the pandemic has pushed business schools to innovate and align their strategies with contemporary learning theories, ensuring that EE programs remain relevant, dynamic, and impactful in today's rapidly changing global environment. These programs are critical for participants' professional and personal growth, offering opportunities to build networks, develop leadership skills, and foster creativity. While the study offers valuable insights, future research should consider multiple EE programs across different contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and innovations in

executive education during the pandemic. Despite its limitations, this study provides important contributions to the ongoing conversation about the future of executive education.

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