

Using Action Research in Business: Developing New Practical Framework of Financial Planning Process for a New Franchise System

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Abstract

Franchising is the fastest growing method of doing business these days, however, there is little academic research to guide or regulate industry practices. Thus, this research investigated the financial planning process in developing a new franchise system. This study used action research methodology to develop a new practical framework of financial planning for a new franchise system within the Malaysian government department franchise regulators. Three main action research cycles were conducted with three new franchise systems seeking to register with the Registrar of Franchise Malaysia (ROF). To triangulate the findings of the action research, the researcher also presented them at a National Franchise Workshop (NFW). These activities showed that the process of financial planning for a new franchise system should comprise 14 elements with specific linkages. These practical frameworks for financial planning in a new franchise system were adopted by the ROF to be used as guideline in the process of developing a new franchise system and serve as evaluation tools for franchise registration.

Keywords: Franchising, action research, qualitative research

1.0 Introduction

Franchising is the fastest growing method of doing business (Miranda, 1995) and has become the most important and popular method of creating new businesses (Justis, 1995). Franchises contribute about 10 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 14 per cent of the world's total retail sales (Mendelsohn, 1995; Mendelsohn, 1999). Indeed, franchising contributed 49 per cent of the United States' total retail sales, and 30 per cent of the United Kingdom's and Europe's sales (Baucus & Baucus, 1997; Mendelsohn, 1999; Sherman, 1995; Swartz, 1995).

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Many countries have laws to regulate the franchising business. For example, the United States has pre-contract disclosure documents (Mendelsohn, 1999), and France, Spain, Brazil and Mexico have pre-contract disclosure laws. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom implemented a Trading Scheme Act in 1996 and Russia has enacted a set of regulations affecting franchising, while Italy has recently proposed a bill to regulate franchising businesses (Mendelsohn, 1999). Furthermore, Australia has now introduced a Franchising Code of Conduct. In turn, in Malaysia where this research was conducted, the government has promoted the Malaysian's franchise industry aggressively since 1992 (Adzmi, 1999) and it has experienced rapid development. The Malaysian Franchise Act 1998 was introduced to protect the franchise industry, and requires registration of every new franchise system.

In general, franchising is an under-researched area that is not well understood and the sector suffers from lack of reliable information (Dyl, 1991; Frazer 1998; Katz & Owen, 1992; Welsh, 1996). This lack of information is especially evident in Malaysia (Mohd Ali, 1995). The Malaysian Government under the Franchise and Vendor Development Division, Ministry of Entrepreneur Development, Malaysia (Kpun), has offered research grants to conduct research in the franchising area. Some higher education institutions and consultants have conducted preliminary studies (Franchise and Vendor Development Division, 1999). However, there has been no empirical research about the process of financial planning in franchising business (confirmed through search in ABI Inform, EBSCO, Emerald, and Kpun databases). Financial planning is a core part in setting up a franchise because it provides information to a prospective franchisor that he or she needs to make a decision about opening and operating a new franchise business. Research about the financial planning process will reduce the risk of failure by improving the franchise planning process. Hence, the aim of this research was to develop an effective conceptual framework for financial planning in developing a new franchise system. This paper addresses the problem of:

What should be the elements of financial planning in developing a new franchise system?

This paper is organised into three sections. Firstly, a preliminary framework based on the literature is outlined. Then the methodology of action research is briefly discussed. Finally, a final framework from the action research project is presented.

2.0 A Preliminary Framework

A preliminary framework to guide this research was developed from the literature on the process of financial planning in developing a new franchise system in developed nations, and in Malaysia in particular. Entrepreneurs who want to develop and operate a franchise system in Malaysia must obtain approval from the Registrar of Franchise (Malaysia Franchise Act, 1998), as noted above. The new franchisor needs to prepare financial planning along with other documents (Franchise and Vendor Development

Division, 1999), for submission with an application form for review by the Registrar of Franchise (Bustaman, 1995; Miranda, 1995).

3.0 Financial Planning in Developing a New Franchise System

The financial planning process in developing a new franchise system requires prospective franchisors to calculate, explain, and summarise the reward and risks of the venture, which involves gross and operating margin, potential profitability and durability, fixed costs, variable costs, semi-variable costs, while identifying the framework to attain the break-even point, positive cash flow, key financial projections, and expected return on investments. The entrepreneur develops various documents in the process such as the income statement and balance sheet of an existing business (if available), pro-forma cash flow, pro-forma income statement, pro-forma balance sheet, break-even chart and calculation, and financial ratio analysis. Except for Justis and Judd (1998), Mat Hassan (1998), and Abdul (1995), there is a gap in the literature about how the elements should be developed in the financial planning of a new franchise system by the potential franchisor, and this research had to establish these new franchise system financial planning elements. As well, it had to identify linkages between these elements because that had not been previously done in the literature.

This study had developed a preliminary, but very comprehensive list of financial planning elements of a new franchise system from various Western and Malaysian sources, as shown in Table 1. Meanwhile, Figure 1 emphasises the linkages and the flow of financial planning process that had to be made explicitly in this research:

- in preparing the pro-forma annual balance sheet, it shall use the information from the existing balance sheet as an opening balance (line “a” in Figure 1), operating budget (line “b” in Figure 1), capital budget (line “c” in Figure 1), and cash flow projection (line “d” in Figure 1),
- the information from the operating budget will be used in preparing the pro-forma annual income statement (line “e” in figure 1),
- cash flow projection is also helpful to a franchisor in identifying whether the franchisor needs to source outside financing in developing and operating the franchise system (line “f” in Figure 1),
- the ratios are designed to compare the current business activity (before franchising) using the existing financial statements (line “i” in Figure 1) with the pro-forma financial statements (lines “g” and “h” in Figure 1), and
- the start-up or turnkey costs to open a franchisor’s outlet will be used in preparing the capital budget (line “j” in Figure 1).

Twelve financial planning elements and ten linkages within financial planning process could be included in the process of developing the new franchise system and they were used for this research.

The next step was to investigate if those 12 elements and 10 linkages were in fact necessary, feasible, or desirable in the real-world setting of Malaysia.

Table 1

The Elements of New Franchise System Financial Planning

No.	Elements of financial planning in developing franchise system	A	B	C	Total	This research
1	Existing financial statements (statements from the established business)	-			2	
2	Identify franchise development costs		-		2	
3	Franchise start-up or turnkey cost for the franchisor and franchisee to begin the franchise system			-	2	
4	Franchise fees (initial fee, continuing fee, and advertising levy)				3	
5	Operating budget (monthly)	-	-		1	
6	Capital budget (monthly)	-		-	1	
7	Cash flow budget (monthly basis) and cash flow projections statement (yearly basis)				3	
8	Pro-forma annual income statement				3	
9	Pro-forma annual balance sheet				3	
10	Break-even analysis		-		2	
11	Financial ratio analysis		-		2	
12	Financing				3	
	Total	9	8	10		12

Legend:

A = Justis & Judd (1998)

B = Abdul (1995)

C = Mat Hassan (1998)

Source: Developed for this research

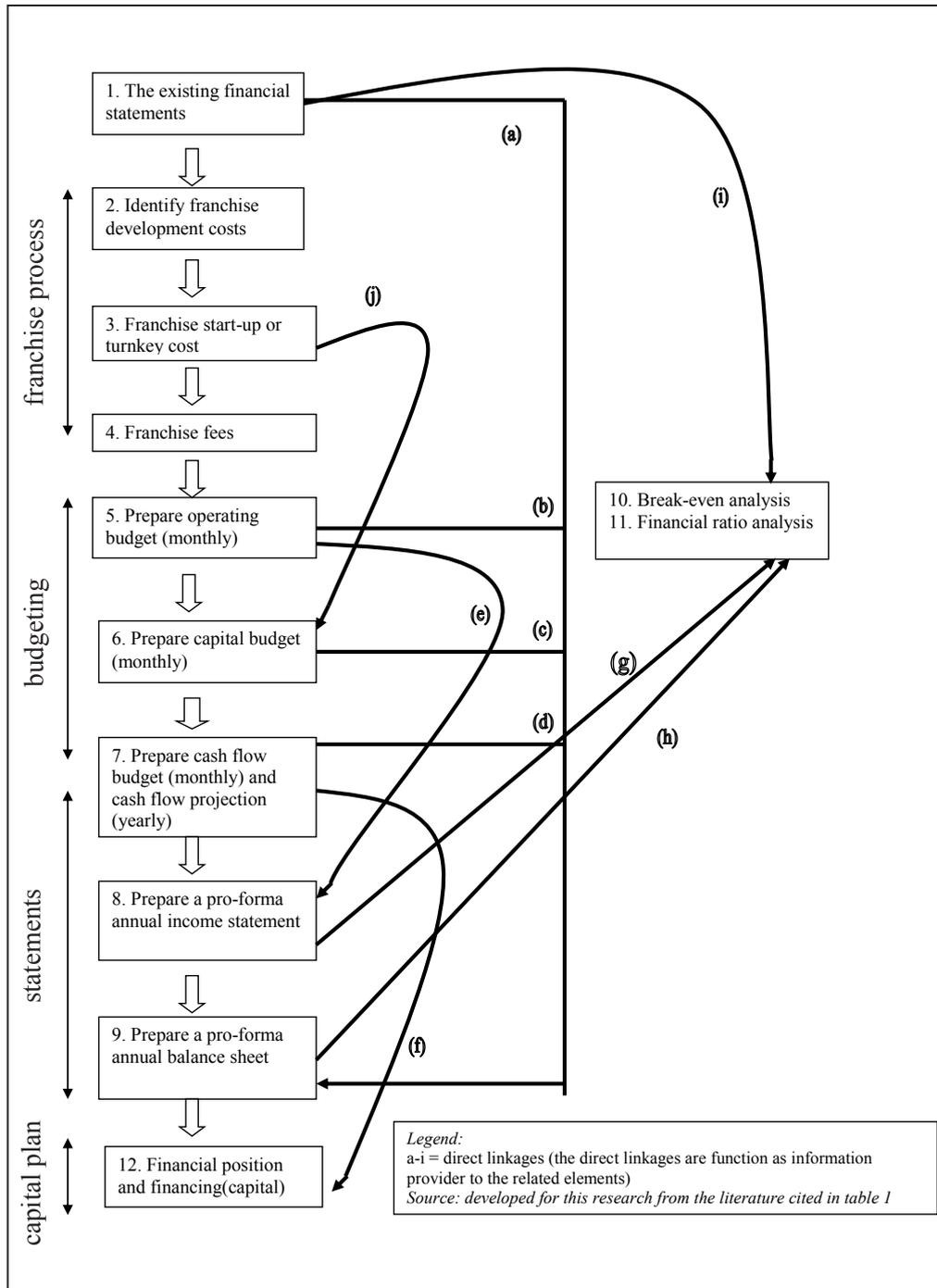


Figure 1. The Flow of Financial Planning Process in Developing a New Franchise System, Emphasising the Linkages Between Elements.

4.0 Methodology

This research sought to explore a little-researched area, that is the theory-building research, rather than theory-testing. Thus, it was appropriate to use a qualitative methodology to obtain a “window’ on to the complex processes of financial planning in developing a new franchise system in Malaysia (Carson et al., 2001). Action research was the qualitative method used, mainly for access reasons. For example, case studies of franchisors, franchisees, or consultants could not be obtained because the financial matters in a franchise system in Malaysia are complex and deal with confidential elements. Nevertheless, access to three prospective franchisors and their financial plans was eventually obtained through a group of regulators within the Registrar of Franchise (ROF). This research involved the researcher in participative and collaborative research in the best site in Malaysia to investigate the planning processes of the many would-be franchisors who are required to apply for registration with the division.

Several researchers have defined action research, some of whom include Altrichter (1990), Bawden and Zuber-Skerritt (2000), Dick (1992), Lewin (1946), Perry and Zuber-Skerritt (1992), and Rapoport (1970), which lead to the synthesis of the action research definition employed for this research that has three core ideas:

- a collaborative group of people work using a cyclical process methodology that incorporates the process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on results generated from a particular body of work;
- to increase the understanding of the participants in a workgroup (called the policy workgroup) and others within an organisation (at a National Franchise Workshop toward the end of the research project); and
- produce a public report of those experiences (the PhD thesis and guidelines for developing a new franchise system that were adopted by the government department).

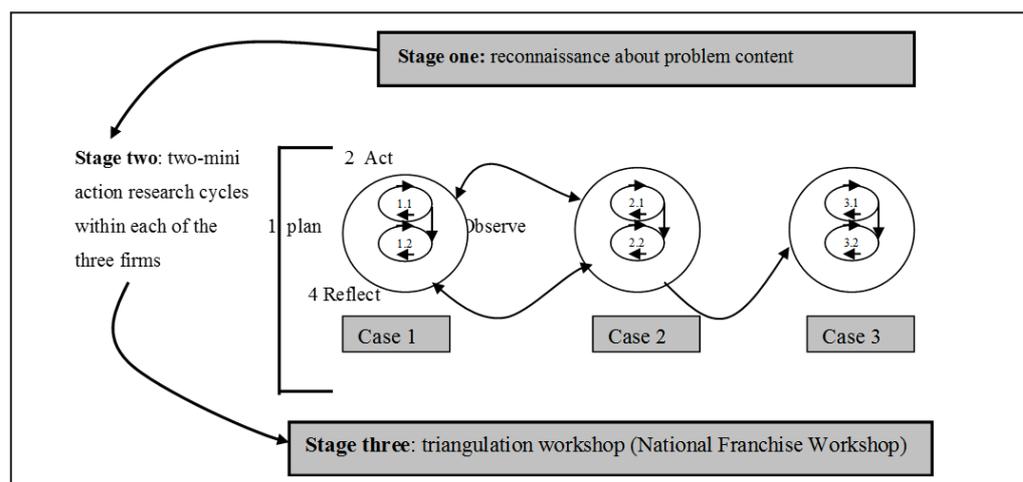


Figure 2. The Procedure of the Action Research Project for This Research

Legend:

1.1 and 1.2: two mini-action research cycles in case 1

2.1 and 2.2: two mini-action research cycles in case 2

3.1 and 3.2: two mini-action research cycles in case 3

note: the cycle in each case was a combination of two mini-action research cycles

Source: developed for this research

The Action Research Process for this research consisted of three stages: reconnaissance, two-mini action research cycles for each of the three firms (cases), and a triangulation workshop, as summarised in Figure 2.

4.1 Stage One: Reconnaissance

Stage one of reconnaissance consisted of an explanation and fact-finding progression to derive further information about the research topic, and gain a greater understanding of how the franchise system in Malaysia was established with particular reference to financial planning. This investigation was performed using the following steps:

Step One: The Franchise Division, PNS was Selected for the Action Research Project

The researcher approached the Ministry about the problem addressed in this action research project. The discussion started immediately after the researcher was awarded the research grant. The ROF agreed to implement the action research project as a tool to solve the problem of how to establish a new franchise system, especially from the financial planning aspect. Indeed, this action research project was expected to produce guidelines on how to develop a new franchise system in Malaysia that complied with the Malaysian Franchise Act 1998.

Step Two: Literature Review

The literature review was used to increase the understanding of the process of developing a franchise financial planning system. Articles, research journals, and books were used in this process, while at the same time the nature of franchisee and franchisor in Malaysia were considered. Finally, the preliminary theoretical framework of developing a new franchise system in Malaysia was produced.

Step Three: Review of Internal and External Resources

The researcher reviewed both internal and external sources (documents and personnel) to ascertain existing knowledge within the ROF, franchise consulting companies, and other relevant entities (“Perbadanan Nasional Berhad”, “Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Berhad”, SME Bank, and “Bank Pembangunan”). This was to establish whether a similar project had been completed and whether experiences from other undertakings could be extrapolated toward the current project.

Step Four: Convergent Interviewing

Convergent interviewing was also used to obtain ideas from people who are experts in the franchise industry. This process of five convergent interviews in Malaysia was used to support the theoretical framework of this research before the second stage of action research project was commenced, which is discussed next.

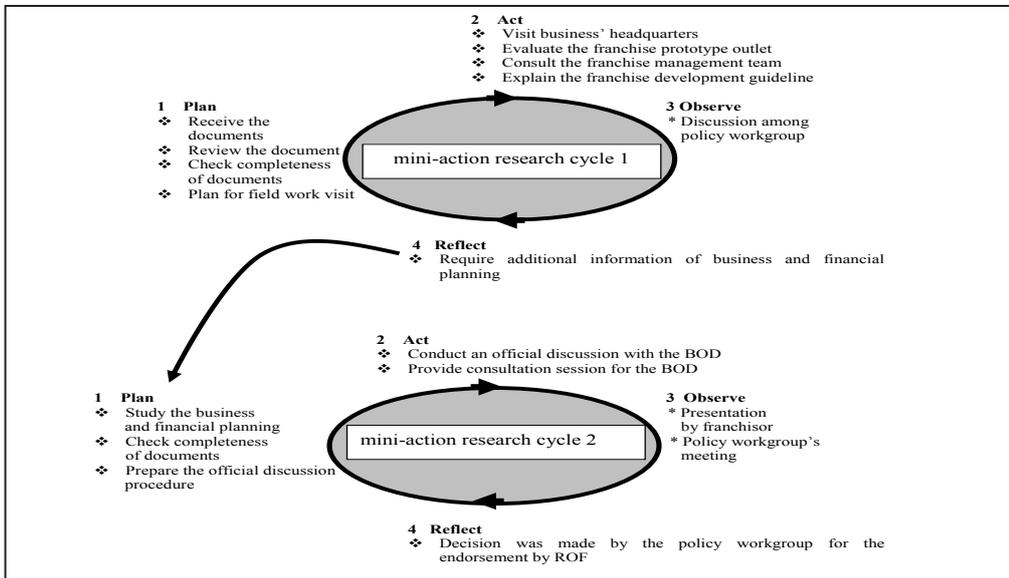
4.2 Stage Two: Two-mini Action Research Cycles for Each of The Three Firms (Cases)

The action research process was used after the theoretical framework and research issues had been determined from the literature review and the convergent interviews. It involved working in a collaborative workgroup with the members in the division soliciting information, input, responses, and seeking assistance to implement the theoretical framework that had previously been defined.

As noted, this action research took place at the ROF's office. This department is the authority that handles all the franchising matters in Malaysia, such as monitoring the Franchise Development Programme (FDP) and evaluating franchisors' applications for endorsement by the ROF. To begin the second stage of the action research project, the researcher discussed in depth with the head of the ROF, pertaining the planning of problem solving activities. Six officers were included in this action research project to work with the researcher, which was to be known as a policy workgroup. These officers were those who are in charge of the process of monitoring the development and evaluating a new franchise system for endorsement by the ROF.

During the first introduction meeting of the action research project, all members of the policy workgroup were briefed by the researcher regarding the aim, mission, processes, and tasks that needed to be carried out in the action research project. During the first meeting, two firms were identified by the policy workgroup to be included in this action research project. These two firms were in the process of developing their business into a franchise system and their application endorsement by the ROF had been submitted. These two firms had achieved 50 per cent progress in developing their franchise system and they had established a pilot operation for more than two years. Indeed, the two firms had been registered under the Franchise Development Programme (FDP) in the initial stage of developing their franchise system. Two officers were appointed to be directly responsible for each of the firms. The policy workgroup selected the third firm after completing the second main action research cycle.

Three main action research cycles were conducted for the three firms (Figure 3). The first and the second main action research cycles were conducted in four months and the third main action cycle was concluded after the third month, as shown in Table 2. Each of the main action research cycles comprised two mini-action cycles for each case, as shown in Figure 3.



Source: developed for this research

Figure 3. Outline of Two Mini-Action Research Cycles in Each Case.

Mini-action research cycle 1. The first mini-action research cycle 1 consisted of four steps, namely the plan, act, observed, and reflect activities. During the “plan” step in the first mini-action research cycle, four tasks were carried out: receipt of documents from the firm, review of documents, check of the completeness of documents, and plan for the field work visit (the “plan” step of the mini-action research cycle 1 in Figure 3). The policy workgroup studied the documents and a checklist was produced by the officers’ in-charge to inform all the other members. That is, a preliminary guideline of franchise development was generated to increase the understanding of the process in developing a new franchise system, which was distributed during visits to the firms.

The first mini-action research cycle then continued with the “act” step. Four tasks were carried out: visit the business headquarters, evaluate the prototype outlet, provide a consultation session to the franchise management team, and explain the usefulness of the franchise development’s guidelines (the “act” step of the mini-action research cycle 1 is shown in Figure 3). Representatives from the policy workgroup visited the headquarters of the firm and the franchise prototype outlet. As a result, a report of the visit was produced to inform the other members. Indeed, the performance of the franchise prototype outlet was analysed by using the past two years’ financial statements as agreed by the policy workgroup. For better understanding, a representative from the firm was invited to attend a consultation session and a full explanation pertaining to the usefulness of the guidelines to improve the process of developing their franchise system was given. An explanation emphasised the financial planning elements that needed to be considered by the firms to improve the business and financial process of developing the new franchise system.

Table 2

Date of Policy Workgroup Core Meetings and Discussions

	Mini-action research cycle 1			Mini-action research cycle 2		
	Fashion Goods (main cycle 1)	Food Products (main cycle 2)	Domestic Education (main cycle 3)	Fashion Goods (main cycle 1)	Food Products (main cycle 2)	Domestic Education (main cycle 3)
Plan*	8 Sept. 2010	20 Sept. 2011	30 Nov. 2010	27 Oct. 2010	7 Nov. 2010	11 Jan. 2011
Act	4 Oct. 2010	9 Oct. 2011	7 Dec. 2010	8 Nov. 2010	13 Nov. 2010	15 Jan. 2011
Observing	11 Oct. 2010	16 Oct. 2010	19 Dec. 2010	17 Nov. 2010	20 Nov. 2010	17 Jan. 2011
Reflecting*	18 Oct. 2010	20 Oct. 2010	22 Dec. 2010	23 Nov. 2010	29 Nov. 2010	5 Feb. 2011

Legend:

* = these meetings and discussions also considered the process of the two main cycles combined, and the “act” and “observe” parts of those combined cycles were done during the “act” and “observe” parts of each mini-cycles.

Note:

- the first discussion with the Head of Division was conducted on 22 August 2010.
- the first introduction meeting with the policy workgroup was conducted on 3 September 2010.
- the National Franchise Workshop was conducted on 18 January 2011 for the triangulation process of this research.
- the final presentation and discussion with the Secretary General (also Registrar of Franchise Malaysia) to inform the conclusion of action research project and to handover the franchise development guidelines was conducted on 28 February 2011.

Source: developed for this research

Next, the third “observe” step took place with the members of policy workgroup having a discussion to review the progress of developing the new franchise system (the “observe” step of the mini-action research cycle 1 is shown in Figure 3). For this purpose, reports from earlier planning and acting steps were used to help the policy workgroup to make a conclusion. Indeed, the policy workgroup also discussed how

to improve the guidelines of franchise development based on experience from the previous steps.

The final step of the first mini-action research cycle reflected the conclusion of the “observe” step (the “reflection” step of the mini-action research cycle 1 is shown in Figure 3). The policy workgroup produced an official letter to the firm regarding the additional requirements that needed to be reviewed and submitted for further action. The additional requirements covered the full set of business and financial planning of the new franchise system. The firm was given a period of time to prepare and accomplish the documents required for further implementation of the action research project. This will be discussed next.

Mini-action Research Cycle 2. This cycle also consisted of the same basic four activities as in cycle 1 above. However, the detail of each activities in this cycle differ with the first cycle. To begin the mini-action research cycle 2, the “plan” step was implemented. Three tasks were carried out: study the additional information of business and financial planning, check of the completeness of the documents, and prepare the official discussion procedure (the “plan” step of the mini-action research cycle 2 in Figure 3). Once the information required by the policy workgroup was received from the firm, a thorough analysis was conducted. A comparison with the guidelines of franchise development was made to ensure the process of business and financial planning in developing a new franchise system was on track. Based on the comparison, a report was produced to inform all the other members. For further investigation, the members of the policy workgroup agreed to conduct an official discussion with the firm. As a result, an official discussion procedure was prepared to be implemented in the “act” step.

The mini-action research cycle 2 then continued with the “act” step. This step involved two tasks: conduct an official discussion with the Board of Directors (BOD), and provide a consultation session with them (the “act” step of the mini-action research cycle 2 in Figure 3). The policy workgroup made an appointment to meet all the BOD for official discussion at the firm’s office. Representatives from the policy workgroup with the Head of the ROF attended this session. In order to be flexible in the discussion procedure, the official discussion and consultation were conducted with a “win-win situation” in mind, as this could benefit both parties to find a better way in developing a new franchise system. At the end of the session, the BOD of the firm was asked to prepare a comprehensive presentation to the ROF and the members of the policy workgroup in a week’s time.

Next, the “observe” step of mini-action research 2 performed two tasks: attend the presentation by the firm, and meeting among the policy workgroup (the “observe” step of the mini-action research cycle 2 in Figure 3). All the members of the policy workgroup were given a notice to attend the presentation by the firm. The ROF was also invited to attend this session. The presentation session was held at the ministry’s office and lasted an hour. The firm that was in the process of getting endorsed as a franchise business

was asked to justify questions to ensure whether they were ready to implement the franchise system in Malaysia. Then a meeting among the policy workgroup was held to discuss the overall progress of the firm. All the reports from previous steps, including the mini-action cycle 1 were considered to make the decision whether the firm was recommended to be endorsed by the ROF. The policy workgroup also discussed in the meeting for the amendment of the guidelines of franchise development.

Finally, in the “reflect” step of mini-action research 2, the policy workgroup produced a report that consisted of the whole progress of the firm in developing a new franchise system (the “reflect” step of the mini-action research cycle 2 in Figure 3). In addition, the policy workgroup helped the ROF by sharing advice and opinions in making the endorsement decision. The policy workgroup also produced new amended guidelines of franchise development to be used in the next main action research cycles.

The process of this action research project was continued until the initiating problem was satisfactorily resolved and the exit point from the action research process was then reached. That is, three main action cycles were conducted in the second stage of action research methodology for this research. Then, to ensure the implementation of action research project was continued, a discussion and presentation were conducted with the ROF to inform the conclusion and findings of the study. Indeed, a complete set of franchise development guidelines was provided to the ROF, who responded positively, “I am very satisfied with this study and we will continue to use this process for the development and evaluation of a new franchise system. Thank you”.

4.3 Stage Three: National Franchise Workshop Used As a Triangulation Workshop

Triangulation uses different measures or data collection techniques to examine answers to a particular research question (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). The basic idea of the triangulation technique is that measurement improves when diverse indicators are used. Using multiple sources allows the researcher to fill the gaps or loopholes that would occur if the researcher relied on only one source (Berg, 1989). The triangulation can be used in both data collection and data analysis to check the validity and reliability, that is, clearing up any elementary misunderstandings and by verifying information (Burgess, 1984). Indeed, triangulation is a commonly used technique to improve the internal validity of research. That is, if the researcher exclusively relies on one method, it may be bias or distort the picture that the researcher is investigating (Burns, 1994). Moreover, triangulation contributes to the verification and validation of qualitative research by checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods and checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same method (Burns, 1994).

For this action research project, four types of triangulation based on Denzin (1978) were used, which are the data, investigator, theory, and methodological triangulations. The data triangulation technique was chosen for this research (Burgess, 1984) to confirm

the three main action research cycles conducted by the policy workgroup. The National Franchise Workshop was used by the policy workgroup as the platform to present the core findings of the three main action research cycles. The core findings were presented as a paper in the NFW with the title of “The effective business and financial planning process in developing a new franchise system”.

Over 100 participants attended this workshop. These participants were people directly involved in the franchise industry such as franchisors, franchisees, bankers, franchise consultants, qualified accountants, lawyers, President of Malaysian Franchise Association (MFA), Chief Executive Officer of MFA, representatives ROF, from PNS, representative from PUNB, and representatives from higher education institutions. Thus, they represented the experienced experts, franchise business investors, and the financiers and consultants who resource or advise the current and potential franchisees and franchisors. The researcher moderated the workshop and the other members of the policy workgroup acted as observers. The purpose of this session was to allow all participants to collaborate and contribute feedback to the policy workgroup.

5.0 Methodological Implications

This research has a few methodological implications, which showed that action research can be anchored in the literature and can also change practices in the workplace. Thus, the usefulness of the process running a core action research project within a particular workplace and then doing analytical generalisation from those workplace findings, first developed by Perry and Zuber-Skerritt (1992), has been further established as a way of combining the thematic concerns of a workgroup and theoretical concerns.

The project also showed that action research can be conducted in non-Western cultures. Of course, the high-power distance structure of the ROF had to be carefully walked through, but that culture is not very different from that of similar ministries in the West. Moreover, the collectivist culture of Malaysia helped the project team to work together, and to overcome barriers of face or status. Perhaps one reason why this occurred is that the researcher (the first author) was a Malay of moderate to high status who had studied in western Australia for a year before the project started. This reason could be added to the six, western-based points of acculturation of action research in Marquardt, (2001). In brief, this research provides another example of the world-wide power of action research methodology.

6.0 Findings

Findings from this action research project extended the preliminary framework that has been developed based on the literature, to provide two conclusions. To begin, the findings of this research added another two elements of financial planning to the original

twelve elements of developing a new franchise system as shown in Table 1. Firstly, the payback period analysis of the new franchise system must be included in the process of financial planning in developing a new franchise system because it is an element of financial planning that could be used to monitor the financial plans of a new franchise system in Malaysia. In addition, it helps a franchisor to forecast the duration of getting back the total investment of a new franchise system. Secondly, the safety margin analysis must be included as well because it is an element of financial planning that could be used to monitor the financial plans of a new franchise system in Malaysia and it can help the franchisor to indicate the level of safety of the franchise operation to continue the business operation in the worst-case scenario. Using payback period and safety margin analysis for this purpose were discovered for the first time by this research because of the processes of the action research project. These two additional elements in financial planning in developing a new franchise system had not been considered before and so add to the contribution of this research.

The second conclusion, the 10 linkages in the financial planning process of developing a new franchise system had not been discussed in the literature. This research had included the linkages in the conceptual framework. The *findings* of this research also confirmed for the first time the use of all the 10 linkages in the financial planning process of developing a new franchise system. This research discovered the linkages usage because of the collaboration between the new franchisors and the members of workgroup in the action research project, with the aim of producing a high standard of financial planning.

In summary, 14 elements of financial planning and 10 linkages within the elements of financial planning are to be used in the process of developing a new franchise system in Malaysia. No other researches had previously examined the process of financial planning in developing a new franchise system as precisely or as broadly as in this research, especially in Malaysia where only minimal literature exist.

7.0 Conclusion

There is very limited research on the process of developing good financial planning for a new franchise system in Malaysia. This research has developed the practical framework concerning the elements of financial planning for a new franchise system based on the western and Malaysian literature. All elements of financial planning identified from the literatures were considered to be used in the financial planning for a new franchise system with two additional elements.

This paper not only contributes to the body of knowledge by providing an effective financial planning framework for both new franchise systems and new venture businesses, but it also has implications for policy and practice. This paper also produced guidelines for franchise evaluation that has been successfully adopted by the Registrar

of Franchise Malaysia (ROF). These guidelines could be used to build franchise guidelines in other developing countries and even in developed countries like Australia and New Zealand. The business consultant can also use these guidelines to strengthen the process of developing the franchise system. Furthermore, bankers could also use this framework to update their evaluation guideline of financial planning characteristics for business financing.

Finally, these guidelines also provide a platform for comprehensive training for existing franchise systems on how to improve their financial planning system. In terms of the methodology used, this study provides another example of the advantages of action research methodology in developing a theoretical framework. Further research could consider how these findings could be employed in other country, culture, and regulatory contexts.

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