

Quality of Life in Education and Career Promoting for ASEAN Community

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Abstract

To gain benefits from being a part of ASEAN Community in 2015, Thai people and society shall requires kinds of preparation. This research aimed to examine Thai people's quality of life in education and career and their obstacles when Thailand becomes the ASEAN Community, and to provide ways for preparation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in this study. The data was collected through a questionnaire from 200 university students in related fields, and interviews with related academics.

The results revealed that, being ASEAN Community, Thai educational quality shall gain benefits from increasing academic and cultural exchanges, as well as social activities, which will lead to a higher quality of life. Nevertheless, there can be some troubles in the educational system and evaluation, including the improper making use of learning resource and tools, which are found to be different among parts of Thailand. English language proficiency, in particular, is found to be an important factor influencing the quality of life. When examining the quality of life in career, health related careers, which include physician, dentist, and nurse, are revealed to attract foreign patients, possibly due to their higher trainings than other Asian countries. Thai accountants, engineers, and architects are also found to have great potential like those in other countries. Unfortunately, they are found to have problems in English language proficiency and information technology. Although Thailand is famous for its tourist attraction, and hospitality, the increasing crimes among tourists is destroying Thailand's reputation on tourist's safety.

The study suggested 2 main strategies for educational and career preparation in becoming ASEAN Community. The first strategy is international education encouragement, as well as enhancing teaching practices and promoting practical English language. Finally, the second strategy is human development by increasing more practical practices, student exchanges, knowledge on ASEAN, English language, and other ASEAN languages proficiency.

Key words: ASEAN Community, Thai quality of Life, education, career, skilled labor

Introduction

ASEAN Community has its origin from The Association of South-east Asian Nations –ASEAN). It was proposed its establishment at the 9th ASEAN Summit in October 2003, Bali, Indonesia, which was later concluded at the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, Cebu, The Philippines, that the ASEAN Community shall be established by 2015, with 3 aims or pillars:

- (1) ASEAN Security Community – ASC: aiming to promote peace in Southeast Asia, to resolve any problems peacefully, to set up conflict management system, and to promote collaboration for safety and security.
- (2) ASEAN Economic Community – AEC: aiming to encourage economic concentration in Southeast Asia, and to support international trades in order to gain prosperity, competitiveness, and strong economy.
- (3) ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community – ASCC: aiming to promote social generosity in Southeast Asia, better social welfare, coordinating activities, and exchanges in education, institutions, and businesses.

With all these pillars of ASEAN Community on security, economics, society, and culture, including the purpose of becoming one market and production, Thailand then needs to examine itself on; for example, whether they are well prepared, and whether these will be good or bad influences. Being much or less benefited from being ASEAN Community may depend on Thailand's preparation as well; for instance, whether Thai educational system supports Thai students with internationally accepted skills. Unless it is, how we may improve Thai educational system for Thai students to be prepared for competition among ASEAN countries after their graduation and seeking employment. Providing education for students throughout the country is an essential aim in the socio-cultural pillar.

Moreover, as English shall be the main communicating language among ASEAN members, it is thus one of the most important issues that Thai people need to be prepared. They should be able to communicate well in speaking, reading, and writing in English. A clear obstacle regarding English proficiency can be the use of language in daily life. As Thailand's official language is Thai, not English, students may have little opportunity developing their practical English. In addition, early Thai students may not have a chance to learn much on other countries; although, there have been more textbooks, books for children, and a variety of media on ASEAN Community recently to enhance the knowledge on ASEAN Community

for Thai people. Nevertheless, not all Thai people can access the same educational level. As there are social inequalities in Thai society, with the education as an example, some have enough money for education, while others are poor, having no opportunity to study, and need to work to live. Not only there is a very rare chance for these people to learn and to know about ASEAN Community, but the opportunity for them to develop English language proficiency is also quite impossible. Another result of this lack of educational opportunity may be seen in job application and employment.

For the issue of career and labor market, ASEAN's member countries have proposed the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) in 2003 with the purpose to facilitate the free flow of skilled labor in the total of 7 professions:

- (1) Engineering Services
- (2) Nursing Services
- (3) Architectural Services
- (4) Surveying Qualifications
- (5) Medical Practitioners
- (6) Dental Practitioners
- (7) Accountancy Services

In 2011, the tourism professionals are included as the 8th skilled labor profession. At the ASEAN level, the ASEAN Joint Coordinating Committee, consisting of agents from professional institutions of member countries, has its role to facilitate the agreement on skilled labor; for example, by promoting the understanding of ASEAN's rules, and developing strategies to encourage the arrangements, At the national level of each ASEAN's member country, the responsible institutions include professional councils, ministries, or involved organizations. There are 8 professional councils in Thailand: The Medical Council of Thailand, Thailand Nursing and Midwifery Councils, The Dental Council, The Council of Engineers, Federation of Accounting Professions, The Architect Council of Thailand, and The Professional Tourist Guide Association of Thailand. These institutions shall be responsible for registering or providing permissions for inbound foreign skilled labor professionals (Department of ASEAN Affairs, 2012).

For the preparation of career and skilled labor, it is essential to

learn; for instance, how Thai labor market shall be influenced positively and negatively; how to improve Thai labor to become the desirable one among competitive ASEAN's member countries, and how to reduce Thai labor's weakness. In addition, it may be said that a very essential way to improve the quality of 8 skilled labor professions is education, which is an important factor providing background of knowledge and skills in their career. As mentioned earlier, the educational preparation, particularly English language proficiency which will become a required skill in labor market, is essential, so there should be policy preparation guidelines for Thai youth to gain knowledge and required working skills, especially the 8 skilled labor professions as mentioned. Therefore, the preparation for the quality of life in career is needed to be connected with the preparation for that of education, which encourages the expansion of knowledge and required skills.

This research then aims firstly to study the tendency of Thai people's quality of life in career and education; secondly, to examine problems or obstacles of the quality of life development; and finally, to propose guidelines preparing Thais and related institutions.

Methods

This research employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Literature review was performed. A questionnaire is used to explore the understanding, knowledge, and opinions of students enrolling in the same fields of study with the 8 skilled labor professions both male and female in the total number of 1,600 persons from 10 universities across the country. The research also gathered information from academic seminars on relevant topics of ASEAN Community, and conducted both formal and informal interviews with scholars on ASEAN Community.

Results

The Quality of Life in Education

Thai educational quality is found to be at moderate level. Many educational problems are seen as follows:

Lack of teachers with high quality

In 2011, there was a shortage of school teachers for 58,805 positions across the nation (Prachachat, 2012) such as, in the fields of mathematics, foreign languages, Thai language, science, social studies, arts, computer, and physical education. A factor not so many persons want to be a teacher is probably because of the low salary or income (Thailand Development Research Institute, 2012). The lack of teachers affects the development of students. As a result of the lack of teachers, many teachers are found, not only to be assigned

with the subjects different from their fields of study causing them to teach with no true knowledge (Manager, 2010), but they are also assigned a variety of tasks, such as conducting research, academic services, and self-assessment reports etc. (Matichon, 2013). In particular, when the students learn from inexperienced teachers or wrong fields of study, the students would not be able to gain the quality education.

Learning and evaluation system

Thai educational system has been criticized for focusing on memorizing the content for examination, instead of encouraging students to think, analyze, and create new ideas (Thailand Development Research Institute, 2013). Although there have been attempts to improve the educational system, the learning content and learning process still remain the same. The executives, teachers, parents, and students seem to still care more about the certificates than the better learning process, the eager of seeking knowledge, or the child development (Chiangkul, 2011). In addition, the evaluating examination is found to be old-fashioned by having students choose an only correct answer from the multiple choices, and their contents which students need to memorize them in order to provide the correct answers. These practices are dissimilar to the 21st Century learning skills encouraging thinking, analyzing, and creativity.

Quality of educational resources

The early belief that there are not enough learning resources in Thailand was found to be obsolete (Siamwala *et al.*, 2011). During the last decade, the Ministry of Education doubled the educational budget; as a result, the budget is now share similar level with that of other countries in the same region. In addition, the school teachers' salary has also been increased. It then can be said that Thailand's educational problem is not because of insufficient educational resources, but inefficient management and use of the resources; for example, the lack of teachers, instructional media, the access to computer, and information technology.

English language proficiency

One may wonder why Thai students have been studying English for at least 10 years but still cannot communicate in English well. According to the EF English Proficiency Index in 2012 (Education First, 2013) examining 1.7 million working age population in 54 countries, the result revealed Thailand's English language proficiency at the 53th. The reasons Thai students cannot use English well in their daily life may be because of the learning styles and the focus on English lessons (Manager, 2011). As it was found that the English lessons in school often focus on grammar and vocabularies, the students just learn to pass the examination and ignore the importance of English conversation and speaking skill. Although many organizations have lately given priority to im-

prove English language proficiency among their employees, learning English in school still reflects problems. Unless Thai students do not have proper English language lessons since they are young, English language can be a major weakness and barrier for Thai labor in the future.

In conclusion, Thai education is found to have problems due to: 1) insufficient and inefficient teachers; 2) old-fashioned educational and evaluating system; 3) insufficient use of educational resources; and 4) improper English learning style and daily usage. These factors play an important part on Thai educational quality. If we do not resolve these issues, Thai graduates and future generations may be affected in international labor market, which may influence Thai economy and the quality of life.

Nevertheless, the establishment of ASEAN Community shall bring more opportunities in studying exchanges and social activities; on the other hand, it shall increase social competitions at the international level. These changes shall challenge Thai government, as well as relevant organizations, to develop and reform Thai educational system for the better quality of life.

The Quality of Life in Career and Skilled Labor

The researcher has examined 1,200 Thai students' perception of their career and skilled labor professions in ASEAN Community. The results are as follow:

Thai Students' Perception of ASEAN Community

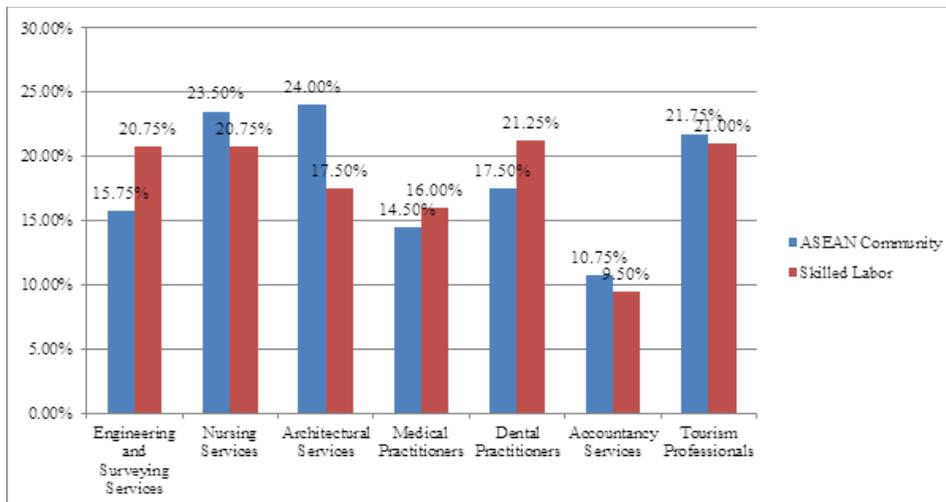


Figure 1: Percentage of Thai Students' Perception of ASEAN Community and Skilled Labor Professions

The findings reveal that less than 50% of the sample group, 1,200

Thai university students across the country, does not know much about ASEAN Community and skilled labor professions. It expresses how serious Thai young adults should be more prepared and learn more about the importance and impacts of ASEAN Community.

Tendency of Thai skilled labor in ASEAN Community

The free flow of skilled labor in ASEAN Community for 8 professions shall decrease the barrier in international labor market. The tendency of Thai skilled labor can be concluded as follows:

1) *Health related practitioners and services*: The competence of Thai physicians, dentists, and nurses are ranked at the top level among ASEAN's member countries. The Thai government also supports Thailand as the center of medical hub and medical tourism, which attracts so many foreign patients to the nation. The lack of physicians, dentists, and nurses in Thailand nowadays may lead to the flow of similar professions from other ASEAN's member countries to find job opportunities in Thailand. It may benefit such as, the exchange of knowledge and medical technology; although, foreign practitioners may cause higher job competition in Thai society and may cause Thais unemployed. On the contrary, Thai practitioners may be attracted to work in other countries should they gain better salary or welfare.

2) *Accountancy services*: Similar to health related practitioners, Thai accountants are rated at the top level among ASEAN's member countries. With sufficient Thai accounts in the labor market and the attempt to level up the standard of Thai accountancy to become international, Thai accountants have opportunities working with international business companies and organizations. However, the weakness of English language proficiency and information technology skills may affect Thai accountants in competition with foreign accountants with better language proficiency and information technology skills.

3) *Engineering and Architectural services*: It is found that engineers and architects are continually needed in the ASEAN labor market, as there are still high infrastructure investments in many countries. It is then a good opportunity for Thai engineers and architects to find international job positions; although, they may be disadvantageous when competing with those from countries with English as an official language, such as Singapore and Malaysia.

4) *Tourism professionals*: Thailand has so many strengths in tourism; for instance, beautiful natural landscapes, historical places, and hospitality, which attract tourists around the world to increasingly travel to Thailand. It brings high income to the nation and increase job opportunities; nevertheless, problems, such as competitions and crimes, are recently found. Unfor-

tunately, the increase of foreign tourist guides in Thailand may cause serious competition to Thai tourist guides.

Discussion

From the findings mentioned earlier, this research proposes two major strategies: internationalization of education and professional skills development.

Strategy I: Internationalization of Education

Academic institutions should create their own uniqueness and identity in correspondence with the international education trend, which shall attract more international students to Thailand. Moreover, educational resources, such as budget, teachers, computers, and information technology, should be distributed thoroughly over the country. The database system such as, research and journals, should be up-to-date and available to teachers and students. In addition, students should be encouraged to exchange their study or training overseas; for example, by granting more scholarships or creating more academic collaborations for study exchange. Not only encouraging students to study in exchange overseas, but teachers should also be supported to exchange overseas. It shall lead them to learn the international trend in their fields of study, to learn the latest teaching technology, and to increase their opportunity to meet scholars in the same fields of study worldwide.

Another important issue that should be improved is the changing of teaching style. Teachers should employ student-centered style of teaching rather than teacher-centered, which students often have to memorize the content for examination instead of thinking and analyzing content for new ideas. The problem-based learning style shall practice the students with skills such as, researching, team-working, and analytical skills. In addition, the way of teaching English language should be changed. The lessons should focus more on practical skills such as, daily life simulation, conversation, preferably with foreigners whose mother language is English. Other languages of ASEAN's member countries should also be taught as an option as well.

Strategy II: Professional skills development

Apart from learning inside the classroom, students should have more opportunity to learn outside the classroom. They should be trained in actual operation, as well as practicing analytical, synthetic, communicating, and information technology skills which are essential in the labor market nowadays and in the future. The private sector, especially the successful businesses, should be encouraged to play more part in student training, for the students to learn from the experienced ones.

In addition, academic institutions should focus more on teaching English language proficiency and the knowledge on ASEAN to students. The skilled labor professions shall be benefited from having these skills. Being able to communicate well in English and being familiar with ASEAN culture shall provide the students much better opportunity and qualification in the ASEAN and international labor market.

Finally, the career path of Thai students, including Thai skilled labor professions, depends heavily on good background of education. The relevant institutions and organizations then share the responsibility to provide the best education for Thai students, which may include the improvement of teaching style, up-to-date curriculums, and the internationalization of education for students, so that they will have bright future in their profession.

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