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Students' Expectations Towards Teaching and Learning Process for Entering into the AEC Era

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ABSTRACT

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which is the regional economic integration will be enforced in 2015. Countries in ASEAN have large diversity. They prepare various policies and activities to enable citizens to adjust to changes which will follow, for example, there will be more exchanges and mobility among people in the region hence governments are supporting education institutions to promote learning about ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). This research aimed to investigate the expectations of students pursuing teacher degree regarding the teaching and learning processes which could help them to prepare to enter the AEC (ASEAN Economics Community). Focus group interviews were performed with 1st to 4th year students in the Faculty of Education in Ramkhamhaeng University in Thailand. Students could freely express their opinions and concerns regarding AEC and their personal development. Themes were derived from the interviews. Results revealed that students expected the teaching and learning process to educate them in 5 issues: (a) learning objectives (b) class materials (c) teachers' qualification (d) application of learned materials and (e) ethical issue.

Keywords: AEC, students' expectations, teaching and learning

Introduction

Countries cannot stand alone in the networked globalization era. The trade disputes among countries especially regarding tax and tariff as well as trade barriers led to the establishment of many bi-, and multi-lateral trade agreements among countries. The World Trade Organization (WTO) was established on 1 January 1995 (World Trade Organization, 2014) in order to seek cooperation among countries in the world in order to reduce the disputes and promote economic well-being for member countries (Bateman, 2014). Currently 160 countries are members of WTO. In the regional level, co-operations were also formed, for example, the European Union which aims for the economics, societal and cultural integration (European Commission, 2014). The integration promotes European Union (EU) to become one of the strongest economies in the world today. Countries in Southeast Asia (SEA) also form similar co-operation and integration. Formerly, there were several attempts to integrate among countries in Southeast Asia (SEA) but those failed because countries in Southeast Asia have a lot of diversity and adversity through history so countries were rather protectionist against each other. For example, people in SEA use



different language, unlike EU people who have Grego-Roman foundation and have similar languages. Countries in SEA have own national languages which are rather different. Although people in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia can understand each other, Thai, Philippines, Lao, Myanmar, and Cambodia have different languages. But now, due to the forces of globalization and world tight economy system, countries realize the need to co-operate else each country in SEA wouldn't survive if compete alone (Thepchatree, 2009a).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 by 5 founder countries namely Malaysia, Indonesia, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Bangkok Declaration was signed in order to strengthen the economics, society and culture among countries in the region and ASEAN blueprint or roadmap was drawn. The member countries seek to promote cooperation in 3 areas or the 3 pillars of ASEAN: ASEAN Security Community (ASC), ASEAN Economics Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-cultural Community (ASCC). AEC was first achieved through the agreement on ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992 with the goal to reduce trade and tariff among 6 countries in the region. Other countries were convinced to join later. In 1999, all 10 ASEAN member countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) agreed on AFTA. AFTA was expand into AEC agreement which will start in 2015 with the aim to transform ASEAN nations into single market and production base with free flow of skilled worker, investment, and capital with the market size of more than 600m population in order to compete in the global trade arena (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2012). The timeframe development of AEC is shown in table 1.

Table 1. The development timeframe of ASEAN Economic Community

Year	Agreements
1967	Bangkok Declaration – the establishment of ASEAN
1992	ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) agreement
1996	ASEAN Industrial Cooperation Scheme (AICO)
1997	ASEAN Vision 2020 formulated
1998	Hanoi Plan of Action (HPA) ASEAN Framework Agreement on Service (AFAS) ASEAN Investment Area (AIA)
2000	Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)
2001	Roadmap for Integration of ASEA (RIA) ASEAN Competitive Study
2009	ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA)
2011	ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA)
2015	ASEAN Economics Community (AEC) in force

Countries in Southeast Asia are facing unprecedented socioeconomic challenge. New forms of wealth are emerging across the region. An important force that changes Asian countries from the past into modern era is the influence of religions from other regions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Parts of these religions were selectively blended with the indigenous belief systems to form a complex modern value system difficult for outsiders to understand (Dayley and Neher, 2013). It is said that no co-operation groups in the world is as diverse as ASEAN (Thepchatree, 2009a). We have people who follow all major religions in the world, earners among the poorest who earned USD600 per year and among the richest who earn USD50,000 per year. AEC member countries, with different belief systems, need to struggle to find common conducts in order to overcome barriers against full economics cooperation.

ASEAN countries, just like other countries, have different strengths and weaknesses. In AEC, each country must focus on her strengths and use member countries' strengths to cover a country's weakness. Together with the cooperation on many developments such as logistics, technology, and etc., many changes are introduced in the whole regions' economic and market structure. There is a necessity that people in the region should adjust themselves in order to cope with the changes in the ASEAN environment.

Higher education has the duty to prepare students to become quality member of AEC. The teaching and learning process should be adjusted to reflect the changes in the environment, economically, societally and culturally. With this need, educators should abreast themselves with the knowledge about AEC and tailor the education system to help students to develop. In this regard, the expectation of students is an important consideration for educators. Hence, this research was conducted with the aim to investigate students' opinions on their expectation regarding the teaching and learning process which they believe can help them in the AEC era.

Methodology

The objective of this research was to investigate students' expectations from the higher education system which can help them function in the AEC era. The researcher utilized focus group interview technique to elicit data from informants. Focus group interview is a data gathering technique that enables informants to think while discussing with each other. Ideas can be generated through the discussions. Ten focus groups were organized. Freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior students in the Faculty of Education in Ramkhamhaeng University in Thailand were recruited voluntarily. Each focus group consisted of 10 students from the same years of study to yield homogenous groups (Zigmund, 2011). Topics for discussions were students' expectations from education system which they need for their (and their future students') preparation to enter AEC. The researcher facilitated the discussion and motivated students to express their opinions and concerns regarding AEC and their personal development particularly the issues relevant to their needs or expectations from the teaching and learning process which they thought could prepare them to enter the AEC era. Data were recorded verbatim.

Results and discussion

Data from focus group interviews were analyzed and themes were elicited. Most students mentioned they were not confident that they will be able to work well in the new environment of AEC. There are tremendous amount of changes to be learn and handled. Five themes emerged from the data. Students reflected that they need to acquire certain knowledge and skills and they expect the teaching and learning process should be modified in order to prepare them for the forthcoming AEC era. These themes are (a) learning objectives, (b) class materials, (c) teachers' qualification, (d) application of learned materials and (e) ethical issue.

Learning objectives

Students express their opinions that Thailand's current learning objectives basically emphasize the technical knowledge, especially science. The government and education institutions aim to produce workforce for businesses and industries. The integration among countries needs interpersonal capability and networking. Hence, the learning objectives should include the aims to enhance interpersonal relationship capability rather than technical knowledge alone. Socio-cultural objectives should be included. The curriculum may have to be revised to reflect the changes that AEC brings about. The objective of learning should aim to prepare students to become a quality AEC citizen or world citizen, technological-wise and human-wise. Teaching and learning should be broadened to include regional perspectives.



Class materials

Students show their concerns that they lack knowledge about other countries in order to adjust themselves for the AEC integration. Workforce is able to cross the border to work in other member countries easier than before. The visa system and work permit will be easier to obtain. Hence, students expect to work with people from other countries or they may have to work in other countries. Without a thorough knowledge about other countries' history, culture, norms and believe systems, it would be difficult for them to create proper work relationship. Cross-cultural contents should be offered. Socio-cultural knowledge should be offered in order for them to know the rules of conduct in other ASEAN countries.

English is one of the major concerns of students. Many Thai students lack adequate English proficiency but the AEC integration needs a medium for communication. English is currently used as the medium for communication among ASEAN countries(Thepchatree, 2009b) so students expect that English will continue to be used among member nations. Furthermore, many students think technology is also important in the future. Class content should include technological knowledge especially in the area of Information Technology (IT). Materials about AEC should be added into every subject, for example, member nations' economy should be included in economics courses, accounting standards in each country should be added into accounting courses. Law and regulations are also very important for them to function properly such as international treaty and acts, child abuse, immigration treaties should also be included.

Teachers' qualification

The informants suggested that many teachers are bounded in the traditional student-teacher relationship mindsets. Many teachers are too conservative and against changes but the joining into AEC bring about major socio-economic changes. Unless teachers open their mind and become flexible to accept new ways of seeing and seek new visions, they wouldn't be able to learn the new information about foreign countries. Hence, they would not have sufficient knowledge about AEC to transfer to students. Teachers should have experience with people in other countries. Several students mentioned they want their teachers to have work experience in ASEAN member countries. Hand-on experience in other countries would benefit the students. In short, students want teachers to become more international or world citizen rather than the old-fashioned conservative teachers in the traditional teaching and learning approach. Some students mentioned about the attire teachers wear. Many teachers in Ramkhamhaeng University always dress very traditionally which they said does not portray the international appearance and they do not have confidence that such teachers could deliver them international knowledge.

The informants are teachers and they reflected about modern teaching and learning environment. Students in the modern era have lower respect and tolerance towards teachers than before. Teachers should know students' psychology and have the skills to draw attention from students. Most importantly, skills in teaching are also required so teachers could teach them properly. Finally, teachers should be well averse in devising the tools and methods to assess students' accomplishment with certain standards which are applicable to class objectives.

Application of learned materials

Students want to have more case studies about issues among ASEAN nations. Information from case study could help them to learn and apply knowledge about other countries. Assignments should be designed so that students would seek information about other member countries and their behaviors. Moreover, students also suggest that there should be educational trips to other countries so they would have opportunity to learn the ways people work in other countries. Exchange programs with universities in other countries for both teachers and

students could help both parties to function in other countries as a practice. Scholarship should be offered for both groups to take courses or programs in other member countries so that students and teachers could learn from practice and also create relationship with personnel in other countries. There are many research studies in Thailand regarding AEC, these should be disseminated among member nations to enable people in the member nations to better apply knowledge.

Ethical issue

Students agreed that the ethical standards are different among countries. This makes it difficult for co-operation in practice. Ethical standards enable a society to maintain justice and fairness. Without common or agreed upon code of conduct, there will be chaos and disputes. Common ASEAN ethical conducts should be created in order to be used as the standard ethical codes among member countries. There are a lot of ethical issues students expected from education system. Since AEC co-operation involve legal binding issues, the observation of intellectual property, code of ethics and labor welfare are issues they would like to know in order to protect themselves against unlawful conduct either by themselves or being ill-treated by others. Honesty and responsibility should be enhanced so people could live together in the community. Corruption should be prohibited. Good governance should be promoted among member countries.

Conclusion

Students realize they have to compete with people from other ASEAN nations in the coming AEC era. They want to advance themselves and want education institutions to provide them with proper teaching and learning system to enable them to become a qualified member of ASEAN. They would like to learn things beyond technical knowledge alone. Formerly, Thailand focused on mobilizing the country technologically. Science knowledge was promoted to advance the well-beings of people. Hence, Thailand education system had a competitive perspective to compete with other nations. Under the new integration scheme, Thailand should be co-operative rather than competitive. Hence, the education should aims towards more socio-cultural issues. Students emphasized that socio-cultural capabilities and knowledge are necessary. Many ASEAN and AEC relevant knowledge are required. Such preparation is unlikely if teachers and educators do not open their minds to seek new ideas and information first. Furthermore, universities in the region should create network and share information in order to promote better knowledge and application of knowledge among students in member countries.

In conclusion, students realized they need to develop themselves to meet the requirement of the free flow of skill-workers and trade within the region. They implied they lack necessary skills. Hence, higher education institutions should incorporate their needs and expectations and revise the curriculum and course contents to match their needs. Last but not least, this research was conducted with students at Ramkhamhaeng University as the informants. There is a limitation that the result might apply only with students with similar qualifications and perspectives. Students in other universities might have different opinions. Another research project to include students from other universities will contribute further to the knowledge in this area.

Thailand's education philosophy was rather Essentialism which focuses on the transfer of the country's traditional knowledge along from generations to generations (Wattanapanit, 2014). Now that Thai culture is blending with other ASEAN cultures. The philosophy should change to be more progressivism because we have to adopt the ASEAN culture, traditional philosophy may not be appropriate in the AEC era. Progressivism educational philosophy should be adopted. Progressivistic philosophy aims for the learning of diverse people and live together in peace. Hence, the educational philosophy of education institutions should be changed rather than to stick with own culture.



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