

Evidence-Based Implementation Analysis of Mutual Recognition Agreement on Tourism Professionals at Tourism Education in Thailand

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Abstract: ASEAN Member States (AMSs) which consist of ten countries have shared a common commitment to achieving an integrated ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015. The commitment has been realizing through implementing the Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) on Tourism Professional. This study aims to analyze the implementation of MRATP and to identify the barriers or challenges in the perspective of tourism and hospitality study program and other related institutions such as tourism and hotel associations, national tourism board in the early stage of adoption period from the year 2016-2017. The sample taken from this study were six universities based on advised from the ASEAN Secretariat Offices in Jakarta and Indonesia National Tourism Professional Board (NTPB). There are many universities in Thailand delivering tourism and hospitality, however only limited numbers recognize the MRA on Tourism curriculum including the eight study programs above. The study used qualitative approach with the in - depth interviews method. The result shown the MRA on Tourism professional have been disseminating to tourism and hotel study programs in Thailand, however not all study program are implementing yet due to some reasons. The challenges facing are the availability of resources and language barrier. This study considered limited in the MRA on tourism implementation analysis in one of AMSs in ASEAN.

Key words: MRA on Tourism • Asean Economic Community • Tourism and Hospitality Study Program

INTRODUCTION

World Travel and Tourism Council announces that the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was THB1, 292.5bn (USD36.7bn), 9.2% of total GDP in 2016 and is forecast to rise by 9.3% in 2017 and to rise by 6.7% pa, from 2017-2027, to THB2, 708.0bn (USD76.9bn), 14.3% of total GDP in 2027 [1]. This primarily reflects the economic activity generated by dynamic service industries such as hotels, travel agents, airlines and other passenger transportation services. Another fact from World Tourism Organization in the year of 2016 reveals, that Thailand position is in the 6th world tourism rank for the top destination.

Figure 1, explained that from the statistic provide at TAT, it shown that tourists from China dominate the total visitor to Thailand come from the ASEAN countries. Beside China (52.29%), Asia and ASEAN Countries are also contributing the potential tourist to Thailand from 8.75% to 14.24%. Other indicator showing a significant growth of tourism and hotel industry in Thailand is through increasing number of visitors.

The high numbers of tourist is a great phenomenon that Thailand's vibrant tourism field has played a significant role in the economy and successful boosting the related industries. It is also necessary for Thailand to prepare the qualified human resources to achieve highest level of services as well as satisfaction to tourists and visitors. These are also become a part of journey to the implementation of Asean Economic Community which is started to be implemented in early 2016.

Thailand and other ASEAN Members State (AMSs) committed to establish the Asean Economic Community (AEC) in 2015. There are some critical aspects such as being a single market and production base, with free flow of goods, services, investment and skilled labor. Thailand is designated to coordinate accelerated integration in the service and tourism sector for the ASEAN country members [2].

There are another constraints on job mobility in the tourism and hospitality industry in Thailand relative to the anticipated outcomes that may flow from the implementation of the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreement on Tourism Professionals (MRATP), once the

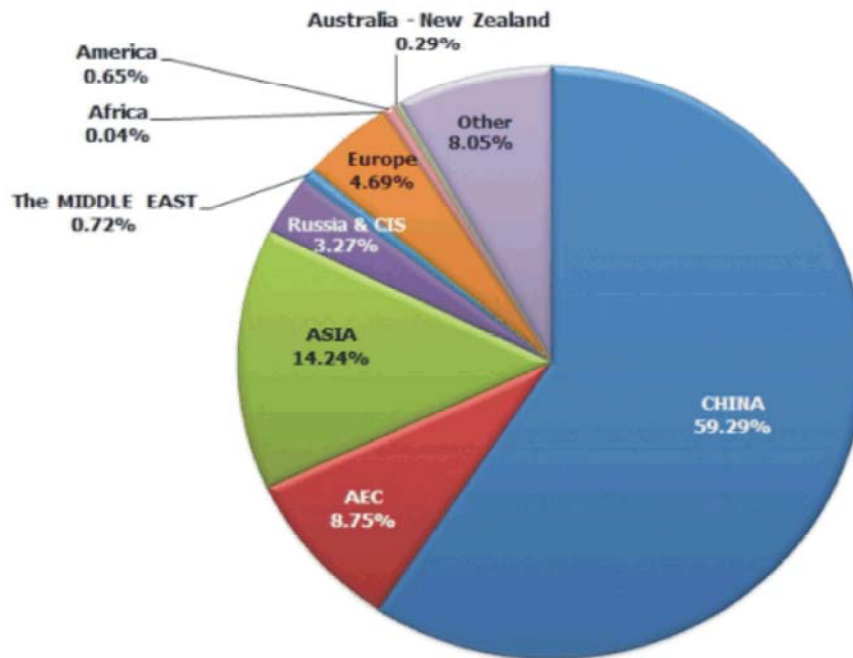


Fig. 1: Tourism Statistic by Market as of 30 September 2017
Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2017

ASEAN Economic Community implemented. Based on the previous research conducted by [3], that Thais working in the tourism and hospitality industry may be encouraged to make the move to work in specific ASEAN countries once the MRATP is implemented with some benefits such as higher salaries, linked to higher positions and improved promotional prospects.

To achieve those benefits, the standard competencies of the tourism professional must be established through Asean certification. Certifying ASEAN tourism professionals will enable AMSs to achieve cross recognition of professional standards and enable a freer flow of labor mobility and trade in the region. The Hotel industries will benefit through an increased cadre of quality, trained staff, improving the consistency and quality of service and customer experience. The University with tourism and hospitality study program and other Tourism schools in AMSs will also get the benefit through higher graduate employment rates of qualified, accredited and certified tourism professionals, in demand by industry.

This study aims to analyze the implementation of MRATP and to identify the barriers or challenges in the perspective of tourism and hospitality study program and other related institutions such as tourism and hotel associations, national tourism board in the early stage of adoption period from the year 2016-2017.

Research Context: The scope of this study is focus on analyzing the MRA TP implementation from the tourism and hospitality education in Thailand in 2017.

Literature Review

A Brief on MRA TP Development in AMSs: In January 2006 ASEAN Tourism Ministers supported the decision by ASEAN NTOs to establish the ASEAN Task Force on Tourism Manpower Development (ATFTMD) to prepare a Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA – TP) for ASEAN Tourism Professionals. The ASEAN Tourism Ministers signed the MRATP in 2009. The ATFTMD was one of six tourism task forces formed to assist ASEAN NTOs (National Tourism Organizations) in all matters related to tourism manpower development. It operated until 2010. To extend the responsibility of the previous ATFTMD, the ASEAN Tourism Professional Monitoring Committee (ATPMC) was formally established in June 2010, at Lombok, Indonesia. The main focus are promoting, updating, maintaining and monitoring Asean Common Competency Standard for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP) and The Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC) and for disseminating information about MRA – TP. ATPMC will work closely with the Quality Tourism Working Group which is primarily responsible for developing standards and in the implementation of the MRA – TP [4].

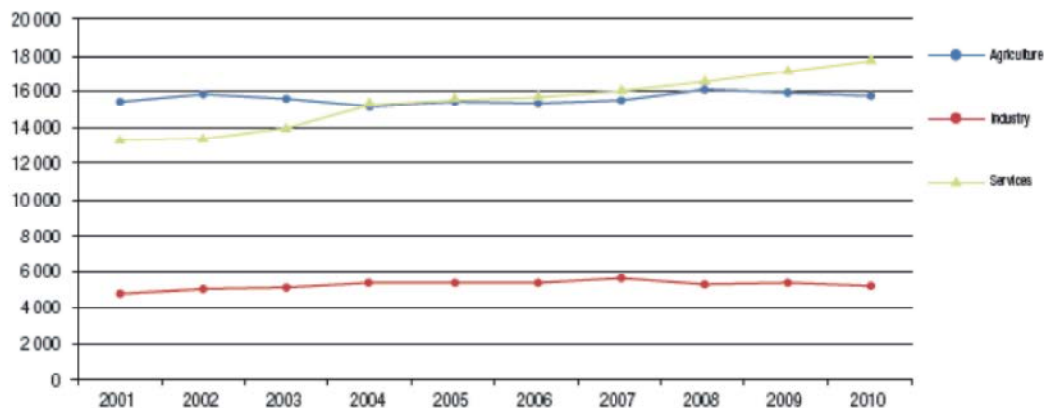


Fig. 4: Employed Person By Sector in Thailand

Source: [5]

The ASEAN MRA on Tourism Professionals would provide a mechanism for agreement on the equivalence of tourism certification procedures and qualifications across ASEAN. The mechanism will encourage a free and open market for tourism labor across the region and boost the competitiveness of the tourism sector in each ASEAN nation. Other ASEAN Member States may recognize the qualification of a Foreign Tourism Professional and if such qualification is recognized, they may be eligible to work in a host country provided that they possess a valid tourism competency certificate in a specific tourism job title as specified in the Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC), issued by the Tourism Professional Certification Board (TPCB) in an ASEAN Member State. The eligibility to work in a host country will be subjected to prevailing domestic laws and regulations of the host country [4].

Labor and Its Sectorial Distribution in Thailand:

Thailand has considerable potential to strengthen services as well as increasing productivity through the implementation of ASEAN Economic Community commitments, signed in 2006. Thailand's economy is projected to be 3.1% in 2016 and 3.2% in 2017. The service sector employs as many as 40% of the work force and produces 50% of GDP. In comparison, the manufacturing sector employs only 15% of the work force and produces as much as 35% of GDP. (worldbank.org, 2017). The labor condition in Thailand is spread to the working-age population from 15-64 years.

The sectorial employment in Thailand categorized into three including agriculture, industry and service.

The agriculture sector remains the primary employment sector contributing 40 per cent of the

employment share as shown at the Figure 4 above. The transition from agriculture to non-agriculture has slowed down. This suggests that the expansion of the industry and service sectors is fed by new entrants to the labor force rather than by movements from the agriculture sector (Labour Force Surveys, 2001-10).

Education Sector in Thailand: Thailand has performed major education reforms and invested significant proportion of its national wealth into educating youngest citizen (UNESCO, 2016). This report encourages Thailand to focus on four priority areas for a fast-changing world; (1) Setting clear, common standards for all students through a revised and improved curriculum, (2) Building capacity to reliably assess students across the full range of competencies needed for success in life and in learning, (3) Developing a holistic strategy to prepare teachers and school leaders to deliver education reform. Focusing on higher education as the factory of qualified human resources supply, most new public universities in Thailand are being created by merging existing colleges and subsequently reorganizing them as universities [6].

Table 1: Population of Higher Education Institution in Thailand

No	Type of Higher Education	Numbers
1	Higher Education Institution	171
2	Public Universities	80
	a. Autonomous Universities (15)	
	b. Universities (65)	
3	Private Higher Education Institutions	71
	a. Universities (40)	
	b. Institution (9)	
	c. Colleges (22)	
4	Community College	20
	Total	342

Source: [7]

The table shown that majority the higher education Institution is dominating with 171 population and followed by public universities and others. Among the public universities that serve the country, three are worth mentioning separately: Rajabhat Universities (41 different universities) that typically focus on teacher education, Rajamangala Universities of Technology (9 universities) that focus on science and technology and Pathumwan Institute of Technology, which focus on engineering. These three institutions have been the biggest source of the recent enrollment growth among public universities in Thailand [8].

Tourism and Hospitality Higher Education in Thailand:

In regard with the effort to improve the human resources quality in Thailand, the ecosystem of education must be well developed and matched with the global requirement particularly dealing with the implementation of MRATP. [9] stated that internationalization of hospitality and tourism higher education in Thailand should be viewed as a proactive strategy that education providers should embrace if they are to prepare graduates for careers in a global business environment.

[10] also added that the influence of globalization and free trade of education services created significant condition for Thai educational providers to expand the curricula and prepare graduates for professional careers in a competitive business atmosphere. It is really obvious, that the tourism and hospitality industry require high talented manager with great intercultural communication in the diversity customer and workforces. At the previous research conducted by [11] indicates that the quality and qualifications of Thai graduates may not meet the standards required by the industry. There is another common issues in higher education institution in Thailand, the concept of internationalization by focusing on the development of program quality, students' learning opportunities, faculty development and global understanding [12]. Thai academics should recognize that internationalization has mutual benefits. The four key elements contributing to internationalization based on some researchers [13, 14] are (a) faculty, (b) students, (c) curriculum development and (d) international alliances.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is an empirical study used descriptive qualitative. We conducted in-depth interview with seven coordinator of travel and hospitality study program in Thailand held from 3-7 September 2017. The

questionnaires during the in-depth interview explored about four topics: (1) The development of Thai labor standard in tourism sector (2) the awareness of MRA TP within the higher education in Thailand (3) The implementation of MRA TP in the curriculum. The process of in depth interview in average took 2-3 hours including campus tour accompanied by the management, from 09.00 to 12.00 am or from 14.00 – 17.00pm.

The in-depth interview is a technique designed to produce a rich picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic. The vast majority of writing about interview research methods states that interviews should be conducted face-to-face or simply assumes that they will be done in this mode [15]

In-depth interview could also considered as a semi structured interviews. [16] stated that it is quite common for social science researchers to conduct this type of interview. The characteristic is a mix approach, where the questions are pre-planned to the interview however the interviewer gives the interviewee the chance to elaborate specific issues through the use of open-ended questions. This type is appropriate to researchers who have an overview of their topic so that they can ask questions.

The Findings: The analysis implementation of MRA TP in hotel and tourism higher education in Thailand is formulated through an in-depth interview approach. The process delivered through the steps below :

- Determining the purpose of the in-depth interviews including the topics that should be discussed in order to meet that purpose.

In this case the research would like to analyze the implementation of MRATP in the hotel and tourism higher education perspective. Another purpose is to identify the barriers and challenge facing by the higher education field. In this stage, some preparations were including letter of proposal and list down open-ended questions.

- Planning the in-depth interview process.
- Who will be the source persons?
- Within the planning, the researcher approached the potential sources; Indonesia National Tourism Professional Board (NTPB) and the Asean Secretariat to gain some advises on the ASEAN destination for benchmarking activity of MRA TP and hotel and tourism higher education persons in-charged.

Table 2: The list of participants of in-depth interviews process

No	University/Institution Name Code	Position
1	TPD	DIR
2	BU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■International Relations Director ■Dean ■Study Program coordinator
3	MUIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■International Relations and Networking Unit International Affairs Office ■Director
4	SUIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■International Relations and Networking Unit International Affairs Office ■Director
5	BHU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■Dean ■Lecturer
6	DTC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■Dean ■Lecturer
7	THRA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■Director ■Senior Advisor

Source: In depth interview by the researcher, 2017|

- How many hotel & tourism higher educations in Thailand?

Considering the available time and as well as the response rate from the hotel & tourism educations, there were about 5 (five) universities confirmed to welcome the researcher for in-depth interview activity. The other 2 (two) sources as additional to strengthen the finding were Thai Hotel and Restaurant Association and Thai Tourism Operation Division.

- What variety of demographic characteristics should they have?

The varieties are the public and private universities offer the hotel and tourism major, both bachelor and master program.

- Where will interviews take place and who will do the interviewing?

The venue was held in each campus/university and followed by the campus tour activity.

Conducting the In-Depth Interviews: After collected the data, then turned it into usable data by transliterating it. Through this process, the researcher created a written text of the conversations that composed the interview. It can be analyzed after transliterating process. With in-depth interviews, analysis takes the form of reading through the transcripts to code them for patterns and themes that provide a response to the research question.

The Table 2 above shows representatives persons from reputable higher education institutions offer the

hotel and tourism study program in Thailand, both for bachelor and master degree.

The result on investigated questions is described below:

- The development of Thai labor standard in tourism sector

From the above table it can be concluded that actually Thai government has shown a great attempt to increase the capacity of their human resources including for hotel and tourism sector. It is closely relevant with the data taken from ILO in [17], that Thai's government-subsidized short skills courses enrolled 69, 477 trainees in 2006. The result from this program was the number of trainees skyrocketed that year to 169, 285, which was more than double the number for the previous three years.

The universities are also becomes crucial stakeholder to have similar perception and understanding on the benefit of MRA standard and curriculum. Majority, they have shown a better understanding on this matter, however they expect that the following steps of the implementation must be well formulated by the government. The government must extend the socialization program on this curriculum to the universities in Thailand.

Thailand government realizes that it is highly essential to develop human resources by providing education system, which meets the standard of ASEAN, including improving skills and foreign languages, good work attitude as well as a work disciplines.

- The awareness of MRA TP within the higher education in Thailand

Table 3: The feedback table about the development of Thai's labor in tourism sector

No	University/Institution Name Code	Answers
1	TPD	The goal of TPD is enhancing the service quality of tourism professional. However, the challenge faced by the stakeholder was many of stakeholders do not understand about the benefit of MRA on TP. However, the socialization of MRA has been implementing since 2016.
2	BU	Mostly Thai's labor shown a great service minded already, however the English language skill is need to be improved.
3	MUIC	The supply of skilled labors in tourism in Thailand is increasing currently. It is due to the fact if the hotel and tourism school's growth. Another fact of that many Thais working in hotel and tourism sector is still showing a low level of English proficiency.
4	SUIC	The proportion of Thai people with a higher education is increasing. The government also deals directly with skills development of the people in the workforce.
5	BHU	The standard labor of Thais is getting better with the government support. Even though the socialization of the MRA has been done before, it is still need to be continued for increasing the awareness of Thais worker.
6	DTC	There are many vocational schools growing in Thailand which make Thais worker quality are increased very well. The gap of language particularly in English becomes "homework" for schools and institution to develop an effective curriculum for language competency.
7	THRA	THRA always support the effort for improving standard competency of Thais worker in hotel and tourism sector, by providing a training program including for English Language Skill periodically. It shown a thoughtful step for increasing a better qualification toward the MRA standard.

Source: In depth interview by the researcher, 2017

Table 4: The feedback table about the awareness of MRA TP within the higher education in Thailand

No	University/Institution Name Code	Answers
1	BU	The university was appointed as assessment center for the MRA certification since two years ago. The faculty members are mostly already becomes a certified assessor. It shown that the awareness level of MRA TP in the faculty of hotel and tourism is considered high
3	MUIC	The university notices very well on the MRA TP, but since the focus is to become world class research university therefore the focus is how to contribute the qualified research.
4	SUIC	The hospitality and tourism is delivered in the master program. Only a few faculty members noticed about MRA TP. They are very welcome to have further socialization program on this matter, organized by the tourism association or government.
5	BHU	MRA TP is well recognized in the campus and been implementing in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the level of implementation are on the understanding level not deepest in to technical matter.
6	DTC	As the institution established as vocational, many of the faculty members are becomes assessors already. The university is implementing the MRA curriculum into detail.

Source: In depth interview by the researcher, 2017

Table 5: The feedback table about the implementation in the curriculum

No	University/Institution Name Code	Answers
1	TPD	The TPD have been doing the socialization on MRA TP to schools, association as well as related industries. The program was postponed due to the restructuring the organization. The TPD start the program again in the early of 2017 to achieve the goal for increasing the quality of tourism professionals.
2	BU	The university has been implementing the MRA TP in some selected subjects majoring in hospitality
3	MUIC	The university has not implemented yet the MRA TP
4	SUIC	The university has not implemented yet the MRA TP
5	BHU	The implementation of MRA TP is set in the understanding level.
6	DTC	The university have been implementing MRA TP
7	THRA	THRA always provide a significant support for the implementation of MRA TP.

Table 6 reveals that the level of awareness on MRA TP is considered average to high. Only limited university never heard about the progress of this standard. Many of vocational schools have been implementing this concept for two up to three years. In another hand, the data taken from previous researchers indicates that the quality and qualifications of Thai graduates may not meet the standards required by the industry [11].

- The implementation of MRA TP in the curriculum.
The above table explains that majority of the existing university offering hospitality and tourism are recognizing the MRA TP already. The challenges faces are the implementation of the standardization on the curriculum. Only limited schools are implementing the MRA TP with extra effort such as providing necessary facilities and resources.

CONCLUSION

The MRA TP understanding is considered low, due to the low socialization program from Thai Tourism Department to tourism higher education institution. However, the university or the faculty considered the MRA TP as the program requires high budget allocation. They do agree that the faculty needs to improve the quality of curriculum development through many other activities in relation to Thai higher education in general (international program), staffs with overseas experience (studying or working) are expected to communicate effectively in English since English is used as the medium of instruction in international. The area for improving the skill of human resources under the MR TP scheme covers 6 (six) labor division and 32 job titles.

There are six eligible "Labor Divisions" which include thirty-two occupational groups ranging from Bell Boys (sic) to Tour Managers. Under the guidelines set forth in the ASEAN Handbook, a wide range of hospitality staff will come under the umbrella of "tourism professionals", subject to certain qualifications as set out in the Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum, (CATC). The specific positions are under the headings of Hotel Services and Travel Services.

The result shown the MRA on Tourism professional have been disseminating to tourism and hotel study programs in Thailand, however not all study program are implementing yet due to some reasons. The challenges facing are the availability of resources and language barrier. This study considered limited in the MRA on tourism implementation analysis in one of AMSs in ASEAN.

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