

THE ASEAN MUTUAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENT ON TOURISM PROFESSIONALS IN THAILAND: A MIXED BLESSING?

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Abstract: *This paper explores aspects of the possible 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, once the ASEAN Economic Community becomes operative in 2015. A range of issues come into focus. While issues that promote workplace mobility, job satisfaction and motivation are well known and have been the subject of exhaustive academic research, this paper aims to explore what may be termed the less obvious factors which may constrain Thai intra-ASEAN work-flows. The historical record suggests that the movement of workers into and out of Thailand is asymmetrical, with the inflow exceeding the outflow. The reverse is true of a number of other ASEAN nations. The conclusions cannot be definitive given that the MRA will not come into operation until late 2015, or 2016 at the earliest. There is, however, a strong indication that the inflow of hospitality industry workers into Thailand will far exceed the outflow. Such factors as low levels of English proficiency, high levels of employment and embedded cultural traits may collectively influence the extent to which Thais take advantage of the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreement on Tourism Professionals. The conclusions to this research suggest that initiatives may be needed in both the educational and tourism management contexts.*

Key Words: *Mutual Recognition Agreement, Tourism Professionals, job mobility, English language proficiency, Thai cultural values, employment in Thailand.*

1. Introduction

This paper follows on from research conducted by Halakoo (2013), which looked at the extent to which the traditional workplace motivators might promote job relocation within the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (hereinafter 'ASEAN') by staff in the tourism and hospitality industry in Thailand consequent to the implementation of the *ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreement on Tourism Professionals* (hereinafter the 'MRATP').

The traditional workplace motivators considered in Halakoo's research study includes: autonomy, feedback, skill variety, task identity and task significance as well as the determinants of organizational commitment (Morrow, 1993, and Ng et al., 2007, cited in Halakoo 2013). Halakoo's research concluded that Thais working in the tourism and hospitality industry may be induced to make the move to work in specific ASEAN countries once the MRATP is implemented provided higher salaries, linked to higher positions and improved promotional prospects, were offered.

This paper investigates another perspective on the issues researched by Halakoo (2013) and focuses, not on the motivators of job

relocation but instead on the constraints which may come into play once the MRATP becomes operational thereby inhibiting workflow. Specifically, it identifies and explores the relevance of three factors that may inhibit intra-ASEAN workplace mobility and asks to what extent they may collectively influence the extent to which Thais seek to take advantage of the MRATP. The three factors are: (i) existing high levels of employment in Thailand; (ii) embedded cultural traits; and (iii) low levels of English proficiency.

This paper first briefly looks at MRATPs and then at MRAs and ASEAN Integration. Next, it examines labor movements within ASEAN. It ends with a discussion of the three factors influencing intra-ASEAN work flows,

2. The ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreement on Tourism Professionals in Thailand

On November 9, 2013, ASEAN issued the following communiqué:

"The Government of Thailand has just completed its internal requirements and procedures to join other ASEAN Member States in signing the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) on Tourism Professionals, which is one of the key ASEAN tourism

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initiatives to support the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community 2015.”²

As stated in the official communiqué, on the 9th of November 2012, after years of negotiation, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports in Thailand, signed off on the AMRATP.³ The AMRATP is one in a series covering occupational groups relating to architectural services, the nursing profession, doctors, surveyors, accountants, automotive workers and engineers.

MRAs find their origin in Article V of the 1995 ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS) which states that:

“Each Member State may recognize the education or experience obtained, requirements met, or licenses or certifications granted in another Member State, for the purpose of licensing or certification of service suppliers. Such recognition may be based upon an agreement or arrangement with the Member State concerned or may be accorded autonomously.”⁴

MRAs can be broadly defined as “policy

instruments that are designed to promote economic integration and increase trade between participants, particularly between nations.”⁵ Their primary objective is to remove impediments to intra-ASEAN workflow within post-2015 ASEAN with respect to the prescribed occupational groups.

As with the MRATP, the “ASEAN Mutual Recognition on Tourism Professionals Handbook”⁶ (the ‘Handbook’) provides “an essential reference to the key policies and implementation guidelines for National Tourism Organizations (NTO’s) in ASEAN”. It identifies 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).⁷ The specific positions, under the headings of Hotel Services and Travel Services, are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: 32 Job Titles: Six Labor Divisions

Figure 1: 32 Job Titles - Six Labor Divisions

Hotel Services				Travel Services	
Front Office	House Keeping	Food Production	Food and Beverage Service	Travel Agencies	Tour Operation
Front Office Manager	Executive Housekeeper	Executive Chef	F&B Director	General Manager	Product Manager
Front Office Supervisor	Laundry Manager	Demi Chef	F&B Outlet Manager	Assistant General Manager	Sales & Marketing Manager
Receptionist	Floor Supervisor	Commis Chef	Head Waiter	Senior Travel Consultant	Credit Manager
Telephone Operator	Laundry Attendant	Chef de Partie	Bartender	Travel Consultant	Ticketing Manager
Bell Boy	Room Attendant	Commis Pastry	Waiter		Tour Manager
	Public Area Cleaner	Baker			
		Butcher			

Source: <http://www.uq.edu.au/cbamt/index.html?page=55450> (ibid)

²<http://www.asean.org/news/asean-statement-communicues/item/thailand-signs-mra-on-tourism-professionals> (Accessed May 18 2014)

³<http://www.uq.edu.au/cbamt/index.html?page=55450> (Accessed 18 May 2014)

⁴*Id.*

⁵http://www.wise.co.th/wise/Knowledge_Bank/References/Labour/MRA_TOURISM_PROFESSIONALS_HA_NDBOOK_2012.pdf (Accessed 18th May 2014)

⁶<http://mra.esrt.vn/tourism-professionals/what-is-the-common-asean-tourism-curriculum> (Accessed May 18 2014)

⁷<http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-economic-community/category/other-documents-11> (retrieved 18th May 2014)

In terms of the impact of the MRATP, two distinct yet inter-related questions arise. Will there be an outflow of Thai hospitality workers to locations where terms of employment are more attractive? And from another perspective, will there be a significant influx of foreign workers who, incidentally, may pose a challenge to the continued employment of Thais in the local hospitality industry?

The rationale underpinning the Tourism Professionals Framework Agreement is the facilitation of workplace mobility to specific categories of tourism professionals within ASEAN.⁸ It is apparent, however, that while there may be a significant inflow of workers within the above labor divisions to Thailand from such countries as the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Myanmar, there may not be a corresponding outflow of Thai workers seeking intra-ASEAN employment. Given that the MRATP is intended to create opportunities for Thai workers, it is suggested that in practice the opposite may be true, as the ultimate beneficiaries may be the imported labor engaged by tour operators to the detriment of local employees.

3. MRAs and ASEAN Integration

The formulation of the various MRAs within ASEAN is integral to the promotion of higher levels of regional cohesion and aims to ensure the growth and sustainability of the ASEAN economy. The launch of the AEC, initially scheduled for January 1, 2020, and later accelerated to January 1, 2015 pursuant to the 2007 *Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015* (the 'Cebu Declaration'),⁹ has since been delayed for 12 months (reportedly to prepare for regulations). The AEC is now due to be established by December 31, 2015.

As articulated in ASEAN Vision 2020, adopted at the 2nd Informal Summit in Kuala

Lumpur in December 1997, the purpose of the AEC is "to create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN Economic Region in which there is a free flow of goods, services and skilled labor, a freer flow of capital, equitable economic development, and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities."¹⁰

Historically, ASEAN has sought to emulate the European Union (EU) as a model in terms of integration and homogeneity. The free flows at the core of the AEC, for instance, are a direct reference to the so-called 'four freedoms' at the origin of the borderless EU Single Market. Yet, although ASEAN only comprises ten nations, and not twenty-eight as in the EU, it has not to date been able to achieve anticipated levels of institutional or functional integration. This may be due to a combination of factors, not the least of which may be the "non-interference" rule set out in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter which aims to ensure the preservation of the national sovereignty and identity of member nations.¹¹

While mutual recognition agreements aim to build bridges, a wide range of disparities persist both within and between member nations across cultural, social, economic and political perspectives.

Member nations have no fewer than thirteen official languages and a vast number of dialects yet paradoxically, ASEAN has adopted a single language, English, as its "working language". In contrast, the EU has twenty three working languages. On the economic front the absence of uniform financial regulation, and the reality that there are ten distinct banking systems supporting ten different currencies, widens the chasm. In tandem with these incongruities ASEAN has ten different legislative regimes and distinct regulatory frameworks, with roots in both Eastern and Western juristic traditions, which under-pin disparate civil and criminal regulatory provisions.

⁸<http://www.asean.org/news/item/cebu-declaration-on-the-acceleration-of-the-establishment-of-an-asean-community-by-2015> (Retrieved June 20th 2014)

⁹<http://www.asean.org/news/item/highlights-of-the-second-informal-asean-summit-malaysia-14-16-december-1997>. (Retrieved June 20th 2014)

¹⁰ www.asean.org/asean/asean-charter/asean-charter (retrieved June 12th 2014)

¹¹ Bryant and Gray (2005) at <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/thailand/unemployment-rate> (Retrieved June 9th 2014)

4. Labor Movements within ASEAN

Research undertaken by Pasadilla (2011) and Capannelli (2013) points to the asymmetrical nature of intra-ASEAN labor movements. The statistical data as summarized in Table 2 below indicate that the net movement of workers into and out of Thailand

is low in contrast to most other ASEAN countries and is biased in terms of inward over the outward migration. Thais clearly show a tendency not to wish to work abroad. This is true of both intra- and extra- ASEAN movements.

Table 2: Inward and Outward Migration

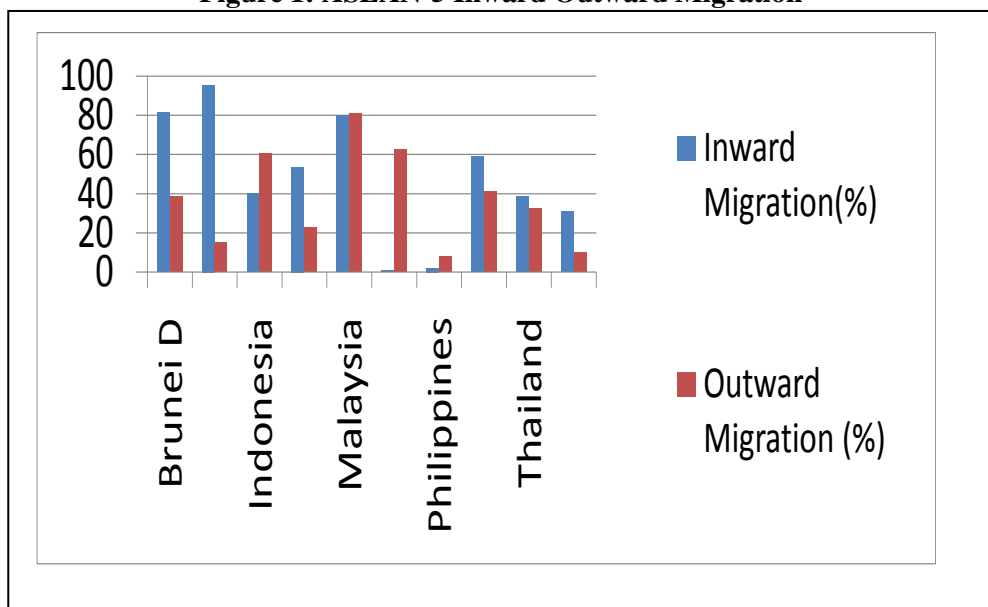
ASEAN Nations	Intra-ASEAN			Total Migration			(% Intra-ASEAN to Total Migration)	
	Outward Migration	Inward Migration	Ratio of outbound/inbound	Outward Migration	Inward Migration	Ratio of outbound/inbound	Outward Migration	Inward Migration
Brunei D.	9,313	120,578	0.08	24,343	148,123	0.16	38.26	81.40
Cambodia	53,722	320,573	0.17	350,485	335,829	1.04	15.33	95.46
Indonesia	1,518,687	158,485	9.58	2,504,297	397,124	6.31	60.64	39.91
Lao PDR	82,788	10,134	8.17	366,663	18,916	19.38	22.58	53.58
Malaysia	1,195,566	1,882,987	0.63	1,481,202	2,357,603	0.63	80.72	79.87
Myanmar*	321,100	814	394.47	514,667	98,008	5.25	62.39	0.83
Philippines	335,407	9,096	36.87	4,275,612	435,423	9.82	7.84	2.09
Singapore	122,254	1,162,960	0.11	297,234	1,966,865	0.15	41.13	59.13
Thailand	262,721	448,218	0.59	811,123	1,157,263	0.70	32.39	38.73
Viet Nam	221,956	21,511	10.32	2,226,401	69,307	32.12	9.97	31.04
TOTAL	4,123,515	4,135,357	1.00	12,852,027	6,984,461	1.84	32.08	59.21

Source: Pasadilla, G.O., (2011) ADBI Institute. <http://go.worldbank.org/JITC7NYTT0>.

More recent research by Capannelli (ibid), presented at the Third Roundtable on Labor Migration in Asia, conducted in January 23rd –

25th 2013, also highlights the “stay-at-home” tendency evidenced by Thais, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: ASEAN-5 Inward Outward Migration



Source: Capannelli (ibid)

Yet, as is apparent from the work of these researchers, Thailand is not alone in having greater inward than outward labor migration.

A recent article in the Straits Times, one of Singapore’s dailies, highlighted the similar problem faced in Singapore (Alvin Foo,

September 11th 2013). Focusing on the difficulties Singapore companies operating abroad have finding managers willing to relocate overseas as expatriates, in spite of all the benefits attached to being sent to another country as manager, it indicated that the issue has reached such a magnitude that the government is now contemplating creating legal incentives.

The Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, addressing guests at the International Enterprise 30th Anniversary dinner in Singapore confirmed the reluctance of Singaporeans to take on management positions overseas when he admitted that “Singaporeans don’t always go as readily as their employers would like them too” (Ibid). This contrasts with the fact that Singapore is most successful in attracting overseas talent, yet Singaporean talent also tends to stay at home. One of the main reasons listed in that same Strait Times article is the unwillingness of the spouse to give up his/her own career in

order to follow his/her spouse and also the desire not to disturb the children schooling.

As to Thailand, reference back to the findings of the research by Pasadilla and Capannelli (ibid) leads to the question; why does it appear that Thais are reluctant to take up employment opportunities outside Thailand? In addressing this question this paper explores the extent to which existing high levels of employment in Thailand, low levels of English proficiency, and embedded cultural traits may collectively offer an answer to this and related questions.

5. The Three Factors Influencing Intra-ASEAN Work Flow

(i) High Employment Levels.

In considering the question of whether Thais are inclined to seek employment outside Thailand it may well be argued that there is no need for them to do so as Thailand has very low (official) unemployment rates as indicated by Bank of Thailand data.¹²

Figure 2: Thailand Unemployment Rate



While the official unemployment data from the Bank of Thailand indicate that the unemployment rate in Thailand averaged 1.57 Percent from 2001 until 2014, reaching an all-time high of 5.73% in January of 2001 and a record low of 0.39 percent in November of 2012, it is of relevance to realize that a majority of the population work on the land, as noted in Table 3 below, and hence one might speculate that the farming population are

always employed and are never characterized as unemployed. Even so, with or without this bias, the Bank of Thailand unemployment statistics are indicative of what may be a relevant factor in considering whether Thais find it necessary to migrate to find work. The relevance of this data to the discussion comes into clearer focus when considered relative to unemployment levels in other ASEAN nations.

¹²http://www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe3/docs/pe3_051001d1_en.pdf. (Retrieved June 9th 2014)

Table 3: Percentage of Population Working the Land

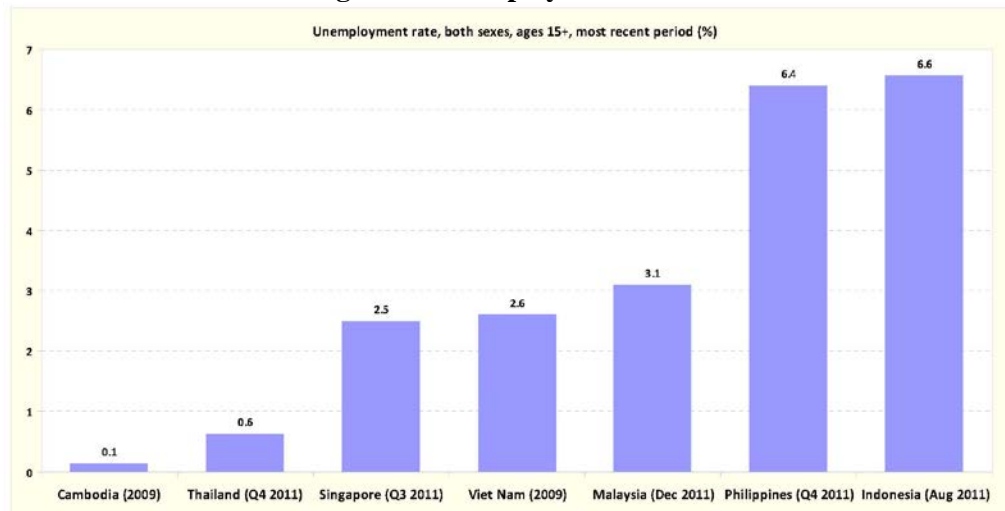
1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
87.5%	86.8%	83.0%	81.3%	68.3%

Source: Population and Housing Censuses.¹³

Data of greater relevance to the current discussion is to be derived from the research of Dasgupta (2006) which indicates the relativities of unemployment across ASEAN. In addition to confirming low unemployment rates in Thailand, the figures clearly indicate

higher unemployment levels in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Myanmar, countries with populations in 2010 of 235 million, 94 million, 60 million, 86 million, and 60 million respectively.¹⁴ Correspondingly, Thailand has a population of about 67 million.

Figure 3: Unemployment Trends



Source: Dasgupta, S. Employment Trends in ASEAN Countries.¹⁵

The significance of these figures, when linked to the findings of Capannelli and Pasadilla (ibid) in relation to worker mobility raise significant issues relating to the likely projections of the inflow of workers into Thailand once work related migration is deregulated under the various mutual recognition agreements. The prospect is that while Thais may choose not to seek intra-ASEAN employment to advance their careers, thousands of nationals from a number of other ASEAN nations may well, of necessity, feel compelled to take advantage of the free workflow agreements and make a move to

Thailand.

To offset this suggestion, it may be argued, however, that while Thais may not have any “necessity” to move intra-ASEAN to obtain professional employment, they may do so anyway since one of the factor determining a prospective employee’s marketability generally turns on experience. A wider range of workplace experience may correlate to higher salary, better promotional prospects and better working conditions. This then leaves open the question, will Thais seize the opportunity to use the benefits offered by the MRATP to further their careers?

¹³http://www.asean.org/resources/archives?task=callelement&format=raw&item_id=5416&element=a0c6d315-bb76-42c6-9ecf-c287d406937b&method=download. (Retrieved June 9th 2014)

¹⁴<http://www.google.co.th/url?url=http://www.ilo.org/gimi/gess/RessourceDownload>. (Retrieved June 20th 2014)

¹⁵Ulrich Werner; “Thailand does not need 10,000 Einsteins. It needs one Einstein, 10,000 qualified academics, and a skilled workforce of 10 million”; at, <http://www.nesothailand.org/dutch-organizations/education-news/public-education-needs-major-overhaul-pronto> (Accessed 22/08/2011)

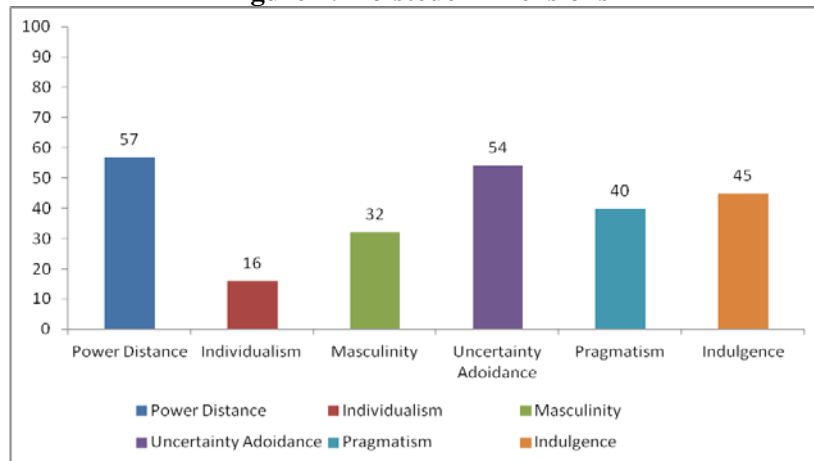
This leads to a consideration of two other factors which it is suggested may influence workflow outcomes within ASEAN post 2015. Firstly, the extent to which Thai cultural traits may come into play as a determinant of Thai workforce mobility, and secondly, whether English proficiency levels may likewise influence the inward and outward flow of workers once current restrictions on worker mobility are lifted.

(ii) Embedded Cultural Traits

Does Thai Culture Impede Job Mobility? This question is complex. The Thai cultural factors that have direct relevance to this issue have been discussed in a plethora of academic contexts by numerous researchers, both European and Thai; the seminal cultural

research of Geert Hofstede (1980), reported widely in numerous publications, complimented by the work of such Thai scholars such as Professor Suntaree Komin, (1990), are directly in point. Professor Komin, a Thai Fulbright Scholar, built on and extended the work of Professor Hofstede, identifying common threads which under-pin and inform Thai cultural norms. In 1990, Professor Komin, published a seminal paper, “The Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns.” Both Hofstede and Komin have identified and elaborated on factors that distinguish Thai culture from those cultures of other countries, as reflected in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Hofstede Dimensions



Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com/thailand.html> Accessed 13/02/2014

Consistent with the findings of Hofstede, Komin highlighted the fact that Thai culture may be characterized as a high context culture; a culture that places a very high value on relationships and, which is by choice, hierarchical. Avoidance of risk and uncertainty also ranks very highly in the Thai cultural psyche as Thais seek to avoid conflict and cherish certainty. In practice, this suggests that Thais tend to avoid any situation that may give rise to “ambiguity”. A new work situation, in a foreign country where the language, cuisine and customs are challenging, quite apart from the business environment, can be nothing less than a source of significant “ambiguity”.

It is postulated that as Thais place a high value on family relationships, and at the same time have a deep respect for “hierarchy”, the wishes of “elders” may carry great weight. In

the light of this it is suggested that “family bonding”, respect for the wishes of elders, and the avoidance of uncertainty, which may be translated as conservatism, may all converge to a point if a decision to “leave home” arises. In many cases the outcome may be a predictable “no”.

It is therefore unsurprising, consistent with the work of Capannelli and Pasadilla (ibid), to note that Thais have an over-riding tendency to stay at home in the “comfort zone” of family and friends and not to venture into unfamiliar territories. Yet, to offset this conclusion, as traditional Thai cultural values may erode over time, as a result of creeping westernization, these barriers to mobility may be reduced.

(iii) Low Level of English Proficiency

The final factor which it is suggested may influence the inflow/outflow equation relates

to levels of English proficiency in Thailand. What is the role of English language proficiency in job mobility?

There are numerous reports, generated from within Thailand and elsewhere, on English language usage in Thailand. Such headlines as ‘Public Education Needs Major Overhaul Pronto’ (sic) that appeared in the Bangkok Post on the 9th of March 2011¹⁶ and recent publications by the World Bank (2010) and the Asian Development Bank (2011) emphasize a need for change. The ADB Report (2011) stressed the need for ‘quality education that promotes creativity at all levels supported by and eco-system that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship’ (ibid: 42).

A World Bank Report (Benveniste 2010) identified that 90% of manufacturing plants surveyed had vacancies for professionals and production workers in the ‘hard to fill’ vacancy category and went on to identify lack of English language skills as a significant impediment. However, having a tertiary qualification from a Thai university may be of little help in securing a job in an international firm if the applicant cannot communicate with a prospective manager. English as the *lingua franca* of the commercial world is highly significant to the success of the tourism and hospitality industry.

In 2011, a rather curious debate took place

in the Thai legislature as to whether English should be adopted as an official second language. It was curious in the sense that the proposal was decided in the negative, apparently on the basis that it might suggest that Thailand had in some way been “colonized”. This decision, it is suggested, may be seen as reflective of an exaggerated sense of protective nationalism which has inhibited the promotion of English language usage.

More recently, the Nation Newspaper, one of Thailand’s English dailies, reported in that, from a global perspective, “Thailand ranks near the bottom in English proficiency” (the Nation, November 2013). Commenting on the findings of a survey conducted by EF Education First, it also stated that:

“All over Asia, Thailand’s ranking is only above Kazakhstan. Leading the regional league is Malaysia with a score of 58.99 score, followed by Singapore. The others - India, Hong Kong, South Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and China - are all over 50 points, while Thailand gained only 44.44.”

As can be seen from Table 4, when it comes to English proficiency, Thailand lags behind its main competitors within ASEAN and is at a severe disadvantage.

Table 4: EF: English Proficiency Index (Third Edition)

1 Sweden	16 Switzerland	31 Russia	46 Colombia
2 Norway	17 Portugal	32 Italy	47 Kuwait
3 Netherlands	18 Slovakia	33 Taiwan	48 Ecuador
4 Estonia	19 Argentina	34 China	49 Venezuela
5 Denmark	20 Czech Republic	35 France	50 Jordan
6 Austria	21 India	36 United Arab Emirates	51 Qatar
7 Finland	22 Hong Kong	37 Costa Rica	52 Guatemala
8 Poland	23 Spain	38 Brazil	53 El Salvador
9 Hungary	24 South Korea	39 Peru	54 Libya
10 Slovenia	25 Indonesia	40 Mexico	55 Thailand
11 Malaysia	26 Japan	41 Turkey	
12 Singapore	27 Ukraine	42 Iran	
13 Belgium	28 Vietnam	43 Egypt	
14 Germany	29 Uruguay	44 Chile	
15 Latvia	30 Sri Lanka	45 Morocco	

Source: <http://www.multivu.com/mnr/62435-ef-education-first-top-english-speaking-countries>

¹⁶Plan to Make English Second Language Vetoed; <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/202224/plan-to-make-english-2nd-language-vetoed> (Accessed 22/08/2011)

Given that English has been adopted as the *lingua franca* of major global corporations and is the common language of the tourism and hospitality industry, it is suggested that English language proficiency will be a key factor in determining both inward and outward workflow mobility in tourism and hospitality industry.

It is also suggested that in the case of Thailand, which as indicated above has one of the lowest English language proficiency “scores” not only in Asia but in the world, this factor will clearly be a significant constraint on intra-ASEAN mobility by Thais. At the same time English proficiency will certainly open the door of opportunity to workers from other ASEAN nations with higher levels of English proficiency.

6. Conclusions

The conclusions to this discussion paper are by their very nature tentative; however it appears quite likely, in answer to the opening questions, that each of the constraints discussed are of relevance to outcomes that may be anticipated on the implementation of the MRATP.

It is suggested that the relevance of existing levels of employment in Thailand, Thai cultural constraints, and the level of English proficiency may also extend to the outcomes of the operation of the various other mutual recognition agreements. English proficiency levels stand out as a barrier to outward, and at the same time as a motivation or encouragement for inward mobility of workers, not simply in the tourism and hospitality sector, but also in the other prescribed professions. Hence, Thailand may face new challenges with an influx of workers from other ASEAN nations once the protections currently afforded by restrictive labor laws are diluted.

While proactive steps are already being taken in the educational sector, tourism professionals may initiate strategies to ensure existing staff remain committed by improving salaries and working conditions. On the one hand, while this may help retain local tourism and hospitality employees, yet on the other hand it may attract a greater inflow of prospective employees from other ASEAN

nations. Whether the “asymmetry” highlighted in the research of Capannelli and Pasadilla (ibid.) will be reversed, however, must remain an unknown for the present at least.

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