

ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING: VOICES OF THAI AND VIETNAMESE SCHOOLS

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This study examined vocational teachers' and administrators' perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training and identify factors affecting their perception. A documentary and questionnaire were employed to collect data. At least 79 percent of respondents agreed that ASEAN information is disseminated widely, clearly, continuously and it is easy to recognize ASEAN publications among others. However, information about the regional cooperation in tourism training in particular was not considered to be adequate. Administrators and teachers in general had positive attitudes toward ASEAN cooperation. Yet while respondents did not appreciate the impact of differences in national culture and school formal organization procedures on ASEAN cooperation, the results of this research showed that nationality and school status do influence their perception, and thus, guide their behavior in cooperation. The data also revealed a fact that schools value resources that ensure quality of training provision rather than existing relations or financial resources of a potential partner.

ASEAN cooperation, perception, tourism training, administration, teacher

INTRODUCTION

For a number of years, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations which includes 10 country members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia) tourism cooperation, particularly in the field of tourism education and training, has been a discussing topic of many ASEAN meetings, seminars and workshops on tourism. The ASEAN Tourism Training and Education Network (ATTEN) was established in 2001. One year later, ASEAN Tourism Agreement was verified which expressed commitments of ASEAN member countries to improving regional tourism quality services and set guidance for further cooperation in tourism. Recently, the ASEAN Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP) was developed and publicized in 2005.

However, there was a noticeable fact that the performance of ATTEN and implementation of ACCSTP have been at a modest pace. In reality, the process of applying ACCSTP in training among ASEAN tourism schools has been slow. In addition, cooperation activities within the network were not as much flourishing as it should be. It was doubt that few tourism institutions in the region were knowledgeable about ASEAN Tourism Agreement, ATTEN and ACCSTP.

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Recently, empirical researches have demonstrated that a sustainable and long-term cooperation needed not merely commitment at government level but also support of involved stakeholders. Findings from a recent research showed that “formal pursuits and political measures aiming at cross-border cooperation can only develop their expected integration impacts to full extent if they are actively used and permanently fed by the local population rather than being implemented in a more top-down like process” (Zillmer, 2005: 5). In another word, educational cooperation agreements between governments can only be actualized once they are based on mutual interests of respective institutions (Osborne, 2006).

Obviously, while much commitment has been expressed at government level, it seemed to have a little awareness of the regional cooperation activities at institution level. This issue of interest called for an insights look at tourism schools in the region to understand what have really happened. Unfortunately, there have been not yet researches within the region about this issue. This exploratory case study thus basically attempted to answer the question: what do Vocational Education and Training (VET) teachers and administrators perceive the ASEAN cooperation in tourism training? And what are possible factors affect their perception?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As seen previously, in order to accelerate ASEAN cooperation in tourism training, it is important to develop a feasible plan for its implementation and promotion at school level. Therefore, the outcome of this research was **to develop guidelines for implementation of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training at school level**. The research questions guide this study were:

- (1) What do teachers and administrators perceive the performance (objectives, communications, and activities) of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training?
- (2) In their opinions, how do differences in background of partners influence cooperation?
- (3) What resources of potential partners do schools look for?
- (4) Are there any significant relations between personal characteristics, nationality, schools status, or information channels and the perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training?

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Schools

Firstly, the criterion for selection of cases was that these tourism schools need to have initial international cooperation experiences or international cooperation has been included in their agenda. The research, therefore, based upon an assumption that schools was seeking to international partners and may have to consider ASEAN cooperation as a strategy. Secondly, the cases should involve both public and private providers in order to have an equal view of the two sectors.

Due to the wide differences in targeted population between schools (the largest population was 76 and the smallest population was 29), a controlled number of approximately 30 respondents for each school was decided in order to ensure equal samples size between Thailand and Vietnam as well as between private and public providers.

ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING

Description of Respondents of the Research

It is important to notice that respondents also involved those whose nationalities were other than Vietnamese and Thai, although this group accounted for a small proportion of respondents (10.4%). The expatriates, who came from Philippines, India, Australia, or United States, were currently working in Thailand rather than in Vietnam. This reflected a possible trend of an increasing number of expatriates working in tourism training sector in ASEAN region. So, their perception should be included in this research.

A majority of respondents (89.6%) use English in their daily work, (52.1% saying “sometimes”). As much as 63.2% of respondents has never involved in any ASEAN cooperation activities or worked with schools in other ASEAN countries. Most of the respondents had access to information about ASEAN cooperation through mass media such as television/radio and newspapers rather than from their schools, government authorities, or ASEAN publications. There was a high proportion of respondents (32.6%) who have never received information about ASEAN cooperation from school announcement or government authorities.

Instrument

The tools used in this research composed of documents and questionnaire. The use of documents was to describe the current education system in general, vocational training in particular, quality assurance and certification system as well as tourism strategy of each country, Thailand and Vietnam. While questionnaire was used to measure respondents’ perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training.

For the survey, a standardized questionnaire was developed accompanying with explanatory notes to ensure a common understanding in data collection process. One version of questionnaires was used for both administrator and teacher. Respondents had a choice of using Vietnamese, Thai or English version of the questionnaire.

Likert 3-scale was used to justify respondent’ perception levels in each questions. Depend upon the nature of question, these scales could be 1= never, 2 = sometimes, 3= frequently or 1= don’t agree, 2= neutral, 3= agree or 1= low priority, 2= neutral, 3= high priority or 1= negative, 2= neutral, 3= positive or 1= not important, 2 = neutral, 3= important.

Statistics and Data Analysis

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, which was to describe perception and identify factors affect perception, percentage and chi-square were employed to analyze data. Descriptive statistics presented a description of respondents’ perception. The chi-square statistics would help to display the significant correlation between independent variables and dependent variables.

Regard to reliability, this research used Cronbach’s alpha formula and received a confident value in the cooperation coefficient of information equal to .84.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Perception of Performance of ASEAN Cooperation in Tourism Training

Knowledge of ASEAN Cooperation in Tourism Training

Overall, respondents agreed that information about ASEAN cooperation activities is disseminated clearly, widely, continuously and it is easy to recognize ASEAN publications amongst other ones (minimum proportion of respondents citing “neutral” and “agree” is 79.2%).

Although quality of ASEAN communication is highly appreciated by the respondents, it does not mean information about cooperation in tourism training particularly is provided sufficiently. There are slightly high proportions of respondents who have never heard about ATA, ACCSTP and ATTEN (25.5%, 32.6% and 38.5% respectively). Respondents who stated that they somewhat know about these document accounted for as much as 50% for ATA, 40% for ACCSTP and 38.5% for ATTEN. Surprisingly, almost of respondents from two schools that are ATTEN members did not know about the existence of this network. This finding confirmed our doubt that tourism training schools have little access to information of ASEAN tourism training cooperation.

An average knowledge about ATA, ACCSTP and ATTEN is not sufficient for respondents to notice, thus, to make decision about involving activities promoted by these three events. This may be one of reasons that help to explain why the cooperation between tourism training schools in ASEAN is on the modest scope.

Are Schools Interested in ASEAN Cooperation in Tourism Training and What are Common Goals?

The analysis in this research suggested that there was a favored condition for development of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training at school level. In the case of Thailand and Vietnam, respondents shared common priorities for all goals stated in the ASEAN Tourism Agreement (minimum proportion citing “high priority” is 48.9%).

Among the five regional goals of human resource development in tourism, goal 5 (*To cooperate with other countries, groups of countries and international institutions in developing human resources for tourism*), goal 2 (*to intensify the sharing of resources and facilities for tourism education and training programs between member countries*) and goal 3 (*to develop tourism competency standards and certification procedures for mutual recognition of skills and qualifications in the ASEAN region*) were given higher priority over goal 1 (*to formulate non-restrictive arrangements to enable ASEAN member states to make use of professional tourism experts and skilled workers available within the region*) and goal 4 (*to strengthen public-private partnerships in human resource development*). For the first three goals, ASEAN cooperation in tourism training was expected to perform inter- as well as intra- cooperation. On the one hand, the cooperation ought to play a linkage role between tourism institutions in the region with other countries or regional groups. One the other hand, cooperation, whether it is multilateral or bilateral, was expected to promote resources and facilities sharing between member countries. These resources can be the quality teachers, curriculum, physical infrastructure, new service technique, external relations, etc those we found later in this research.

Moreover, the development of tourism competency standards and certification procedures should be considered also a goal of cooperation, according to respondents. Actually, the development of ACCSTP, which was a join project between ASEAN and Australia government, has been completed and publicized by ASEAN secretariat. Yet the fact was that Thailand was currently adopting Thai Vocational

ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING

Qualification for tourism (TVQ for tourism). Vietnam was implementing the Vietnam Tourism Occupational Skill Standard System (VTOS) – a joint project between Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) and the European Community (EC). So the question is whether ASEAN member governments decide to adopt this set of standards into tourism training practice in their countries.

How does ASEAN Cooperation Possibly Affect Personal Career Development and School Performance?

In general, there was a perception of positive effect of ASEAN cooperation on personal career (77.1%) and on school performance such as school reputation, teaching quality, organizational, student competencies, access funding, and enrolment. According to over 80% of respondents, the cooperation would most positively affect the reputation and quality of teaching once schools taking part in it. For quality of teaching, no respondent cited the cooperation as having negative impact on this aspect. Formal organization, student competencies, access to funding and student enrollment were also considered to be positively affected. Also, there was no respondent sees the negative impact of cooperation on formal organization.

The positive perception, on the one hand, meant that respondents would act on favorable evaluation of regional cooperation in tourism training. On the other hand, it implied that they would be more careful when they considered a partnership and looked for keys to success. In reality, there were a small number of 1% respondents stating that ASEAN cooperation would produce negative effect on personal career and school reputation once it is unsuccessful.

This result also implied that respondents have high expectations for ASEAN cooperation, which would be their motives of participating in any ASEAN tourism training networks or consortia. So, for a successful performance, ASEAN tourism training consortium such as ATTEN should address these desires and clearly demonstrate that there would be “rewards” once schools become its members. These rewards could be to secure school members’ reputation, to improve training quality, organization, and management, student competencies, to provide opportunity for more funding or to increase student enrollment.

What are the Most Favorable Cooperation Activities?

Establishment of joint programs was the most favored activity by respondents, which is a noticeable result. This was remarkable because the typical pattern of ASEAN cooperation (and Asia Pacific in a broader context) was not amongst the countries in the region, rather, it was between regional nations and OECD countries (OECD, 2004). That respondents voted in favor of establishment of joint programs would create an opportunity for development of cooperation within the region.

Other favorite activities were teachers and staff exchange, organization of conferences, seminars on tourism training which are conventional activities in ASEAN region. Besides, respondents expressed their willing to apply ACCSTP into the training practice of school. This meant that teachers and administrators also realized the importance of standardization of competencies in tourism professional and that once it was recognized by national government, ACCSTP would be immediately used for training activities of schools.

Although supported by 60.4% of respondents, student mobility and exchange was least interested. This was not surprising because of the fact that in Asia Pacific region, students from developing countries incline to conduct their study at OCED countries. OECD (2004) reported that factors affecting student mobility and exchange were students themselves and their family, the government policy and education providers. For individual students and their families in Asia Pacific region, the reasons for studying abroad are that foreign education is considered to have better quality, they desire to broaden

experience, they desire to live overseas, foreign education is more highly respected, this is their family will, courses are not available in national country or they desire to improve English skills. These reasons lead to the fact that students are likely to choose to study in OECD countries where education is considered to have better quality than that of ASEAN countries. So in choosing where to study, country will be firstly considered, followed by courses, institution, and city (OECD, 2004). Regard to government policies, although national governments encourage student exchange activities within ASEAN region, there are few scholarships given by member governments to ASEAN students. Furthermore, almost of these regional scholarships are for university students rather than for vocational education ones. Not surprisingly, students exchange and mobility does not attract much attention of teachers and administrators compared against other activities.

How Do Differences in Background of Partners Influence Cooperation?

Differences in school status (private versus public) was considered to have little effects on ASEAN cooperation by majority of 73.6% of respondents. This possibly means that there is no discrimination between private and public institutions and both sectors have equal opportunity in the domain of regional education cooperation. More than expect, for some respondents, this difference is considered as an advantage in the relationship (a slightly high proportion of 20.9% citing “positive effect”).

In another aspect, difference in national culture is also seen to have minor margin effect on cooperation (cited as “neutral effect” by 66.7% of respondents). It is important to highlight that cultural features are heterogeneous among member countries. Vietnam and Singapore is influenced by Confucian. Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia share Islam culture. Latin is dominant in the Philippines. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand value Buddhism and Hindu. Still, this result is congruent with Beerkens’s (2004) finding about university professors’ perception of ASEAN University Network. According to Beerkens’s respondents, national culture had minor net impact on cooperation.

In a slight contrast, differences in assurance was weighed in favor of having negative effect on cooperation (24.5% - negative, 17% - positive).

For differences in organization, Thai respondents seemed to be more optimistic about the positive impact of differences in formal organization procedure on cooperation. As much as 86% of Thai respondents cited as “neutral effect” and “positive effect” (22% citing “positive”) while only 60.4% of Vietnamese respondents agreed with this statement (only 2.3% citing “positive”). Relation between nationality and this perception was proved significant. Likewise, we observed that 80 % of respondents from public institutions perceived that differences in formal organization procedure have “neutral effect” and “positive effect” on cooperation (22.2% saying “positive”). Whereas, 68.8% of private respondents shared this opinion (4.2% saying “positive”). We also found significant correlation between school status and “differences in organization” perception.

What Resources of Potential Partners Do Schools Look For?

VET institutions now sought to gain and maintain competitive advantage over their competitors. They believed that resources would sustain this competitive advantage. So they cooperate in order to empower the resources. Of the ten proposed resources, the most concerns were quality of training, language of instruction; physical infrastructure; quality of management and leadership; and student market. Particularly, no respondent considered quality of training unimportant.

The measurement of these resources, except for language of instruction, obviously was related to quality assurance and accreditation. The mutual recognition of quality standards therefore is essential for promotion of regional cooperation. Actually, the definition of “quality” is different from country to

ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING

country and even within one country. Each national education system adopts their own education standards that are in line with the requirement as well as the situation of the country. Yet it is important to ensure the compatibility of national education standards with those of the world, or at least, of the region. Recently, Vietnam National Accreditation System (VINAS) has been built based on the proposal of ILO/ADB for Mekong regional countries. Thailand also enhances the education quality in order to increase the country's competitiveness. It is noticed that such aspects as graduates, teaching-learning activities, human resources, finance, management and leadership, physical infrastructure and other supporting service are common indicators of quality assurance of the two countries. Once again, an open, transparent, and compatible accreditation system in education amongst member countries is a pre-requisition of any successful cross-border education.

We now come back to language of instruction - a concern of respondents. It is needed to highlight that no respondent saw this resource as unimportant. Actually, ASEAN is located in Asia Pacific region that composes "over half of the world's living language" (OECD, 2004). In ASEAN, there are roughly 15 languages spoken by somewhat 500 million people in the region. In Thailand and Vietnam, languages used in education are Thai and Vietnamese respectively. The countries that use most English in education are Malaysia and Singapore. In many other countries, English is considered as prevalent language of "communications, media and research" (OECD, 2004:142) and it is "more for reading and writing than speaking" (OECD, 2004: 142). Additionally, major languages used in the Asia-Pacific countries, apart from English, are Putonghua (Mandarin), Hindi, Bengali (Bangla), Bahasa (Malya/Indonesian), Nihongo (Japanese), Punjabi, Wu, Jawa, Marthi, Hankukmal (Korran), Viet (Vietnamese), Telugu, Yue (Cantonese) and Tamil. It is advised that education providers will need to be competent in one or more of the large languages, beside English (OECD, 2004).

Student market is also among concern of 94.7% of respondents (64.9% saying important). In reality, VET in Thailand and Vietnam are suffering a decrease of intake students. In a recent regional meeting⁷, Vietnam reported that there was imbalanced distribution between tertiary education and VET in term of student population. It was claimed that culture and socio-psychology were factors affecting student choice of higher education rather than vocational training. In Thailand, MOE has warned the shrinking of VET student population although there is an increasing demand for skilled labor. Obviously, respondents did see ASEAN cooperation as a solution for expanding student market. Particularly, it was observed that as much as 75% of respondents from private providers valued the importance of partner's student market whilst only 54.3% of respondents from public providers believed that it is important.

In another aspect, we have noticed that while student mobility and exchange is least favored amongst cooperation activities (60.4% compared against maximum of 80.2%), a new student market is an issue that schools look for in partnership with other school. This leads to a conclude that although schools do look for expanding their student market through cross-border education yet if there is any joint program (favored by 80.2%) it should be teacher and staff mobility (favored by 79.2%) rather than student mobility.

The country characteristic was not a priority of respondents in choosing partnership. This is a bit contrary to OECD (2004) finding regard to the student choice of where to study. For students and their family, the key concerns, in fact, are country, course, institution, and city (OECD, 2004). This thus raised a doubt that students and their parents' perception of cooperation differs from those of teachers and administrators in this regard.

Proximity was the least concern of respondents. In fact, travel in ASEAN region is not difficult especially the region become visa-free area. Additional, the recent development of cheap airline is expected to increase the travel within the region.

Roughly, we could see that respondents valued most resources that related to quality of provision such as quality training, infrastructure, quality of management and leadership. New student market was also a concern of respondents. The “not- quality- related” characteristics such as external relation, reputation, finance resources, country or proximity were not important, according to respondents.

Significant Relations Model of Perception

Among three factors affecting perception (setting factor, internal factor and external factor), it seemed that perception only depends upon setting factors rather than internal or external factors, although in theory, the three factors do affect one’s perception in general. Since no empirical researches were found regarding to factors affect perception of cooperation in particular, there was a weak practical foundation for explaining why only setting factor, but internal and external factors, affecting cooperation in this case. However, from this result, we can draw the following comments:

- The nationality characteristics correlate with perception of ASEAN cooperation. This means perception of ASEAN cooperation depends upon cultural value, socio-economic situation and most important the national education policies. Within the framework of the research, there are insufficient evidences to decide which characteristics have stronger impacts on the perception discussed in this study.
- The school status has relation with respondents’ perception. Respondents from public providers in this study perceive ASEAN cooperation somewhat differently from their counterparts from private institutions. This means that perception of cooperation depends upon institutional values and norms, reflected in school’s philosophy, vision, mission and students and staff policies.
- Perception of ASEAN cooperation, in this case study, does not depend upon individual characteristics which are position, qualification, use of English at work or ASEAN cooperation experiences.
- Perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training, in this research, does not depend upon the information volume about ASEAN cooperation that respondents receive from school/authority announcement, ASEAN publications, internet, newspapers and television/radio. This is consistent with the above finding that the sufficiency of ASEAN cooperation in general does not mean the adequacy of information about ASEAN cooperation in tourism training in particular.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Guidelines for Implementation of ASEAN Cooperation in Tourism Training at the School Level

For policy making level, since all five goals of human resource development for tourism stated in article 8 of ASEAN Tourism Agreement, especially goal 5, goal 2 and goal 3 are given priority by respondents at institutional level, they need to be taken into account in any discussion about ASEAN cooperation in tourism.

For policy making level, such activities as establishment of joint programs; teacher and staff mobility and exchange; organization of conferences, workshop on tourism training; and application of ACCSTP into training program should be promoted. For joint programs, such models as student mobility and exchange or twinning program are not recommended at this stage as it is not much interested by respondents.

For policy making level, since quality assurance and certification system difference is considered to have negative effect on cooperation which is an obstacle to regional cooperation, it is suggested that the mutual recognition of accreditation and certification system should be accelerated by national education authorities once ASEAN cooperation to be promoted. Particularly in the case Thailand and

ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING

Vietnam, for accreditation system, the mutual recognition can be done by examining the Vocational Standards of Thailand and Vietnam National Accreditation System for Vocational Training (VINAS for Vocational Training). For the recognition of competencies in tourism training, it is necessary to examine the compatibility of Vocational Qualification for tourism (TVQ for tourism), Vietnam Tourism Occupational Skill Standard System (VTOS) and ASEAN Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP).

For school level, respondents' perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training depends upon their nationality (Thai or Vietnamese) and school status; these characteristics need to be taken into account when establishing ASEAN cooperation in tourism training.

Public Relations and Marketing strategies

For policy making level, since the more information provided the better the teachers and administrators have notice on cooperation in tourism training, it is necessary to build a strong communication system between tourism schools and within each school in the region. This system should also include private tourism training providers.

For policy making level, since differences in quality assurance and certification system is considered to have negative impacts on cooperation, information about national education system, quality assurance and accreditation on vocational education of member countries should be announced widely in English. This will help concerning schools to have sufficient information for right academic decisions in cooperation.

For interest schools, since the most concerned resources of potential partners are quality of training, language of instruction, management organization and student market, this information should be included in the school publications.

Future Research

This research revealed administrators' and teachers' perception of ASEAN cooperation in tourism training who are amongst many other stakeholders that decide international education cooperation, such as government administrators and educational users (students, parents, employers). However, since it is carried out at a small scale, findings from the research are not statistically represented for large number of tourism training schools in the region. Rather, it suggests a trend of notion regarding to ASEAN cooperation in tourism training. Therefore, it is recommended to expand the research to a larger scale.

In another aspect, results from the research raise a doubt that teachers' and administrators' perception of ASEAN cooperation is different from students' educational choice. Hence, it is suggested studying educational choices of students and their family, in relation to ASEAN cooperation in tourism training. This will help to provide better information for decision making of tourism training cooperation in ASEAN region.

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NGUYENTHUY HIEN

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ASEAN COOPERATION IN TOURISM TRAINING

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