

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TOURISM EDUCATION, TOURISM INDUSTRY AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: INTRICACIES AND EMERGING ISSUES IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The university education system in ASEAN will be affected by the new market conditions. The path to success for Thai educational institutions is to engage the market with a frontal assault by anticipating market demands and preparing themselves to meet that demand. Hospitality and Tourism is an interdisciplinary field requiring different employability competency that has yet to gain attention by tourism and hospitality educators in the academia. If the travel and tourism industry in Thailand hopes to sustain itself, it will need personnel who are both willing and enthusiastic workforce. This requires educational institution to create curricula to equip tourism and hospitality graduates with necessary skills and to impart knowledge. Students aspiring to take up tourism as their careers must be well aware of the 'professional' commitments of the industry. The future of the tourism and hospitality industry will really demand creative ideas from the next generation. Employability questions are beginning to stress what new ideas the candidates can bring. This paper provides insight into certain overlooked perspectives, missing linkages and policy gaps between institutions imparting tourism education and the tourism industry leading to employable graduates.

Keywords: Curriculum, tourism education, tourism graduates, tourism industry, Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism business sector in Thailand is well developed and established. Tourism accounts for about 10% of Thailand's economy. Thailand's direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP was THB 1,037.3 bn (8.6% of the total GDP) in 2014 according to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) 2015 Tourism Satellite Account study. According to the Amoah and Baum (1997), the interaction between the tourism industry personnel and the tourist is an integral part of a total tourist experience.

There are plenty of opportunities in the tourism industry in Thailand but one needs to be cautious in understanding these opportunities not to be losing out on them to competitors. The main issues are:

The launching of AEC in 2015 was an important milestone of ASEAN integration, representing 10 ASEAN countries in an attempt to integrate their economies as a single market and production base. The challenge is to grow through the gains of integration while staying prepared for changes.

To create employment across the ASEAN region, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Integration in 2015 has enabled the mobility of employment for skilled tourism labor. The significant element to this arrangement is the recognition of skills and qualifications required for working tourism professionals from different ASEAN countries. The 2002 ASEAN Tourism Agreement (ATA) pledged to upgrade tourism education, curricula and skills through the setting up of competency standards and certification procedures, thereby leading to a mutual recognition of skills and qualifications in the ASEAN region (<http://www.mekongtourism.org/wp-content/uploads/MRA->

[GUIDE-for-Tourism-Training-Providers-V10-28122012.pdf](http://www.mekongtourism.org/wp-content/uploads/MRA-GUIDE-for-Tourism-Training-Providers-V10-28122012.pdf)).

The research conducted by Kasikorn Research Center in 2014 predicted that AEC, with free movements in goods, services, investments, capital and professional workers, will force Thailand to prioritize on education in order to produce quality workers and enhance our competitiveness vis-à-vis other ASEAN member states to brace for the opportunities and challenges ahead <https://www.kasikornresearch.com/EN/KEconAnalysis/Pages/ViewSummary.aspx?docid=32687>.

Solis (2013, p.42) cautioned that with minimum competency standards for ASEAN tourism professionals as well as an intra-ASEAN curriculum exchange program with cross training and cross-certification, tourism education institutions would have to ensure that their programs are consistent with the changed scenario in terms of the requirements for a tourism professional.

Tourism SMEs

With the opening up of the service economy for free trade under the AEC plan, the degree of market competition has increased among ASEAN members. However, Thai tourism SMEs may face some difficulties in competing with ASEAN countries due to several challenges including the following:

- The free-flow of skilled workers from ASEAN member countries will require Thailand to place importance on producing graduates with receptive and independent minds, capable of critical analysis and communicating their perspectives in global settings, and further, to cope with rapid changes in Thailand and in global tourism,

influenced as it is by changes in politics, economics, societies, and cultures.

- A large number of business operators have little access to existing tourism related information, which is a serious challenge for tourism SMEs to prepare them to compete, expand and invest in the market locally and in other ASEAN countries.
- Inadequate knowledge and skills prevail in the areas of world economics, currency exchange, natural disasters, terrorism, tourism management, multi-languages, information communication technology in tourism and new tourism product development.

Opportunity

“Tourism and travel related services” as service sectors liberalized under the free trade agreement within the ASEAN Economic Community offers more opportunities for people within the region to invest in tourism businesses with the possibility of a free flow of labor between ASEAN countries. The boom in free trade implies more travel for pleasure and business, both within the ASEAN region and to/from its dialogue partner countries. (<https://www.travel-impact-newswire.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/UNWTO-REPORT-on-ASEAN-Tourism-Integration.pdf>)

The changing profile of arriving tourists will require fundamental changes in the supply and design of products and services. For example, catering to the Chinese, Middle Eastern traffic and Indians, including millions of first-timers, will become as important as catering to the more seasoned travelers from Europe and North America. These changes have the potential to negatively or positively impact

many enterprises and employees in Thailand’s travel industry.

Contemporary Tourism and Hospitality Education System

Many educational institutions all around the world offer varied courses to cover different aspects of travel and tourism. Several travel agencies also offer short-term training courses, and tend to absorb most of the candidates. Tourism education in Thailand is increasingly being recognized as a vital aid in employing dedicated human capital for the continuous growth and sustainability of the tourism industry. According to Chang (2011), higher education institutions in Thailand, both private and public universities that offer academic programs in tourism and hospitality education, mushroomed significantly during the past decade.

In Thailand almost 10, 000 students graduate majoring in tourism and hospitality programs every year (TDRI, 2012, p. 24). Despite the relatively large number of university pass outs, there is a shortage of tourism workforce at the operational fronts in major tourist destinations. The changing global employment market as well as technological advances are two critical considerations to be taken into account in terms of employability skills programs or curricula. Indications clearly are that:

- The existing tourism curricula do not keep track of dynamism of the tourism industry
- Courses taught in tourism institutions are either too broad or lack focus
- There is an insufficient hands-on experience opportunity for students
- There is ineffective language training other than in the mother tongue

- There is an inability to apply theory courses taught in the classes to the actual tourism industry work-place environment

- The teaching materials are instructor focused that cover mainly their interests, and understanding is not being updated regularly

- Prescribed textbooks are either very expensive (international publishers) or written by international instructors who focus primarily on issues and environments different from ASEAN tourism perspectives.

Which Comes First, the Chicken or the Egg?

Tourism educational programs focus more on formal educational qualifications, degrees and certificates but fail to understand that potential industry employers are increasingly giving attention to transversal skills, such as communication, design, analysis, ethics and management skills and competencies aligned with the requirements of the tourism industry!

Enable Tourism Professionals to Build on Existing Qualifications

Graduate schools offering tourism and hospitality programs should be quite clear about the intended 'graduate profile' for those successful in completing the programs. Knowing and understanding why students would want to take the programs would seem to be a good starting point, and also building upon the knowledge, skills and attitudes/abilities of the incoming students.

Students may enroll with wide educational backgrounds and interests and would plan to graduate with different likings, either to work in the hospitality sector, the transportation sector, the food-service industry, the

attractions sector, or perhaps in the public sector or an economic development agency. However, jobs in tourism are not necessarily similar, as stated by Churchward and Riley (2002) cited in Inui *et al.*, (2006, p. 28), they require application of different academic knowledge bases, suggesting that tourism education includes a variety of transferable subjects. While many 'employability skills' will be generic across these different sectors, others will be very specific, and competencies will change depending on the intended career path.

Developing and implementing an effective tourism education is just half the battle; recruiting and then retaining individuals with the right blend of interpersonal and technical skills is also challenging because tourism needs people who are both trained and inspired. Yet, very few people in the tourism industry speak multiple languages, are proficient in high-tech computer skills or have a good knowledge of statistics and how to utilize them. Littlejohn and Watson (2004, p. 411) advocate the inclusion of international languages as a compulsory addition to the curriculum without which causes both financial and opportunity losses and the inability to adapt to upcoming challenges can occur.

Educating University Level Students in Tourism

School is one of the stepping stones in one's life that provides learners the opportunities to learn and grow. Enrolling in a higher level of qualification enables students to use and build on the previous units they have studied. Their unit selection will again reflect the blend of functional competencies they wish to attain, and as previous units count towards

their new qualification, additional units are included to add the new competencies demanded by industry. It is a hard fact that not all fresh tourism industry entrants feel 100% optimistic towards working in the tourism industry. Many of them continue to dream only to reach top managerial positions without adequate learning and tricks of the trade. They really need to sink into the realism of having to “climb the ranks,” in a tourism & hospitality environment.

Nature of Student Experience

The millennial generation exerts a strong influence over the tourism education sector. As millennials clamor for wholesome adventures and unique experiences, the sharing economy has emerged to meet them. It is now a force to be reckoned with. The next generation of students prefers “Work Shop Style” teaching in class, which requires 70% activities or outside class visits, plus case studies and the remaining 30% lectures. Studying on a chair in class listening to a teacher is no longer the draw; instead it’s all about taking life by the horns and doing something worthwhile. There is a need to match the lifestyle of Generation Y, who doesn’t want to work nine-to-five in an office. Like in the West, many want to work from home or from different locations, and to interact with people who are not necessarily in their industry.

Changing Work Force

Chang (2011), stressed that universities should focus on the quality of education and direct more efforts on continuing education in view of changing jobs and careers, and new and emerging occupations. Future employment

will be determined by four important factors, namely, the changing economic structure of Thailand, globalization, internationalization, technological development and an information-driven world. Thailand should promote the learning of foreign languages. It is evident that there are large numbers of Chinese tourists pouring into the Kingdom of Thailand, but there are not enough Chinese-speaking locals to take care of them.

Know Your Employer

Past experience has shown that the expectation of graduates is landing a high ranking position from the start. It is high time to work on having students identify their own competitive advantage through personality assessments, SWOT analyses, and temperaments to be able to find their perfect “fit.” Students should be taught to do their research with the tourism organization they are interested in prior to application. Making sure the company’s values align with their own is important. No one should work for a company they do not personally appreciate. Students fairly unimaginative in their job and enterprise orientation should be awakened by tourism educators about practical understanding, such as career growth and structure, pay, promotional opportunities, working conditions, expected skills and training requirements, to prepare graduates in a more realistic manner for Thailand’s demanding tourism industry.

Curriculum Planning Issues

According to Cooper and Shepherd (1997, p. 45), there is a constant need for educators to retain an up-to-date knowledge of trends in the tourism industry and practices

to ensure that the academic perspective is consistent with the industry approach. In addition, Sangpikul (2009, p.3) stressed the need for internationalizing the curriculum with aims to prepare and equip students for challenges of globalization, while Zhon (1991), cited in Lam and Xiao (2000), maintained that existing the curriculum in higher institutions generally places more emphasis on classroom instructions without adequate skills development.

In Zopiatis and Constanti's (2007, p. 392) opinion, educators argue that the multidisciplinary nature of the tourism industry requires qualified personnel with abilities to synthesize and integrate their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Therefore, tourism curriculum designers need to meet the dynamic industry requirements that develop the students' managerial skills such as leadership quality, the ability to solve problems and dealing with customers.

A Case of Graduate School of Tourism Management in Bangkok, Thailand

The Master of Business Administration in Hospitality & Tourism Management (MBA-HTM) under the Graduate School of Business (GSB) at Assumption University (ABAC) in Bangkok has been a premier institution for professional research and studies in tourism since 2000. For to maintain tourism as a sustainable, profitable and enjoyable enterprise it takes a substantial number of good tourism managers. The syllabus is dynamic, keeping pace with tourism industry requirements and focuses on activity-based learning at the premises. Successful tourism & hospitality alumni are invited to the classes and students get an opportunity to talk to them

to find out the main values of working in the tourism career and the like.

The course structure identifies key courses that infuse international and/or intercultural context to the courses as core curricula or body of knowledge along with 'add-on' subjects' as elective courses. All courses taught follow the Thai Qualification Framework (TQF), incorporating key domains of learning outcomes: knowledge, ethics & moral, inter-personal skills & responsibility and communication, cognitive skills, information technology and numerical skills. To cover the concept of problem solving, class assignments are designed to allow students' access to required information from various disciplines and to personally interact and consult with tourism business practitioners across Thailand. To build academic development and to enhance their capability, thesis students and independent study (non-thesis) students are encouraged to present their research findings at both national and international conferences individually as well as to co-author with teaching faculty.

The school employs teachers who are directly involved in tourism businesses. This way they can provide for students without any working experience and portray a clear idea of the actual working conditions. Moreover, the school added an international dimension through a faculty composition of both international and local teaching staff. International teaching staff are glad to share their personal experiences from back home and can easily pin-point similarities and contrasts between Thailand's tourism and hospitality and abroad to uplift students' learning and to broaden their perspectives in the class. The school sincerely cares for "quality interaction" between students and

faculty members by organizing socializing activities from day one till graduation. Therefore, to provide local students with cross-cultural understanding and to let them learn different viewpoints, group projects that mix students of different nationalities are encouraged.

Independent study and research (mini thesis for non-thesis track students) provide an opportunity to the students to take up tourism related projects to plan, brainstorm and handle day-to-day issues on the pattern of learning by doing, as any tourism entrepreneur. Student-led field work outside class is a capstone activity that develops skills and the crucial understanding of the actual tourism industry environment. Field trips are often undertaken with a dominating spirit of 'edutainment'. Tourism education in Assumption University seeks active professional partnership between the Graduate School of Tourism Management and organizations driving changes in tourism such as the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA), the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Expedia Thailand, and the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB). Students have to successfully undergo internships in organizations such as PATA and selected Hotels to return to school and write of their experiences in the GSB Connect student magazine (<http://www.graduate.au.edu/newsletter/Connect%20Issue%204.pdf>). GSB administrators work together as a team to create a positive academic environment conducive to fostering the students' motivation.

The degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Hospitality and Tourism Management (PHDHTM) is the flagship programme established a few years ago under GSB at Assumption University (ABAC) to meet an

increasing need of tourism professionals to upgrade their knowledge base. This programme has received widespread support within Thailand and ASEAN. Tourism educators in universities should be prepared enough to teach courses for which they are academically qualified. The course offers a unique transforming, developmental educational experience that stimulates intellectual and personal growth by building deep practical knowledge and fostering sound judgment through advanced research activities. The course provides to students a lifelong process of researching, aimed at creating new knowledge in the hospitality and tourism fields. It contributes to learning and teaching as a sharing experience of enhancing the ability to listen, think, discuss and develop a deeper understanding of the distinctive and important task of the hospitality and tourism manager.

Tourism Education and Tourism Industry Interface

The communication and links between tourism industry users and educational institutes offering tourism should always remain open. The mismatch between the tourism industry and tourism education providers can be bridged through industry-education engagement that can stimulate graduate employability as follows:

1. There should be studies on the requirements of the tourism industry (educational institutes need to provide a platform to interact with industry employers), on how industry-based training can assist students in acquiring the needed competencies (that is both enriching and relevant to their long-term careers in the tourism industry).

2. Educational institutions offering tourism programs should try to meet the tourism industry's requirements and expectations as basic aim in developing tourism curricula, which allow the graduates to develop competencies that accordingly enable them to work (Mileva, 2015, p.41).

3. Tourism curricula must continually be reviewed to match the skills that will be in demand over the coming decades. Introducing a wide mix of subjects amid an ever-shifting labor market demand must be guided by public-private partnerships and institutional support for continuing education. Dautrey (2013) stressed that a restructured tourism curriculum should address relevant managerial, organizational, financial, behavioral, legal, logistical, operational, strategic, and marketing issues raised as part of conducting activities in ASEAN and working with a multicultural workforce either in ASEAN-specific courses or in the context of general courses.

4. Tourism education institutes should mandatorily invite tourism industry representatives in advisory board meetings to assist in the identification of specific ranges of tourism and hospitality such knowledge and skills are needed by academics, for their managerial and administrative responsibilities to deliver services in a highly competitive AEC business environment beyond 2015. The board should help develop the curriculum and guide the learning institution with their industry insight along with recommendations for revision of tourism curricula, course designs, the selection of new electives, and the inclusion of industry specific case studies.

5. Tourism education institutes' should invite tourism industry representatives for campus recruitment and host panel discussions with prospective employers who will be

recruiting at the career fair. This could wisely connect beginners, students, or graduating students about to enter the workforce and to share opportunities in the tourism industry. Available vacancies in tourism should clearly illustrate the job description. Multinational tourism corporations (MNCs) aiming for business expansion can consider recruiting diverse cultural workforce.

6. On-the-job training programs internships or placements are further practical means to get an early exposure to working in the tourism environment. Tribe (2001), cited in Inui, Wheeler and Lankford (2006, p. 27), stated that internship enhances the ability of students to critically reflect on the tourism business. Six or twelve months in industry placements [termed IBL or Industry Based Learning], i.e. once the students have completed a substantial part of their studies, enables them to test and contextualize their acquired knowledge in real-life situations. This concept is widely being practiced in Australia and India. This approach ensures that students return to complete their studies with vastly more eclectic views of theory vs. praxis. Therefore, universities offering tourism courses at the supply level should include practica as part of the curricula as they provide students with an opportunity to apply classroom learning to actual work.

7. The tourism schools should impart students with an invaluable learning experience that involves alternate teaching pedagogies to provide a better understanding of subject topics, such as out-of-class visits to industrial sites, inviting professional guest speakers, case study discussions, internships, brain storming sessions, the use of videos, films & documentaries, individual and group presentations, thesis/non-thesis academic

writings that combine adequate skills and necessary knowledge required by the tourism industry. This way students gain confidence through meaningful presentations and effectively passing on messages in their written reports, all of which will definitely be applicable to the tourism industry in the future.

8. To enhance the employability of graduates, universities in Thailand should integrate in their educational curricula skills as required by the local, regional and global market to meet the challenge of creating new jobs and providing the skills new workers need to ensure a more inclusive and sustainable growth. Educational and technical training institutions may offer short courses and certificate courses in tourism for candidates wishing to earn a certificate in order to make themselves more desirable to a potential employer or for those who are already working in the tourism industry and want to sharpen their management skills.

9. Thailand-based tourism educational institutions, as part of that efforts to strengthen collaboration with educational institutions, can sign memoranda of understanding with other ASEAN countries under the AUN (ASEAN University Network) or with the off-shore private tourism sector to send their students for a term to gain industry exposure (e.g. work in various departments of a hotel for 6 months). This could be part of a field study experience along with additional opportunities to learn more about the Hospitality & Tourism Management Program there.

10. A public organization, the Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau, or TCEB, organized the “MICE is Digitally Yours” seminar on 11 January 2013. The seminar explored the important theme of how to

harness digital media to prepare the MICE business to enter the ASEAN Economic Community http://www.tceb.or.th/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/annual-reports/TCEB_Annual_Report_2013.pdf. Moreover, the TCEB has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Association of Korean Exhibition Industries (AKEI), together with 6 institutes of higher learning in Korea. The TCEB not only offers international courses and organized seminars in Thailand but also assists local professionals in earning more knowledge. MICE courses were included by leading universities in Thailand. According to the TCEB (2014), cited in Hua and Batra (2015), 52 Thai state and private tertiary educational institutions and 33 vocational schools offer introductory MICE courses in response to the growth in the MICE sector both at home and in AEC.

11. The tourism & hospitality sector can offer internships and scholarship opportunities to deserving candidates and stay in touch with the universities for hiring students for part-time and full-time positions. The need of the hour is to increase the level of investment in vocational schools through public–private partnerships that can consequently increase the scientific and technical skills needed to foster technological progress and innovation. (<http://www.mekongtourism.org/wp-content/uploads/ASEAN-2030-ADB.pdf>).

12. Courses can consider the inclusion of studies on ASEAN arts and culture (similarities and contrasts in religion, languages, working cultures) as well as foreign languages (Chinese, Japanese, French, Russian and Germany) as optional subjects in school curricula in Thailand.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thailand's educational sector has planned measures such as capacity building for students and citizens with necessary skills such as English proficiency and communicating in other ASEAN languages. Education standards are upgraded in compliance with the Thailand Qualification Framework for ASEAN-wide competitiveness.

It is time for the public and private Thai tourism authorities and educational institutions to mold their offers and act in harmony to deal with the rise of the global middle-class population and evolving demographics which will change aspirations and expectations. The tourism and hospitality education centers and vocational training institutes based in Thailand need to be proactive by carefully redesigning their current curriculum structures, by instilling an ASEAN approach among future tourism aspirants. The aim is to be open-minded, to have digital affinity, analytical and interpersonal skills and mandatory practical know-how in order to be responsive to the demands of the industry employers. As Saenghiran (2012, p. 87), cited in Batra (2015), maintains, "the biggest gains are from applying, assimilating and adapting existing technologies; these skills may eventually enhance the capacity to develop new technologies provided". ASEAN calls for the establishment of tourism work force in Thailand who can engage to be effective problem solver with the willingness to understand other points of view and acknowledge the cultural differentiations so that the business gains are in line with national gains.

In addition to employability skills, importantly tourism and hospitality educational

institutions schools should prepare students not only for working for others but also for working for oneself i.e. creating a start-up mentality and entrepreneurial skills. Establishing entrepreneurship training programs will bring significant contributions to the students' skills, increasing the number of graduates interested in creating their own tourism venture after graduation. Moreover, the Thai government's policy to encourage start-ups will groom new entrepreneurs with a vision for success in a digitized market.

Finally it is concluded that the tourism industry should be involved in curriculum development of educational institutions in such a way that the course contents and delivery are consistent with the industry expectations of graduates. Thus, besides the tourism and hospitality skills and knowledge, it is important in today's world that the graduates have the ability to embrace change since the tourism industry is influenced by dynamic trends that require strong execution strategies to survive. It is rightly said that the future belongs to those who prepare for it today.

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