

Chapter 5

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

This research as designed was to check the readiness of the Chiang Mai tourism industry for the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Tourism Professionals which starts at the end of 2015. The research focus was narrowed using consumer opinions of TripAdvisor for 5 hotels, 5 restaurants and 5 tourism organizations. A manager and staff from each tourism business was interviewed for a total of 30 people. Research questions focused on ASEAN and MRA-TP awareness, English ability, migration and training tendencies. Based on the results of the research, Chiang Mai is not ready for the ASEAN MRA-TP which starts at the end of 2015.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 ASEAN MRA-TP Awareness

Knowledge of ASEAN and the MRA-TP is important. At the very least, lack of knowledge of the MRA-TP program makes it impossible to use this program for both the employee and the organization. From the 30 people interviewed, only 2 (6.6%) were aware of the MRA-TP and no one knew any details of how it works. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) attributes this to their office not marketing this program yet (P. Wutthi, personal communication, July 20, 2015). At the same time, other government offices in Thailand are preparing for the AEC and have already implemented most of the 463 AEC Blueprint objectives (ASEAN, 2015a).

Businesses also should know and be aware of the business environment they will operate in. The AEC Blueprint instructs ASEAN governments to translate ASEAN objectives into national objectives (ASEAN, 2008, p. 28). Waiting until the last minute to inform Thai businesses on the ASEAN MRA-TP may place Thai businesses and or Thai tourism employees at a competitive disadvantage. Only the business or individual can determine if this lack of knowledge is a disadvantage or not.

5.2.2 English Ability

The MRA-TP is dependent on the tourism professional being able to communicate by reading, writing and speaking in English. The trainee manuals for the ASEAN certificates are written at a level commonly found in textbooks that are part of international programs in a Thai university. Many of the textbooks in Thai university international programs are written for American university students. The ability to speak English is as important as the tourism training the certificate is based on. A Thai tourism professional has no chance of earning an ASEAN MRA-TP certificate if they can't speak English. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) is developing a Thai language version of the MRA-TP which will be used to certify students and academics as having the same knowledge of the ASEAN MRA-TP; however, this version will not allow mobility to the other ASEAN countries. Also, while it is better to have this program than nothing at all, the MOTS requirement to attend a training center to certify for this program will most likely exclude many in the current tourism workforce from participating in this program. The reason being most tourism professionals work full 8 to 12 hour days and likely will not have the time to attend additional training when their shift is over.

Like Thailand as a whole, the tourism industry in Chiang Mai does appear challenged by the English ability of the tourism work force. With no single standard or training program in place, the tourism industry is left to individual and organizational motivation to want to improve English ability across Chiang Mai. The tourism worker's contact with foreigners does appear to have a positive influence on the motivation of employees to learn English more but is it enough?

As pointed out earlier, the ability to speak English is critical to take advantage of the ASEAN MRA-TP. It does not matter how much the Thai tourism professional wants to earn an ASEAN MRA-TP certificate. If they can't speak English it is impossible for them to do this program and likely, their propensity to earn a certificate will be low. However, for the English speaking Chiang Mai tourism professionals interviewed, the propensity is highest in the hotels and mixed in the restaurants and travel agencies.

Additionally, Chinese language and culture is also being taught in many tourism organizations in Chiang Mai. Although Thailand may have 5 million Chinese tourist a year and need Chinese speakers to help take care of these tourists, most of the other 20 million

tourist speak English and their experience is impacted by the tourism destination's ability to speak English. The lack of well-developed English speaking tourism labor force necessitates the need to train extensively in English.

5.2.3 Migration

The decision of ASEAN MRA-TP certificate holders to work in their own country or work abroad is also at the heart of the MRA-TP. Traditional economic push-pull factors such as mentioned by the staff during the interviews may be an indicator of their intentions to take advantage of the MRA-TP. The interviews showed that English speaking staff at hotels, restaurants and some of the tourism agencies see the MRA-TP as an immense opportunity to expand their skills, experience new cultures, receive higher pay and benefits for their service, as well as travel abroad. However, when looking at the entire Chiang Mai tourism industry, the amount of English speaking tourism professionals who could take advantage of the MRA-TP and work abroad is a small percentage of the entire city's tourism industry. The ones that can are already working in positions where English is required.

Management, on the other hand, may see it as a small opportunity to fill critical shortages such as English and Mandarin speaking tourism professionals. English speaking tourism professionals from the other ASEAN countries may be very attracted to the Chiang Mai tourism industry because the benefits may be greater. Management interviewed has already stated their interest in hiring some ASEAN tourism professionals. If the recruitment of low skilled migrant labor by low budget tourism business is any indication of what a high budget tourism business might do with high skilled ASEAN MRA-TP labor, then Thai tourism professionals could possibly be replaced by ASEAN tourism professionals.

5.2.4 Training Ability

Realignment of the training priorities of a tourism business to that of the Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC) would appear to work better in an organizational culture that conducts structured training on a regular basis. However, in order to do this, the English ability levels would have to be quite high. While this section is considering the training ability of the hotels restaurants and tourism agencies, it is really hard to ignore the impact English ability has on training for the ASEAN MRA-TP. The ASEAN MRA-TP is structured and all 52 certificates have a framework of required competencies which a tourism

professional would need to be deemed competent in prior to receiving an ASEAN certificate in English.

If Thai tourism professionals are able to earn an ASEAN MRA-TP certificate and they do go abroad to work in other ASEAN tourism industries and are unable to perform in English, Mr. Eddy Krismeidi Soemawilaga, Senior Officer in the Infrastructure Division at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia said ASEAN will be able to track down the assessor who approved the certificate (E. K. Soemawilaga, personal communication, September 30, 2013). What ASEAN does to an assessor in this situation remains to be seen.

Some of the ASEAN countries, including Thailand, are creating a version of the ASEAN MRA-TP in their country's main language and are passing out certificates based on knowing the competencies in that language. For Thailand, this means all the classes and training materials are sometimes in Thai language. From the point of view of some training is better than no training at all, this does give Thai tourism professionals tourism knowledge but it does not give them the ability to perform in English.

These Thai MRA-TP certificates are not valid in ASEAN and cannot be used as meeting the MRA-TP certificate requirement to work in another ASEAN country. It will be up to the Thai tourism industry to decide if they have any value at all.

For the most part, the 5 star hotels had the most efficient training programs that were dictated by their corporate headquarters. Training records are kept and counseling done to ensure the employee continues to grow in the skills needed in the position they are hired to do. The 5 star hotels still spend money on English training because the majority of their hotel employees have poor English abilities.

The low budget restaurants and some tourism agencies, on the other hand, mostly consisted of inefficient owner training or no training other than on the job training. Inefficient in this context means a training program with no structure or records with which to gauge progress of training within an organization to accomplish the tasks needed to do the job. As one tourism owner put it, "we show by doing, training on the job and demonstrating. No records are kept."

5.3 Recommendations

Of the hotels, restaurants and tourism organizations in the Chiang Mai tourism industry, no one can exist without the other. Hotels don't give tours, restaurants don't let diners stay the night and tour agencies don't have a dining room. Each of these types of businesses are dependent on the other for survival. If any of them in Chiang Mai gives bad service, the reputation of the entire city's tourism industry could be effected.

The research showed various levels of quality in the Chiang Mai tourism industry. From 1 to 5 star hotels to 1 to 5 star restaurants and travel agencies. These tourism businesses are trying to compete in a competitive business environment. Some benefit from location alone while others benefit from location and a corporate strategy and support team. Still there is room for improvement.

The tourism industry in Chiang Mai appears to be fragmented. There are various tourism organizations representing various tourism groups. However, no one group appears to represent all. While the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) is supposed to represent all tourism businesses in Thailand, the truth is, the local Chiang Mai MOTS office is far from the Bangkok MOTS office and the lines of communication don't appear to function efficiently.

1. Often when the central government is unable to support the needs of its constituents Social Enterprise (SE) or Public and Private Partnerships (PPP) rise and fill need. Chiang Mai could benefit by a local SE or PPP office which would keep all tourism businesses informed of developments in the tourism industry. This is especially true with the ASEAN MRA-TP. The city or provincial government could host such an organization for the benefit of all in Chiang Mai province. With the lingua franca being English, it might benefit the organization to hire a native English speaker or a Thai with an IELTS score of above 7 to help with disseminating international information.
2. With up to 10% of the Thai GDP coming from tourism, the emphasis on English training should be much higher. Thailand's GDP composition is moving to post industrialization towards a service industry but may find it more challenging to reach if English abilities are left at pre-industrialization levels. English training at all levels must be improved.

3. ASEAN community awareness needs to part of the primary, secondary and university education. Much of the misunderstanding of ASEAN and the MRA-TP could have been avoided if awareness was higher. Awareness does not mean having an ASEAN food exhibition or ASEAN fashion show. Although it could be part of it. ASEAN awareness means structuring an ASEAN education program that runs through the entire education system so that by the time a bachelor's degree is completed, the Thai graduate will be able to understand ASEAN and how to take advantage of all the agreements and declarations between the ASEAN countries.
4. Awareness also means having elected and non-elected government officials properly trained on ASEAN and the agreements Thai foreign ministers make for the sake of Thailand. Thai Government officials make and enforce the rules of the country and should be fully aware of ASEAN agreements so they don't make any rules that may violate an ASEAN agreement. They also need to be able to explain ASEAN to their constituents and why they make the decisions they are making. It was found that during this research that government officials in Chiang Mai have very low ASEAN awareness. Even the Chiang Mai Ministry of Labor, Employment Department, and ASEAN Department at Chiang Mai City Hall were all surprised to learn of the ASEAN MRA-TP. ASEAN is not going away and the sooner Thailand starts to incorporate English and ASEAN training into their society the greater the benefit Thailand will be able to get from it.