

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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