Some Intercultural Implications of ASEAN and Thai Educational Policies for Thai Higher Education

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Abstract

In this paper, I present my thematic analysis of selected policy documents produced by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and by the Higher Education Commission of Thailand, a member state within the ASEAN and my home educational context. In particular, I focus on the policies in which the possible impacts of the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on the Thai higher education are considered. I will first outline the background to my study, and then, present my analysis of the documents selected. Informed by this analysis, I draw some conclusions regarding how the chosen policy documents comment on the complexities of this globalised and interconnected era and the skills these policies seem to focus on with regard to Thai graduates functioning well in this era. I conclude with a discussion of some possible implications for the role of Thai higher education institutions and teachers like me.

Keywords: Thailand, higher education, policy documents analysis, ASEAN Economic Community, intercultural age

Introduction

In this paper I present an analysis of a selection of policy documents within the context of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Thailand higher education. The aims of the analysis were twofold. Firstly, it aimed to investigate how the selected policy documents comment on the 'intercultural age'. For the purposes of this paper, the notion of 'intercultural age' refers to the period in which the world is becoming more and more interconnected as a consequence of globalisation. Most of us are now living in a complex and interwoven world community, and no society can hope to remain a cultural island. Secondly, this policy analysis sought to explore which qualities are seen to be desirable for university graduates in this intercultural age as explicitly stated and implied in the policies.

I have divided the paper into four sections. The first section deals with the background to this policy analysis. The second section outlines the methodology which includes the selection of the policy documents and the data analysis method. The key findings of the analysis follow in the third section of this paper. Finally, I will conclude by discussing some possible implications for Thai higher education institutions as well as for teachers in the tertiary level.

1. Background

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a geopolitical organization founded in 1967 to bring about peace and prosperity to the region. Today, the ASEAN comprises ten member states (namely, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam). Together, these ten countries are now preparing to establish the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), a collaboration which will remove economic borders between the member states by the end of 2015. The whole region will have been transformed into 'the single ASEAN' market in which workforce, goods, services, investment and capital will flow freely (ASEAN, 2008a). Intercultural interactions between people from the same region but from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds will increase as never before through this process of economic integration.

Many ASEAN countries including Thailand have been preparing, in many aspects, for this fast approaching AEC integration at the end of 2015. As a Thai national, and as an English language teacher in a Thai university, I want to better understand how Thai education, and especially the higher education sector, is dealing with the AEC agenda and what it means for intercultural communication in the region, and, in turn, what this might mean for the communication skills and other attributes needed by graduates.

Higher education plays a pivotal role, not only in cultivating young Thais for the future employability, but also preparing them to cope with challenges they may face in this changing world. One source for insights in this regard is the Office of Higher Education Commission of Thailand (OHEC) which has produced a number of strategic documents in which the possible impacts of the establishment of the AEC and the momentum of globalisation on the Thai higher education sector are considered. These documents provide guidance for Thai higher education institutions on how to prepare for the launch of the AEC, and they also, through both explicit statement, and by implication, suggest the desirable

qualities of Thai graduates in this era. It is against this contextual background that this analysis should be read.

2. Methodology

In this section, I will present the methodology of this analysis, which includes the selection process of the policy documents and the method of data analysis.

2.1 The Policy Documents Selection Process

With regard to the establishment of the AEC, I purposefully selected the central strategic document of the ASEAN, namely *Charter of the South East ASEAN Nations* (ASEAN, 2008b; also known as *The ASEAN Charter*). It was adopted in 2007 by the leaders of the ASEAN countries at the 13th ASEAN Summit and came into effect in December 2008. The document functions as the 'constitution' for the ASEAN Community and provides a framework for establishing policy to develop the building of the ASEAN Community. Then, I searched for related educational policies in the ASEAN regional level which make reference to *The ASEAN Charter.* In this regard, I selected a document called *Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to achieve an ASEAN Caring and Sharing Community* (2009). This declaration on regional education cooperation was adopted in October 2009 by the leaders of the ten ASEAN member states. The purpose of the document was to reaffirm Article 1, paragraph 10 of *The ASEAN Charter* (2008): to develop human resources through closer cooperation in education and life-long learning, and in science and technology, for the empowerment of the peoples of ASEAN and for the strengthening of the ASEAN Community.

As for the Thai policies, I chose strategic documents or plans within the context of Thai higher education. In particular, I focus on the strategic documents in which the possible impacts of the AEC integration on Thai higher education are taken into account. The first document is *The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015* (Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010a), which resulted from a research study by the OHEC. Opinions from stakeholders were gathered in order to set up strategies for the Thai higher education sector to prepare for the establishment of the AEC in 2015. The document is also response to the *Framework of the Second 15-Year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand* (Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010b), the final policy document selected for this study. *The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015* was published in the Thai language; there

is no English version of the strategies. However, the OHEC has published a summary of the strategies in English, which can be found from its website. I have included the summary as a part of this policy analysis as it provides an additional view of the strategies through the use of English language. The final policy document selected for this study is *The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-Year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand* (Commission on Higher Education, 2008). It covers the period of 2008 to 2022 and serves as the roadmap for Thai higher education institutions. It was planned between February and September 2008 and was published in October 2008 in Thai and English. The plan focuses on increasing quality of Thai higher education which leads to the quality of the graduates.

All selected documents were written between 2008 and 2010. In each, the documents address the issue of the integration of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, so I consider these policies to be current. ASEAN documents in general are firstly written in English, and some of them might be translated into ASEAN languages including Thai. I chose to study documents which are available in both English and Thai languages because I believe that exploring the documents written in both languages adds additional insights into how the intercultural age is understood in the region through the primary languages available (English is the agreed working language for ASEAN). Table 1 provides an overview of the selected policy documents.

Table 1

An Overview of the Selected Policy Documents

Name of the document	Year published	Aim	Language / Length (pages)
1) *Charter of the South East ASEAN Nations (The ASEAN Charter)*	Adopted in 2007 by the leaders of the ASEAN countries, came into effect in December 2008	Providing a framework and establishing policy for the building of the ASEAN Community	- English (59) - Thai (68)
2) *Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to achieve an ASEAN Caring and Sharing Community*	Adopted at 15th ASEAN Summit 2009 by the ASEAN leaders	Reaffirming Article 1, paragraph 10 of *The ASEAN Charter*	- English (3) - Thai translation (4)
3) *The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the*	Published in 2010 by Thai OHEC	Preparing Thai higher education sector for the	- Thai (87)

Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015		establishment of the AEC in 2015 and responding to *the 15-year long range plan on Higher Education of Thailand* (below)	- English summary (2)
4) *The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand*	Published in October 2008 by Thai OHEC	Providing a long strategic plan for Thai higher education development and management	- Thai (19) - English (17)

2.2 Method of Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis adopted in this study is thematic analysis as framed by the following research questions: (a) how do the selected policy documents comment on the intercultural age?; and (b) which skills do these policy documents focus on regarding Thai graduates functioning well in this intercultural age? I coded the selected policy documents inductively rather than with reference to existing theories or models concerning the intercultural age and graduate attributes for it. I did so because I wanted to explore the ASEAN and Thai discourses of interculturality rather than view them through conceptual lenses developed elsewhere. Most available theories and models of Intercultural Communication and Intercultural (Communicative) Competence originate in the West and are formulated in English. In contrast, these documents articulate - in Thai and English as the ASEAN lingua franca – locally-framed understandings of these intercultural issues (although they too, as part of our increasingly interconnected world, will most likely have been shaped in part by external discourses of interculturality). After coding, I organized related codes into different categories and looked for emerging themes relevant to my research questions. In the final stage, I made sense of the themes on the basis of my professional background as a Thai-national university lecturer and my understanding of the ASEAN and Thai higher education context.

3. Key Findings

3.1 How the Selected Policy Documents Comment on the Intercultural Age

From the analysis, I have learned that all the selected policy texts contain comments in relation to the intercultural age to a great extent. Throughout the texts, there are statements

related to the globalised world and impact of the globalisation. I coded these statements into the following codes and sub-codes:

1. *people-to-people interaction,*
2. *unity,*
3. *language and cultural globalisation,*
4. *globalisation,*
5. *identity* (with sub-codes of *ASEAN identity, national identity and multiple identity*),
6. *unity in diversity,*
7. *connectivity* (with a sub-code of *beyond ASEAN),*
8. *impacts of the AEC on Thai higher education* (with sub-codes of *mobility, employment opportunity and liberalization of education service),* and
9. *multiculturalism* (with sub-codes of *diversity of culture* and *people*s).

Some examples of the coded statements are: "Future employment will be determined by four important factors, namely, the changing economic structure of Thailand, globalization, technological development and information-driven world" (code: *globalisation; The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-Year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand,* Commission on Higher Education, 2008, p. 3); and "PLEDGE our resolve and commitment to strengthen education to realize an ASEAN Community of Actions, a Community of Connectivity and a Community of and for the Peoples of ASEAN" (code: *connectivity; Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to achieve an ASEAN Caring and Sharing Community,* 2009, paragraph 32).

After coding, I put some related codes under a category and gave each category a name. The two most prevalent categories in terms of the coverage and the importance of the message from my point of view seem to be the categories of *connectivity* and *diversity*. The former consists of codes and sub-codes which are *globalisation, unity, people-to-people interaction* and *beyond ASEAN,* while the latter contains the codes *multiculturalism, peoples, national identity* and *multiple identities*. Interestingly, I have observed the relationship between the two categories and have found that they co-occurred in most of the documents. Hence, I created the theme *unity in diversity* to reflect the relationship between the two categories. The theme is evident in these two extracts from *The ASEAN Charter* (2008): "To promote an ASEAN identity through the fostering of greater awareness of the diverse culture

and heritage of the region" (Article 1, paragraph 14); and "Respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of *the peoples* of ASEAN, while emphasizing their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity" (Article 2, paragraph l; my own italics).

The term '*peoples'* perhaps indicates the cultural (and linguistic) diversity of the different groups of people within the ASEAN community. The theme of *unity in diversity*, as well as the use of the term *peoples,* is paralleled in the other policy document within the ASEAN level, the *Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to achieve an ASEAN Caring and Sharing* Community, 2009, as can be seen from the following paragraph:

> RECOGNIZING the importance of education sector in contributing to the establishment of an ASEAN Community that is people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and *peoples* of ASEAN by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society which is inclusive and where the well-being, livelihood, and welfare of the peoples are enhanced; (*ibid*., paragraph 4; my own italics)

This theme of *unity in diversity* is also supported by this statement: "PLEDGE our resolve and commitment to strengthen education to realize an ASEAN Community of Actions, a Community of Connectivity and a Community of and for the Peoples of ASEAN." (*ibid*., paragraph 32)

The Thai higher education policies also reflect the theme *unity in diversity* when they discuss ways to promote multiculturalism in universities and students. The documents urge universities to "reflect multifaceted and multicultural nature of a society" (*The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand*, Commission on Higher Education, 2008, p. 6). In addition, Thai higher education institutions should "promote awareness of the Thai national identity and the identities of the ASEAN countries and promoting activities strengthens the bond among people, higher education communities, and the youth of ASEAN" (*The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015*, Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010a, p. v; my own translation).

3.2 Graduate Skills in the Intercultural Age

The second research question of this policy analysis is: which skills do these policy documents focus on regarding Thai graduates functioning well in this intercultural age? To

answer the research question, I examined the parts of the two Thai higher education policies in which they explicitly state or imply the qualities, attributes or skills required by Thai graduates with reference to this globalised or interconnected age. I identified these qualities/attributes/skills using the following codes:

1. *English abilities,*

2. *ASEAN languages,*

3. *ASEAN arts and culture studies,*

4. *having wide worldview,*

5. *recognising own culture,*

6. *realising/valuing multiple identities and multiculturalism,*

7. *recognising ASEAN citizenship,*

8. *being prepared for changes,*

9. *able to work in overseas organization or abroad,* and

10. *intercultural (communicative) skill.*

For this second research question, I created the theme *graduate skills in the intercultural age* for these codes without putting them under any categories because I think it fits with the purpose of identifying the skills in the chosen policy documents. The following extract demonstrates a statement which I assigned it under the codes of *having wide worldview* and *realising/valuing multiple identities and multiculturalism*: "prepare [the graduates] to expand their worldview in this age of language and cultural globalization and to recognise and value multiple identities and multiculturalism" (*The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand*, Commission on Higher Education, 2008, p.7; my own translation).

Among the mentioned attributes/skills above, the one which seems to be the main focus of Thai higher education policies is *English abilities*. For example, *The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015* proposes "the promotion of bilingual curricula (e.g. Thai and English) in higher education institutions" (Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010a, p. vi; my own translation). The following excerpt also exemplifies the importance of having English skills in this era:

> The fact that English has been designated by the ASEAN as its working language
> suggests that learning foreign languages is essential for today and the future,

especially [the learning of] English, the language which regarded as the international

language for communication. (*ibid.*, p. 21; my own translation)

The other important skill for today's Thai graduates as addressed by the Thai policies

seems to be *intercultural (communicative) skill*. Below is the quote which demonstrates the

skill:

The future employment in ASEAN will require the graduates to have additional skills

apart from their professional skill such as English and other languages used in

ASEAN and *inter-cultural skill*. Hence, the strategy strongly encourages higher

education institutions to produce the graduates of international quality who equipped

with professional skills, language skill and *inter-cultural skill*. (*ibid.*, p. 2; my own

italic)

Another statement which shows the significance of this *intercultural (communicative)

skill* is: "experience obtained studying in an international environment and *cross-cultural

communication skills* are the desirable graduate attributes in national and international labour

markets" (*ibid.,* p. 17; my own translation and italic).

It is worthwhile to note that when making reference to the *intercultural

(communicative) skill*, the policy neither defines nor describes what the terms above might

mean. I assume from the context that it might refer to the ability to communicate and work

with people from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Also, surprisingly, I found an

inconsistency of the use of two related terms, 'inter-cultural skills' and 'cross-cultural

communication skills'. The Thai version of this document uses the term 'การติดต่อสื่อสารข้าม

วัฒนธรรม.' The word 'ข้าม' (my own underline) literally means 'to cross' or 'to go across',

hence, I translated the phrase into 'cross-cultural communication'. However, in the English

summary of the same document, the term 'inter-cultural skill' was used instead. It might be

interesting to further study the discrepancy of the use of such terms within the Thai context

but it is beyond the scope of this study.

To sum up, I have so far presented the key findings of this thematic analysis with

reference to how the idea of intercultural age might be conceptualised by the selected

strategic documents of ASEAN and Thai higher education. I have learned that the policies

contain statements related to the notion of intercultural age in various topics, but the most

important theme emerged from my analysis is *unity in diversity*. I also presented the

qualities/attributes/skills which seem to be indispensable for Thai graduates in this intercultural era. The most prevalent attributes/ skills seem to refer to English abilities and intercultural (communicative) skills.

4. Implications for Thai Higher Education and Teachers

This policy analysis adds to an understanding of how a selection of strategic documents has viewed the intercultural age and skills essential for university graduates in this era. In this section, I am going to discuss what the key findings might possibly mean for Thai higher education institutions and for teachers at the tertiary level like me.

Firstly, the policies have suggested that university graduates these days need to have various skills in order to be successful in this increasingly interconnected world. Apart from language skills, especially those of the English language, there are other skills which will help to prepare graduates to engage with this era such as the recognition of their own culture and the respect of other cultures different from their own and the sense of citizenship in the wider community beyond that of their own nations (i.e. ASEAN and global citizenship). Higher education institutions in Thailand and elsewhere, including the teachers in those institutions, need to (re)consider their goals regarding the desired qualities for their graduates and whether they have sufficiently cultivated those qualities in their students and graduates.

Secondly, the policies do not seem to have reached the 'end-users' of the policies. From my experience as an English teacher at a Thai public university, I found that this information do not seem to reach to the teachers who are the end-users of the policies. To my knowledge, there is no tangible measure which will practically turn these policies into practice. Further research should be done to investigate whether teachers in Thai higher education institutions are aware of these existing policies and their perspectives regarding this intercultural age and graduate's qualities in this intercultural era.

Thirdly, the recommended measures by the policies will not possibly benefit the majority of Thai students in higher education institutions. *The Strategies of Thai Higher Education for the Preparation for the ASEAN Community in 2015* (Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010a, p.2) calls for "a reform of languages education, an additional student mobility programme, which emphasises on the credit transfer, and a cultural exchange programme". Similarly, the other higher education policy also urges that Thai higher education institutions "increase the mobility of students and the diversity of students' (and teachers)' age groups, social and cultural backgrounds through the important

mechanisms of exchange programmes and bilingual curricula" (*The Executive Report, Framework of the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand, Commission on Higher Education*, 2008, p.7; my own translation). These suggested methods raise the question of how many Thai students (and teachers) will have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from such privileged academic and cultural exchange programmes.

Finally, from my professional point of view, I would like to suggest the integration of teaching these 'intercultural skills' through English language teaching. This is because English has gained a status as **the** tool for international/intercultural communication within and beyond the ASEAN region. English has been the only official 'working language of the ASEAN' since 2008 (*The ASEAN Charter*: Article 34, 2008) and this role of English as the prominent lingua franca within the region is set to become even more marked after the establishment of the AEC (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2011; Wilang & Teo, 2012). English is also a compulsory foreign language in every Thai university. Adding the intercultural aspect to English language teaching and learning at university level will possibly present an attractive option to prepare young Thais for this intercultural world.

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