# Challenges for Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) Implementation: The Case of Tourism Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

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**Abstract**

Since 1990, the implementation of MRA (Mutual Recognition Arrangement) in tourism has been supporting the ASEAN Economic Community 2015. Although there has been an increased awareness of government and related agencies in ASEAN countries to support the MRA implementation, challenges have also significantly increased in its practice. This study explores and evaluates challenges of MRA implementation and considers what recommendations might be proposed for tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia. ASEAN MRA for tourism includes tourism professionals, employers and training providers. The discussion highlights MRA implementation within the qualification system used by the tourism and training industry in Indonesia. The results of this study may serve as a basis for educational institutions to assess MRA implementation in developing curriculum appropriate to tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia. The National Tourism Professionals Board and the National Tourism Professional Certification Board are also expected to use this information in developing their strategy and for policy making and management of MRA implementation. This study involved a qualitative approach using an in-depth interview technique of 30 tourism lecturers and instructors in charge of academic affairs and curriculum development in several education and training providers in Indonesia.

Key Words: ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA), Tourism Higher Education.
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## 1. Introduction

The potential of tourism as a major socio-economic driver for growth and tools for development in the ASEAN region has been identified. It is one of the twelve priority sectors that will help hasten the integration of the ASEAN countries by 2015 (ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011–2015: p.3). Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) has been acknowledged as the starting point to unify the competency standard among ASEAN countries namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. ASEAN MRA on Tourism Professionals is an arrangement among ASEAN countries designed to facilitate the free movement and employment of qualified and certified personnel between ASEAN Member States. MRA for tourism qualifications are seen as one essential requirement of the ASEAN Community as stated in the Bali Concord II at the Ninth ASEAN Summit (2003). The Bali Concord II calls for completion of Mutual Recognition Arrangements for qualifications in major professional services by 2008 as confirmed by the Cebu Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Community by 2015 adopted at the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007. The objectives of the MRA are to facilitate mobility of Tourism Professionals, to exchange information on best practices in competency-based education and training for Tourism Professionals, and to provide opportunities for cooperation and capacity building across ASEAN Member States.

In 2015 the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will be launched, with the objectives of bringing a greater integration between ASEAN Member States (AMS). One important criterion for ASEAN Economic Community is the mobility of skilled labor force and professionals from various disciplines to relocate and work in other AMS. The basis of labor mobility is the mutual recognition of qualifications between ASEAN countries (Penfold, 2013). At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, the leaders affirmed their strong commitment to accelerate the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015 as envisioned in the ASEAN vision 2020. In particular, the leaders agreed to hasten the transformation of ASEAN into a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and freer flow of capital. Although the vision of the ASEAN Economic Community existed, the study below shows that to implement all ASEAN programs, there is need for a stronger commitment from all parties in order to reach the following objectives: 1) A single market and production base : Free flow of goods (services, investment, capital, skilled labor, priority integration sector, food, agriculture and forestry); 2) A highly competitive economic region; 3) A region of equitable economic development; and 4) A region fully integrated into the global economy (Laksaguna, 2012).

The coverage of ASEAN Economic Community is shown in Figure 1).

## 2. Literature Reviews

*2.1. ASEAN Economic Community 2015*

*Figure 1: Members of ASEAN Economic Community (http://www.asean.org/communities/asean-economic-community, 2012)*

*2.2. MRA in Tourism*

Tourism has been defined as "the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destination, and the facilities created to cater to their needs" (Mathieson and Wall, 1982:1). Tourism sector is also considered as a vital economic factor thus one of the country's priority. Therefore, in order to develop responsible tourism, the most effective method is through education, training, and propagation. It is important to increase awareness of promoting tourism and the consequential cooperation and development required by all enterprises involved in the tourism industry (Tho, 2013). As a result there is an increased attention concerning tourism human resources development in ASEAN. The ASEAN leaders signed the ASEAN Tourism Agreement at the 8th ASEAN Summit (4 November 2002). This Agreement aims to create favorable industrial conditions in support of ASEAN's vision for a free flow of tourism services before 2020. As part of the agreement, the ASEAN leaders agreed to upgrade tourism curricula, improve the relevant knowledge and skills through the formulation of competency standards and certification procedures, thereby leading to mutual recognition of skills and qualifications in the ASEAN region. The formulation and acceptance of common competency standards allows trade liberalization in the tourism sector by facilitating a flow of tourism professionals through the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA). Tourism training outcomes and qualifications will generate intra-regional investment and facilitate the flow of human resources in this sector at regional level. AUSAID, 2007 addressed the above issues by developing ASEAN Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP). ASEAN Tourism Agreement specifically article No 8 on Human Resources Development indicates that member States shall cooperate in developing human resources in the tourism and travel industry with the following guidelines:

1. Formulate non-restrictive arrangements to enable ASEAN Member States to make use of professional tourism experts and skilled workers available within the region on the basis of bilateral arrangements.

2. Intensify the sharing of resources and facilities for tourism education and training programs.

3. Upgrade tourism education curricula, improved knowledge and skills and formulate competency standards and certification procedures, which will lead to mutual recognition of skills and qualifications in the ASEAN region.

4. Strengthening public-private partnerships in human resource development.

5. Cooperate with other countries, groups of countries and international institutions in developing human resources for tourism.

In 2007 ASEAN received technical assistance from AUSAID through the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program (AADCP) to carry out: 1) development of the ASEAN Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP); 2) prepare common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC) and 3) provide capacity building for an ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement in Tourism Project (ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011–2015, p. 44). This leads to the establishment of the Roadmap for Integration of Tourism Sector (RITS) that will be enhanced through: 1) accelerating the development of Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA); 2) establishment of ASEAN minimum common competency standards for tourism professionals and 3) strengthening HRD activities through the development of an intra-ASEAN curriculum covering exchange program, cross-training, and cross-certification activities. The objectives of this arrangement are to: 1) facilitate mobility of tourism professionals; 2) exchange information on best practices in competency-based education and training for tourism professionals and; 3) provide opportunities for cooperation and capacity building across ASEAN Member States.

MRA on tourism professionals will: 1) facilitate mobility of tourism professionals based on their competency and qualification; 2) enhance conformity of the competency based training/education; 3) skills recognition; 4) improve the quality of tourism human resources (graduates are ready to work in the industry); and 5) enhance the quality of tourism services Tourism Strategic Plan 2011–2015). Furthermore, the recognition of foreign tourism professionals by ASEAN member states opens possibilities for a professional to work in a host country provided that s/he possesses a valid tourism competency certificate in a specific job as specified in the ASEAN Common Competency Standard of Tourism Professionals (ACCSTP) issued by the Tourism Professional Community Board (TPCB) in an ASEAN member state. The eligibility to work in a host country will be subjected to prevailing domestic laws and regulations of the host country. The mechanism is shown in Figure 2
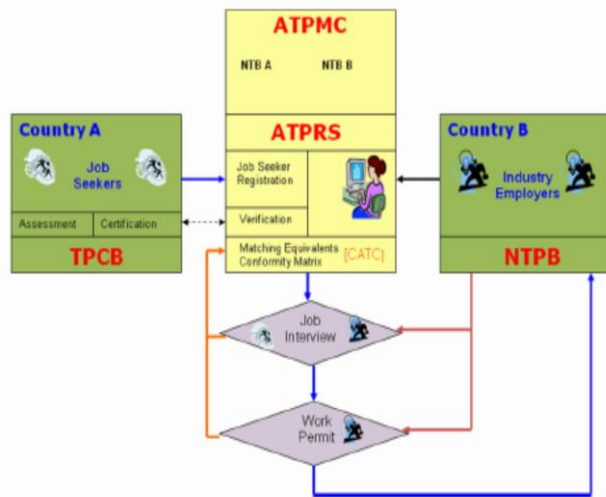
*Figure 2: Mechanism of MRA for tourism professionals (ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan 2011–2015:19)*

Note:
TPCB, Tourism Professional Certification Board
NTPB, National Tourism Professional Board
ATPMC, ASEAN Tourism Professional Monitoring Committee
ATPRS, ASEAN Tourism Professional Registration System

In view of the above, ASEAN member states are encouraged to apply the ACCSTP and the Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum (CATC). The ACCSTP refers to the minimum requirements of competency standards in hotel and travel services which aim to upgrade tourism services and facilitate the development of this Arrangement between ASEAN Member States. CATC refers to the common curriculum for ASEAN Tourism Professionals as mutually agreed upon by the ASEAN Tourism Ministers and recommended by the ASEAN NTOs. The design principles of CATC and the Regional Qualification Framework and Skill Recognition System (RQFSRS) are industry based, structured and flexible. Although the model of MRA application programs draws attention to a good qualification system in the ASEAN Member States, it remains open for further research and refinement through implementation and evidence from the fields. It is argued that this approach may be different in its implementation and its implication in member States. Therefore, there will need to be more campaign of information to colleges and educational institutes to ensure they understand the implications of MRA for tourism professional. Consequently, the institutions will recommend modification and alignment of the curriculum to meet the requirements of a Common ASEAN Tourism Curriculum. This is important should the institutions wish to have qualifications of their graduates recognized by other ASEAN Member States.

MRA implementation may face numerous problems, therefore efforts should be made to develop guidelines such as industry based guidelines to be adopted by all countries and making subjects relevant and useful to both students and industry. In addition, packaging competencies into curriculum for different labor divisions should be linked with qualifications framework. The system is structured but flexible with clearly defined levels of qualifications (5 levels across 6 labor divisions). Thus, curriculum and qualifications are mapped with job functions and levels as shown in Figure 3.
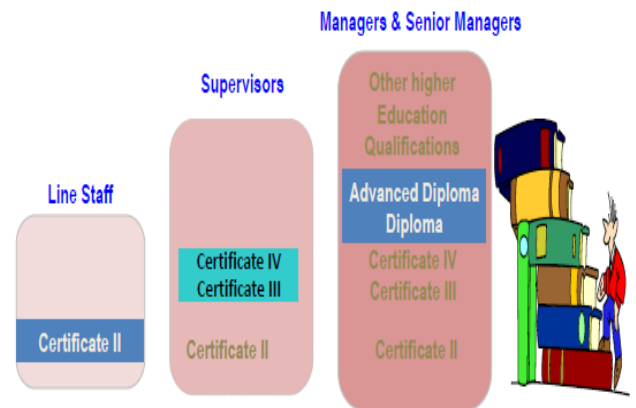


*Figure 3: Level of Labor Division (Laksaguna, 2012)*

To support the implementation of MRA in tourism professional the infrastructures are available at the regional level such as The ASEAN Tourism Professionals Monitoring Committee (ATPMC) and the ASEAN Tourism Professionals Registration System (ATPRS), whilst at the national level there are the National Tourism Professionals Board/Agency (NTPB) and the Tourism Professional Certification Board (TPCB). The quality of instruction, evaluation and standards of curriculum in tourism developed by the various educational and training providers in each country is on voluntary basis.

### 2.3. Tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia

There are 143 tourism higher education institutions and colleges operating in Indonesia, out of which 139 institutes/colleges are under the Directorate General of Higher Education - Ministry of Education and Culture. Four institutes/colleges are under the Ministry of Tourism. Tourism higher education institutions offer 238 study programs. Compared to the total number of courses in Indonesia, the tourism education contributed 1.5% of the total 15.741 study programs and mostly vocational (44%) (Brahmantyo and Kusmayadi, 2010). The roadmap of tourism education documented the long process of tourism to be admitted as science in Indonesia since 2008. The working group meeting of the Indonesia Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2006) defined 4 general competences for tourism graduates i.e:
2. Academicians / researchers / scientists are experts and competent in developing scientific tourism knowledge and conduct scientific research in the field of tourism. The research result should contribute to the advancement of knowledge, theory and even technology. The research outputs can be used by industry personnel, professionals and both academic and vocational institutions.

3.   Technocrats are tasked and competent to develop tourism policy, tourism product diversification, tourism destination planning and design, tourism marketing strategies with scientific methods and innovations. The output will be useful for both industry and educational institutions.

4.   Professionals should be competent and have the expertise to develop and manage tourism businesses applying science and technology needed by both the industry and the educational institutions.

5.   The technicians have competency and skill to perform technical task in tourism business. They work based on the research results and technological knowledge.

In Indonesia the tourism higher education institutions are under the Association of Tourism Higher Educational Institution called *HILDIKTIPARI (Himpunan Lembaga Pendidikan Tinggi Pariwisata Indonesia)*. This body hosted annual scientific conferences and meetings in several ASEAN countries. The number of institutions and members of the association has grown significantly in the last 5 years. This indicates the growing demand for tourism professionals. Since 2008, the Ministry of Education and Culture has included tourism as applied science, which shows the Government of Indonesia's commitment to support tourism education in ASEAN in general and in Indonesia in particular. This encourages the tourism higher education institutions to strengthen the MRA on tourism professionals because of the following benefits : 1) A clear set of standards for development of training programs; 2) A competency-based training and assessment system for preparing trainees for the tourism industry; 3) A range of job-based tourism qualifications based on common labor divisions and 4) An opportunity to become one of the preferred education and training providers with  ACCSTP qualifications (ASEAN, 2012) .

With regard to MRA, the tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia are called to support the ASEAN roadmap for tourism, which aims at unifying training standards and qualifications with a view to facilitating labor mobility in the region. This will facilitate the application of a verifiable certification system and enable the region to develop an MRA and derive economic benefit from profitable tourism services in a more integrated, consistent and coordinated manner. The AUSAID project addressed this matter through the development of a common matrix of job specifications in the ASEAN Framework of Common Competency Standards for Tourism Professionals (AFCCSTP) (AUSAID, 2007)

## 3.   Methods

This study aims at identifying the challenges of MRA implementation faced by the Tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia in anticipation of the ASEAN Community 2015.  Through a case study, qualitative strategy has been developed to allow the researcher "to explore in-depth a program, event, activity, process, from one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2009).  The study was carried out using in depth interview with respondents who are actively involved in MRA implementation, identified the challenges and are able to propose recommendations. The in-depth interview is a technique used for collecting primary data to get first-hand information about the implementation of MRA in Higher Tourism Education in Indonesia. Structured interviews were later carried out with 30 key respondents. However, there is no guarantee that this particular case is typical and this limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other cases.

A carefully-worded interview schedule was prepared with some items requiring short answers that could be ticked off. The interviews were also semi-structured so that when some questions were asked, respondents were encouraged to express themselves and to talk freely.  The interviewer then probed for elaboration, with questions such as "Why do you say that?" or "That is interesting, tell me more" or "Would you like to add anything else?"

## 4.   Results and Discussion

The result of the study presents information of MRA implementation during the process of education delivery. The respondents were individuals and key persons in the academic operation and curriculum design. They came from a variety of tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia and they were recruited using the snowball technique. The result is presented as follows:

### 4.1. Challenges to Implement MRA

It is evident that tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia faced challenges in implementing the MRA. Figure 4 below shows the overall result of the study.



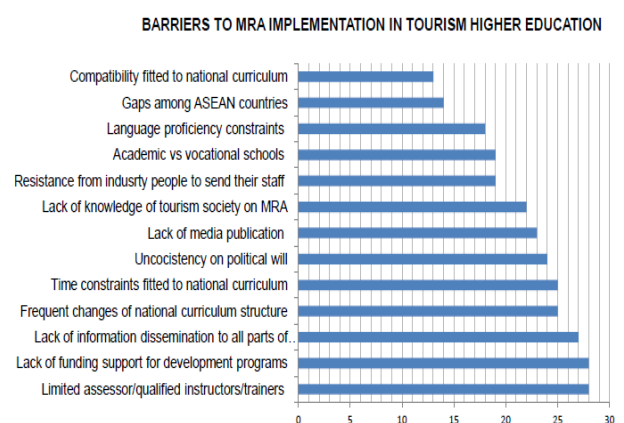BARRIERS TO MRA IMPLEMENTATION IN TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION

Figure 4: Challenges for MRA Implementation (Interview, 2013)

Respondents evaluated the challenges of MRA implementation in their institution and provided the following detailed answers: (28 respondents) said that the main challenge is limited assessor/qualified instructors/trainers, (27) lack of information dissemination to all parts of ASEAN regions, (25)

frequent changes in national curriculum, (25) time constraints to include in national curriculum, (24) inconsistency of political will, (23) lack of media publication, (22) tourism society's lack of knowledge on MRA, (21) financial constrains, (19) resistance from industry, (19) academic versus vocational schools, (18) constraints in English language, (14) gaps among ASEAN countries, and 13 respondents find that there is incompatibility with national curriculum. Apparently, limited assessor/qualified instructors/trainers and lack of funding support for MRA implementation and development program were identified as the most serious challenges for MRA implementation followed by lack of information dissemination to all parts of ASEAN regions. These are common issues in most tourism institutions. Also, time constraints to include MRA in national curriculum and frequent changes in national curriculum can create confusion.

### 4.2. Suggestion for MRA Implementation

Respondents were also invited to give suggestions for MRA implementation in tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia. Recommendations are stated in Figure 5. The study used an open-ended question where one respondent provided multiple answers. The results show that although prior awareness of MRA implementation was strong, the most common suggestions provided were suggestions for more information, stronger coordination and integration of ASEAN member states and greater multi stakeholder involvement in the implementation. The top five suggestions were: 1. Conduct better dissemination of information to colleges and educational institutes (29 responses); 2) Provide sufficient funding support for MRA development program (29 responses); 3) MRA should continue strengthen integration and coordination between ASEAN member states (29 responses); 4) Increase socialization of Tourism MRA in all ASEAN member states (28 responses); and 5) MRA implementation needs roadmaps with clear programs and goals achivements (27 responses).
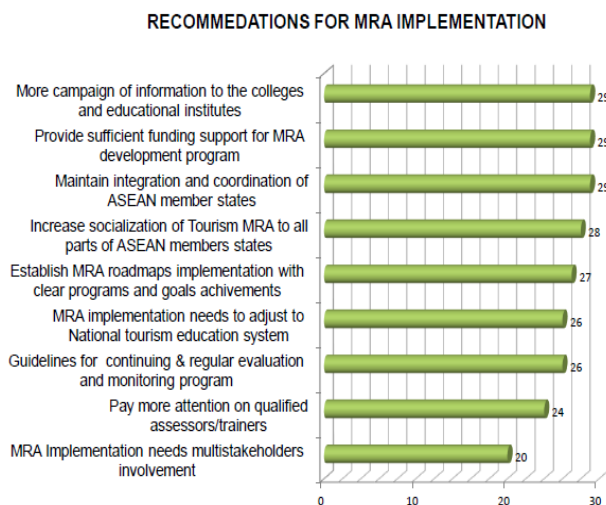


Figure 5: Recommendation for MRA implementation (Interview, 2013)

Thus, there is a call for key actors in MRA implementation to give greater attention to enhancing public awareness in activities conducted by tourism higher education institutions particularly the importance of MRA implementation in all ASEAN member states.

## 5. Conclusion

Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) will make a substantial contribution to tourism higher education institutions in Indonesia as well as to local and regional development. MRA has greatly influenced the curriculum modification in tourism education system. The findings above support the widespread belief that MRA implementation in tourism education and training will support efforts in facing the ASEAN Economic Community 2015. With regard to Indonesia, limited funding support and frequent changes in national curriculum have become serious obstacles. However, if tourism education is to be a long-term growth generator for human resources provider, then the achievement of MRA is important. The results suggest that better dissemination of information on MRA application and funding issues should be addressed appropriately in order to achieve MRA. Additionally, integration and coordination of all ASEAN member states to monitor and evaluate the MRA goals achievement are imperative.

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