Advancing Library Profession through Regional Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges for Filipino Librarians in the ASEAN Economic Community

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ABSTRACT

Being one of the three key pillars of the ASEAN Integration, the ASEAN Economic Community aims to have a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and freer flow of capital by the end of December 2015. Among its eight areas of cooperation, two are likely to affect the practice of librarianship in the region: first, human resource development and capacity building; and second, recognition of professional qualifications. The Philippine government has instituted some changes in the educational landscape in order to adapt to the Integration although many things are still needed to be done. This study aims to provide the librarians’ point-of-view on how the ASEAN Economic Community may affect the practice of librarianship in the Philippines. Target population was pre-selected, having considered factors such as experience in library cooperation and exposure to the issue at hand. Majority of the survey questions inquire about the respondent’s understanding and views regarding certain topics and issues about the ASEAN Integration. Through this, various prospects and opportunities for Filipino librarians were determined, together with the respondent’s perceived fears and concerns. Prospects and opportunities identified include resource sharing through regional library networks, improvements in library and information science education and training, research collaboration, development of competencies, and mobility of Filipino librarians. On the other hand, respondents’ perceived fears and challenges include rigid competition and job security, shortage of librarians and mutual recognition agreements, cross border mobility and legal provisions on reciprocity, and serious lack of information. Two important factors that Filipino librarians must pursue in line with regional cooperation are the advancement of research in the field of library and information science, as well as the development of librarians’ professional competencies.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community, 2015 ASEAN Integration regional cooperation, librarianship, library competencies
1. INTRODUCTION

2015 ASEAN Integration – this is the current buzzword in the Southeast Asian region. What started as a shared vision among the leaders of the ten nations of the ASEAN is now taking shape. The seed of regional cooperation that was sowed in the past is now taking root, and nobody can stop its growth nor prevent it from happening.

1.1 ASEAN Economic Community

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – the five founders. Since then, it has expanded to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, making up the current ten Member States of ASEAN (Teh Cheng Guan, 2004; Kurlantzick, 2012). In 1997, during its 30th anniversary, the ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020, aiming to transform ASEAN into “a stable, prosperous, and highly competitive region with equitable economic development, and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities” (ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, 2008). This has become the precursor to the 2003 decision of establishing the ASEAN Community by 2020. And when the Leaders gathered in 2007 for the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, Philippines, they have decided to accelerate the regional integration by 2015 (ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, 2008).

The stability of the ASEAN Community lies on its three pillars. The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) is committed in building a peaceful, democratic and harmonious ASEAN Community. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) aims to have a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and freer flow of capital. And lastly, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community’s (ASCC) goal is creating an ASEAN that is people-oriented and socially responsible (Amador & Teodoro, 2014).

The AEC Blueprint (2008) points that by the end of December 2015, the ASEAN economy should have four key characteristics: (1) a single market and production base, which basically means combining the production bases of the ASEAN nations in order to form a single market with no restrictions or additional taxes (Kimura, 2013); (2) a highly competitive economic region, or in other words, an economy that fosters a culture of fair competition; (3) a region of equitable or impartial economic development which is important, given the different levels of development among ASEAN Member Countries; and (4) a region fully integrated into the global economy, making ASEAN a more dynamic and stronger piece of the global supply chain while remaining attractive for foreign investment. It also defined eight specific areas where cooperation should happen. As for librarians, the focus lies on the first two areas: (1) human resource development and capacity building, which is about the education and training of librarians; and (2) recognition of professional qualifications, since the qualifications to practice librarianship in the Philippines is completely different from those in Singapore, Thailand and other ASEAN nations.

The Philippine government has already instituted some changes in the educational landscape in order to adapt to the Integration. Before, Filipinos spend six years for primary education and four years for secondary, for a total of ten years which is two years lesser than other countries. The change to K-12 curriculum was a necessary move, although it was done relatively late. It was only launched on June 2012 and based on the government’s plan, the first batch of K-12 students will be able to finish their undergraduate degree by year 2022 only. That means, there will be a shortage of library school graduates for two years as a result
of the K-12 adaptation, and they will not have a level playing field with other ASEAN counterparts for seven years following the 2015 Integration (Abad, 2014). Aside from the K-12, there are also several colleges and universities that have shifted their academic calendar to be parallel with other international schools which will make academic exchanges with foreign educational institutions more feasible. This shift in academic calendar was basically aimed for the 2015 Integration to allow cross-border mobility among people from the academe.

1.2 The Philippine Librarianship Scenario

In order to practice librarianship in the Philippines, one can take Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS) as an undergraduate degree and Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) as a graduate degree. There is also a Diploma in Librarianship for specialized training. However, having an LIS education is not enough for one to be able to practice the profession. Republic Act No. 9246 or The Philippine Librarianship Act of 2003 requires LIS degree holders to pass the national board examinations for librarians in order to acquire a professional license. In short, one needs to have an LIS degree, pass the exam, and receive license in order to be considered as a professional librarian. Still, even having a professional license to practice the profession is not acknowledged as substitute to the two-year shortage in basic education.

2. THE 2015 ASEAN INTEGRATION SURVEY

The pragmatic approach to research was used in the study, having performed an extensive literature review to describe the extent of available materials on the topic, and conducting an online survey with questions that yield both quantitative and qualitative data. Target population was pre-selected, having considered factors such as experience in library cooperation, whether local or international; as well as exposure to the issue at hand. Majority of the survey questions inquire about the respondent’s understanding and views regarding certain topics and issues about the ASEAN Integration. Through this, various prospects and opportunities for Philippine libraries were deduced based on the views of the respondents, and their fears and concerns regarding the topic were discovered.

Online survey was sent to thirty target respondents and seventeen (or 60%) accomplished it. Respondents are composed of an active member of the Professional Regulatory Board for Librarians (PRBFL), the current Director of the National Library of the Philippines, 4 library directors, 3 university librarians, 1 head librarian, 1 retired librarian (former member of PRBFL), and 6 library science professors (4 of which has served as dean). When asked about their level of awareness regarding the ASEAN Integration, 65% of the respondents answered that they are very much aware, while 23% said that they are quite aware, having some substantial knowledge, and 12% answered that they are aware, having done a little reading (Figure 1). Nobody answered that they are not aware of the topic. Regarding the method on how they found out about the ASEAN Integration, 76% of the respondents learned about it through conferences, seminars and forums, while 71% heard about it from their own colleagues, 47% chose the Internet and 41% chose newspapers (Figure 2). This data show that all the respondents have a certain level of awareness on the issue at hand, as originally intended when they were chosen to answer the survey.
On the question “Is your library/university open to participate in the ASEAN Integration, such as library cooperation?” almost all of them (83%) answered ‘yes’, 11% answered ‘maybe’, and only 6% answered ‘no’ (Figure 3). However, on the question “Do you think the Philippine libraries are ready for the ASEAN Integration?” the responses are quite divided. 35% answered ‘yes’, 35% answered ‘no’, and 30% answered ‘maybe’ (Figure 4). Based on the answers, it was clearly evident that respondents are very open to participate even though there is doubt whether they are ready or not. This proves that the respondents are aware of the many opportunities ASEAN Integration can bring to the librarians, but at the same time, mindful that there are many things needed to be done in order to gain from those opportunities.

3. PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Regional integration is being conducted because of the many advantages it brings to the member countries. Having a single market requires the removal of taxes and other fiscal barriers, making it ideal for foreign investment by allowing even international companies to operate regionally at ease. Knowing the prospects and opportunities 2015 ASEAN Integration brings to libraries in the Philippines is truly important in order to take advantage of all the benefits that are to come.
3.1 Resource Sharing Through Regional Library Networks

The greatest asset of any library lies on the quality of its collection. However, we also know that no library is complete on its own, or there is no library that is self-sufficient. A certain library may be strong in engineering resources. However, it will be difficult if a researcher is comparing the engineering practices in the Philippines from that of Singapore, Malaysia or Thailand, for example. Library cooperation and resource sharing has been the librarians’ solution to such problem. In this area, the 2015 Integration opens great opportunity for ASEAN libraries to cooperate and benefit.

Library cooperation and resource sharing is actually not something new for the ASEAN region. In fact, the ASEAN University Network Inter-Library Online (AUNILO) was established since 2002 and currently has twenty-three university library members, three of which are from the Philippines. It aims to enhance information networking through the sharing of digital scholarly resources and develop an ASEAN virtual university (About AUNILO, 2013). AUNILO is just one of the many networks Philippine libraries are currently engaged in. With the ASEAN Integration to take place by the end of 2015, it is expected that such library linkages and resource sharing programs among various libraries in the ASEAN will greatly increase and improve.

3.2 Improvements in LIS Education and Training

Library and Information Science (LIS) professors also saw great opportunities in the field of LIS education and training once the Integration takes place. Many believe that it will empower LIS schools to be globally competitive. One professor mentioned that up to now, the target of the institution has been to produce graduates that are practically prepared to join the profession – meaning, graduates that will pass the licensure exam and are proficient to do the tasks required for a librarian. This is good, but since the target is to hone the skills, the development of theoretical foundations of LIS, which is equally important, is somehow being neglected. In order to become globally competitive, the academe needs to produce more research papers, which will be challenging, but at the same time, beneficial to everyone. With the ASEAN Integration at hand, they are now discussing about ways to solve the issue. This is just the start but it is expected that in the long run, necessary improvements will be done in the curriculum in order to produce graduates that are equipped to practice librarianship not just locally but regionally or even globally.

Another important issue is the shortage of Ph.D. graduates of LIS in the country. Since universities can only offer up to MLIS education, graduate students need to go to other nations in Europe or in the United States if they wish to continue with their education. And since only few can do that, universities could not offer doctorate degrees even if they want to, because of the shortage of faculty members with Ph.D. who are available to teach. This is another issue that can possibly be addressed through the Integration. Once the Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) for library services was set between the Philippines and other ASEAN countries, it would be possible for the academe to invite Ph.D. graduates in the region to teach in the Philippines and also produce Ph.D. graduates locally.

3.3 Research Collaboration

Research collaboration is another field that is expected to have great improvements once the Integration takes place. By shifting the academic calendars of the major universities in the Philippines to be parallel with those of international schools, it shall make faculty
exchanges and research collaboration more feasible. Expert archivists from Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, for example, can easily collaborate and make a research about the restoration of records destroyed by Typhoon Haiyan. They can go to Central Philippines to gather materials, use laboratory facilities in Singapore, and just write their paper by collaborating online. LIS students can also do their practicum and training in Thailand, or universities can even have student exchanges for a semester without delaying the student’s program of studies.

3.4 Development of Competencies

Making ASEAN a highly competitive region is one of the major goals of the AEC. And when there is competition, there is also a need to develop competencies or qualifications. In order for competition to run to one’s advantage, one should be well equipped and competent. It is the qualifications that give value to professionals and not nationality, religion, social class, educational origins, or ‘connections’ (Manzala, 2013). The two-year shortage in basic education, requirement of passing the licensure exam, diversity of ASEAN culture and language – all of these can be viewed both positively and negatively. However, in a highly competitive region, one word is weightier than any of these issues, and that is ‘competency’. The more skilled a person is, the more advantageous his position will be.

Foreseeing the possible problems the two-year shortage in basic education may bring, the Professional Regulatory Board for Librarians (PRBFL) is already developing alternative ways to catch up. Having an MLIS degree should be viewed not as an advantage now but more as a requirement. In addition, a system for Continuous Professional Development programs was created in order to promote lifelong learning and further develop the skills of practicing librarians. Having a professional license may not add anything to one’s competencies, but it should boost one’s confidence and image, having passed a rigorous examination. Another huge advantage Filipinos have is the familiarity in speaking and writing in English, which has long been embedded in the education system.

3.5 Mobility of Filipino Librarians

Many librarians fear that they will be placed in the disadvantage when reciprocity takes effect. However, upon closer analysis of the qualifications for librarians among other ASEAN countries, we can say that Filipino librarians can actually compete.

In Singapore, minimum qualifications include any undergraduate degree plus an MLS, any undergraduate degree plus a postgraduate diploma in librarianship, or a BLS degree; in addition to the mandatory apprenticeship or training period. This is pretty much similar with the entry level requirements in the Philippines, plus the professional license. For Thailand, these are the requirements for head librarians in government organizations: an MLIS degree and minimum of five years library experience; a BLIS degree and ten-year experience; or any bachelor degree, course training in LIS, and ten-year experience. This is also almost similar to head librarians in the Philippines. For Cambodia, formal library education is not being offered yet. So, few receive their degree in other countries, some attend local workshops or short courses in nearby countries, but most librarians learn ‘on the job’ (as cited in Labayani, 2014). This proves that Filipino librarians will not really lag behind if ever the Integration takes place now. Instead, it provides them opportunities to work in other ASEAN countries, giving them a wider horizon to practice their skills and further their experience.
4. FEARS AND CHALLENGES

Many have already predicted that the ASEAN Economic Community will struggle to become a reality and would not be launched by the end of 2015 deadline (Xianbai, 2014). Indeed, there are issues still. And these issues will cause fear unless they get solved.

4.1 Rigid Competition and Job Security

The late implementation of the K-12 program resulting to the two-year shortage in basic education is already a big blow for the Philippines. Having a single market will surely result to rigid competition, and in order to become globally competitive, graduates should be equipped with professional skills and competencies responsive to labor market needs (Abad, 2014). However, for seven years, Filipinos will be competing in an uneven field. By having a workforce that is considered sub-standard and not globally competent, there is fear that joining such level of competition will probably be detrimental. The only way to level the playing field is to catch up – study more, train more, participate more, practice more. However, competition is also good since it brings out the best in people.

4.2 The Shortage of Librarians and Mutual Recognition Agreements

The Philippine government released the Skilled Occupational Shortage List (SOSL) on January 2014 which includes occupations experiencing a shortage of skills and could be opened potentially to foreign skilled workers (ABS-CBNnews.com, 2014). Many cried foul since the country is already suffering from a high unemployment rate. Included in the list are licensed librarians. Is there really a shortage of librarians in the country?

There are more or less 188 colleges and universities throughout the country which are known to be offering LIS education. However, only 76 are actively producing graduates from 2009 to 2013 (David, 2014). Based on the licensure exam results from the past three years, there are only 303 passers per year on average, which is only 42% of the total number of people who take the exam. This results to a huge demand for licensed librarians. Philippines have 2,299 colleges and universities; 12,878 secondary schools; 46,404 primary schools; 1,119 public libraries; and an unknown number of special libraries. However, there are only 7,169 librarians who received license. Clearly, there is a shortage of ‘licensed’ librarians in the country since there are many graduates who have LIS degrees but could not be considered as professionals because they do not have license. And considering that other ASEAN countries do not require license to practice librarianship, there are people who claim that local librarians are on the disadvantage. The PRBFL maintained that they will still have the upper hand on the entry of foreign professionals in the country. The recognition of professional qualifications is dependent on mutual recognition agreements (MRA) between the Philippines and other ASEAN countries. However, there is no final MRA on library services yet, and until it is established, fear will always present.

4.3 Cross Border Mobility and Legal Provisions on Reciprocity

There are actually a number of restrictions in the Philippine Legal Framework regarding the entry and employment of foreign professionals. These provisions are placed in order to safeguard the rights of a Filipino to work on his own country. Article 4 Section 28 of The Philippine Librarianship Act of 2003 is about foreign reciprocity which provides the necessary requirements for foreign nationals to be able to take the licensure exam. Allowing cross border mobility would require repealing or revising such laws. There is also fear that
cross border mobility will encourage highly competent Filipino librarians to find greener pastures abroad, which will eventually result to brain drain. Nonetheless, these are only wild assumptions and may not actually happen in reality.

4.4 Serious Lack of Information

Another concern is the serious lack of information and media coverage about the Integration. Philippines should actually be well informed since the 2007 ASEAN Summit when the leaders decided to accelerate the integration by 2015 was held in the country. However, both the 2007 Summit, as well as the 2015 Integration suffered minimal newspaper and media coverage, resulting to many Filipinos being uninformed about it. Even the government is rushing and cramming the reforms necessary for the Integration (Geronimo, 2014). The public needs to know and the issues need to be openly addressed in order for any form of fear to die out.

5. ADVANCING RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

Two important areas that Filipino librarians must pursue in line with regional cooperation during the 2015 ASEAN Integration are the advancement of research in the field of library and information science, as well as the development of librarians’ professional competencies. Respondents were also asked regarding research areas that should be undertaken in relation to the Integration. 82% of the respondents selected information and communications technology (ICT), while 76% selected library leadership and management, and 71% selected information literacy (Figure 5). More than half of the respondents also selected user services and collection development. Also, since professionals were being defined by their competencies, the development of librarians’ skills and abilities is a very important factor in the ASEAN Integration. Among the list of competencies of 21st century information specialists provided in the survey, 82% of the respondents have chosen customer service, as well as ethics and values, which are the highest. 76% chose communication, lifelong learning and personal growth, and managing information organizations which are the second highest. Also, 70% chose leadership, managing information services, and managing information tools and services which are the third highest (Table 1).

![Figure 5: Research areas needed to be undertaken](image)
Table 1: Core competencies necessary for a 21st century information professional

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6. CONCLUSION

Despite all the problems and issues that may hound the Philippines in participating in the 2015 ASEAN Integration, Filipino librarians actually have the necessary skills and weapons to overcome the problems and be able to contribute great things to this regional cooperation. Even though there is lacking in terms of preparation, Filipinos will be more than willing to take that rough road and do their best to participate.

So in order to make Filipino librarians well informed, design and implementation of the ASEAN Integration 101 website was included in this study. It shall function both as a primer and a resource center for Filipino librarians who wish to discover more about the 2015 ASEAN Integration – a form of information dissemination. It compiles recent news, conference materials, presentation slides, journal articles, websites and other materials related to the topic. The site is located at [http://aseanintegration101.wordpress.com](http://aseanintegration101.wordpress.com) (Figure 6).

![Figure 6: Screenshot of the ASEAN Integration 101 website](http://aseanintegration101.wordpress.com)

REFERENCES


