



Get ready: Asean economic community is coming in 2015

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Opportunities, crises predicted; language skills will be needed

Thailand may encounter both crises and opportunities when the Asean Economic Community is implemented in a few years. But if Thais prepare thoroughly, the AEC would not affect them that badly and they may even find opportunities, academics said recently.

However, after seeing no concrete move towards preparing for the AEC by the government, Visanu Vongsinsirikul, director of Dhurakij Pundit University's Asean Community Preparation Centre (ACPC), the most influential body with the power to prepare the country for changes, called on the government to think and act as soon as possible. Otherwise Thailand would lag behind other countries rather than be able to grasp the opportunities.

"Thailand has advantages over other Asean countries in terms of geographical features, weather, races and cost of living. The question is how can we make use of the advantages we have?" he said.

"Foreign languages, English in particular, are our big problem. But we can learn them," he said.

"We cannot escape the AEC. Even if we don't want to work in other Asean countries, citizens from those countries will certainly come to work in Thailand," he said.

The government should put preparing for the AEC on the national agenda.

"Prime Minister (Yingluck Shinawatra) should assign each ministry to study what it should do and present its own proposals to the premier. Then, the ministries implement the proposals. If the government tries to achieve good preparation and successfully does that, it will be the government's great accomplishment."

ACPC is trying to educate people about the Asean community, including the AEC, to help them understand Asean and inspire them to find possible opportunities in the new setup.

ACPC has provided seminars and courses on the Asean community to requesting agencies, including educational institutions, and has invited experts on Asean to share their knowledge.

It has joined hands with the Thailand Development Research Institute to carry out research on the state of preparation of institutions in basic, vocational and higher education in Thailand and compare that to Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia.





The centre has also surveyed business owners on how they think the AEC will affect their business, what they want the government to do to help and what kinds of employees they want.

The ACPC will help them voice what they want so that they can seek assistance from the government. The survey results will also be used as a guideline for education so educators will adjust their curricula to produce more qualified workers for the AEC.

Entrepreneurs and educators should work together to revamp curricula.

However, most teachers do not understand the AEC well enough while officials at the Education Ministry who shape policies show inadequate preparation.

The ministry should find more people with English communication skills and let them teach at schools. The curricula revamp should encourage students to think analytically and be able to solve problems so they are able to handle problems when growing up. Teachers should study and understand the ways of life and cultures of other Asean countries, he added.

Wiriyah Ruechaipanit, founder and coach of www.eduzones.com, a popular education site in Thailand, said students should keep four things in mind to deal with the coming challenges from the AEC.

"Only a bachelor's diploma is not enough. They should learn an occupation, like cooking or haircutting, that will give them more job opportunities. They should learn how to search for knowledge by themselves. When studying what they like, they should study it deeply. Lastly, they should not forget to adhere to what people consider as morality," he said.

"Now, teachers use only 50 per cent of their capacity. They are interested in and alert to the challenges, but they have been working in the same system for a long time. I'm not sure how much they will be able to prepare students," he said.

So, teachers should work harder and think "out of the box", he added.

Both academics recently hosted seminars together in each region of the country to inspire teachers to prepare themselves and their students for the AEC. The ACPC plans to organise more seminars in more provinces this year.

"Don't wait until we experience the impact as it may be too late. We should prepare ourselves first," Visanu said as a warning to his fellow countrymen.

