Asean 2015: Philippine education’s boon or bane?
(Musings from an outsider looking in)

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The Philippine education industry has been hit by a double-whammy from two fronts: DepEd’s K-12 shift and CHED’s OTBQA. We have not seen an upheaval of this magnitude in the education industry since 1982 when the landmark Batas Pambansa Blg. 232, otherwise known as the Educational Act of 1982, effectively introduced comprehensive reforms in the educational system.

For the last three years since October 2010 when the Department of Education officially announced the mandatory shift of our basic education course from the original 10 years to 12 years, and released its “K to 12” Discussion Paper for comments, schools had been mainly pre-occupied with solving all the logistical issues, problems and other permutations arising from the implementation of the K-12 program.

Even as the mechanics for the K-12 shift was still being formulated by DepEd and the law had yet to be drafted in September 2012, colleges and universities were beset with directives coming from the Commission on Higher Education to institute a change from “content-based” quality assurance to “outcomes and typology based” quality assurance per CMO No. 46, series of 2012.

Not a few colleges and universities balked at this new CHED initiative. One national educational association had even raised its strong yet very valid concerns to this new initiative, requesting that implementation of the OTBQA be postponed until after K-12 shift – or at the very least, when a more exhaustive and comprehensive discussion and consultation by

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and between stakeholders in the education industry shall have been made.

It was only after much research and from hindsight, that I came to realize that the double initiative of K-12 and OTBQA was part of a much bigger scenario.

Like “A Game of Thrones”\(^2\) where the warring noble houses had been caught in their own manipulative schemes to wipe out the other, Philippine educational institutions had been largely unaware of a bigger foe looming over the near horizon - the ASEAN 2015 integration.

It is in this context that I have been asked to give you a brief overview of ASEAN 2015, to set the stage for discussions by the next speakers. I will attempt to show the legal framework as an outsider looking in. I will not claim that I have any answers to the question posed as my title in this short discourse. But I hope to raise questions which your convention will try to resolve.

What is ASEAN and ASEAN 2015?

Before ASEAN was an organization called the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA). This was an alliance consisting of the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand that was formed in 1961,\(^3\) against the backdrop of the Cold war, the emergence of communism in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) and rise of Fidel Castro in Cuba and cutting-off of the diplomatic ties with the United States.\(^4\)

It was while Thailand was brokering reconciliation among Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia over certain disputes that it dawned upon the four countries to seize the opportunity for regional cooperation, or the future of the region would remain uncertain.\(^5\)

And so in early August 1967, the five Foreign Ministers (of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) spent four days in the relative isolation of a beach resort in Bang Saen,
a coastal town less than a hundred kilometers southeast of Bangkok. There they negotiated in a decidedly informal manner the wordings of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) which they would later delight in describing as "sports-shirt diplomacy." 

Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten (10) Member States of ASEAN.

The Secretary of Foreign Affairs who represented our country at that historic moment was SECRETARY NARCISO RAMOS, the 66-year old father of future President Fidel V. Ramos (then serving in Vietnam). It is said that Secretary Ramos was a one-time journalist and long-time legislator who had given up a chance to be Speaker of the Philippine Congress to serve as one of his country's first diplomats. He spoke darkly of the forces that were arrayed against the survival of the countries of Southeast Asia in those uncertain and critical times, and explained the need to form the ASEAN alliance, thus:

"The fragmented economies of Southeast Asia, (with) each country pursuing its own limited objectives and dissipating its meager resources in the overlapping or even conflicting endeavors of sister states carry the seeds of weakness in their incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations. ASEAN, therefore, could marshal the still untapped potentials of this rich region through more substantial united action." 

When ASEAN turned 30 years old in 1997, the ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020, and largely agreed to create a deeper partnership amongst member nations. By 2003, the idea of an ASEAN Community (probably patterned after the European Union model) was established.

The ASEAN Community is comprised of three pillars, namely:

- Political-Security Community;
- Economic Community; and
- ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.,
8 Ibid.
Each pillar has its own Blueprint, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and IAI Work Plan Phase II (2009-2015), they form the Roadmap for and ASEAN Community 2009-2020.¹¹

At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007 (IRONICALLY HELD IN CEBU), the ASEAN leaders agreed to accelerate the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community from 2020 to 2015 and to transform ASEAN into a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor and freer flow of capital.¹²

The areas of cooperation in the economic aspect include human resources development and capacity building; recognition of professional qualifications; closer consultation on macroeconomic and financial policies; trade financing measures; enhanced infrastructure and communications connectivity; development of electronic transactions through e-ASEAN; integrating industries across the region to promote regional sourcing; and enhancing private sector involvement for the building of the AEC. ¹³

Simply put, as of January 2007 – the Philippine Government had already committed to the vision of the ASEAN COMMUNITY as a SINGLE MARKET AND PRODUCTION BASE, by regional integration of priority sectors and facilitating movement of business persons, skilled labor and talents, among others.¹⁴

BUT WHO KNEW? There was minimal newspaper coverage of the affair!

The funny thing is that, considering the magnitude of the impact of the Cebu Declaration of the 12th ASEAN Summit, the only item that I can faintly remember of the 12th Asean Summit from the newspapers was the issue of the controversial and very

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¹⁴ See: Declaration on the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, 27 November 2007.
expensive state-of-the-art French lampposts\textsuperscript{15} commissioned by Cebu Governor Gwen Garcia, as well as the fact that the costs to build Cebu International Convention Center had escalated from P250Million to P800Million.\textsuperscript{16}

Why so? I venture to say that in this instance, the Philippine Government has miserably failed to make the Filipino people truly aware of its participation in, and commitments to, the ASEAN community. If at all, due to our big brother-little brother syndrome with the United States, our collective antennae been have trained to latch on to political and/or socio-cultural developments in the United States, and dismiss the news relating to our Asian neighbors as mere trivia.

It is therefore not surprising that ASEAN – much less ASEAN 2015 – remained a backstory, simply because the Filipino people were NOT made aware of the importance of the alliance. This, despite the fact that the Philippines was an incorporator thereof. Thus, it had led Dr. Natalia Morales, the vice-president of the Philippine Council for Foreign Relations, to lament:

\begin{quote}
"There is no regular ASEAN habit of mind in our shores. One has to seek special website editions to know what’s happening and what the official support the ASEAN program requires and deserves from us. The recent postcard-sending campaign of the Departments of Education and Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with ASEAN embassies, partly addressed this lack of ASEAN awareness among Filipino youth."\end{quote}

\textbf{NOW THAT THE DECEMBER 2015 ASEAN INTEGRATION DEADLINE IS NEARLY UPON US, HOW}


\textsuperscript{17} Dr. Natalia Morales, "Shaping our ASEAN mindset", Inquirer article, 30 July 2007. \url{http://www.inquirer.net/specialreports/12thASEANSummit/view.php?db=1&article=20070730-79407}
DO WE ADDRESS IT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION?

From the human capital perspective, a successful ASEAN integration will require education systems of the region to provide individuals with requisite skills for a changing labour market. Dynamic production processes across the region have resulted in changing demands for skills in industries and services. In response to these dynamics, domestic labor forces need to be well prepared.\textsuperscript{18}

It has been said that the Philippines is cramming toward ASEAN 2015.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps we are just being consistent with the “last-two minute mentality” of this basketball-crazy nation. Thus, Rappler contributor Jee Geronimo quoted DepEd Secretary Armin Luistro in his article:

\begin{quote}
“When it comes to the impending ASEAN 2015 economic integration in 2015, the Philippines is cramming things it should have done a decade ago because bureaucracy got in the way then. xxx.”\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Thus, it is clear that the government had already started its way toward ASEAN integration by raising the educational standards of the country through the K-12 shift, and the OTBQA.

BUT ARE WE GOING TO MAKE IT TO THE DEADLINE?

At this point, I will initially examine this scenario from the perspective of a college graduate by December 2015, when ASEAN integration is scheduled to commence.

As had been intimated earlier, there is supposed to be an OPEN LABOR MARKET allowing the free flow of services (including education services) and skilled labor amongst all member-countries.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., Jee Geronimo’s Rappler article.
Under this scenario, multinational corporations operating within the ASEAN region may now transfer its manpower component across regional borders freely and without much restrictions.

Theoretically speaking therefore, and owing to free trade and movement among ASEAN countries, our Filipino college graduate by December 2015 should be able to compete in the global market against the labor complement of the nine (9) other ASEAN member-states. To put it in more concrete terms, a fresh Filipino college graduate of an education course should be able to compete for teaching jobs in Singapore – and earn the same wages as that of a Singaporean citizen by December 2015.

However, to be able to compete, our Filipino college graduate should already be equipped with “21st century skills and other competencies responsive to labor market needs, both local and international, as well as to the requirements of national development.”

Even with our K-12 shift, I am afraid that there will not be a level playing field for Filipino workers in the global arena by December 2015.

WHY?

Note that by the time ASEAN integration hits us on December 2015, our college graduates at that time would have graduated only from the old 10-year basic education curriculum. Having started the K-12 shift only last year, the first graduates of our new educational reforms with a 12-year basic educational program will graduate only in 2021.

At this point, there will be a gap of SIX (6) YEARS from 2015 all the way until 2021 when our Filipino workforce will be considered “sub-standard and not globally competent”.

This is hardly a comforting thought especially when you consider that our architects who graduate in 2015 and apply for jobs in Singapore, may only be considered as DRAFTERS, for lack of compliance with the 12-year basic education program.

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21 Commission on Higher Education Strategic Plan for 2011-2016, Item 6 on Major Targets, sub-item 6.1 on Rationalization of Higher Education Institutions and Programs
A fresh Filipino law graduate who wishes to take masteral degree courses in Singapore, England or the United States, will still be required to take additional general education courses, in the light of the 10-year basic education program.

SEEING THIS PROBLEM, WHAT CAN WE DO?

There is still a window of opportunity for us to correct this negative imbalance.

*Suggestion 1: Fast-track curriculum revision or offer short-term certificate courses. --*

If I may dare suggest, we can make use of this time between March 2014 until December 2015 to fast-track the process of integrating additional subjects into our present curricula, so as to ensure our present students’ global competitiveness by the time they graduate in 2015.

What particular subjects may be offered – as food for thought, considering the open labor market of Asean integration? For starters, we may integrate courses on comparative study of the different ASEAN member-states on the following:

- Legal systems
- Introduction to the culture and history
- International Business Transactions (including obligations and contracts, as well as cross-border contract negotiations)
- Labor and immigration laws

Expanding it further, we can even dovetail our efforts at curbing the negative impact of the K-12 shift.

College professors without subject loads for two years due to the K-12 shift, will teach the short term certificate courses or bridging programs for global competitiveness FOR A MUCH LARGER MARKET --- the graduates from the old 10-year basic education curriculum.
Personally, I think this must be done because there is already a danger, as it is, of losing corporate middle management positions to foreigners.

Note that our middle management personnel are indubitably graduates of the old 10-year basic education program. Unless they are re-trained, re tooled and equipped with skills for the handling of transnational commercial transactions, among others, it is altogether possible that our Filipino middle-management employees may be eased out in favour of more globally-equipped and competent foreigners.

Even without the ASEAN 2015 integration, this is already happening in some multinational corporations in the business process and research outsourcing industry.

Suggestion 2: Adherence to a common qualifications framework recognized by the ASEAN member-countries and the world.

My niece and god-daughter Peejay is a graduate of the UP College of Education. She has a double degree in European Languages and Special Education. She had also taken several units for her masteral degree in Education. It took her some time to find work as a teacher locally, as she was considered “over-qualified”. Moreover, there were not many special education schools in the Philippines.

Eventually, she went to Singapore and applied for a teaching job, and submitted her transcript of records. The Singaporean school asked her to go back to the Philippines to get a more complete description of her subjects and course.

While I can honestly attest to the capabilities of my niece, the fact remains that it was difficult for her to be hired and prove her worth solely on the basis of her UP transcript.

As it turned out, the Singaporean school could not figure out the competencies of my niece, because the transcript and course descriptions given by the UP Registrar’s office merely provided a one or two sentence description of the contents of the course. The Singaporean employer school wanted to know what my niece could already do after she shall have completed and passed the subject.
Inasmuch as it was not possible to change her transcript and course descriptions, she had to return to the Philippines twice to look for her former professors, get a copy of their respective course syllabus and request for a longer descriptive narrative of the envisioned objectives of the course.

I believe that the Filipino worker has its own special niche in the global labor market. As a people, we are known to be good English speakers, industrious, resilient, naturally caring and nurturing, hospitable and easily adaptable. In other countries, the employers look for Filipino workers – to fill up jobs in nursing, medicine, teachers, caregivers, domestic helpers, construction workers, precisely because of these character traits.

That is our strength as a people. This is our niche as a people. This is the human equivalent of branding.

That said, let us grab this opportunity and can help our graduates compete and get hired even against the other nationalities of the other ASEAN member-countries, by highlighting their competencies and strengths on paper under a qualifications and quality reference framework (I don’t care by whatever name it is called), recognized as a standard by the ASEAN countries.

**Suggestion 3: Ensure safeguards to avoid the unnecessary flooding of foreign labor into the local market, and the easing out of our Filipino workers**

The Asian Development Bank noted that greater integration in Asia (and ASEAN) will bring benefits by reducing inequalities between the countries, but also potentially huge risks, as when income inequalities within countries increase. ADB theorizes that allowing workers to move across borders more freely would also help reduce income disparities, for which reason countries should improve its policy, regulatory and institutional frameworks (e.g., complicated trade procedures, cumbersome customs clearance) to boost intra-regional activity.²²

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The ideal situation should be one wherein we graduate our students, so that they can be employed here in the Philippines and contribute to the national development and increase the national revenue.

The stark reality is that the Philippines will always be relegated to a labor-exporting country for as long as there is a dearth of employment opportunities in the Philippines. Our people have no choice but to seek greener pastures abroad. That is a given, and unless radical changes are made, this situation will continue for the next few years.

I am sure our OFWs would want to come home and work here, if they had any choice – what with OFW phenomena of children growing up without parents and its consequent psychological effects.

So the question that I would like to propound to you is this:

Are we educating our students to fill in the demands of the labor market abroad as envisioned under the ASEAN 2015 integration? Is this going to be our goal as educators? Are we not sustaining the brain drain? How do we change the paradigm and make them stay? Is there anything we can do from an educator’s view point?

Corollary to this, did you know that last 13 January 2014, the Department of Labor listed fifteen different “hard-to-fill” occupations that would allow the entry of foreign workers to the Philippines, on account of an alleged skills shortage?

Included in the occupational shortage list alleged derived from a series of survey and consultation with concerned stakeholders are the following: architect, chemical engineer, chemist, environmental planner, fisheries technologist, geologist, guidance counselor, licensed librarian, medical technologist, sanitary engineer, computer numerical control machinist, assembly technician, test technician, pilot and aircraft mechanic.23

23 Mayen Jamaylin, Phl opens up hard-to-fill jobs to foreign workers. Philippine Star, 13 January 2014. http://m.philstar.co.314191/show/ae7e29c0c79329028c935ca413f2339/
Renowned Hall of Famer and one of the PRC recognized Top Ten Librarians in the Philippines Fe Angela Verzosa\(^24\) raised alarm bells and said that “the reason why there is a shortage of librarians is because we require our librarians to be licensed. But allowing the entry of foreign librarians will not do justice to the many librarians available for the positions but sadly lacking the required license.”\(^25\) Reacting to the news that foreign experts who would apply for listed occupations will be exempted from free and other requirements, she commented that “it would be very unjust if foreigners who are not required by their own country to pass a licensure examination may be hired as librarians but preventing our own citizens to secure said jobs precisely because they failed the exam.”\(^26\)

Mrs. Verzosa has raised a very valid point – and I agree with her one hundred percent!!! As she noted, “the transition to globalization is best achieved after local safeguards are put in place to protect the interests of our Filipino citizens.”\(^27\)

Certainly, we cannot --- and should not – be eased out of our own labor market!

Indeed, there are constitutional provisions which ought to protect and prioritize our Filipino citizens for local employment opportunities. Thus:

**Article VII – NATIONAL ECONOMY AND PATRIMONY**

Section 12. The State shall promote the preferential use of Filipino labor, domestic materials and locally produced goods, and adopt measures that help make them competitive.

- in conjunction with –

Section 13. The State shall pursue a trade policy that serves the general welfare and utilizes all forms and arrangements of

\(^{24}\) [https://paarl.wikispaces.com/Verzosa,+Fe+Angela+M.](https://paarl.wikispaces.com/Verzosa,+Fe+Angela+M.)

\(^{25}\) Dr. Verzosa’s comments are lifted from a Facebook thread, and per my actual actual phone interview on 26 February 2014 at 8:30 p.m.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
exchange on the basis of equality and reciprocity.

Section 14. The sustained development of a reservoir of national talents consisting of Filipino scientists, entrepreneurs, professionals, managers, high-level technical manpower and skilled workers and craftsmen in all fields shall be promoted by the State. The State shall encourage appropriate technology and regulate its transfer for the national benefit. The practice of all professions in the Philippines shall be limited to Filipino citizens, save in cases prescribed by law.

This should be juxtaposed with the Labor Code provision on the employment of foreigners, to wit:

Article 40. Employment permit for non-resident aliens. Any alien seeking admission to the Philippines for employment purposes and any domestic or foreign employer who desires to engage an alien for employment in the Philippines shall obtain an employment permit from the Department of Labor and Employment.

The employment permit may be issued to a non-resident alien or to the applicant employer after a determination of the non-availability of a person in the Philippines who is competent, able and willing at the time of application to perform the services for which the alien is desired.

For an enterprise registered in preferred areas of investment, said employment permit may be issued upon recommendation of the government agency charged with the supervision of said registered enterprise.

Similarly, there are also specific provisions and procedures in the Immigration laws, as well as the Foreign Investments Act.
relating to the nationalized industries of which only a percentage can be owned by foreigners.

While the existing legal framework protects our Filipino workers, it is unfortunate that these constitutional and statutory guarantees can be subverted by a simple administrative concession of creating an occupational shortage list.

This should not be so. **HUWAG NAMAN PO!**

In conclusion, we have two things hanging in the balance.

The Philippine roadmap toward Asean 2015 integration envisions the attainment of inclusive growth and sustainable national development driven by the formation of high-level technically competent and knowledgeable human resource under a liberalized trade economy. It is a pragmatic approach to the realities of the 21st century, where people are now more closely connected by modern technological advances in communication and transportation, thereby virtually dissolving previous barriers of time and space.

The benefits of the ASEAN 2015 integration and homogeneity in reference to the global platform are obvious; the goals of reducing inequalities and income disparities between member-countries are noble indeed.

It is easy to be swayed and think: Let’s go – this is our time to become a tiger economy (vestiges of the Ramos administration circa 1992-1998)!

The above notwithstanding, it is believed that these mechanisms can only be short-term solutions, and may even be our downfall. Our dream of achieving the status of a tiger economy will never be attained, and we shall remain impoverished as a people, unless we firmly address the deeply rooted causes for our economic malaise – the issues of graft and corruption, failure to level the playing field, and lack of a concrete economic and political vision arising from a general leadership birthed from patronage politics.

We cannot escape ASEAN 2015. The world is growing smaller day by day – the wonders of technology and the efficiency of internet transactions have made it so. Global integration will come, whether we like it or not.
So by all means, let us embrace it and use it to our advantage.

But in embracing integration, let us not forget to “fix our own house,” protect ourselves, and preserve our rights as individuals, and our identity as a people and a nation.

MARAMING SALAMAT PO SA INYONG LAHAT.