

Implementing a One Asia Foundation Project at the University of Battambang: An Empirical Examination

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Abstract

The One Asia Foundation (OAF) is an incorporated non-profit organization, based in Japan. OAF provides funds to help the establishment of an Asia-wide community, and has over the years funded over 40 countries throughout Asia. The OAF provides funds for various cooperative activities through the use of economic, educational and cultural exchanges, and aims to improve people's mutual understanding; to create sustainable peace, security and development across Asia and the world. In Cambodia, there are two universities, including the University of Battambang (UBB), which have been funded by the OAF, their aim being to educate students on various activities related to culture, policy and a general knowledge of Asia, and particularly ASEAN countries. The ASEAN economic community (AEC) will be implemented on 1st January 2016, and the UBB has special training courses funded by the OAF on this topic, and these have been included in its curricula for first year students since 2013. The aim of this study is to understand students' perceptions and evaluations of the OAF project. The author invited 928 students (of which 50% was female) who had been on the special training courses on culture, policy and the economy, and asked them about this course as well as the latest news regarding ASEAN, and the current status of Asia as a whole. Empirical examination and fact-to-fact interview techniques were applied as part of the data collection process for this study. In terms of the results, most students expressed a positive view of the training courses run, and they said that the knowledge it had imparted would be very useful for them; to strengthen their ability to deal with future challenges within the AEC. In addition, 30 students from each training course were given an award of 100 US\$ by OAF for coming in the top 30 of a quiz run by the course. The study finds that the training courses not only benefited the students as a whole, but also the lecturers and staff at UBB who participated in the activities.

Keywords: Asia; ASEAN Community; Culture; Education; Policy; Students and University

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967, with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) then established in 2015. The three core pillars underpinning the AEC are security, economics and socio-cultural aspects (ASEAN 2015). Although the establishment of the AEC is known-of among university students, the lack of preparation for and awareness of the AEC among students is a cause for concern in terms of their level of adaptation to regional changes (e.g. Alzaza and Yaakub, 2011; Sum et al., 2014). Understanding the root causes of conflict among member countries, and the culture and history of other countries, should be taken into account when wishing to become an effective ASEAN member. A number of academic activities in relation to ASEAN, such as short courses, contests and debates, have been added to the curricular of higher education institutions and universities in Cambodia. A project funded by One Asia Foundation (OAF) was launched at the University of Battambang (UBB) in 2013, its aim being to educate students on a number of activities regarding Asian culture, policies and general knowledge, and particularly within the ASEAN countries. OAF is an incorporated non-profit organization based in Japan, and has funded projects in over 40 countries (OAF 2015). The OAF runs training courses for first-year students across all majors, the aim being to enhance their knowledge of ASEAN countries. In total, 928 students have been trained, and it is hoped the training courses will help the students prepare for and be aware of regional changes; to aid successful adaptation. The aim of the research for this study was to evaluate students' level of knowledge of ASEAN countries having taken the OA training course, to understand their perceptions of the OAF project, and also to understand the students' level of awareness of and preparation for the ASEAN community.

2. Methods

Data collection

The empirical research took place over two phases. First, course evaluation data (i.e. the students' marks) from 243 students who attended OA training courses during the 2014/2015 academic year were collected from the Department of Foundation Year of UBB. The data was collected from 13 majors across four faculties and one institute of the UBB. The 13 majors can be grouped into five fields of study: agriculture (horticulture, animal science and food processing), business administration (finance and banking, and management,

marketing and tourism), language (English and Korean), science and technology (civil engineering and information technology), and sociology (economics and rural development). During the second phase, 68 students were randomly selected out of the 243, then interviewed in order to gather data on their perceptions of the OA training courses.

Data analyses

Two-way frequencies of the chi-square test were used to test for significant differences between study preferences and genders. A one-way ANOVA was also applied to test whether the students' knowledge regarding ASEAN differed among the fields of study. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test for differences in the marks received between genders (as the categorical factor), after accounting for the effects of the covariate (age of student). First, interactions between the covariate and the categorical factor were tested. If these interactions were significant, it indicated that the slopes were not homogeneous and; thus, the parallelism assumption of the standard ANCOVA was not satisfied, but implied effects from the terms involved, even if the factors alone were not significant (García-Berthou and Moreno-Amich, 1993). When the interaction was non-significant, it was removed from the model to improve statistical power, and a standard ANCOVA design was then used (i.e. homogeneous slopes were assumed). Finally, the model tested differences between genders with age as the covariate, equivalent to comparing intercept or mean values of the response variable adjusted to the mean mark of the students (García-Berthou and Moreno-Amich, 1993). All statistical analyses were performed using R statistical software (R Core Team 2015).

3. Results

Fields of study, gender and ability of the students

Across the five fields of study, the gender ratio of the students in each field was not equal, suggesting that the field of study chosen was dependent on gender ($P < 0.001$). Business administration and language were preferred by women, whereas agriculture, science and technology, and sociology, were preferred by men (Table 1).

Table 1: Fields of study chosen by female and male students for academic year 2014/15.

Field of Study	Female	Male	Total
Business administration	61	36	97
Agriculture	17	27	44
Science and technology	7	32	39
Sociology	11	22	33
Languages	18	12	30
	$\chi^2 = 28.79; df = 4; P < 0.001$		243

On the students' level of knowledge regarding ASEAN, those studying business administration and languages received higher marks than those studying the other fields ($P < 0.05$), after taking into account the OA training courses (i.e. culture, education, policy, history and the current status of ASEAN), indicating that students who choose business administration and languages may be more interested in issues related to ASEAN than those who study other fields (Fig. 1).

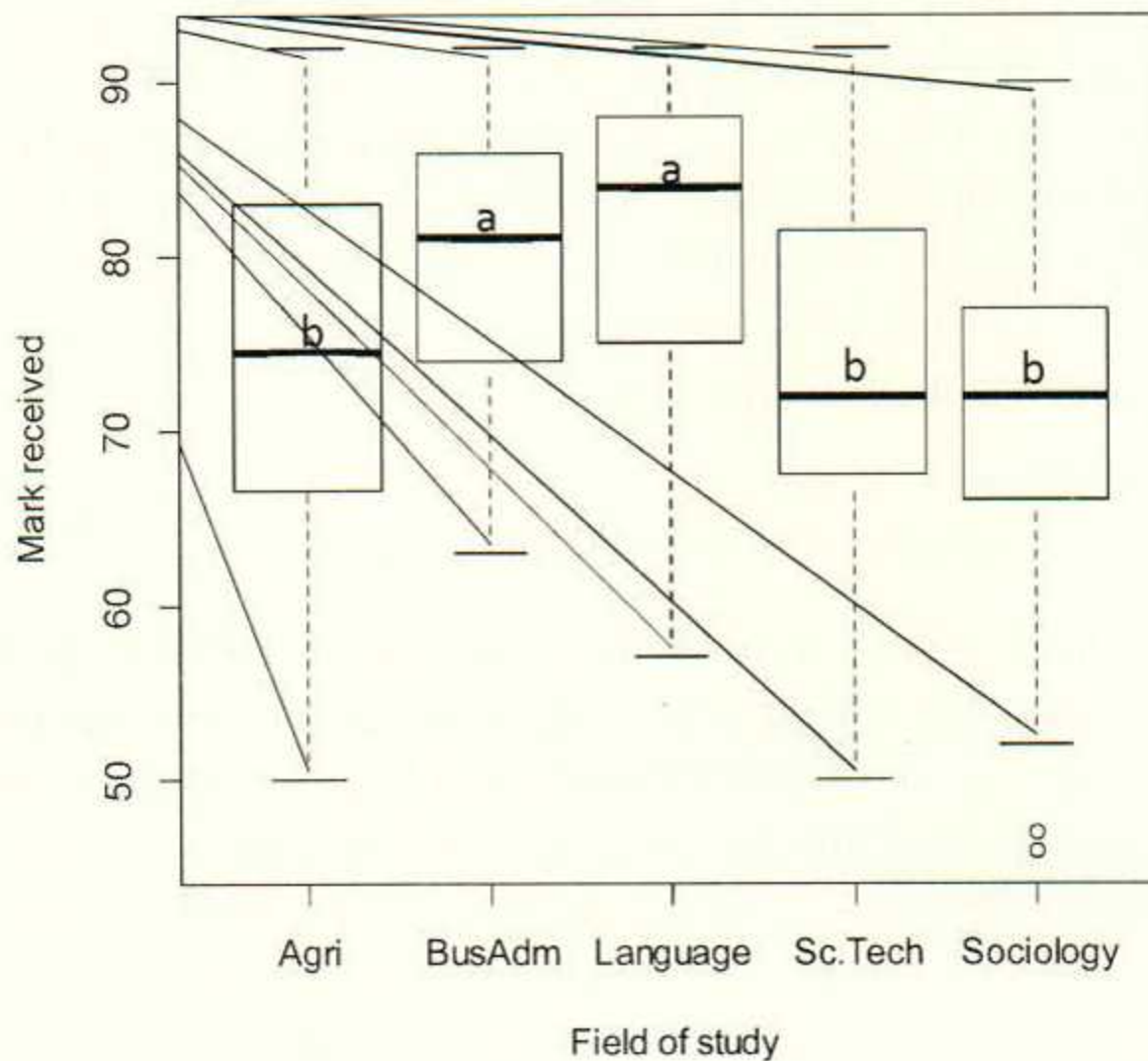


Fig. 1: Box-plot evaluation of students' awareness of ASEAN after taking the One Asia training course – by field of study. Note: total mark is 100. Agri = agriculture, BusAdm = business administration, and Sc.Tech = science and technology. Different letters (a, b) on the figure indicate a significant difference ($P < 0.05$), according to Tukey's HSD test.

Surprisingly, the relationship between the marks received by the students and their age differed between the two genders (i.e. a different intercept was found for the linear function; see Table 2 and 3), with women receiving higher marks than men at the same age, and with the marks received negatively related to age for both women and men (Fig. 2; Table 2). More than 95% of the students who attended the course received a mark over 60%, suggesting only a minority of the students may not be interested in or have a poor knowledge of ASEAN (Fig. 2).

Table 2: Significant linear regression functions ($y = a + bx$) for the marks received and ages of the students – by gender. Note: * $P < 0.05$.

Gender	Response Variable	Explanatory Variable	a	b	r^2	n	P
Female	Mark received	Age of the student	0.93	97.47	0.021	14	0.126
Male	Mark received	Age of the student	1.05	95.81	0.046	29	*

Table 3: Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for the effect of gender (as a categorical factor) on student ability. Note: Interactions between the covariate and the categorical factor were non-significant ($P > 0.05$) and were removed from the model; * $P < 0.001$.**

Source of Variation	Mark Received		
	SS	df	P
Age	1253.7	1	***
Gender	935.3	1	***
Residuals	18770.9	239	

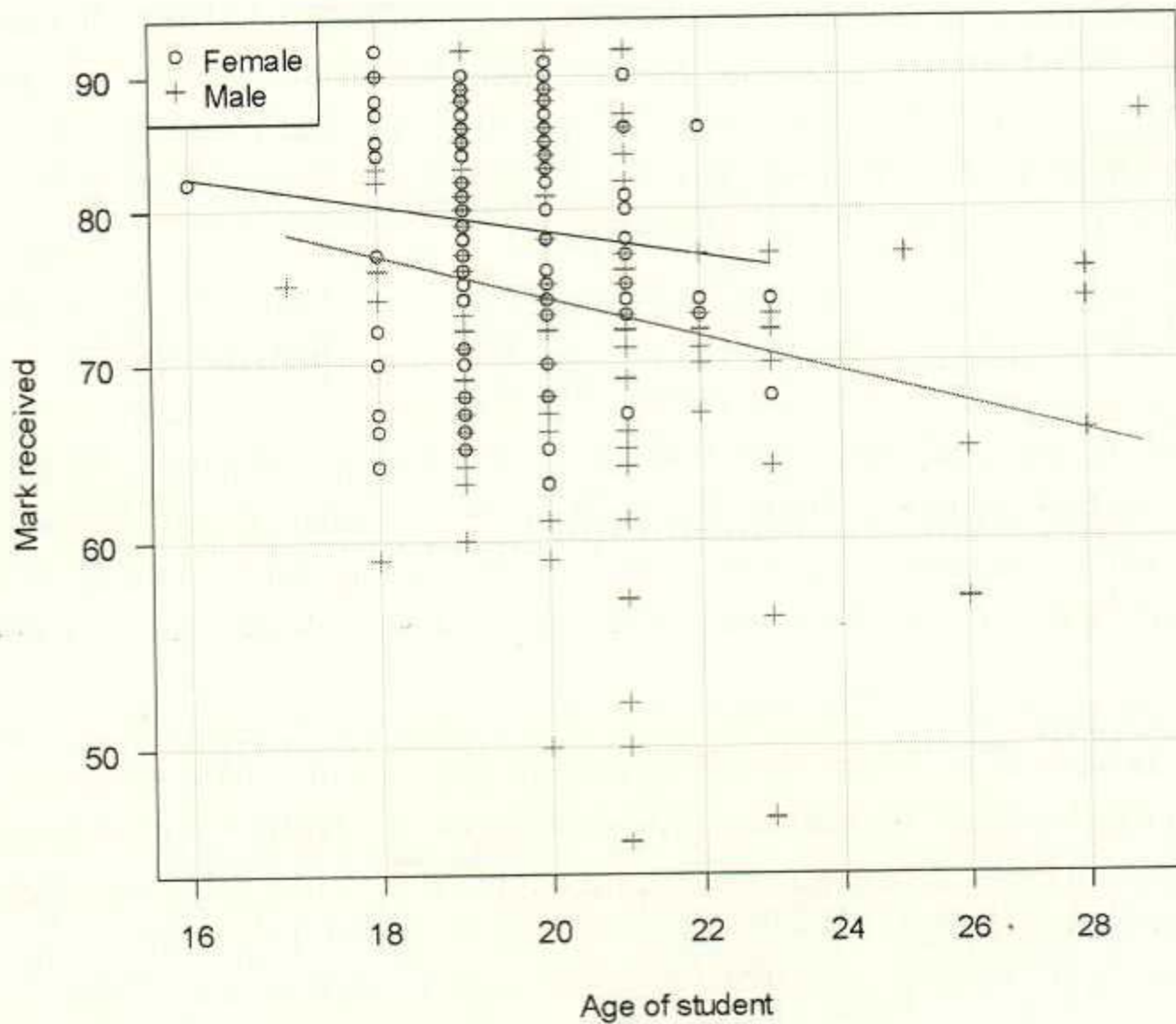


Fig. 2: Relationship between marks received and the age of the students – by gender. Note: The marks are from the course evaluation; maximum score of 100. See Table 2 for regression statistics. The log scale is for both genders.

Perceptions of and preparations for ASEAN among students

Most of the students who responded (91%) declared that taking an OA training course was necessary for them to understand more about the current status, policies, economies and development aspects of the ASEAN community, which will help them prepare for and improve their skills regarding the AEC. The courses also alerted them to the need to prepare themselves in advance, and forced them to study hard. In addition, awarding US\$100 to each of the top 30 students who attended the OA training courses made the students enjoy their learning experience. They stated that they would be willing to attend more courses regarding ASEAN and its member countries.

Although the coming of the AEC is known by the students, their only preparation for it is to learn English. English is the preferred working language among the ASEAN countries, so although Thai, Chinese and Korean language training courses are run at UBB, the most interest shown is in learning English.

However, as well as learning a language, acquiring other skills may also help students enhance job opportunities in the AEC, but the students showed they have little knowledge on what future challenges the AEC will bring in that regard, and how they can meet these challenges.

4. Discussion

In the context of the introduction of the AEC in 2016, the UBB's female students are studying business administration and languages, while the males are studying agriculture, science and technology, and sociology. The study's results also show that women are doing better in terms of learning subjects related to ASEAN and the AEC. However, among the students, learning English seems to be the only key way in which they are preparing for find a job in the AEC. Taking an OA training course helps them prepare for and be aware of future challenges brought-about by the establishment of the AEC, because they have little knowledge about it. These kinds of training course or activities should be added to high school curricula in Cambodia, order to improve students' knowledge and awareness of the AEC in advance.

This is not just an issue for students at UBB, but also for those studying at other universities in Cambodia; who also do not have an appropriate level of knowledge about the aims and purpose of ASEAN and the AEC (Sum et al., 2014). Guido and Abdullah (2011) have reported that Indonesians have little knowledge on the proposed formation of the ASEAN community. Although most of Indonesian respondents said they had not even heard of or read about the ASEAN Community, they said they believe that the three core pillars (i.e. security, economy and socio-cultural aspects) within the ASEAN community may benefit their country, its people, society and economy (Guido and Abdullah, 2011). However, according to studies, private company employees in Thailand with a higher education seem to understand more about the AEC (Pattum and Sutamaung, 2013; Tangthienthong and Yousapronpaiboon, 2015), indicating that the future challenges brought-about by the AEC may have more of a negative impact on those with a lower education level than on those with a higher education, leading to unequal levels of competition among such populations. However, one of the main purposes behind establishing the AEC is to address poverty and development among ASEAN countries (Thompson and Thianthai, 2010).

Improving people's knowledge of ASEAN and the AEC through education should be the target at all levels; to help improve people's awareness of these

institutions, help them prepare for their impacts, and ultimately maximize the benefits to be gained from their introduction.

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