

Is the ASEAN Economic Community Relevant To Gen Y Professionals?
A Comparative Study on Attitudes and Participation of Young Professionals in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam on ASEAN Economic Integration

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to investigate the awareness and perception of young professionals in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam countries on the ASEAN Economic Community (hereafter, AEC). Data from a survey of 575 young professionals, with approximately equal distribution from each country, were collected in June and July 2015. Research findings revealed that the knowledge and understanding of the AEC among the Gen Y professionals were still marginal. Although they lack awareness, young professionals had a good impression and perception of the AEC in connection with important benefits for them individually as well as for their country. Finally, the study revealed that the Gen Y professionals showed some level of optimistic attitude that they could succeed in the AEC as they thought that they were quite well prepared, having sufficient skills to work or to do business in other ASEAN countries.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community, young professionals, awareness

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Introduction

Emulating the initial success of European regionalism, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has set its objective to forge further regional integration among member countries and embarked upon the ambitious project of creating the ASEAN Community to be established effectively at the end of 2015. However, in contrast to European regionalism, ASEAN is elitist and state-centric and lacked public involvement in its formation (Benny, Moorthy, Daud, & Othman, 2012a and 2015b; Acharya, 2003; Benny & Abdullah, 2011; Moorthy & Benny, 2012 and 2013). Thus, there is a huge gap between the public and the elite in terms of decision-making and the formation of the ASEAN Community. The European experience has clearly shown that public opinion needs to be gauged and attended to for the success of the integration and for making effective decisions. Theories of regional integration have shown that opinions and participation of the public determines the success of such efforts (Abdullah & Benny, 2013; Benny & Abdullah, 2011; Moorthy & Benny, 2012, 2013; Collins, 2008; Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970; Hewstone, 1986; Ortuoste, 2008).

Problem Statement

ASEAN has set the theme for its year of declaration, 2015: "One People, One Community, One Vision." However, in contrast to this theme, ASEAN processes are characterized as elitist, state-centric, and lacking in public involvement. Given the current plurality of political systems in the region, it is difficult to gauge the voice of the public by a direct voting mechanism as in the European context. Thus, a more feasible measure is the effective use of public opinion surveys. However, there is no comprehensive measurement on the support, opinions, or consensus of the public on the creation of the ASEAN Community. There is also an absence of studies that have attempted to capture the voices of the public on an ASEAN Community. This is not to mention the absence of studies about public aspiration of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community – namely the political security community, economic community, and socio-cultural community.

This study aims to compare opinions among Gen Y professionals pertaining to the establishment of the AEC in three ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam) as the timeline for the establishment of ASEAN Community are fast approaching. The youth – those between 18 and 30 years old – are an important segment of people in ASEAN countries and deserve to be attended to as it is expected that the Gen Y in ASEAN will increase to 55% by 2020. The three main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine to what extent the Gen Y professionals are aware of the AEC.
2. To investigate their perception of the relevancy of the AEC.
3. To analyze whether awareness relates to perceived relevancy.

Literature Review

The experience of European integration has clearly shown that public opinion is among the key elements for the success of the integration and the making of effective decisions that can satisfy the public. Theories of regional integration have shown that opinions and participation of the general public would determine the success of such efforts (Benny, Ramli, & Siew Yean, 2014; Abdullah & Benny, 2013; Benny & Abdullah, 2011; Moorthy & Benny, 2012a, 2012b, and 2013; Collins, 2008).

The current literature on ASEAN shows a notable absence of studies that attempt to capture the voices of the young professionals on the AEC. Studies on the ASEAN community are numerous, yet these studies were conducted on or by government officials and academics using an elite decision making approach for assessing establishment processes or social, political, and economic challenges of ASEAN (Acharya, 2003; Hew, Wah, & Lee, 2004; Hew, 2007; Guerrero, 2008), as well as the readiness of the business sector for the AEC (Abidin, Loh, & Aziz, 2012; Mugijayani & Kartika, 2012). Studies on public opinion about ASEAN are quite rare. There have only been a few studies so far involving public opinion about ASEAN (Abdullah & Benny, 2013; Benny, 2014; Benny & Abdullah, 2011; Benny, Moorthy, Daud, & Othman, 2015a, 2015b; Benny, Rashila & Tham, 2014; Benny, Siew

Yean, & Ramli, 2015; Moorthy & Benny, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Thompson & Thianthai, 2008), but those studies were based on the public opinion surveys conducted in 2009/2010 and do not discuss opinions, attitudes and aspirations for the AEC among young professionals nearing the date of its establishment.

A review of literature on public opinion about the ASEAN Economic Community found only one study written by Guido Benny, Tham Siew Yean and Rashila Ramli (2015) based on a survey conducted in 2010. It investigates the extent of public attitudes and aspirations in four dimensions—support, commitment, perceived benefits, and aspirations — among the public in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and discovers that the attitudes of the public were positive, but there were differences in the extent of support, commitment, and perceived benefits.

This study differs from the previous study in three ways: First, none of previous studies focuses the opinion and attitude of young professionals of the AEC, . Second, the study investigates opinions towards the AEC from the perspective of objective and subjective awareness as well as perceived relevancy – which is somewhat different from previous study. Third, the object of the study is different from previous studies because Vietnam is involved to represent a newer member of the ASEAN.

Research Variables and Indicators

Research variables used in this study are organized based on the three research objectives. First, in order to achieve the first research objective “to examine to what extent the Gen Y professionals know and understand the AEC,” we measure: (1) objective awareness of the AEC (4 open-ended indicators); and (2) subjective awareness (measured with 6 Likert-scales indicators. Most subjective awareness indicators were adapted from the questions on the 2009/2010 ASEAN public opinion study conducted by Abdullah, Benny, and Omar Din (2010) and Moorthy and Benny (2012b).

The second objective of this study is “to investigate their perception of relevancy of

the AEC.” This objective is measured using three indicators of perceived relevancy. Most indicators of this variable were adapted from the questions on the 2009/2010 ASEAN public opinion study (Abdullah, Benny & Omar Din, 2010; Abdullah & Benny, 2013; Benny & Abdullah, 2011; Benny, Moorthy, Daud & Othman, 2015a, 2015b; Benny, Rashila, & Tham 2014; Benny, Tham, & Rashila 2015; Moorthy & Benny, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), and have undergone a thorough examination in a series of focus group discussions. Details of the questions are presented in the appendix.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative survey for collecting responses in three countries. It was administered using purposive quota sampling in each city one city in each country (Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, Jakarta in Indonesia, and Ha Noi in Vietnam). A set of structured self-administered questionnaires were used and were translated into three national languages – Indonesian, Malay, and Vietnamese. Questions were tested with pilot surveys of 50 respondents in each country.

The survey was conducted in the capital city in each country between June and July 2015. In each city, the study targeted 190 young professional respondents between 18 and 30 years old. The study used purposive sampling and required that the respondents be employed – thus, respondents who do not work or have no formal working experience should not be included in the study. For this reason, the study took data from those in Graduate School (Master and Ph.D. programs) as rarely do students in Bachelor education have working experience.

To collect responses from survey respondents, the enumerators directly met the respondents in public spaces on university campuses (such as cafeterias, libraries, or university corridors) and asked them to fill out the self-administered questionnaire. The respondents who were selected in the study satisfied the working status requirement and purposive quota sampling design, including:

- Gender (male and female @ 50%).
- Professional education/working background - (the quotas for the types of programs were: business, banking & economics 30%; social science, political sciences & law 30%; engineering, technology & science 30%; other (literature, education, etc.) 10%.

The study used campus networks in which the researchers had contacts, including professors, deans, or lecturers of the main public and private universities in Malaysia², Indonesia³, and Vietnam⁴. Also, research was conducted in focus group discussions with professors or lecturers in each city to get their knowledge, insights, and opinions regarding the issues under study.

The study used univariate statistics procedures to obtain a descriptive statistical profile of the respondents. Whenever relevant, data were analyzed using the univariate analysis statistics such as frequency, percentage, mode, median, and mean. To simplify the analysis, the frequency distributions of 6- point scales were regrouped into two response categories. For example, those who somewhat disagree, disagree, and completely disagree were combined into one group; and those who somewhat agree with the statement were combined with those who agree and completely agree.

Research Findings

Respondents' Demography

The respondents involved in the study consisted of the young professionals who were attending graduate schools in leading public and private universities in each city, since

² In Malaysia, respondents were taken from the Postgraduate Programme in the National University of Malaysia.

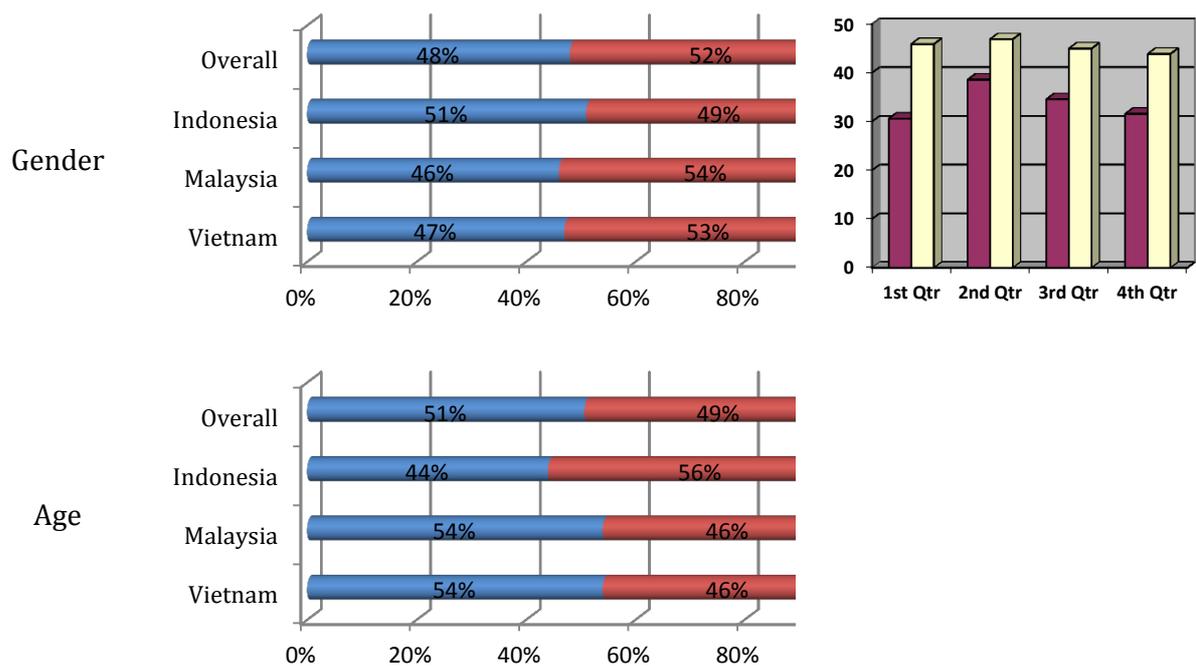
³ In Indonesia, respondents were taken from the Postgraduate Programme in the University of Indonesia and Binus University.

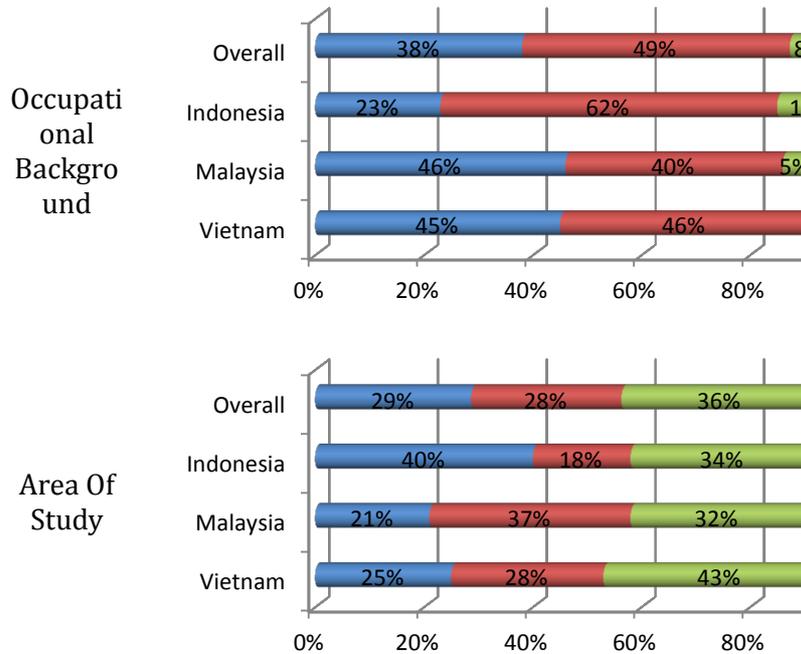
⁴ In Vietnam, respondents were taken from the Postgraduate Programme in the Vietnam National University.

it was logistically impossible (given time and resource constraints) to extend the sample to include the general public in the three countries. The survey involved 193 Malaysians, 192 Indonesians, and 190 Vietnamese. A description of the respondents is summarized in Figure 1.

In terms of gender, the respondents in general were almost balanced between male (48%) and female (52%). In Indonesia and Vietnam, 51% of respondents were male and 49% were female. In Malaysia, female respondents made up 54% of respondents, while 46% were male.

Figure 1 Respondents Profile





The study targeted those between 18 and 30 years old, and divided them into two groups – 18-25 and 26-30. Those between 18 and 25 years old form the majority of respondents in Indonesia and Vietnam (each 54%). In Malaysia, however, the majority of respondents were those between 26 and 30 years old (56%).

The study also targeted those in universities because of the complexity of the questions. In Indonesia, the areas of study of the respondents are as follow: 40% business or economics, 18% social sciences, 34% engineering or sciences, and 8% others (humanities or education). In Malaysia, the areas of study of the respondents are as follow: 21% business or economics, 37% social sciences, 32% engineering or sciences, and 10% others (humanities or education). In Vietnam, the areas of study of the respondents are as follow: 25% business or economics, 28% social sciences, 43% engineering or sciences, and 4% others (humanities or education).

Finally, concerning occupational background, the majority of respondents in Indonesia were working in the private sector (62%), followed by public sector employees

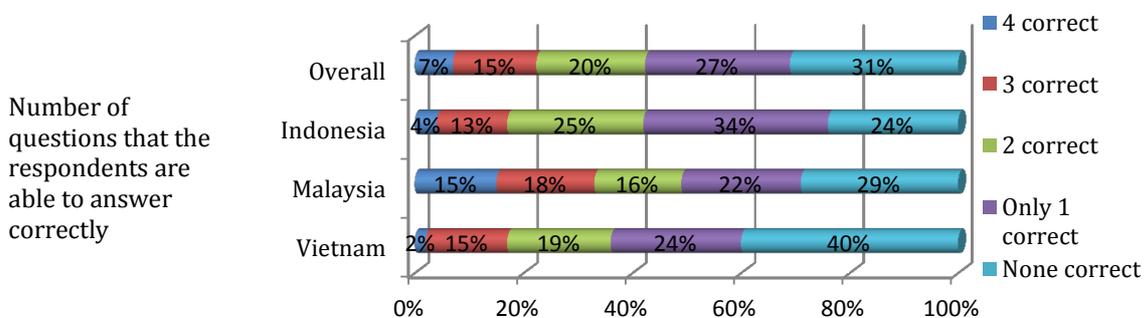
(23%), self-employed (13%), and other occupation (2%). In Malaysia, the occupational background was as follows: public sector (46%), private sector (40%), and self-employed (14%). In Vietnam, private sector employees (45%) were the largest group, followed by public sector employees (34%), self-employed professionals (12%), and other occupations (9%).

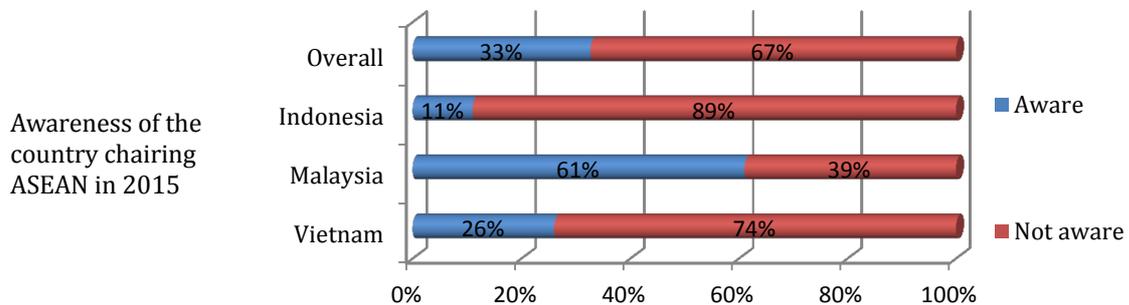
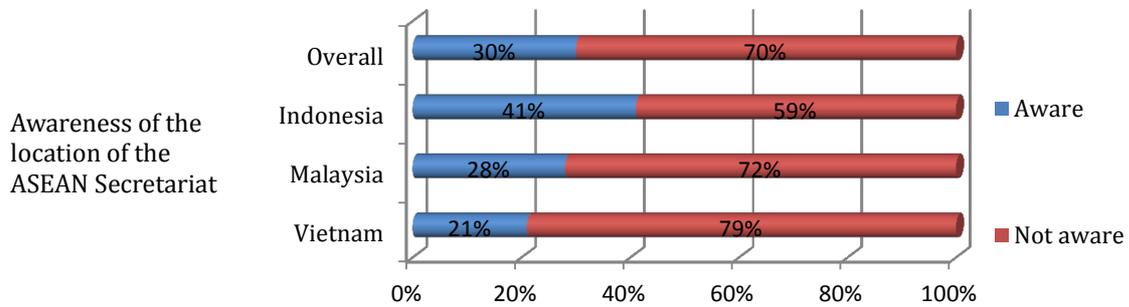
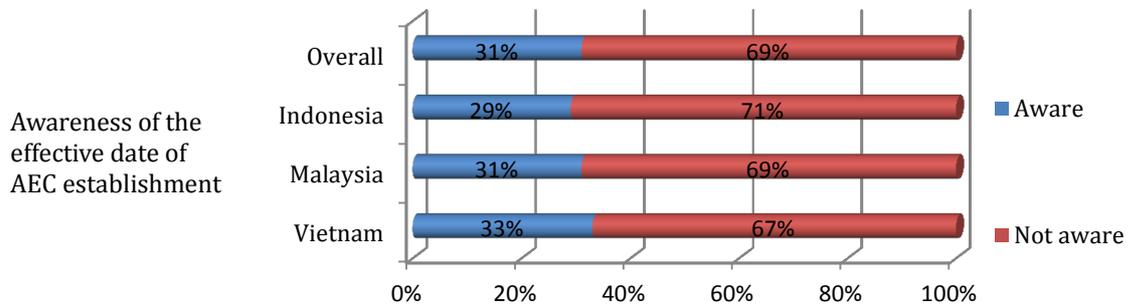
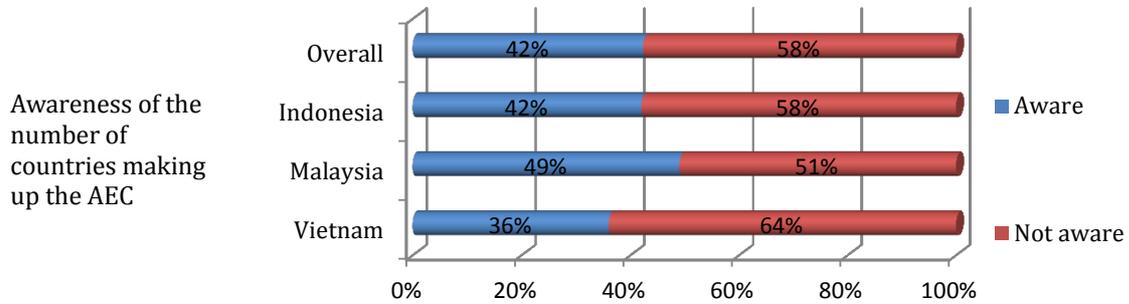
Objective Awareness of the ASEAN Economic Community

To measure the objective awareness of the young professionals about the AEC, four open-ended objective questions were asked. The level of awareness was measured by the number of correct answers to the questions. Thus, if a respondent could not correctly answer the question or did not answer a question, the study categorized the respondent as unaware of the issue mentioned in the question. The answers and level of awareness is displayed in Figure 2.

Based on the four questions posed to the respondents, their level of awareness was low. Less than half (42% in general: 42% in Indonesia, 49% in Malaysia, and 36% in Vietnam) were aware of the number of countries making up the AEC. The awareness regarding the effective date of AEC establishment was even lower. Less than one-third respondents (31% in three countries: 29% in Indonesia, 31% in Malaysia, and 33% in Vietnam) were able to answer correctly that 2015 is the effective date for establishing the AEC.

Figure 1 Awareness of the ASEAN Economic Community





In addition, the awareness of the location of the ASEAN Secretariat was also low – less than one-third of respondents (30% in general, 41% in Indonesia, 28% in Malaysia,

and 21% in Vietnam) knew that the ASEAN Secretariat is located in Jakarta. It is an irony that, although Indonesian respondents were more aware than those in Malaysia and Vietnam, the majority of Indonesian Gen Y professionals (59%) were not aware that the ASEAN Secretariat is located in their capital city Jakarta.

The awareness that Malaysia is the country chairing the ASEAN in 2015 are known only by one-third of respondents (11% in Indonesia, 61% in Malaysia, and 26% in Vietnam). The results showed that Malaysian respondents were more aware about their country chairing the ASEAN this year. However, the awareness in Malaysia was very much in contrast to the awareness in Indonesia and Vietnam.

Finally, it can be concluded that, based on the numbers of correct answers, the awareness of the AEC was small. The results show that only 7% of Gen Y professionals (4% in Indonesia, 15% in Malaysia and 2% in Vietnam) were able to answer all four questions correctly. Only 15% (13% in Indonesia, 18% in Malaysia, and 15% in Vietnam) answered three out of four questions correctly. The number of respondents who could answer two questions correctly is 20% (22% in Indonesia, 16% in Malaysia, and 19% in Vietnam). However, there were 27% (25% in Indonesia, 22% in Malaysia, and 24% in Vietnam) who answered only one question correctly. Finally, the largest group of respondent (30%) of Gen Y respondents (22% in Indonesia, 29% in Malaysia, and 40% in Vietnam) could not answer any questions correctly.

The study also determined whether the level of awareness differs based on the respondents' characteristics - gender, age, education level, and area of study - by conducting comparative statistical tests using Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests. These statistical tests revealed that among the four demographic variables, only area of study influenced the level of awareness. Further analysis found that those from education studies tended to have a better awareness than the other groups. Those who studied business, banking, or economics tended to have a better awareness than those who studied sciences, engineering, and technology or social sciences or law. The social sciences group

showed the lowest level of awareness among the four groups.

Subjective Understanding of the AEC

The purpose of this variable is to investigate the degree of understanding of the concept of AEC. This objective was measured by asking seven Likert scale subjective statements that showed whether they understand the concept of the AEC. The statements as well as the results are exhibited in Figure 3. The study revealed that:

- The majority of respondents in three countries (60% in general, 73% in Indonesia, 53% in Malaysia, and 55% in Vietnam) claimed that they also had some level of knowledge about the AEC.

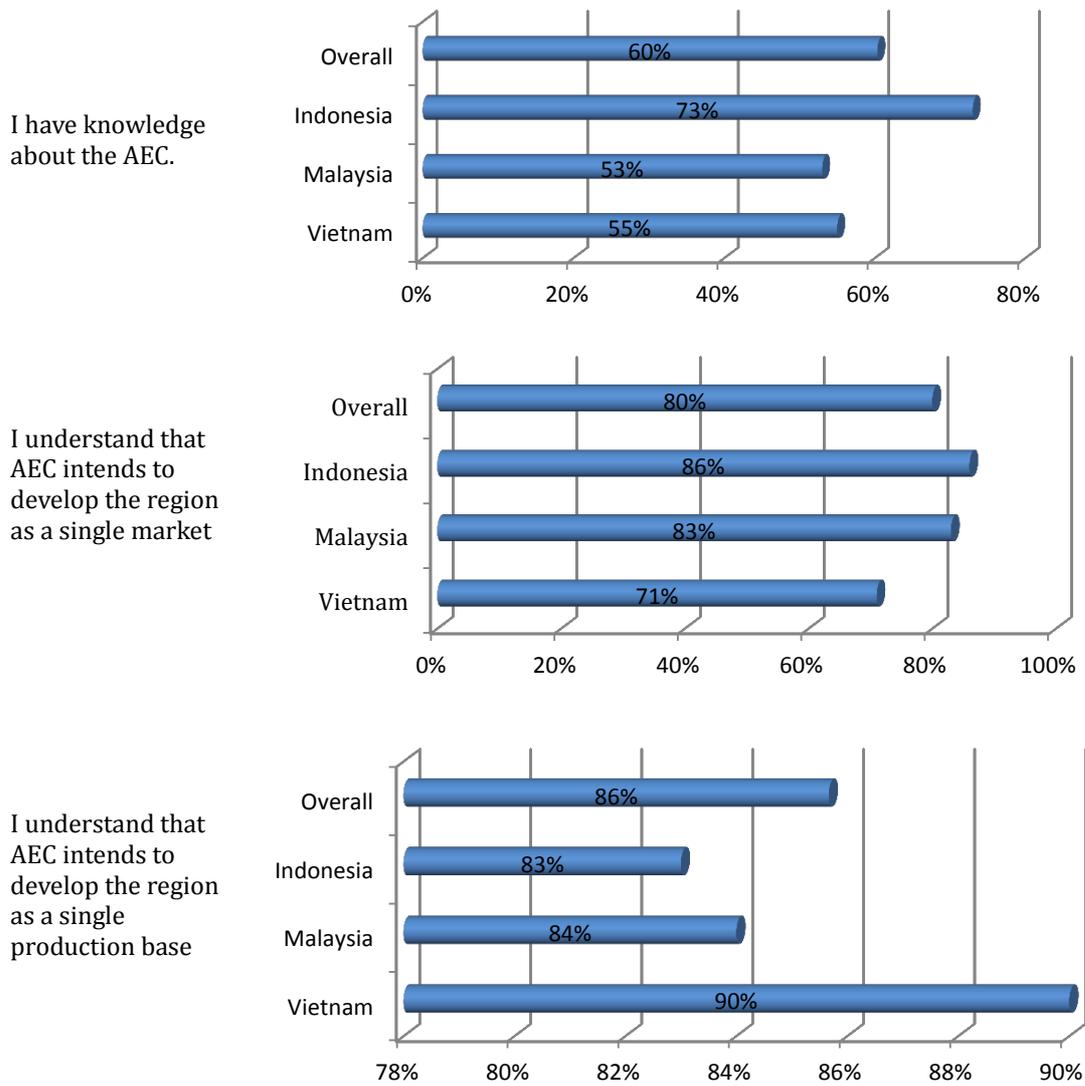
- Most respondents (80% in general, 86% in Indonesia, 83% in Malaysia, and 71% in Vietnam) claimed to have an understanding about the AEC's intention to develop the region as a single market.

- Most respondents (86% in general, 83% in Indonesia, 84% in Malaysia, and 90% in Vietnam) claimed to have some level of understanding about the intention of the AEC to develop the region as a single production base.

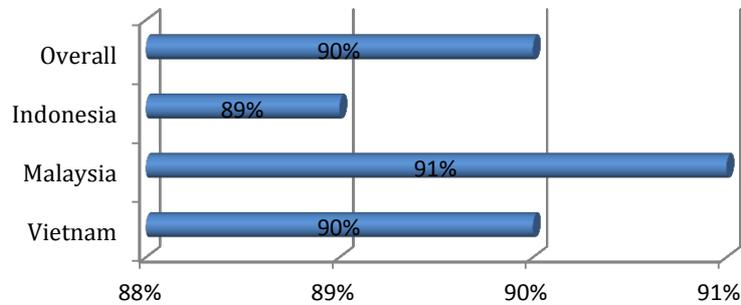
- Most respondents (90% in general, 89% in Indonesia, 91% in Malaysia, and 90% in Vietnam) claimed to have a good understanding about the aspiration of the AEC for freer flow of investment in the region.

- Most respondents (91% in general, 91% in Indonesia, 89% in Malaysia, and 93% in Vietnam) claimed to have a good understanding about the AEC's aspiration for free flow of skilled/professional ASEAN workers.

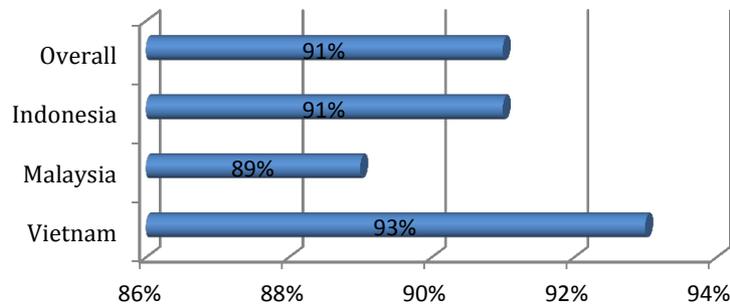
Figure 3 Understanding of the ASEAN Economic Community



I understand that AEC aspires for freer flows of investment in the region



I understand that AEC aspires for free flows of skilled/professional ASEAN workers in the region



The study further identified whether the level of subjective understanding is different by respondents' demographic profiles- gender, age, education level, and area of study. The study revealed that:

- There was no significant difference in the level of subjective understanding of the two genders, except about the AEC aspiration for the free flow of investment in the region, where males showed a better understanding than females.

- There was no significant difference in the level of subjective understanding of the two age groups, except regarding the AEC aspiration for freer flow of investment in the region, where the older Gen Y professionals exhibited a better understanding.

- There was no significant difference in the level of subjective understanding among the three education level groups, except on the understanding that the AEC intends to develop the region as a single production base and the understanding that the AEC aspires to be a region of equitable economic development.

- The level of understanding regarding the AEC intending to develop the region as a single market was higher among the business, banking, or economics; education and literature students; and social sciences and law groups compared to those of the engineering, technology, or sciences group.

- The level of understanding that the AEC aspiring for a free flow of skilled/professional ASEAN workers in the region was higher among the business, banking or economics; and social sciences or law groups compared to those from engineering, technology, or sciences group as well as the education or literature group.

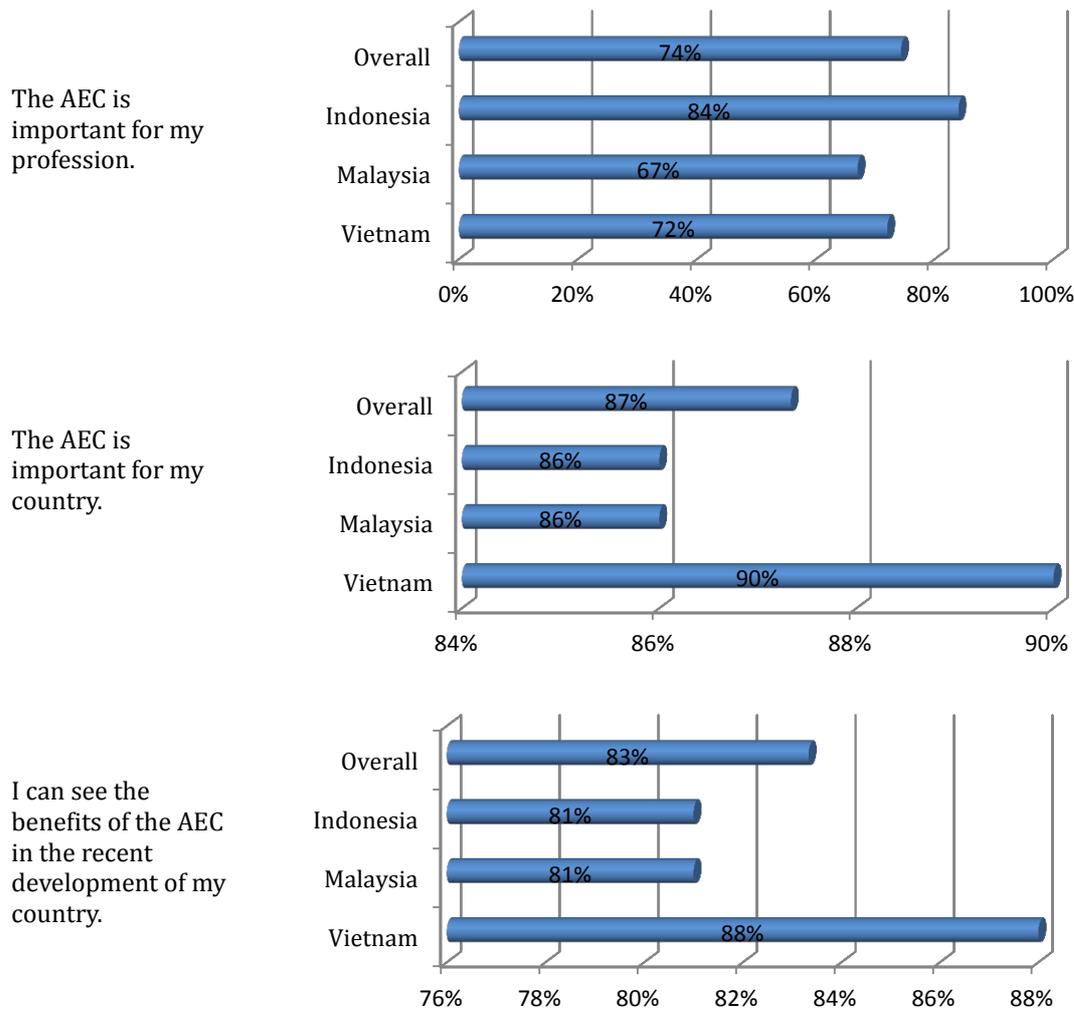
- The level of understanding that the AEC aspiring for a region of equitable economic development was higher among the business, banking, or economics; and social sciences or law groups compared to those from the engineering, technology, or sciences group as well as the education or literature group.

Perceived Relevancy of the ASEAN Economic Community

Perceived relevancy measures the relevance or importance of the AEC to the Gen Y professionals individually as well as to their country. Further, it also inquired whether they could see the benefits of the AEC in the recent development in their country as well as their opinion on the importance of several features of the AEC drafted in the AEC Blueprint (see Figure 6).

The study found that a great majority of Gen Y professionals surveyed perceived the AEC as important for them individually as well as their country. Almost three-quarters of respondents (74% in general, 84% in Indonesia, 67% in Malaysia, and 72% in Vietnam) stated that the AEC is important for their profession. In addition, a larger majority (87% in general, 86% in Indonesia and Malaysia, and 90% in Vietnam) thought that the AEC is important for their country and even claimed that they could see the benefits of the AEC in the recent development of their country (agreement of 83% in general, 81% in Indonesia and Malaysia, and 88% in Vietnam).

Figure 4 *Perceived Importance of the ASEAN Economic Community*



Further, the study assessed whether the perception of relevance differs based on respondents' demographic characteristics – gender, age, education level, and area of study – by conducting comparative Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests. Details these tests showed several interesting findings:

- There was no significant difference of perceived relevance based on gender.
- There was no significant difference of perceived relevance based on age.

- Level of education influenced two of the three perceived relevance indicators: perceived the importance of the AEC for their country and its people; and ability to see the benefits of the AEC in the recent development in their country. Interestingly, those with higher education show less perceived relevance than those with lower education.

- Area of study influenced two of the three perceived relevance indicators. In general, the perceived relevance among those who studied business, economics, or banking; social sciences or law; and education were higher than those who studied engineering, technology, or sciences.

Analysis on the Influence of Awareness on Perceived Relevancy

In order to analyze the relationship between awareness of the AEC among the young professional respondents and their perception of relevancy, bivariate test using Pearson's correlation was used, as exhibited in Table 1 below. In general, the study found a positive relationship between awareness and perception of the AEC relevancy.

Table 1 *Bivariate Test between Awareness and Perceived Relevancy*

Bivariate relationship between		Sig. (2 tailed)	Pearson Correlation	Decision*)
Objective awareness**)	AEC is important for my profession	0.036	0.089	Very weak positive relationship
Objective awareness**)	AEC is important for my country and its people	0.021	0.097	Very weak positive relationship
Objective awareness**)	I can see the benefits of AEC in the recent development of my country	0.241	0.050	No significant relationship
Subjective awareness***)	AEC is important for my profession	0.000	0.488	Strong positive relationship
Subjective awareness***)	AEC is important for my country and its people	0.000	0.259	Weak positive relationship
Subjective awareness***)	I can see the benefits of AEC in the recent development of my country	0.000	0.305	Moderate positive relationship

Note:

*) Decision is based on Pearson's Correlation at 0.05 of 2-tailed significant level

**) Objective knowledge is measured by the number of correct answers to the objective questions

***) Subjective knowledge is measured by "I have knowledge about the AEC" indicator

The study shows that there are weak-to-strong relationships between subjective awareness and perceived relevancy. The relationship between subjective awareness and the importance of the AEC for the respondents' profession was strong. There was a weak positive relationship between subjective awareness and perceived relevancy for their country and its people. In addition, the relationship between subjective awareness and benefits of the AEC in recent development was at a moderate level.

Further, the table also shows an interesting finding: the relationships between objective awareness and perceived relevancy tended to be weaker than those between subjective awareness and perception. The relationship between objective awareness and the relevancy of the AEC to the individual's profession as well as to the country and its people was very weak. Further, there was no significant relationship between objective awareness and the benefits of the AEC in recent development in their country. Thus, it is arguable that there was a very weak relationship between awareness and perception of the AEC relevancy.

Conclusion

The study determined that the objective and subjective awareness of the AEC among the Gen Y professionals was minimal. Although most of the respondents claimed subjectively that they understand the intentions and aspirations of the AEC, the study found that their objective awareness of the AEC was very weak. Further, it found that the above the line source of information (e.g. television and newspaper) played a key role in providing information to the young professionals. Such sources of information may be distortive and limited in conveying correct and detailed information about the AEC to their audiences. In addition, the finding that only a few respondents got information from government websites indicates the lack of information from national governments on the establishment of the AEC. These explained why the state of objective awareness about the AEC among the Gen Y professionals was very weak in three countries.

The young professional respondents had a good impression of and thought that the

AEC is highly relevant for them individually and also for their country. Most of them also claimed that they were able to see the benefits of the AEC in recent development in their country. Further analysis showed the very weak relationship between objective awareness and perceived relevancy as well the weak-to-strong relationship between subjective awareness and the perception. Thus, the study calls for the ASEAN government to plan information campaigns and to undertake the necessary preparations for their people to face the regional economic integration.

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Appendix

Questions Used in the Survey

I. Demographic questions:

- I.1. Gender: (A) Male; (B) Female
- I.2. Age grouping: (A) 18 – 25, (B) 26 – 30.
- I.3. Occupational background: (A) Public sector; (B) Private sector; (c) Self employed; (D) Others.
- I.4. Area of study: (A) Business / Banking / Economics; (B) Social sciences / Humanities / Law / Politics; (C) Engineering / Technology / Sciences; (D) Others.

II. Objective Awareness:

- II.1 How many countries make up the ASEAN Economic Community? (Correct answer: 10)
- II.2 When will the ASEAN Economic Community come into effect? (Correct answer: 2015)
- II.3. In which city is the ASEAN Secretariat located? (Correct answer: Jakarta)
- II.4. Which country is chairing ASEAN this year (2015)? (Correct answer: Malaysia)

III. Subjective Awareness:

- III.1 I have knowledge about the AEC: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.
- III.2. I understand that the AEC intends to develop the region as a single market: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.
- III.3. I understand that the AEC intends to develop the region as a single production base (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.

III.4. I understand that the AEC aspires for freer flow of investment in the region: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.

III.4. I understand that the AEC aspires for free flow of skilled/professional ASEAN workers in the region: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.

IV. Perceived Relevancy

IV. The AEC is important for my profession. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.

IV. The AEC is important for my country. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.

IV.3. I can see the benefits of the AEC in the recent development of my country. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Somewhat disagree; (4) Somewhat agree; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree

Biographical Note

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Date of the submission: 2015-10-29

Date of the review result: 2015-11-17

Date of the decision: 2015-11-18