

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings from Chapter four that was based on the respondents' profile and the four themes; impacts, opportunities, threats, and challenges of the AEC. The discussion ends with a conclusion and recommendations, a model derived from the study, as well as implications for further research.

5.2 BBA International Programs in Thailand that Had Participated in the Study

The number of BBA IPs in Thailand is highly dominated by the private higher education sector, despite the fact that the number of private and public institutions of higher education is almost equivalent in number (79 public and 71 private). Although there are 150 of these institutions added up together, only a small handful offer BBA IPs. With Thai being the native local language in Thailand, it is typical for the majority of the local Thais to be enrolled in Thai programs rather than that of the International ones where English is the medium of instruction; and a language that most Thais are not fluent in. As it is with most public universities, tuition fees are usually much low and affordable to the general public while private universities charge much more. International programs cost much more whether they are offered by private or public institutions. Since private institutions are more geared at attracting more students, and in generating more income, it is not surprising that BBA IPs are offered by more private institutions than public ones. This trend may however, change in future, as English becomes more significant and relevant in the job market. More universities may start offering BBA IPs in addition to their regular Business Administration Program in Thai. In addition to that, a few respondents with existing BBA IPs in their institutions expressed the fear of internal competition within the university where other Thai faculties/schools may start introducing their own IPs in the future, and this is probably true for both private and public institutions.

Total four-year enrolment figures in the reported BBA IPs were sporadic with the largest enrolment as high as 8,000 and the lowest at 60 students for the entire four year program. The

irregularity in student enrolment numbers in these 14 institutions (Table 6) indicated that the program sizes were vastly different from very small (60-100 students), small (101-300 students), medium (301-1,000 students), large (1,000 – 2,000 students), to extremely large (8,000 students). These differences in sizes were attributable to various reasons such as popularity, capacity, university acceptance policy, student demand, institution's reputation, institution's program, and the institution's location. With the exception of two institutions, the other 12 institutions had expressed their desire to increase student enrolment and some hoped that the AEC could be one contributing factor. The total enrolment of 12,710 students in the 14 institutions in the BBA IP seems like a relatively small number and this may be rationalized through three factors. Firstly, there are other International Programs in other areas of study, and not just the BBA program. Moreover, some institutions that offer Business Programs in English, but come under different names. These programs had not been included in this study as the interest is solely on BBA IPs. Therefore, the total IP headcount of students enrolled in IPs in Thailand is anticipated to be much higher than the reported figure for that of the BBA IP. Secondly, students interested in pursuing an international BBA education have the option of doing it either locally or overseas. Although many students opt to continue their education in Thailand, there has been an increase in the number of students who go abroad to further their education. This is particularly so, with the mushrooming of international schools, that have resulted in an increase of English educated students, who are academically and financially equipped to study abroad. Although not all parents can afford or want to send their children abroad, a good portion of them in the capital of Bangkok, have the financial means to do so. Thirdly, the proportion of regular Thai schools is far much greater than that of international or bilingual schools. The tendency of interest is therefore, frequently directed towards the regular Thai program rather than that of international.

Although the program is said to be an International Program, the percentage of international or foreign students enrolled in the program as a whole is relatively low (Table 7). As the site of this study is in Thailand, where Thais constitute the majority of the population of the country, it is therefore not unusual for the percentage of foreign students to be low. Moreover, as Institution C had mentioned in the interview, Thailand is viewed more as a tourist hub, rather than an educational hub, making it difficult to attract students. An institution that stood out in having a high 95% of foreign

students was due to the nature of the institution. The institution was one of the branches worldwide, and credits was easily transferred amongst its sister institutions. A few institutions have been pressured by management to increase the international student ratio because of the nature of the program (international), and it has not been an easy task to undertake. Some institutions that had been able to attract more foreign students than others, had made trips overseas, and/or employed agencies to help in foreign student recruitment. Others resorted to offering scholarships to foreign students to attract them, but not all IPs have had this privilege of offering scholarships due to the universities' policies.

5.3 Theme 1: Current Impacts of the 2015 AEC on BBA IPs in 2014

At the time of the interviews during the second quarter of 2014, the institutions had been well-aware of the 2015 AEC, and had experienced varying levels of impacts. The numerical values placed on the current impacts were extremely diverse, as it stretched from one extreme to the other; values of one to ten. This goes to show that each institution viewed and experienced the impacts very differently from each other. The overall mean of 4.93 out of a total of 10 (table 8) was a clear indication that the impacts were not that high. It was interesting to take note that the numerical rating of the impacts placed by each respondent varied with the verbal answer they had given. For example, the four respondents who had said "there was not much impact", had different numerical ratings of 2, 5, 4, 7. It was similar for the two respondents who mentioned that there were a lot of impacts; a "7" and a "10". Despite the inconsistency in the verbal and numerical answers for a few respondents, the qualitative responses and quantitative data are still considered valid as the numerical value attached varies according to each respondent's perspective

In the reported findings, the majority of the institutions classified their experienced impacts prior to the 2015 AEC as minimal. Some institutions had also mentioned that their programs were not the only ones affected by the upcoming AEC. Institutions that were a portion of a larger entity, the university, stated that the entire university (mostly Thai), had begun to experience some impacts. With English as the official AEC language, there had been a greater awareness in English language competency within the university, and some institutions have embarked on making their universities more bilingual (English and Thai) in the form of websites, signs, and documentations, in preparation

for the coming AEC. Another very direct impact was competition from within the university itself, as some Thai programs are contemplating on extending their programs to international ones.

Although the number of BBA IPs had started out really slowly and few in number they had mushroomed greatly through the recent decades. Most of these programs are firmly rooted in their establishments and in their offerings of an international curriculum despite the variations in the reputation and quality of their programs. The quality of BBA IPs is closely monitored by the Ministry of Education and Commission of Higher Education of Thailand. With the greater focus on the more global international arena than that of the regional ASEAN one, many of these institutions are aiming to achieve higher international standards to be recognized internationally. However, they are also held liable in meeting Thailand's educational requirements for current and future AEC curriculum alignments. This alignment is clearly manifested in the steps taken prior to the AEC by integrating ASEAN studies, introducing ASEAN languages, ASEAN travel trips, increased signing of MOUs with other ASEAN universities, and the list goes on. All institutions have also aligned their academic years to August prior to the 2015; let it be a year or a few years ago.

Enrolment figures prior the AEC had been satisfactory for most institutions, as their programs were highly demanded, and the majority student-make-up had not been ASEAN-oriented. This was clearly stated on various occasions that enrolment figures were of good standing independent of the AEC. Although some institutions mentioned that their student enrolment had not been impacted by the AEC, one distinct institution had mentioned the tremendous impacts it had received in the form of doubled Thai student enrolment in its BBA IP. It would therefore, be of no surprise, if the other institutions would experience the same scenario when the AEC comes into effect. In fact, it can be anticipated that the growth rate of IPs would be relatively high in the years to come. Despite the current disinterest of a few institutions in ASEAN students, there have been a couple of institutions that currently face pressures from the top management in recruiting student representatives from each of the other nine ASEAN countries. This requirement may not be widespread amongst all institutions, but it might probably be gradually extended to other institutions to promote the "ASEAN-oriented image". Top management in certain institutions had even gone to the extent of offering scholarships to well-deserving ASEAN students. This was done to allure them to study in their institutions, with the goal of creating an ASEAN atmosphere in their institutions.

Singapore is a great example of attracting some of the brightest students from ASEAN by offering ASEAN scholarships. Scholarships are open yearly to all citizens of ASEAN at different levels: (a) secondary three and four; (b) pre-university level; and (c) university level (“ASEAN Undergraduate Scholarship”. 2014).

The interest of ASEAN lecturers in BBA IPs is still minimal, but this would change in time with the shift of hiring entirely Thai and Western lecturers, to that of recruiting other ASEAN lecturers into its lecturing team. It is predicted that the progression of the AEC in the years to come, would result in the increased demand of ASEAN academicians within the ASEAN region. Another point worth mentioning here is the increased interest in ASEAN-related research and joint ASEAN-research collaborations that would progress with time as the economic integration strengthens in the years ahead.

5.4 Theme 2: Future Opportunities of the AEC on BBA IPs

The future looked really bright with opportunities for many institutions despite the differences in their perspectives. The numerical values for this theme (Table 9) ranged between three and eight, with a mean of 6.5 (out of 10), and a standard deviation of 1.7. The mean for opportunities was comparatively higher when compared to that experienced impacts (4.93), thus indicating the belief that the upcoming AEC would provide the BBA IPs with foreseeable favorable opportunities. However, the mean of 6.5 is not really that high which signifies the general outlook that although opportunities do exist, they are not all that prominent. Although a deviation existed, it was relatively small.

The greatest opportunity that institutions had cited was increased student enrolment when the AEC comes into effect in 2015. Most institutions would like to expand their programs, and one of the ways would be through increased student enrolment. It was believed that the AEC would be instrumental in ushering prospective students both locally and abroad from ASEAN countries to their programs. Institution E had noticed a surge in its Thai students’ enrolment in its BBA IP during the past two years. It is anticipated that the popularity of the program would increase with increased awareness of the importance of the English language. The easier access and closer distance combine to make Thailand, a possible destination for interested ASEAN students. This is supported by Jones (2006) who stated that distance plays an important role in making a country attractive to prospective

students. When and if the increased significance of this new economic integration booms in the very near future, Thailand could be one of the ASEAN countries to reap benefits as a possible popular higher education destination. It was also anticipated that these numbers would escalate with time. This sentiment of increased enrolment was however, not shared by two institutions due to their respective universities' policies. There is a future possibility though, that these two universities might change the intended direction, and reconsider their policies. By increasing the capacity in its prestigious BBA IPs, it would be a win-win situation in so many ways. Most importantly, as educational facilities, they would open up doors to more students with the golden opportunity of an excellent international education. On the other hand, it is a way they can give back to society in terms of opportunities in preparing and educating the leaders of tomorrow.

Back to enrolment, it seems like the focus of some universities had been directed at non-ASEAN and/or Chinese students. As international programs, it would be wise to maintain a good balance of student nationalities to make it as diverse as possible instead of concentrating on just the local Thai and ASEAN students. International students would enrich the students' exposure to living in a more global world. China's current positioning as the future superpower, its enormous population, and spending power has made China a good strategic country to recruit students. Some institutions have reported relatively good figures of Chinese students who had brought with them, positive impacts on the school environment. The student body is given the golden opportunity of establishing networks with Chinese friends. This networking exposes students to the Chinese culture, language, way of life, and thoughts that would prove beneficial in the unforeseeable future.

Institutions faced with the challenges of hiring qualified English lecturers may find this intensified with future increased student enrolments and expansion of their programs. However, this could be remedied in a couple of ways such as recruiting lecturers from abroad through the "job fairs" methodology employed by international schools worldwide. Job fairs are professionally organized, and international schools that act as future employers set up booths to recruit prospective applicants who have to pay a fee to join. Resumes are submitted to potentially attractive international schools, interviews conducted, and job offers made just within a number of days at the fair. So, these job fairs are a win-win situation for all parties. Another great popular method is advertising through its own website.

Attracting foreign students, inclusive that of ASEAN ones would not be an easy task because there is just a handful of foreign students who are interested in Thailand as an educational destination. As mentioned in the findings, Thailand is known as a Tourist hub more than an educational one. Moreover, with Thailand's ever ongoing political turbulence, it has earned a reputation as an unsafe country that is considered a social cost. The higher the social cost, the lower the student's intention to select Thailand as an educational destination (Cubillo, Sanchez, and Cervino. 2006). These combined factors greatly influence prospective students' decisions in selecting Thailand as an educational destination. Research studies have already indicated the positive relationship between a student's country selection intention and that of the country's characteristics. In fact, it was also discovered that a student's destination choice would be highly influenced by a country's image as well as recommendations from their families and friends (Cubillo et al. 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar. 2002; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth. 2002). Although efforts had been made to fix Thailand's negative political image, the scars are difficult to remove and remedy. The government would probably have to be more innovative in creating an image of safety and that of freedom from violence and acts of terrorism within the country. That there is a gigantic challenge for Thailand.

The direction taken by some institutions towards the international rather than the regional ASEAN arena is worth noting. There is no doubt that bringing the institution's standard to international recognition and accreditation is probably more significant and noteworthy, and is to be commended. Continued steps in catching up with the Western world, although still relevant, have now extended worldwide, thanks to globalization. The changing economies of the depressing European and U.S. economies, and booming Asia, have turned heads towards Asia. With this in mind, the Thai government had declared in 2009, "its aspiration to become a regional education hub, announcing a goal of attracting 100,000 foreign students enrolled by the year 2014-2015 ("High Hopes to be Asia's International Education Hub". 2009). This educational hub concept would prove to be an additional revenue generating sector for the country, as successfully demonstrated by Singapore. Revenue generated by Singapore's education sector had contributed up to 5% of its gross domestic product. Although it is worth the try, the establishment of an International Educational Hub by Thailand would involve a huge, risky, and time consuming investment and should be carefully studied upon. Two Asian educational hubs, Singapore and Malaysia, have proven to be successful

and act as ideal models for Thailand. Singapore is infamous for its reputation as a shopper's paradise, and a wonderful place for tourism. Moreover, its efforts in promoting itself as an education hub had been likewise, fruitful over the years. Singapore had literally poured in millions of dollars to create a name for itself as an educational hub in Asia ("Singapore hopes to become global education hub". 2003). So, if Singapore, a small island, is capable of achieving so much, it would be interesting to see if Thailand that is well-known as a tourist destination, would like be able to follow suit. It should be noted here however, that despite Singapore's efforts in creating an educational hub, it faces its own challenges in positioning itself in offering quality education and has been successful to a certain extent. Malaysia had too been successful in creating that global educational hub image and has been ranked as the 11th most preferred study destination. This creates a major economic opportunity not only for Singapore, but also for Thailand and ASEAN as well. The bad news for Asia, however, is the continual growing preference for U.S. and European institutions of higher learning amongst the Asian middle class ("Singapore hopes to become global education hub". 2003).

MOUs with ASEAN neighboring universities for both student and faculty exchanges are not only on a rise, but are also expected to gradually increase in the years to come. The overall student exchange effectiveness is questionable because of the low engagement on the part of Thai students. Thais demonstrate little interest in student exchange opportunities either because of their low English proficiency or their preference to go to the more developed Western countries like Europe or the U.S. instead. Regardless of the low favoritism in choosing neighboring ASEAN student exchange programs, this trend may change in the future when Thai students realize the increasing significance of the AEC.

Although English had been declared as the main language in the AEC, each of the ten countries has its own language (s), and many neighboring countries do not have English as their mother tongue. In fact, quite a number of ASEAN countries have low English language skills. It is therefore, of no surprise, why the free flow of faculty among the borders within the region would be limited. This is further demonstrated by the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) whose successfulness is highly dependent on the quality of courses offered by ASEAN University Network (AUN) member universities. The AUN is not without its own challenges:

ACTS face severe problems of differences in the languages of instruction, differences in standards of faculty members and student entry requirements among universities (not only across countries, but also within countries), and differences in university resources to fund exchanges of staff and students” (Das. 2013: 116).

With that in mind, there are limitations in the number of staff and student exchanges (Das. 2013). However, the AEC would increase the facilitation of faculty exchanges at a higher level to achieve greater cooperation, particularly with partnering universities.

Branching out to neighboring countries was definitely not an attractive venture for respondents because of the complexities involved, such as market access, the long four-year study timeframe, and meeting requirements of both the local and host countries. Moreover, it would involve a huge monetary investment that is exposed to high degrees of uncertainty and risks. Like any other businesses, there is a possibility of failure, and therefore not worth the risk. Another point to take note is that some of the programs are still relatively small and they would probably need time to nurture and grow, before they can move forward to bigger ventures. Findings had indicated the interest of a small handful of institutions in offering either extended programs, or work with partnering universities in offering their programs. These ventures would be much safer in terms of risk and investment, and are probably a whole lot more convenient and easier in program delivery.

There is definitely a positive ring to joint research collaboration among ASEAN universities. MOUs that had been or will be signed would provide the needed networking among lecturers in joint research across the region. By collaborating across borders, lecturer researchers can gain access to regional data, thus making their research more complete and interesting. Friendships formed would help foster increased collaboration with partnering universities, and this could result in more visiting professors.

A degree is for most graduates, a pathway to a better career, and the larger regional job market that will be open to them from 2015 onwards. It would be appealing to those who are capable but a threat to those who may find themselves unprepared for the tremendous competition in the regional labor market. Although only a few jobs are currently approved for the free flow of skilled labor, there is a high possibility that the list would increase in the years to come. Accounting, Hospitality and Tourism BBA majors, would stand to benefit as they would be able to apply for a job

within the ASEAN region if they wished to do so. However, the thought of competing with nine other nationalities for a job in Thailand, aside from the domestic competition, is a frightening thought.

English language skills would be not just a plus, but a must in the future. Despite the name “International Program” where English is the medium of instruction, and the expectation that graduates would have a proficient level of English, both verbally and written, that is not always the case. Most institutions have a high enrolment of local Thais, and it is only natural for students to converse in Thai most of the time unless they are speaking with their lecturers or foreign classmates. Not all enrolled students, had attended international schools, meaning that their English proficiency background would not be that strong. A rigorous English language program and English proficiency integrated in every course could however, assist in partially remedying the dilemma. Basic English proficiency would not suffice, and that would be an area that some institutions would have to work hard on to prepare their students for the job market to be more competitive with other AEC workers (Saraithong and Chancharoenchai: 2012).

If and when regional internships open up for ASEAN students that would be truly advantageous and big step ahead in ASEAN’s economic integration. In fact, these internships would greatly facilitate future flows of labor within the region, which can along the way, bring down a few barriers as internships means exposure. The exposure to another country’s culture and work ethic combine to create a new generation of workforce that would learn how to work across cultures, and manage diversity in the workplace. Experiences while abroad in English-speaking countries would increase the confidence in English communication skills that eventually translates into better potential job opportunities. Studies have also indicated that students, who had previous exposures to English speaking countries, had a higher tendency to improve their English proficiency skills (Saraithong and Chancharoenchai. 2012).

Quality Assurance (QA) is a matter that is of utmost importance to universities and points have been allocated to international network. It can be expected that there would be more international related requirements in the QA connected to the AEC. Although the QA can be tiresome process for many universities, it is a methodology used to help institutions grow and to achieve higher standards of quality.

5.5 Theme 3: Future Threats of the AEC on BBA IPs

There is definitely no escape from competition no matter which industry an organization is in. It was therefore, of no big surprise, when competition was the first thing that came to mind when threats were brought up. Institutions that were part of existing Thai universities feared competition from other faculties' plans of starting their own International Programs. New competitors in the form of local Thai universities opening up their own BBA IPs and the establishment of foreign university campuses in Thailand were equally alarming to many institutions. So, even though prospective increased local Thai IPs would mushroom in the future, the real threatening impact would hit in the next few years, when they become more well-established. This would provide current institutions some lead time to firmly establish their reputation and position themselves in the market prior to meeting fierce face-to-face competition with new competitors. With regards to foreign campuses in Thailand, this would benefit the students as they have before them, a greater selection of institutions to attend. Thailand's trade balance can also be partially improved with less money leaving the country. Moreover, students would also be receiving a higher recognized foreign degree compared to a local one. A foreign degree also opens more doors for graduates, and increases their competitiveness in the intense regional job market. There is a word of caution to potential foreign competitors attempting to establish a campus in Thailand as gaining acceptance would be a hurdle to cross. Current BBA IPs need to make haste in trying to firmly establish their programs, and build good reputations, not only within the country, but also market their names abroad, to make themselves more marketable to prospective students.

Turning to the forces of demand and supply, it can be observed that the current demand for IPs are relatively low compared to that of Thai programs. This trend, however, would probably change in the future because of the increasing importance of English. Another reason is the increased number of high school graduates from international schools who desire to continue their education in Thailand. This growth in enrolment would also be escalated with the rising number of high school graduates from bilingual or English program schools in Thailand who are equipped with the necessary English skills to study in IPs. Another point worth noting is demographics. Families are having less children, simply one, or to the extreme, none at all. Moreover, there is a higher rate of singles, thus resulting in much smaller number of children enrolled in schools that in turn, would

influence enrolment in higher education. International education is more costly than the Thai programs, particularly when compared to the low tuition fees in public universities that are highly subsidized by the Thai government. Not all Thai parents can afford an international education for their children. With all these factors in mind, it would be interesting to see how the demand for BBA IPs would be in the years to come. With a greater selection coupled with other factors, it makes it much harder for institutions to compete with each other to gain the desired market share. Institution K had mentioned that it had fallen from its status as a leader in BBA IPs because of the increase in IPs. Its status was not the only impact from the competition, as its enrolment figures had also dropped drastically. Institutions with highly reputed BBA IPs, however, were at a much greater advantage, as they have an excess demand of students, trying to get accepted into their programs.

Although it had been previously noted that not many Thai students are currently very interested in studying in neighboring ASEAN countries, there is a high possibility, that the local enrolment might fall even further if studying abroad in the region becomes the future trend amongst the Thai students. As of now a small percentage pursue their undergraduate education abroad within the ASEAN region. Parents who have a future vision of the AEC may play a significant role in influencing their children to change the direction from the studying in the West to ASEAN instead. The depressing economies of Europe and the U.S. do not hold bright job prospects, but ASEAN would. In fact, ASEAN is projected to grow when it becomes fully integrated. With bright business prospects ahead in ASEAN, parents might want to place their children in these prospectively economically advantageous countries to have an early foothold in these territories. As the mentality of many Thais is to seek out the more developed West, than the undeveloped countries within the region, it would be essential to create an awareness of what is precious nearby in the minds of the young children, and attempts made to help the older children to rethink and prioritize

Lecturers, who are set for an adventure outside their ASEAN countries, would have their dreams come true once free mobility is established for professional lecturers. This is however, a threat and perhaps a headache for institutions as they might face high lecturer turnovers in BBA IPs. Institutions that “borrow” or get lecturers from the Thai programs to help teach in their BBA IPs may not face too many problems, particularly if their lecturers are not overly fluent in English. The fear would however escalate in institutions that have excellent lecturers with good English proficiency, as

they would be the ones headhunters would go after. There are also other possibilities such as lecturers looking for better deals elsewhere if the current compensation package is not attractive or if they are dissatisfied with their jobs. Referring to what Institution C had mentioned, “we would have to offer more attractive packages in order to keep the good faculty”, that would probably hold true if and when a big hunt for good English speaking faculty begins. But then, should institutions wait for that to happen? Perhaps institutions might want to reconsider their priorities in keeping their lecturers satisfied in order to gain employee loyalty and commitment to the institution.

There is no argument about Thailand’s very poor ranking in the educational system, let it be within the ASEAN region or worldwide. It would definitely be ironic to promote Thailand as an educational hub when its educational system is so lowly ranked. As parents, and thanks to the availability of the internet access, students today have greater access to information in making school comparisons and selections. A very big priority here for the Thai Ministry of Education, is to conduct a major overhaul in its educational system to regain its face in the educational arena. Only by doing so, can Thailand be truly promoted as a future educational hub, as people buy into facts and not just marketing efforts. This challenge would probably take a long time, and not a task that would be easily accomplished. It was recommended by Saraithong and Chancharoenchai (2012) that Thai “government agencies should encourage or support businesses, by providing public funding, in offering on-the-job training, combining both technical knowledge and English language, for their workers” (page 370).

To some institutions, the requirements of the Thai Ministry of Education are a big challenge. In fact, institutions are burdened with the ever-increasingly ongoing requirements, including those pertaining to aligning with other ASEAN universities. This means curriculum adaptations, which translates into additional hard work. However, on a positive note, it would pay off in the long run.

The threat of e-learning was mentioned by an institution (N) that once the MOE opens the markets for e-learning in Thailand, it would be a big threat for all institutions in Thailand. The fact, however, is that e-learning had been approved and established in Thailand for quite a few years now. The literature review on e-learning provided an overview on this and sources indicated that there are over 50 e-learning programs had been approved by the OHEC in nine higher educational institutions. Perhaps the misunderstanding that e-learning had not been open to Thailand was due to poor publicity

and unpopularity. The validity of e-learning as a threat is valid and relevant, as its future popularity would mean less market share for all institutions of higher learning. This can however, be combated by offering an option of e-learning by all the institutions. Perhaps what BBA IPs need to do now, is to study deeper into e-learning offerings, and offer it before other institutions do, to earn its positioning as a market leader in BBA IP e-learning. This would require tremendous financial investments, training of its human resources, and marketing it as an acceptable quality program.

A highly vulnerable factor that acts as a big threat for Thailand as an educational destination is its turbulent political situation. This is probably an uncontrollable external factor that is way beyond the institution's control. Institutions have suffered as a result of it in many ways; classes had been disrupted, safety of students and employees compromised, foreign student enrolment dwindled, scheduled foreign lecturers canceled, conferences canceled or postponed, disruptions in scheduling and planning, as well as the psychological impacts on students and employees alike. As long as Thailand continues to function as it is politically, the hopes of being established as a stable educational hub would be a very difficult goal to achieve. Due to its unstable position, it continues to lose potential foreign students to other ASEAN universities, and many other opportunities. Perhaps the constant political unrest was and still is one of the main reasons why ASEAN students have been hesitant in choosing Thailand as a study destination. To remedy this situation, only by maintaining a stable government, would it earn a better reputation as a "safe" country to study at, but as mentioned earlier on, it is clearly a task beyond the institutions' ability and control.

A relatively realistic picture of some BBA IPs was painted by the director of Institution J who stated that living up to BBA IPs' reputation as a quality international program is a threat since:

"A lot of international programs around the country are in name only. They are still teaching in Thai, for example, and if they impact that perception that they are only international in name, and we are lumped in with them, then, we lose out again".

It should not be stereotyped here that all Thai BBA IPs are the same. If an institution had an entire enrolment of Thai students, the tendency of Thai delivery might be higher and possible compared to other BBA IPs with foreign students. BBA IPs are programs that are taught in English,

but the possible deviation from English delivery to that of Thai could also be due to the fact that the lecturers who have been asked to help out in the IP, are lecturers from the Thai program. As they have been assigned to teach in the IP, and if they do not have the adequate English proficiency and confidence to deliver the lessons in English, they might go ahead and do it in Thai if all the students are Thai. To a much lesser extent, is the rationale that the English proficiency of students is very low, coupled with the preference of students to have the lessons delivered in Thai despite the fact that it is an IP. By doing so, these actions have jeopardized the overall reputation of BBA IPs in Thailand, as people tend to put all eggs in one basket. It would be really difficult to know if all course deliveries are in fact delivered in English despite the excellent marketing efforts. And the only way to find out is when a student has already been enrolled in the institution. By hiring qualified lecturers with English proficiency to teach BBA IP courses, this threat can be easily resolved.

A couple of institutions did not see any threats but opportunities instead, which were truly positively stimulating. By looking at the many opportunities out there, more can be done, rather than indulging on the negative. Institution F looked at competition from an entrepreneurial perspective by saying that “competition is good for Thailand”, just as competition is good for business. By being on their toes all the time, institutions can move at a more progressive pace aimed at improving and developing their programs into a truly quality and competitive one.

5.6 Theme 4: Future Challenges of the AEC on BBA IPs

Student enrolment stands out as an imminent challenge for the majority of institutions. With increased options of venturing outside Thailand to neighboring ASEAN universities for an undergraduate education, institutions might witness a fluctuation in student enrolment of Thai students as well as that of foreign students who might find other ASEAN institutions whether current or future, more attractive. The opening of the 2015 AEC means more business and employment opportunities. And if ASEAN students (inclusive of Thai students) desire or plan to work in an ASEAN country, or would like to study in various ASEAN countries; an action facilitated by transferring credits within the AUN universities, student attraction would be a really big challenge ahead. Current competition from within the country presents as a currently a big headache in itself, and BBA IPs have to carry the extra burden of the increase in competition in the form of new BBA IPs, and IPs in other departments/schools. Reported lower birth rates, which translate into fewer

future students, are good facts to know as these programs plan for the future. The question might be if there is possibility lower future enrolment figures, or otherwise? The unexpected lies ahead. Who knows, there might be a big surge in enrolment due to the increased awareness of the necessity in English proficiency among the Thais, resulting in a sudden tremendous shift in enrolment from Thai programs to IPs. This is something that needs to be seen. But then, the enrolment figures would probably fluctuate for a couple of years until it stabilizes.

Curriculum revisions vary from one institution to another. Some had revised theirs to be aligned with the AEC years ago, while others had to do so recently. Others, on the other hand, are still moving along the lines of alignment. The challenge here is to revise it to be more ASEAN-like, and that is a complicated and challenge endeavor. There are very few textbooks in the market that have the ASEAN context, and most current lecturers have very limited, or no knowledge about how things are done in the other nine ASEAN countries. Recruiting ASEAN lecturers specializing in ASEAN case studies would be another challenge and offering attractive compensation packages may be the trick in attracting them. This also applies to Thai lecturers as well, because there is a high possibility that other ASEAN institutions are thinking along the same lines. With increased competition both within and outside the country, lecturers in IPs would be in much greater demand, and this may result in high lecturer turnover; another problem to cope with. This in turn acts as another challenge for BBA IPs; the challenge of retaining their own lecturers.

A couple of institutions expressed the concern they had in preparing their graduates for the competitive AEC job market. One methodology was to adjust the curriculum to meet this challenge. It is expected that this would spread over a couple of years and continuous revisions would be made to perfect it. Despite the challenges involved, it should not be that complicated but perhaps just a little burdensome.

Complying with the regulations of the Commission of Higher Education of Thailand is an ongoing challenge for institutions that grows bigger by the day. In order to align with the AEC in the field of education, the Commission had introduced many regulations to control the university's QA with efforts to raise Thailand's standard of education to be competitive in the market. Regulations are expected to increase with the progression of the AEC because of increased alignment amongst the ASEAN universities. The need to comply with these challenging regulations is a necessity for the

continued licensing of these institutions and there is no way out of this other than to resume its efforts in meeting the requirements.

Thailand is definitely at a big disadvantage when it comes to English proficiency, even though there is a very small percentage that is proficient in the English language. The increases in the establishment of Bilingual, International, Trilingual, and English program schools, have resulted in response to demand for English instruction in schools. Parents have increased options of sending their children to schools that have almost a hundred percent, half, or one-third instruction in English. Although many parents still send their children to Thai schools, there is an increased trend, particularly amongst the middle class to send their children to Bilingual or English program schools. International and Trilingual schools are more popular among middle to upper class parents, and much more costly. As these students graduate from these schools, their levels of English proficiency are relatively high, particularly those from international and trilingual schools. These high school graduates act as feeder students to IPs, and are probably the ones who would be interested in studying in ASEAN universities as they have the English skills compulsory to compete within the region. It is however sad, that these schools are mainly concentrated in the city of Bangkok and other larger cities in Thailand, and not dispersed throughout the country.

For Thailand to gain English proficiency to become competitive in the region, the government would have to rethink its educational strategy by providing the facilities that are necessary for English proficiency improvement (Saraithong and Chanchaoenchai. 2012). One possible alternative is increasing the establishment of more Bilingual and English program schools of low and affordable prices that can be made available to low and middle income groups. English language proficiency can also be increased in local Thai schools by revising and improving its English curriculum. Today's children are the leaders of tomorrow, and a good quality education with big steps made towards English language improvement can help escalate the country of Thailand, to higher standards, and to stand competitive in the ASEAN arena. Thais would then be able to reap AEC-liberalization benefits, or be exposed to the impending threats in terms of survival amidst the strong competition, or the loss of their jobs to other ASEAN citizens with better English skills (Saraithong and Chanchaoenchai. 2012).

Aside from improving the English proficiency skills of students, attention needs to be directed at the institutions' personnel and system to provide supporting services to its program in English. Efforts should be focused at recruiting new employees with proficient English skills, and English classes provided at the institutions' expense to help all employees to adapt to the changes that come with the AEC. This top management support would not only be encouraging but help foster a positive changing climate in English proficiency within the institutions. It can be concluded here that "English proficiency is a critical step in securing the benefits generated from the economic liberalization" (Saraithong and Chanchaenchai, 2012: 352).

The Thai government has been successfully in creating an awareness of the imminent AEC to a certain extent. Thai schools actively promote AEC in their schools and businesses are alert about the opportunities and threats that are attached to it. A few institutions had stated that they did not feel that the AEC was of any significance to them as they were functioning at the international level with efforts aimed towards the global arena, and not at the regional Asian level. Collaborative efforts with European institutions demonstrate that institution M, for instance, had gone beyond the regional level. However, with the emerging significance of China, and the potential growing importance of ASEAN countries, there might be a shift from the traditional focus on the West, whose economies are declining, to that in Asia where growth is highly distinct in the future. Institution N was correct in mentioning that mindset of Thai students needed to be changed as they have placed a higher value upon the developed countries particularly in Europe and the U.S., compared to neighboring ASEAN countries. It was suggested that the knowledge and experiences about ASEAN needed to be "injected" into the mindset of these students in order to change their attitude.

The AEC has and will continue to bring about many required changes. If change is not effectively managed, resistance to change would be very high. This is particularly so, as the country attempts to bring a turnaround in its educational system as one of the poorest to a higher ranking.

5.7 Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the impacts of the AEC to BBA IPs may be perceived to be currently minimal, their future impacts are bound to increase. Universities that have experienced very little or no impacts might think very differently after the AEC comes into effect. It would be truly interesting to see how BBA IPs would meet these new challenges. As competition increases and becomes fiercer by the

day, it is an absolute necessity for BBA IPs to be proactive for survival reasons, and efforts are made to gain competitive advantage.

The study indicated that there were many bright opportunities that exist for BBA IPs. Student enrollment figures are expected to increase with more interested Thai students as the significance of English increases. Easier access to Thailand and the interest in future job employment opportunities in Thailand may also prompt an influx of ASEAN students into the country. Although the current focus of some institutions is on attracting ASEAN students, a good balance of student nationalities to encourage student diversity should be made. Aside from a possible large influx of ASEAN students, Thailand may find itself with an increased enrolment of non-ASEAN foreign students in its BBA IPs. Planning and preparation for this increased enrolment should be considered as planning breeds success. Contingency planning should also be made ahead of time so that BBA IPs would not find themselves in a shocking and complicated situation.

The promotion of Thailand as an educational hub is a great opportunity for increased enrolment but it has been hindered by many obstacles. If these obstacles can be overcome, then, Thailand's dream of being another Asian educational hub can come true. With Asia's booming economy and the West's recessionary economy, the future for Thailand looks brighter. Instead of flocking to the West to study, students may turn to Asia as educational destinations instead; with Thailand as a prospective destination. There is a positive outlook for student and faculty exchanges, increased MOUs, as well as joint research collaborations within ASEAN.

It can be summarized here that though the threats are frightening, they are manageable to a certain extent with good planning. Others on the other hand, may not be within the range of control, but perhaps the main thing is to maintain a strong focus in making the institution's program the best, and let the word of mouth do its job in attracting students into the program, let it be local or foreign students. This also applies to lecturers; it would be truly fulfilling to teach in an institution with a highly reputable program. Thinking positive, and using contingency management to cope with the countries' political situation would all help in fostering a positive climate.

In conclusion, BBA IPs are faced with enormous challenges that require huge undertakings. Even though these challenges look terrifying, they are not beyond the programs' ability to handle with. As the AEC progress with time, the challenges would change accordingly. If BBA IPs

confronted these challenges as organizations fight head on with the dynamic environmental conditions on a daily basis, they would be able to succeed as well. But then, this would take a lot of effort on the part of all institutions.

5.7.1 Model of the Impacts of the 2015 AEC on BBA International Programs. This qualitative exploratory research is based on grounded theory (GT) involving multiple subjects who had been exposed to a similar situation. A visual model generated at the end of the study (Figure 3), the *Model of the Impacts of the 2015 AEC on BBA International Programs* provides an explanation of the phenomenon that was “grounded” in the data provided by the interviewed subjects (Creswell, 2007).

5.8 Implications for Further Research

This exploratory qualitative research was conducted in 2014, a year prior to the effectiveness of the AEC. Therefore, this study provided the different experiences and views of the experiences encountered by BBA IPs prior to the effectiveness of the 2015 AEC. It also provided the perspectives of the impending opportunities, threats, and challenges of the 2015 AEC. It is recommended that further research be conducted at a later date to follow-up on the actual impacts encountered by BBA IPs. A comparative study of the findings obtained from this research and a follow-up research would prove to be an interesting and beneficial study. It is hoped that all of the 14 respondents would also agree to participate in the future study so that future findings can be used in a comparative study. On the other hand, if there is no desire to conduct a comparative study, further research could be done on just the impacts faced by BBA IPs after the AEC becomes effective in 2015.