

Level of Core Competencies Among UM-CHE Graduating Students: An Asean Integration Workplace Context

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study was to gauge the level of core competencies among UM-CHE graduating students to an ASEAN Integration workplace context. Specifically, this study aims to assess the respondents from the variables extracted from an established ASEAN manual namely: 'effective communication', 'working relationship' and 'teamwork'. The study made is a quantitative research. Relevant data was acquired through the use of modified survey questionnaire from an ASEAN manual. The respondents of the study are the graduating students of both HRM and TM programs of the College. There are one hundred (100) respondents for this study, fifty (50) HRM students and fifty (50) TM students. Majority of the respondents are female and mostly are in between the ages of 18 to 21 years old. Among the three (3) indicators, the highest result was 'teamwork' with the mean score of 4.37. This explains that the respondents are competent when it comes to working in a team setting. While there is no significant difference in the core competency among UM CHE graduating students when analyzed according to their age and program, results show that sex has a moderating effect to the aforementioned variables of the male and female respondents. The researchers conclude that the level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students is high and ready for a workplace environment such as of the ASEAN.

Keywords: core competencies, ASEAN integration, soft skills, graduating students.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 has been historic and crucial for Southeast Asian nations since the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was formed. This integration immensely transformed the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) community into a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and a freer flow of capital (Dayley, 2019). Issues related to hospitality and tourism manpower inevitably arise as one of the challenges in the said economic integration. The AEC established an MRA-TP (Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Tourism Professionals) to standardize the skills needed for the Economic Community through certification and qualification procedures (Aragon and Aquino, 2022). This creates a challenge for hospitality training and future professionals. The framework was rooted in competency: knowledge, skills, and attitude. Internationally, in 2011, the Ministry of Labor in

Thailand conducted a survey indicating skills needed among all levels of workers. In the group of skilled workers and professionals, they see teamwork as one of the most in-demand skills to have (Chalapati and Chalapati, 2020).

In the same country, to compete with fellow ASEAN countries in tourism, the educational system should aid in developing the language skills for Thai tourism students to become more competent (Nakkaew, 2021). In the Philippines, relating to conflict management skills, a study revealed that Filipinos have a non-confrontational way of dealing with conflict. This proves critical to group effectiveness because unresolved issues bring forth tension and dissonance that affect the team's performance (Tablan, 2021). The University of Mindanao is forging its path to ASEAN Integration by conducting various activities and internationalization efforts and doing its best to make its graduates ready for the economic community. This is one of the main things that propelled the researchers to determine whether the University of Mindanao College of Hospitality Education (UM-CHE) graduating students are ready for the said economic integration.

Extracted from an established manual of ASEAN, this paper assessed if the UM-CHE graduating students are competent enough to meet the standards of the ASEAN Economic Community in terms of effectively working with customers and colleagues in the workplace (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions: What is the level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students based on the ACCSTP (ASEAN Common Competency Standard on Tourism Professionals) Framework established by the ASEAN in terms of Effective Communication; Working Relationships; and Teamwork? Is there a significant difference in the level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students based on the ACCSTP Framework established by the ASEAN?

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, simply known as ASEAN, which was formed in the year 1967 in Bangkok, is comprised of nations like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia; it is a 10-member international association from countries within Southeast Asia (Weatherbee, 2019). ASEAN is an association that aids in strengthening the economic and political aspects of the region through various dialogues among its member countries. It has made an (FTA) or free-trade agreement with countries like Australia, New Zealand, Korea, China, India, and Japan; making it a rising tiger in the economic scenario (Stubbs, 2019). In the year 1997 of December, a decision was made to innovate ASEAN by its leaders in Kuala Lumpur; it was to formulate a cohesive community that is more substantial, robust, and a globally competitive region that would be able to address the socio-economic inequality and as well as help alleviate the rampant destitution among its people (Pitakdumrongkit, 2023).

After many summits and meetings held by the association, a solid engagement was declared by the leaders during the 12th ASEAN Summit in 2007 to fully realize the economic community when the year 2015 comes, according to the ASEAN Vision 2020 and the ASEAN Concord II that they had formed. At the said event was the signage of the Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2015 took place (Weatherbee, 2019). Notably, to speed up the progress on realizing the integration in the year 2015, mutual agreement of the leaders to fully innovate the region into a community with ease to import and export goods

more freely, as well as in services, opportunities in investment, manpower exchange and a more fluid movement of capital within the Southeast Asian countries (Anh and Tien, 2019). The said integration would surely bring an array of benefits to the region. In spite of the struggles in the worldwide economy, tourism in ASEAN has proven itself to be sturdy and is considered to be one of its assets in fostering regional growth (Khan et al. 2020).

The ASEAN economic community that took place in 2015 will elevate the tourism-related activities in the country due to a rise of visiting tourists from its neighboring ASEAN countries (Laplace, Lenoir, and Roucolle, 2019). However, opportunities may be plentiful for its people to reap, but the challenges, particularly for future tourism and hospitality professionals, remain. The complicated and culturally diverse work environment that this integration will bring would give rise to the need for employees with upgraded capacities, such as having a global perspective and much more solid people skills. (Fink and Gentile, 2019)

Communication skills are very important for tourism graduates (Ho, 2020). Moreover, leaders of the hospitality industry teach students the importance of industry relationships because having and maintaining industry relationships is considered as communicating effectively as well and impact optimum guest satisfaction (Tanković, Kapeš, and Kraljić, 2021) and a critical employability skill (Kenayathulla, Ahmad, and Idris, 2019). Hence, effective teaching of English vocabulary, which is perceived as the most popular international system of communication, is highly crucial for students of hotel management (Ghahramani, 2022).

Moreover, conflict management styles were significantly and positively related to job performance. A significant and positive correlation was found between conflict resolution techniques and emotional intelligence. The results of the said study ultimately showed a substantial mediating role played by conflict management styles in the relationship between emotional intelligence and these traits (Aqqad et al., 2019). To develop this interpersonal skill, problem-based learning (PBL) in higher education, as a constructivist strategy, assumes a crucial role and has been found to be an effective strategy. Through the facilitation of self-learning, PBL fosters the acquisition of conceptual and procedural knowledge, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork skills. Consequently, it amplifies motivation and the sense of self-fulfillment (Silva and Couto, 2022).

A study in Vietnam highlights the impact of teamwork on employee performance (Phuong and Huy, 2022). An employee's performance and job satisfaction may naturally increase when they are given the chance to work in a group. Furthermore, because teamwork provides a means of learning from other members, it is regarded as a tool for maximizing employees' skills. The results of the said study suggest that there will be a marked reduction in the likelihood of quitting a job. Crucially, teamwork ensures that individual productivity is significantly higher in group settings. Furthermore, transformational leadership mediates the influence of emotional intelligence and communication on the effectiveness of teamwork. The results of the said study show that emotional intelligence has a positive and significant effect on transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is able to mediate the influence of emotional intelligence on team effectiveness (Suwandana, 2019).

Tourism is labeled and considered an important aspect of the ASEAN Community because of its perceived capacity to grow tremendously (Asian Institute of Management, 2014). With this fact in mind, together with the aforementioned literature regarding the opportunities in store and the threats for the country from this integration, the researchers strategically formulated the framework of study which focuses on the graduating students at the University who are majoring in the programs of Hotel and Restaurant Management and Tourism Management. This study aims to assess the 'core competency' as per ASEAN standard terminology or the 'soft skills' of the HRM and TM students if it meets the demands of the established manual for hospitality and tourism practitioners. To add, this is also in line with the academe's pursuit of being a world-class institution, one of which is its efforts to forge its path for the ASEAN Integration through conducting various activities and internationalization efforts to make its graduates ready for the economic community.

The study is anchored from the journal of Padhi (2014) on the importance of soft skills. Soft skills are a sociological term relating to a person's Emotional Intelligence Quotient, the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. These skills are about how a person works with others, maintains a positive attitude under pressure, solves a personal or work crisis, and communicates ethically and effectively. This study is primarily based on and derived from the variables established by ASEAN called the ACCSTP Framework.

METHODS

The researchers used the quantitative research design in this study for to its excellent ways of finalizing results and proving or disproving of the hypothesis. A quantitative approach is one in which the investigator primarily uses post-positivist claims for developing knowledge (i.e., cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories) (ÇALIK, 2022). This design is appropriate for conducting this study because the results that will be gained in the survey are real and unbiased.

The respondents of the study were the CHE (College Hospitality Education) graduating students of the University of Mindanao. These students are currently enrolled in the programs for the school year 2016-2017. The researchers distributed the validated questionnaires to one hundred (100) students using the stratified random sampling technique considering the age, sex and program of the respondents. The study was conducted in the month of July 2016 in the College of Hospitality Education, University of Mindanao. The researchers used a self-constructed questionnaire extracted from a manual established by the ASEAN. This will be used to determine the level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students that will be calibrated in the questioner with indicators, effective communication, working relationship and teamwork. Each of the indicators have corresponding rate that will gauge the UM-CHE graduating students. The questionnaires of this study were distributed to the UM-CHE graduating students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 findings show that the respondents are able to comprehend different types of communication (verbal, writtend and non-verbal) (4.43). In conversations, they also tend to

show interest (4.31) and listen well (4.30) when someone is imparting an information. More so, respondents see to it that they use appropriate tone of voice (4.25), effective verbal communication (4.23), as well as, appropriate body language (4.22). Further, respondents are also effective in completing tasks on time (4.20) and even suggest solutions to problems (4.16). Lastly, to ensure effective communication other people, they ensure information relayed are clear and concise (4.19) which are also verified through open and close ended questions (4.17).

Table 2: Level of Core Competency among UM-CHE Graduating Students based from the ACCSTP Framework established by the ASEAN.

INDICATORS	MEAN	DESCRIPTION
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION	3.93	HIGH
Relays information clearly and consisely.	4.19	High
Uses appropriate tone of voice to the audience.	4.25	High
Listens actively when someone is imparting messages or information.	4.3	High
Implements resolution techniques when problems occur.	4.16	High
Completes the routine in a timely manner when a task is given.	4.2	High
Establishes open and close ended questions in a conversation.	4.17	High
Understands various types of communication: VC, WF and Non-VC	4.43	High
	4.46	High
	4.18	High
Use effective verbal communication.	4.23	High
Uses appropriate body language in a communication.	4.22	High
Shows interest on what is being said in every conversation.	4.31	High
WORKING RELATIONSHIP	4.27	HIGH
Understands what colleagues want for the overall output of the group.	4.19	High
Uses different language and tone of voice when communicating face-to-face with other person.	4.21	High
Ensures that colleagues' complaints are being treated with politeness, sensitivity and positive manner.	4.39	High
Meets external and internal needs or expectations of co-team members.	4.15	High
Uses feedback to identify and improve personal performance.	4.28	High
Asks assistance in any circumstances.	4.25	High
Creates and maintain positive and cooperative manner.	4.36	High
Gives deserving and accurate feedback when a colleague gives a harsh tone.	4.27	High
Assists in resolving workplace conflict and difficulties.	4.25	High
Utilizes the functions effectively and participates actively as part of the group.	4.3	High
TEAMWORK	4.37	HIGH
Sticks with the team's objectives or purpose regardless of personal conflicting opinions.	4.38	High
Personally, identifies the team's common goals and places a deep sense of value to it.	4.36	High
Requests assistance from colleagues/team mates whenever a situation is too critical to handle alone	4.37	High
Demonstrates trust, support and respect to colleagues within the team through practical ways possible.	4.46	High

Handles unexpected problems properly with the use of common sense and without resorting to panic.	4.25	High
Performs productively in a team setting regardless team mates' nationality or cultural background.	4.32	High
Prioritizes tasks; like sorting them according to their degree of importance before the day starts.	4.28	High
Takes negative feedbacks given by team mates in an objective and open-minded manner without being personally offended.	4.37	High
Takes initiative in providing assistance to the other team members when they seem to need it.	4.4	High
Provides guidance, offer encouragement, and give recommendations or suggestions to team mates as a way of showing your support to them.	4.46	High
OVER-ALL	4.19	HIGH

Format with the mean score of 4.46. This shows that the UM CHE graduating students can communicate through written format effectively. The item with the lowest mean is Implements resolution techniques when problems occur with the mean score of 4.16. This indicates that only some of the respondents are capable of resolving problematic situations in an effective manner.

The above factors are the indicators that the respondents are competent enough when it comes to communicating effectively in a workplace setting. Obviously, the hospitality and tourism industry of ASEAN as a whole is generally complex, since it comprises of individuals hailing from different nationalities, with varying cultures, values, tradition and background. Hence, as per ASEAN standard, a certain practitioner should be knowledgeable not just in verbal communication per se, but should be equally skilled in non-verbal communication and the nuances of a successful communication process between two or more individuals. Both the industry leaders and the academe perceive the skill to communicate effectively as one of the essential competencies to possess in the tourism and hospitality industry (Green, 2007).

In the element of 'Working Relationship', results show that the respondents are competent as well with an overall mean score of (4.27). When it comes to dealing with colleagues, they always understand what they want for the overall output of the group (4.19) by meeting their needs and expectations (4.15). And when complaints arise, they ensure that they address the matter by being polite, sensitive and positive (4.39) and eventually, identify the feedbacks given in order to improve their performance in the group (4.28). Furthermore, they always make sure to use different language and tone of voice when communicating to them face-to-face (4.21). Additionally, the findings show that the respondents are always creating and maintaining positive and cooperative manner in their workplaces (4.36). In fact, they assist in resolving conflicts and difficulties (4.25) and give deserving and accurate feedback when a colleague gives them a harsh tone (4.27). Lastly, they ask assistance in any circumstances (4.25) and they tend to always use the functions effectively and participate actively as part of the team (4.30).

Observably, the item with the highest mean is Ensures that colleagues' complaints are being treated with politeness, sensitivity and positive manner with a mean score of 4.39. This means that UM CHE graduating students are highly capable of treating their colleagues' complaints politely, sensitively and positively. The item with the lowest mean is Meets external and

internal needs or expectations of co-team members with a mean score of 4.15. The result shows that the respondents are somewhat weak when it comes to fulfilling their roles that would satisfy the expectations of their co-team members' of them to deliver.

When it comes to the variable 'Teamwork', results show that the respondents are competent enough in this certain core competency with an overall mean score of (4.37). They personally identify their team's common goal and place a deep sense of value to it (4.36). In fact, regardless of their personal conflicting opinions, they tend to stick with the objectives of the team regardless of the situation (4.38). Furthermore, they demonstrate trust, support and respect to their colleagues through practical ways (4.46) such as providing guidance, offering encouragement and giving recommendations or suggestions (4.46). Whenever there's a situation that is too critical to handle alone, they tend to request assistance from their co-workers (4.37). Likewise, they take the initiative in providing assistance to the other members when they seem to really need it (4.40). Interestingly, they can still become productive regardless of their team mates' nationality (4.32). Lastly, the respondents take negative feedbacks objectively (4.37), sort tasks according to importance (4.28) and handle unexpected problems properly with the use of their common sense (4.25).

The item with the highest mean is demonstrates trust, support and respect to colleagues within the team through practical ways possible with the mean score of 4.46. This means that the respondents are highly capable in demonstrating trust, support, and respect to their colleagues through practical ways possible in a team setting. The item with the lowest mean is Handles unexpected problems properly with the use of common sense and without resorting to panic with the mean score of 4.25. This means that some of the UM CHE graduating students have a difficulty in the aspect of handling unexpected problems that would require them to think strategically in an instant without resorting to panic.

Students that can be effective and efficient in a team setting are usually the prospects of different owners of most companies. It is a fact that should propel the students to equip themselves with the necessary skills in teamwork while they are in the academe in order to make themselves ready for the establishments that they are going to work for in the near future (Davison, 2013). To further verify, a study in the tourism and hospitality industry in Malaysia revealed that working in a team setting is perceived to be an important skill to possess among the graduates to effectively function in the workplace (Shariff, Kayat & Abidin, 2014). The level of core competency among the UM-CHE graduating students totaled with an overall mean score of (4.19) or high. This means that the respondents are competent enough in meeting Core competencies listed in the ACCSTP Framework. Most probably, it is how the respondents perceived themselves, knowing that this study relied mainly on a self-assessment type of methodology. Although, it safe to say for now because from a practical point of view, this study is basically amongst the initial initiative to delve further knowledge regarding the competencies of the hospitality students to the ASEAN integration workplace setting.

Table 3 results show that no significant program-based differences existed the level of competency. Both tourism management and HRM students declared high level of communication and teamwork competency. Further, while there were no age-based differences in the competency level of the UM-CHE graduating students, sex has a moderating effect to the

level of communication and teamwork competency of male and female respondents. As a study conducted in Greece regarding the role of women in leadership and hotel management revealed that the capacity of the female employees is not inferior to their male colleagues in the hospitality sector. In fact, the women tend to show more care and support to other people and are way better communicators compared to their male counterparts (Marinakou, 2014). On the other hand, O'Leary (2016) observed that there is an existing generalization among genders that females have higher intelligence when it comes to emotions as compared to males, who tend to be critical thinkers in general, although he believes that there is a distinction from person to person, regardless of an individual's gender.

Table 3: Significance of the Difference in Core Competency Among UM-CHE Graduating Students based from the ACCSTP Framework established by the ASEAN when analyzed according to their Profile

PROFILE	FREQUENCY (%) (N=340)	Computed t-test F-value*	Tabular-Value P=value a = 0.05	Decision on Ho	Significance Level
<i>SEX</i>					
Male	4.30 (n=35)	2.13	0.036	REJECTED	Significant
Female	4.13 (n=65)				
<i>AGE</i>					
18-21	4.19 (n=59)	0.02*	0.98	ACCEPTED	Not Significant
22-25	4.18 (n=35)				
26 & above	4.18 (n=6)				
<i>PROGRAM HRM</i>	4.20 (n=50)	0.33	0.742	ACCEPTED	Not Significant
Tourism	4.17 (n=50)				

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

The level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students is high. The level of core competency among UM-CHE graduating students garnered an overall mean score of (4.19) which is regarded as high. Specifically, findings show that the respondents got a high mean score of (3.93) in the 'Effective Communication' element. As well as in the variable 'Working Relationship' with a total mean score of (4.27). Lastly, the respondents got a high mean score as well in the element of 'Teamwork' with a mean score of (4.37). There is no age and program-based differences found in the competency level of the UM-CHE graduating students while sex has a moderating effect to the level of communication and teamwork competency among the male and female respondents of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are given:

The University, specifically the faculty of College of Hospitality Education should emphasize the relevance of every soft skill that are significant in every hands-on or actual activities. For instance, in the Culinary Arts subject, it should be a practice that the professor would orient the students before doing their work in the kitchen regarding the importance of teamwork, in order to do the task effectively. In this way, the professor would act as a coach or as a mentor that would motivate them to become excellent team players. The professor would then thoroughly examine the students throughout the activity and afterwards commend each groups through formal evaluation regarding their performance as a team and not just evaluating their outputs in general.

Based on the indicators across variables with the lowest results on Table 2, the UM CHE graduating students should improve on areas that would require positive in-the-moment responses. Aside from encouraging critical thinking among the students during class discussions, it is best that the Professor would initiate real time and practical simulations that would allow the students to utilize and harness their emotional intelligence or core competency. For instance, creating situational role plays that mimics the practical problems faced by a typical hospitality and tourism workplace environment.

Furthermore, the academe should utilize sophisticated methods that would measure the core competency or soft skills of the students throughout the duration of their learning years in order to have a better assessment if their 'products' are totally ready for the industry, especially in a diverse setting such as in an ASEAN workplace.

For future researchers, one of the limitations of this study is its statistical treatment of the data collected. It is suggested that future researchers should utilize statistical instruments that would individually cover all the variables in order to come up with a more comprehensive result. To add, it is best that the next profile for this study would be those who are already working in the hospitality and tourism industry.

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