

RATIFICATION CHALLENGE WINNER

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1. Introduction

Objectives and Overview

This paper will examine the Declaration on Addressing the Concerns Arising from Free Movement of Skilled Labour to determine its viability and efficacy in the context of Singapore. The ensuing paragraphs will review the issues presented and highlight two of the proposed actions which will be the focus of this evaluation. After establishing the role of skilled labour in Singapore, this paper will assess the prospect of ratification by delving into the two proposed actions.

Background

In the Declaration, the committee recognised the challenges that ASEAN members face with increased labour mobility. The challenges range from, amongst others, brain drain within ASEAN and out of ASEAN, tedious licensing procedures for migrating professionals, low English proficiency of workers, and cultural differences creating social friction between locals and foreigners.

To address these concerns, the committee declared to undertake several remedial actions; the two actions in focus are:

Action 1: Expanding the scope of duties of Immigration Authorities to monitor and moderate skilled labour migration while providing mandatory English courses and oral proficiency exams to foreign skilled workers, and

Action 2: Promoting cultural understanding and appreciation by holding cultural events to celebrate racial diversity, and requiring foreign workers to attend cultural workshops to learn local customs.

2. Singapore's Experience with Skilled Labour

Singapore boasts a highly active job market as we play host to many multinational corporations (MNCs) and undertake a vast line-up of construction and infrastructure projects (Koh, 2015). However, a severe shortage of highly skilled professionals that is hindering business operations (Mead, n.d.) has driven the Singapore government to source abroad for talents. Singapore participates in ASEAN efforts to increase labour mobility (Ismail, 2015) to bring more foreign skilled workers to our shore.

Repeatedly, the influx of foreign workers has resulted in social conflict between foreign workers and locals. As the national ethos remains that socio-political stability promotes a strong and robust economy, the Singapore government stays resolute in promoting mutual understanding and harmony between foreign workers and locals. Presently, the government advocates for initiatives that enhance the social integration of foreign workers within the local community (Toh, 2015).

3. Challenges and Potential Impacts of Ratification

Keeping Singapore's interests in mind, this paper will now address the 2 proposed actions within the Declaration.

Action 1

This action calls for the widening of the job scope of ASEAN members' respective immigration agencies to monitor and moderate foreign worker population and provide mandatory English classes and oral exams. The main criticism of this action is that, while the premise of encouraging a minimum standard of language proficiency is laudable, the proposed implementation of the measures is clumsy and difficult to abide by. Ratification will depend whether the following issues can be resolved:

Firstly, in terms of monitoring numbers, Singapore's Manpower Research and Statistics Department and the Department of Statistics already keep a pulse on the labour market situation. Concurrently, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) administers quotas set on businesses to moderate the foreign worker population in Singapore. Therefore, there is no need for a separate department within the immigration agency to do double work.

Secondly, the responsibility to educate does not fall under the purview of immigration agencies which lack the technical know-how. If this action were to be adopted, the immigration authorities of Singapore would have to seek cooperation from other government branches such as the MOM, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Education.

Furthermore, calling for compulsory education will complicate licensing procedures and inconvenience foreign workers by requiring them to work and study simultaneously. Moreover, the timeframe for workers to undergo 2 months of education before passing an exam is not feasible. Placing a time limit on learning English is arbitrary and unrealistic. It would cause undue stress to the workers who need to juggle studying and working on top of dealing with housing and immigration issues. Another concern is the additional time and financial burden that workers must bear if they fail and must retake the exam. Furthermore, would workers be deported if they do not attend the postmigration classes? Will skilled workers who are already settled locally be required to take classes and pass the exam?

Concerning the ASEAN oral exam, setting the testing standards will be contentious. Objectively, the educational standards in Singapore are higher than those of other ASEAN countries, so should the ASEAN standard follow that of Singapore, the advanced level of English will be difficult for other members to meet. This disadvantages them and may instigate controversies about discrimination. Furthermore, it will be a futile attempt to homogenize the educational system across ASEAN as different countries place emphasis on different educational subjects and national priorities. Above all, education is a national issue should not be interfered with in the spirit of the ASEAN non-interference principle.

Implementing the Declaration in its current form will raise the barriers to entry for foreign professionals too high. The red tape introduced will become a deal-breaker for skilled ASEAN workers to stay in ASEAN, exacerbating brain drain. There is also risk of damaging the camaraderie in ASEAN if controversies arise. Even if implemented, ASEAN would still need to overcome challenges in establishing a uniform standard and method of testing while helping to improve the educational standards in less developed ASEAN countries.

In view of the above, this action requires thoughtful revision prior to ratification.

Action 2

The second action beckons the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to educate foreign skilled workers on local customs and cultures to facilitate their assimilation into new communities. It proposes a framework which expounds on this aspiration, specifying that the ASEAN Economic Committee draw up “a monthly plan outlining the line-up of events that will promote ASEAN cultures” by way of media, workshops, education outreach and public events like ASEAN day, cultural showcases and food fares. While ambitious, Singapore feels that this plan is logistically and financially onerous to implement.

In terms of logistics, the events are too frequent and would unduly strain the coffers of the government. For example, in 2016, the estimated cost to hold Keong Saik Carnival, a one-day cultural bazaar in Singapore, was S\$400,000 (Nim, 2016). If a similar event were to be conducted monthly, it would drain the government of S\$4,800,000 annually. Instead, it would be more practical to engage influential 3rd party sponsors to cushion the government budget. Additionally, the frequency and scale of the events must be rethought to strike a balance on budget and provide downtime for planning and execution.

Mandating cultural workshops can discourage much-needed foreign labour from coming to Singapore. Expatriate workers will feel increased burdens to work in another ASEAN state, averting them from coming here even on transitional basis. Alternatively, it will be more reasonable to offer programs tailored to foreign workers but not make them mandatory. The government can collaborate with the private sector to promote cultural workshops to employees, marketing them as networking opportunities – where employees enjoy cultural performances while socializing with other high net worth individuals – to entice busy working professionals.

Although commendable, the 5-year plan in the current framework is too granulated and too much to actualise. The framework should be set as an aspirational ideal, flourished with overarching goals that profound a more gradual approach, sensitive to the budgetary and logistical constraints of each ASEAN member country. As is, economic gaps among ASEAN countries mean that countries like Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia may be able to afford staging multiple aforesaid events, but the less developed countries may not manage as much. Standing on ASEAN’s principle of non-interference (ASEAN, 2008), it is only right to leave the finer details of the implementation to each country and trust that the governments capture the essence of the framework in formulating their plans.

Most importantly, the AEC should not be the sole overseer of cultural promotion. The AEC should cooperate with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community to tap into the ASEAN Cultural Fund (ASEAN, 2012) established for this purpose. Drawing from the fund, ASEAN states can hold all-in-one ‘ASEAN Cultural Carnivals’ once every 2 years, on a rotational basis amongst ASEAN countries, that will act as a food festival, cultural gathering, and business convention for ASEAN workers. Additionally, every 2 to 3 years, ASEAN governments can conduct multilateral forums to re-evaluate how far they have come. This will create a more controlled and sensible system for ASEAN governments to spend their budgets and track progress.

4. Conclusion

While the underpinning ideals of the Declaration resonate with Singapore, the workings are still too inept to be adopted across the board. Singapore feels that the committee can adopt the amendments proposed above in revamping the Declaration, keeping in mind the ASEAN non-interference principle while designing the frameworks. ASEAN must remain sensitive to the circumstances of every ASEAN state. Singapore is hopeful that the kinks and intricacies of the Declaration can be ironed out with more consideration. Passing ratification, ASEAN will join forces on yet another front to enhance the skills of workers and create a conducive region for all to prosper.

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