

Foreword

Developing relevant skills and using them effectively is crucial for Southeast Asia's ability to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world.

Globalisation, technological progress, demographic changes, migration and climate change are combining to increase and transform the skills needed to thrive in Southeast Asian countries' workplaces and society. People will need a stronger and more well-rounded set of skills, including cognitive, social, emotional and job-specific skills, to flourish in life both in and outside of work. The coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has accelerated the digitalisation of learning and work and made upskilling and reskilling even more critical for many adults.

Southeast Asia has achieved relatively strong skills performance in various areas. In terms of developing people's skills, gross enrolment rates have increased at all levels of education. In terms of using people's skills, the labour force participation rate is generally high throughout the region and has been relatively stable over the last decade. The region has instituted various bodies to improve horizontal and vertical co-ordination for skills policies; has strengthened the collection of skills data; and has established more equitable mechanisms to allocate (often scarce) resources in education and employment.

However, Southeast Asia still faces several skills challenges. Participation in skills development tends to decline at later stages of life, as education and training offers tend to decrease in supply or become more difficult to access. Employment in the informal sector is widespread in many countries, contributing to skills imbalances, lowering overall productivity and placing millions of workers in precarious working situations. Disadvantaged groups, such as women, individuals from low-income households, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, are disproportionately affected by these challenges.

Recent and planned policy reforms show great promise, but more needs to be done to ensure better skills outcomes. Governments and all relevant stakeholders should continue to pursue partnerships that involve every level of government, as well as civil society groups that represent the interests of all learners and workers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, there is great incentive to build stronger data and skills financing systems throughout the region to achieve more equitable outcomes for the Southeast Asian workforce.

While no single action can address all the issues facing the region, a clear vision and concrete steps taken together by all stakeholders can ensure that Southeast Asian countries will address their skills challenges. Citizens of all ages and backgrounds should be able to develop and use their skills effectively to take up the opportunities of a rapidly changing society.

To support Southeast Asia in its reform agenda, the OECD has conducted a collaborative and tailored regional skills strategy. It has done this by providing detailed analysis and engaging widely with stakeholders, leading to several tailored recommendations for Southeast Asia, as outlined in this report.

The OECD stands to support Southeast Asia as it seeks to implement better skills policies for better lives.

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