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**Research Report**

## Promoting investments in education in ASEAN: Inclusive education, cross-border education programs, and ICT capabilities

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Policy Paper No. 45

# Promoting Investments in Education in ASEAN: Inclusive Education, Cross-Border Education Programs, and ICT Capabilities

by Fatharani Taqisa Nadhira

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Policy Paper No. 45  
**Promoting Investments in Education in ASEAN**  
Inclusive Education, Cross-Border Education Programs,  
and ICT Capabilities

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## GLOSSARY

### **ASEAN:**

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

### **ASEAN-QA:**

ASEAN Quality Assurance

### **ASEC:**

ASEAN Secretariat

### **ACU-OER:**

ASEAN Cyber University – Open Educational Resource

### **CDC:**

Council for the Development of Cambodia

### **CIPE:**

Center for International Private Enterprise

### **CLMV:**

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam

### **DAAD:**

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service)

### **EdTech:**

Education technology

### **ENQA:**

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

### **EU:**

European Union

### **EU-SHARE:**

EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region

### **EUR:**

Euro

### **FDI:**

Foreign direct investment



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**GDP:**

Gross domestic product

**GIZ:**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation)

**HDI:**

Human Development Index

**ICT:**

Information and communications technology

**NGO:**

Non-governmental organization

**OECD:**

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**OOSC:**

Out-of-school children

**OOSCY:**

Out-of-school children and youth

**PISA:**

Programme for International Student Assessment

**POA:**

Plan of Action

**UNDP:**

United Nations Development Programme

**UNESCO:**

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

**UNICEF:**

United Nations Children's Fund

**USD:**

United States Dollar

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016–2020 (henceforth “the Work Plan”) was developed by the ASEAN Secretariat in 2016 to coordinate ASEAN Member States’ cooperation in improving the state of education across the region. The Work Plan lists a total of 70 proposed education projects and activities grouped into 19 priority areas under eight sub-goals. Given the number of projects and activities, this initiative undoubtedly requires a considerable amount of investment. However, further analysis is needed of how the Work Plan sets incentives to promote investment in the education sector. This paper analyzes whether and how the Work Plan promotes investment in education in the ASEAN Member States, focusing on three main areas: inclusive education, cross-border education programs, and ICT capacity building.

The Work Plan is part of a wider set of activities meant to achieve the ASEAN Socio Cultural Community Blueprint 2025. Some of its activities have shown more promise in attracting more and better investments in education, such as the establishment of projects to strengthen education for out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) especially in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV countries); the ASEAN Cyber University – Open Educational Resource (ACU-OER) online platform; and the EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (EU-SHARE). Through the EU-SHARE, ASEAN was able to secure an EU Grant totaling around EUR 20 million (≈ USD 23.30 million) to support scholarships and other relevant cross-border higher education activities.

Despite these promising areas, the Work Plan misses some opportunities for investment. Given its high market value in Southeast Asia, education technology (EdTech) could draw more investment and should be an area of deeper focus. Moreover, the Work Plan does not explicitly outline or refer to a regulatory framework for investments in its projects or activities, which could increase the risk of poor-quality investments (corrosive capital) into education in ASEAN Member States, especially in less developed CLMV countries, which are more prone to external influences.

Three recommendations are proposed for future Work Plans to increase the quantity and quality of investments in education in ASEAN. First, the ASEAN Secretariat should continue to allocate specific funds to projects in education for the less developed ASEAN Member States and encourage more intra-ASEAN support from the more developed members. Second, the ASEAN Secretariat should develop a clearer and more specific regulatory framework for investment in Work Plan on Education projects, especially for projects highlighting CLMV countries. Third, the ASEAN Secretariat should identify more diverse and innovative opportunities to incorporate the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in education in future Work Plans.

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## INTRODUCTION

The ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016–2020 (henceforth “the Work Plan”) was endorsed during the ASEAN Senior Education Officials Meeting and adopted by the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting in May 2016 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). The Work Plan was developed to further coordinate the ASEAN Member States’ cooperation in improving the state of education across the region. The Work Plan was established as part of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, which aims to further harmonize relations between the ASEAN Member States in order to realize the full potential of their people (ASEAN, n.d.; SHARE EU ASEAN, n.d.). The Work Plan is broken down into eight sub-goals to achieve in the education sector over the 2016–2020 period<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1 presents an example of a priority area under Sub-Goal 2 in the Work Plan. The complete document<sup>2</sup> lists 70 proposed projects and activities grouped into 19 priority areas under the eight sub-goals. Each project or activity lists its performance indicators, its expected outcomes, the coordinating lead ASEAN country, and the potential external partners. Given the substantial number of large projects and activities to work through for five years across the 10 ASEAN member states, the Work Plan requires and identifies opportunities for considerable investment.

Rather than solely focusing on the quantity of investment, ASEAN has also started to focus on the possible impacts of attracting investments into the region on each country’s development (OECD, 2019). This may suggest that ASEAN pays attention to improving both the quantity and quality of investments in education across its Member States. However, a deeper examination of the Work Plan is needed to determine to what extent it successfully does so.

“Rather than solely focusing on the quantity of investment, ASEAN has also started to focus on the possible impacts of attracting investments into the region on each country’s development (OECD, 2019).”

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<sup>1</sup> The eight sub-goals are as follows: 1. Promote ASEAN awareness through strengthening of Southeast Asian history and indigenous knowledge; 2. Enhance the quality and access to basic education for all, including the disabled, less advantageous & other marginalized groups; 3. Strengthen the use of ICT; 4. Support the development of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector as well as lifelong learning in the region; 5. Complement the efforts of other sectors in meeting the objectives of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD); 6. Strengthen the higher education sector through the implementation of robust quality assurance mechanisms; 7. Foster the role of higher education in the area of socio-economic development through University-Industry Partnership; 8. Provide capacity-building programs for teachers, academics and other key stakeholders in the education community.

<sup>2</sup> To view the complete Work Plan, see ASEAN Secretariat (2016).

**Table 1.**  
**Example of a sub-goal and a priority area in the ASEAN Work Plan on Education**  
**2016–2020**

<b>Sub-Goal 2: Enhance the quality and access to basic education for all, including the disabled, less advantageous, &amp; other marginalized groups</b>					
<b>Priority Area</b>					
<b>2.1. Promoting inclusive schools through improved access and provision of basic education to marginalized and OOSC</b>					
Projects/ Activities	Performance Indicators	Expected Outputs	Lead Country	Potential Partners	Timeline (2016–2020)
21. Development of ASEAN Declaration on Education for Out-of-School Children (OOSC)	Increased access to education and services for OOSC through an ASEAN declaration on education for OOSC  Improved opportunities provided to OOSC through an action plan in support of an ASEAN declaration on education for OOSC	The ASEAN Declaration on Education for Out-of-School Children and POA are formulated and implemented	Thailand (Cambodia)	UNESCO ASEC (UNICEF)	2016

Source: A direct excerpt from the Work Plan as published by ASEAN Secretariat (2016)

This paper analyzes the effectiveness of the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016–2020 in setting incentives to increase both quantity and quality of investment in education in ASEAN Member States and identifies possible gaps in the Work Plan. The analysis in this paper focuses on investments in three areas of education addressed in the Work Plan: inclusive education, cross-border education programs, and ICT capacity building.

Analyzing the projects and activities that cover these areas will provide an overview of the extent to which the Work Plan promotes investments in education in ASEAN. At least one of these fields is covered in the projects and activities under each sub-goal, and often more than one applies to a given project or activity. For example, inclusive and cross-border education are both covered in a project under “Sub-Goal 3: Strengthen the use of ICT”, dedicated to developing cross-border school models and action plans to increase access to ICT in education for children who are marginalized. Under the same sub-goal, cross-border education and ICT capacity building are also addressed together through the endorsement of ASEAN Cyber University-OER platform, through which students can access learning materials from different ASEAN universities online.

The paper will begin by breaking down which types and sources of investment are relevant in the education sector.

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## INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION

Investments can be broken down into domestic and foreign investments, and both can be sourced from the public sector, the private sector, or by a cooperation between the two.

Domestic investment in education by the government may be formally classified both as an “expenditure” in the service sector and as a form of investment in the country’s human capital. A higher quantity and quality of human capital is linked to overall growth, productivity, and development of the economy in the long run (Mankiw et al., 1992). Domestic investment in education by the private sector can take the form of the establishment of private schools, vocational training centers, and other education institutions (ASEAN-Japan Centre, 2020) which also includes education technology (EdTech) start-ups. EdTech start-ups are relatively new and encompasses companies that use computer technology to facilitate education, which has also attracted flows of venture capital into the education sector. According to the data collected by HolonIQ (2020), EdTech firms in Southeast Asia accumulated nearly USD 480 million of venture capital between 2015 and 2020.

One of the main objectives for governments to invest in the education sector is to ensure education quality and equity. On the other hand, the private sector’s main desired outcome when investing, in general, is to generate profits. In the education sector, private actors can generate profit through the sales of educational products and services, such as learning platform subscriptions in the case of EdTech companies, and tuition fees and textbook purchases in the case of private schools. The presence of both the public and private sectors in the education sector indicates the importance of balancing their incentives in order to achieve optimal returns for the overall investment in education.

One way which this can be done is through partnerships. The private sector may fill in the gaps in education which may not be efficiently covered by the government. For example, to expand access to education, governments can partner with private actors such as EdTech firms or radio and TV broadcasters to widely disseminate educational materials to students across the country, including those living in remote areas. This was done by the Ministries of Education of Thailand, Columbia, and Chile during the COVID-19 pandemic who partnered with the private sector and supported the provision of internet subscriptions for students throughout their home-based learning activities (Muñoz-Najar et al., 2021). Through these partnerships, governments would therefore be able to ensure access to education by using the existing operations provided by the private firms, while the firms are guaranteed a pool of consumers and are able to earn a profit through their services.

Foreign investment also takes place in the education sector, especially when the funds from domestic sources leave an investment gap, such as in the case of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, where there is insufficient domestic revenue to fund education (The ASEAN Post, 2019; Miningou & Tapsoba, 2020). The most common form of foreign investment is foreign direct investment (FDI), a category of international investment that “reflects the objective of a resident entity in one economy to obtain a lasting interest in an enterprise resident in another economy” (OECD, 2001). According to ASEAN-Japan Centre (2020), FDI inflows in education from non-ASEAN countries

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into ASEAN Member States have risen from USD 2.26 million in 2012 to USD 54.41 million in 2018.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, foreign investment in education can also take the form of an agreement between government and non-government entities, as in the case of EU's investment in higher education in ASEAN through the "EU-SHARE" program (SHARE EU ASEAN, n.d.).

Although several types of investment in education exist in ASEAN, the overall quantity of investment remains relatively small. Apart from Singapore, each ASEAN Member State has directed 20% or less of their total government expenditures toward education in the past decade (World Bank, 2020a). In terms of foreign investment, education still represents a relatively small percentage of ASEAN investment in services (ASEAN-Japan Centre, 2020). In 2020, FDI in education represented around 0.13% of total FDI inflows to the services sector in ASEAN (ASEANstats, n.d.).

“Although several types of investment in education exist in ASEAN, the overall quantity of investment remains relatively small.”

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<sup>3</sup>The author was unable to find data on FDI inflows in education broken down by recipient ASEAN country.

## CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION

In addition, a large discrepancy in the quality of human capital can still also be seen across the ASEAN Member States. This can be indicated through three education indicators below: Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>4</sup>, the percentage of population ages 25 and older with at least some secondary education<sup>5</sup>, and PISA<sup>6</sup> scores. These indicators reflect the inequality in education between the ASEAN Member States at different education levels. This stresses that more efforts and investment are still needed to develop education as one of the keys to reducing the discrepancy.

The HDI and the percentage of population ages 25 and older with at least some secondary education in 2019 are shown on Table 2 and Figure 1, respectively.

**Table 2.**  
**Human Development Index (HDI), 2019**

Country	HDI	Rank out of 189
Brunei Darussalam	0.84	47
Cambodia	0.59	144
Indonesia	0.72	107
Laos	0.61	137
Malaysia	0.81	62
Myanmar	0.58	147
Philippines	0.72	107
Singapore	0.94	11
Thailand	0.78	79
Vietnam	0.70	117

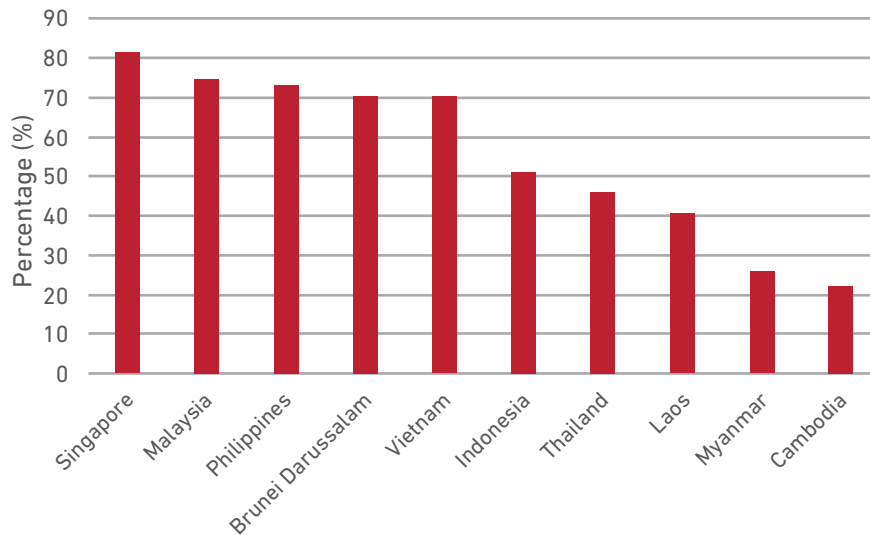
Source: UNDP (n.d.-a)

<sup>4</sup> As defined by UNDP (n.d.-a), HDI is a composite index that measures the "average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development": health, education, and standard of living.

<sup>5</sup> This percentage also takes into account those who have at least "reached but not necessarily completed a secondary level of education" (UNDP, n.d.-b).

<sup>6</sup> PISA is short for OECD's "Programme for International Student Assessment", which measures the knowledge and abilities of 15-year-olds across different countries in reading, mathematics, and science through a series of comprehensive test questions.

**Figure 1.**  
**Percentage of population ages 25 and above with at least some secondary education, 2019**



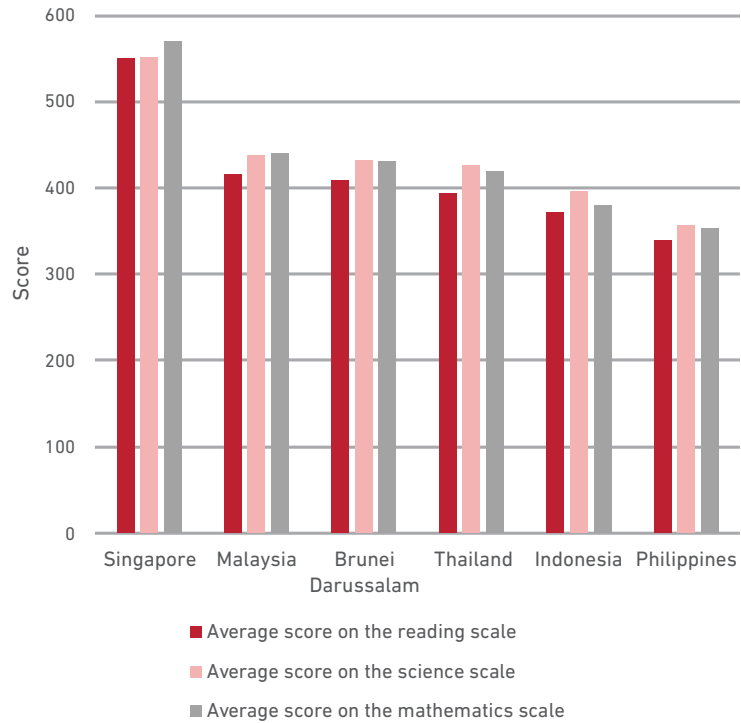
Source: UNDP (n.d.-b)

In Malaysia, which achieved an HDI score of 0.81 (ranking 62 out of 189 countries), 74.70% of this population has at least some secondary education. Meanwhile in Cambodia, which achieved an HDI score of 0.59 and ranked 144<sup>th</sup>, only 22.40% of its population over 25 has attained some level of secondary education (UNDP, n.d.-a; UNDP, n.d.-b).

Furthermore, a large variation also exists between the PISA scores in the younger population across Member States. Figure 2 illustrates that, on average, the scores obtained by 15-year-olds in Singapore for reading, mathematics, and science are each approximately 200 score points higher than those in the Philippines in 2018 (OECD, n.d.).



**Figure 2.**  
Average PISA scores in reading, mathematics, and science, 2018



Note: Data for Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar are unavailable.

Source: OECD (n.d.)

“The joint efforts would push the ASEAN Member States to collectively work towards reducing discrepancies in human development levels in the ASEAN region.”

Therefore, more joint efforts at the regional level through the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting such as the Work Plan, the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth, and the ASEAN Declaration on Higher Education are crucial to promote the development and investment in education. The joint efforts would push the ASEAN Member States to collectively work towards reducing discrepancies in human development levels in the ASEAN region.

## ANALYSIS OF INVESTMENT PROVISIONS IN THE WORK PLAN

According to existing studies, some factors that attract investment generally include the presence of good market characteristics (e.g., good level of competition, high market demand), the availability and quality of factors of production (e.g., land, labor/human capital), and the state of infrastructure (Assunção et al., 2011; Kostevc, 2011). Based on these factors, some attempts to attract investment in the education sector across ASEAN Member States can be seen in the Work Plan.

Although each of the ASEAN Member States have different characteristics and education systems, the Work Plan generally aims to equalize education across the region by increasing both the availability and the quality of human capital through education, and improving the infrastructure needed for education. For example, the Work Plan acknowledges the underdevelopment of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (commonly termed as “CLMV countries”) and highlights that greater effort and investment is needed in these countries to reduce inequality in education development across the region<sup>7</sup>.

By tackling the areas of inclusive education, ICT capacity building, and cross-border education programs, the Work Plan generally tries to endorse a more holistic approach to education in ASEAN and to improving human capital in the region. Firstly, through engagements in projects that promote inclusive education, such as the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY)<sup>8</sup> addressed in Sub-Goal 2, the Work Plan aims to provide education opportunities and support for people with disabilities and other marginalized groups. This provision may increase the value of human capital that would otherwise be lost if such specialized programs did not exist (World Bank, 2020b). Furthermore, OECD & World Bank (2007) elaborates that cross-border education programs, especially at the tertiary level, may allow individuals to acquire a diverse range of knowledge from outside the country or the region and to improve their overall learning capacity. Qamruzzaman & Karim (2020) find that investing in and building ICT capacity may also have positive long-run effects on human capital development. All these contributions would improve the quality of the potential labor force, thereby improving the prospects for future investment in the region (Kostevc, 2011; Miningou & Tapsoba, 2020).

By tackling the areas of inclusive education, ICT capacity building, and cross-border education programs, the Work Plan generally tries to endorse a more holistic approach to education in ASEAN and to improving human capital in the region.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of the projects that specifically aim at CLMV countries include Project no. 25, “Develop a framework and action plan on teacher training and exchange for CLMV” (Sub-Goal 2, Priority Area 2.2) and Project no. 31, “Support the implementation of programmes of relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies and dialogue partners that enhance ICT use in education especially in CLMV countries” (Sub-Goal 3, Priority Area 3.1).

<sup>8</sup> As explained in the Declaration, out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) are children and youth categorized under one or more of these four criteria: 1) do not have access to a school in their community; 2) are not yet enrolled at a school, despite the presence of a school; 3) have enrolled but do not attend school or are at risk of dropping out; 4) dropped out of the education system due to extenuating circumstances.

Below, the areas of inclusive education, ICT capacity building, and cross-border education programs in the Work Plan are reviewed in more detail to examine the extent to which the Work Plan sets the path to increase investment in education in ASEAN. The limitations of the Work Plan in attracting investment are also later addressed.

## Inclusive Education

Several months after the Work Plan was adopted, ASEAN established the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY) (hereafter, “the Declaration”) (2016), as targeted under “Sub-Goal 2: Enhance the quality and access to basic education for all, including the disabled, less advantageous, and other marginalized groups”. This declaration aims to tackle the problem of inclusive education from the perspective of OOSCY in ASEAN, just as the Work Plan highlights the problem of unequal access to the most basic form of education among youths in ASEAN. Both the Work Plan and the Declaration list the relevant

stakeholders, including UNESCO and UNICEF (ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY), 2016; UNESCO Bangkok, 2018).

“The project was able to draw support from the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, with a total investment of around USD 1.14 million (ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, 2020; Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN, 2020).”

In relation to the Work Plan, the Declaration, and ASEAN’s overall goal of improving integration between Member States, a joint project was proposed by Good Neighbors International in Korea and UNESCO Bangkok in 2019 to increase access to basic education for out-of-school children in CLMV countries. The project was able to draw support from the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, with a total investment of around USD 1.14 million (ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, 2020; Mission of the Republic of Korea to ASEAN, 2020).

## ICT Capacity Building

As highlighted under “Sub-Goal 3: Strengthen the use of ICT”, ASEAN strives to strengthen the use of ICT in education not only by acquiring the appropriate hardware but also by improving the capacity of teachers and students to use ICT.

One project highlighted in the Work Plan under this Sub-Goal is the further development of the ASEAN Cyber University – Open Educational Resource (ACU-OER). With an initial grant of USD 1.80 million from the South Korean government, this agreement was first introduced as the “ACU project” in 2011. The ACU project aimed to establish e-learning centers in Vietnam and Cambodia by 2012 to promote the use of ICT in higher education in CLMV countries (University World News, 2011; ASEAN University Network Secretariat, 2012). Following the progress of the project and the establishment of the Work Plan, the ACU project expanded to become an Open Educational Resource that provides access to lectures and other materials from higher education institutions across ASEAN Member States<sup>9</sup> and South Korea. As of 2021, the platform provides over 8,500 educational resources readily accessible to students in ASEAN (ACU-OER, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Singapore.

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Under the same Sub-Goal, the Work Plan emphasizes the extra attention required to deploy ICT systems and infrastructure in the less-developed ASEAN Member States, such as the CLMV countries. The relatively lower development of ICT infrastructure in CLMV countries restricts the use of ICT in education, hence further hindering the growth of ICT capacity in those same countries (Methaneethorn, 2019). Emphasizing the gap in ICT capacity in CLMV countries highlights an opportunity for further investment in ICT development in education to bring these four countries in line with the rest of the six ASEAN Member States.

“Emphasizing the gap in ICT capacity in CLMV countries highlights an opportunity for further investment in ICT development in education to bring these four countries in line with the rest of the six ASEAN Member States.”

## Cross-Border Education Programs

The Work Plan has also encouraged efforts to promote investment in cross-border education programs across the ASEAN Member States, especially in higher education. One such project is addressed under “Sub-Goal 6: Strengthen the higher education sector through the implementation of robust quality assurance mechanisms”, which highlights the “EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region” (EU-SHARE) project.

The EU-SHARE project aims to strengthen regional cooperation between higher education systems across the ASEAN Member States and to increase the quality and competitiveness of ASEAN higher education institutions and students (Manullang & Prasetyawati, 2020; SHARE EU ASEAN, n.d.). ASEAN secured an EU Grant contract valued at EUR 15 million ( $\approx$  USD 17.39 million) to support this project, including 500 scholarships for students from higher education institutions in the ASEAN region to do a semester exchange at another ASEAN university (SHARE EU ASEAN, 2021a). In addition, through this partnership, EU-SHARE was able to develop frameworks to improve the quality of research and teaching at higher education institutions (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016; SHARE EU ASEAN, 2021a). Though the initial timeline for EU-SHARE ended in 2019, the EU has committed to extend the project through to 2022 following the Work Plan 2021–2025, contributing an additional investment of EUR 5.18 million ( $\approx$  USD 6 million) for the program (SHARE EU ASEAN, 2021a; 2021b).

Furthermore, through “Sub-Goal 7: Foster the role of higher education in the area of socio-economic development through University-Industry Partnership”, the Work Plan represents ASEAN’s interest in increasing the number of cross-border education programs for intra-ASEAN students—especially in higher education—through public-private partnerships. These partnerships can take the form of skills development programs and competitions held by the ASEAN Foundation, such as the “eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN” with Maybank and the “ASEAN Data Science Explorers” with SAP. Such programs are also supported by ministers from ASEAN Member States.

For example, the partnership with Maybank formed under the “eMpowering Youths Across ASEAN” program provides training for students across ASEAN Member States and micro grants amounting to around USD 200,000 for youth-led projects that aim to empower different

communities in ASEAN. The annual “ASEAN Data Science Explorers” with SAP provides training and awards prizes totaling around USD 17,000 to teams at the national and regional levels with the best data-driven solution proposals for selected social and economic issues in ASEAN (ASEAN Data Science Explorers, 2021; ASEAN Foundation, 2019). Through these programs, students across the ASEAN Member States have the opportunity to compete and share knowledge with one another.

**The establishment of a proper quality assurance framework and its related activities would encourage further investment (Kostevc, 2011) in cross-border education programs by improving transparency and predictability for potential investors (Morrell et al., 2018).**

To further support and ease the mobility of students across ASEAN Member States, the Work Plan, through “Sub-Goal 6: Strengthen the higher education sector through the implementation of robust quality assurance mechanisms”, aims to implement the “ASEAN Regional Quality Assurance.” The ASEAN Quality Assurance (ASEAN-QA) project is run as a joint initiative between ASEAN and non-ASEAN institutions such as DAAD<sup>10</sup> and ENQA.<sup>11</sup> ASEAN-QA held three-year training programs between 2016 and 2018 for professionals in higher education to develop

the internal and external quality assurance capacity based on the regional standards of the ASEAN Member States (ASEAN-QA, n.d.). The establishment of a proper quality assurance framework and its related activities would encourage further investment (Kostevc, 2011) in cross-border education programs by improving transparency and predictability for potential investors (Morrell et al., 2018).

## Limitations

Despite its strengths, gaps to attract investment remain in the Work Plan. Firstly, several activities in the Work Plan only focus on coordination meetings and building frameworks which do not result in actionable outcomes that would require large investments. For example, Activities 55–56 under Sub-Goal 6 concerns the development and application of the National Qualification Frameworks in higher education, while Activities 57–59 under Sub-Goal 6 covers coordination meetings on higher education in ASEAN. Since they do not indicate nor result in actionable outcomes that would require large monetary investments, these activities would not contribute as much in terms of promoting investment in education.

**The Work Plan overlooks areas that could attract even more education investment, specifically in terms of building ICT capacity.**

Secondly, the Work Plan overlooks areas that could attract even more education investment, specifically in terms of building ICT capacity. For example, the Work Plan does not highlight potential projects involving the many EdTech firms in the ASEAN region—as mentioned previously, these have the potential to draw considerable venture capital. Since EdTech firms incorporate technology into education to make educational materials more accessible to more students, this could accelerate ICT capacity building as well as expand inclusive learning within and across borders, hence attracting even more investments into the education sector in ASEAN.

These gaps may limit the effectiveness of the Work Plan at increasing investment in education in ASEAN.

<sup>10</sup> Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), or German Academic Exchange Service, is the “largest German funding organisation for the international exchange of students and researchers” (DAAD, n.d.). One of their aims is to aid developing countries in establishing productive higher education institutions.

<sup>11</sup> The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an organization that internationally represents the quality assurance and accreditation agencies from the European Higher Education Area (ENQA, n.d.).

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## IDENTIFYING INVESTMENT QUALITY

The quantity of investment does not guarantee its quality or effectiveness. Therefore, it is important to also analyze the extent to which the Work Plan attracts quality investments from credible sources with clear motives.

Good quality investments produce the desired outcome. Ensuring that the institution or country from which the investment comes has a clear investment policy and a transparent legal framework that governs the investments improves the odds of good quality investments (OECD, 2020; Prelec, 2020). The absence of a transparent system increases the risk of poor-quality investment, in which the investment does not meet the targeted outcomes and may even result in negative consequences.

**“The absence of a transparent system increases the risk of poor-quality investment, in which the investment does not meet the targeted outcomes and may even result in negative consequences.”**

The link between clear and transparent investment and good quality investment has proven true in several instances in terms of education (Suryadarma, 2012; Wallace, 2018). For example, the hundreds of corruption cases reported in Indonesian public-school funding between 2006 and 2015 were likely due to the lack of a monitoring system over the spending of regional officials managing education budgets (Chin, 2016). Clear policies when dealing with investments are therefore important.

The Center for International Private Enterprise [CIPE] (n.d.) outlines the characteristics of what they termed “constructive capital” and “corrosive capital.” Constructive capital refers to flows of investment backed by transparent and market-oriented objectives both at the origin and destination of the funds. The word “constructive” emphasizes that when such capital is attracted it generates positive spill-over effects. Constructive capital can spur a cycle of good quality investments in the community and encourage good governance practices (Hontz, 2019).

Corrosive capital refers to flows of investment with vague motives that are often not transparent, politically driven, and sourced from authoritarian regimes into new or transitioning economies with the aim of influencing the recipient economy (Morrell et al., 2018). An originator of corrosive capital could use their financial power to influence a recipient for their own economic, social, or political agenda as the investor, instead of the recipient country’s best interests (James, 1930).

Based on the framework of constructive and corrosive capital, the next section will analyze the extent to which the Work Plan considers the quality of investment in the education sector in ASEAN.

## ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY OF INVESTMENT PROVISIONS IN THE WORK PLAN

**A more educated population not only improves human capital, but it also increases the capacity of people in the society to push for the implementation of better and more transparent investment regulations in the region (Morrell et al., 2018),**

There are some attempts in the Work Plan to address the quality of potential investments in inclusive education in ASEAN. For instance, the Work Plan advocates for lifelong learning and addresses education for a range of groups, including children, teachers, and marginalized groups (such as OOSCY and people who are disabled)<sup>12</sup>. A more educated population not only improves human capital, but it also increases the capacity of people in the society to push for the implementation of better and more transparent investment regulations in the region (Morrell et al., 2018), and encourages an environment that attracts more constructive capital into education and other sectors in ASEAN.

Moreover, these projects and activities are paired with specific goals in inclusive education and specific institutions targeted to be potential partners. For example, in Priority Area 2.2 under “Sub-Goal 2: Enhance the quality and access to basic education for all, including the disabled, less advantageous, and other marginalized groups”, the Work Plan aims to improve the “quality of basic education through quality-focused interventions” with expected outcomes such as developed “strategic online courses” and “framework and action plan for exchange in teacher training,” especially for CLMV countries. On these specific projects, GIZ, UNICEF, and British Council are among the potential targets for partners—institutions globally known for their credibility and advocacy of inclusive education. By specifying target results and reputable NGOs, the Work Plan reduces the gap through which corrosive capital could flow to education in ASEAN, especially in the underdeveloped CLMV economies which are more vulnerable to corrosive capital (CIPE, n.d.; Morrell et al., 2018).

In the development of cross-border education programs, the Work Plan highlights ASEAN’s inclination towards partnering with the private sector and organizations in the region, especially in higher education (Sub-Goal 7). As elaborated by OECD (2006) in their “Policy Framework for Investment”<sup>13</sup>, both private sector investment and public expenditure may increase an economy’s productive capacity and spur job creation. Furthermore, engaging with the private sector illustrates how the Work Plan also considers market-driven objectives of investment, which therefore lays out a path for more constructive capital (CIPE, n.d.) in cross-border education programs.

<sup>12</sup> These points are specifically addressed in some of the projects and activities under Sub-Goals 2, 7, and 8 in the Work Plan: “Sub-Goal 2: Enhance the quality and access to basic education for all, including the disabled, less advantageous, and other marginalized groups”; “Sub-Goal 7: Foster the role of higher education in the area of socio-economic development through University-Industry Partnership”; “Sub-Goal 8: Provide capacity-building programs for teachers, academics and other key stakeholders in the education community”.

<sup>13</sup> The Policy Framework for Investment was developed by a unit of government officials from around 60 OECD and non-OECD economies in partnership with and drawing experiences from other international, regional, and civil society organizations.

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However, the limitations of the regulatory and institutional capacity of some ASEAN Member States introduces a potential risk of corrosive capital flow into the ASEAN education sector. Reilly (2015) found that the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) recorded a total assistance of approximately USD 1.40 billion between 2001 and 2014 from international donors to Cambodia's education sector. Japan and South Korea were the top two contributors, while China contributed less than 7% of the total and ranks at the bottom. However, it was later found that the CDC did not capture unreported Chinese projects worth millions of USD, including China's training and scholarship assistance to the CDC. Once these were documented, Chinese investments were in fact at a similar level to investment from Japan and South Korea. Failure by the CDC to properly identify this investment could be indicative of Cambodia's limited regulatory and institutional capacity, which therefore poses gaps for corrosive capital to flow into Cambodia's education sector.

However, the limitations of the regulatory and institutional capacity of some ASEAN Member States introduces a potential risk of corrosive capital flow into the ASEAN education sector.

Moreover, regarding the general scope of the Work Plan, there are no provisions detailed in the document that governs what happens if investment targets or desired outcomes are not met. The Work Plan also does not explicitly outline nor refer to a regulatory framework for investments in its projects or activities. Governance gaps and risks of corrosive investments therefore remain a challenge.



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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016–2020 has guided the overall development in ASEAN's education sector and each Member State to engage in their different projects and activities. Over its five-year mandate, it has helped to work toward the achievement of its eight sub-goals, which address the top priorities in education for the ASEAN Member States.

However, there has not yet been sufficient analysis of the steps taken by the Work Plan to set incentives to increase the quantity and quality of investment in inclusive education, cross-border education programs, and ICT capacity building in terms of both quantity and quality. Therefore, this paper analyzed whether and how the Work Plan promotes investment through these three areas.

While the Work Plan has revealed opportunities for investment and gives some attention to the quality of investment, gaps remain in both of these areas. The following recommendations should be considered to improve the future Work Plans:

- **Continue to encourage the allocation of specific funds and projects in education for less developed ASEAN Member States**

Characteristics of the recipient economy, such as the availability and quality of resources (e.g., land, labor/human capital) influence its attractiveness for investment. In this regard, education is a proven contributing factor to human capital development. However, there is significant variance in human capital development among ASEAN Member States. Therefore, the ASEAN Secretariat should continue to allocate specific funds and projects for less developed ASEAN Member States, such as the CLMV countries, and to encourage more developed members to contribute. This will benefit all Member States in the long run as the variance in human capital development reduces, therefore increasing the chances to make the ASEAN region more attractive as a destination for constructive investment from non-ASEAN countries both in and beyond the education sector.

- **Develop a specific regulatory framework for investment in Work Plan projects, especially for projects highlighting CLMV countries.**

Although the ASEAN Secretariat does not have the jurisdiction to push national governments of Member States to implement a regulatory framework governing investment in education projects, it should aim to influence policy makers at the national level through its firm implementation of Work Plan projects at the regional level. The framework should require that projects include specific projected amounts of funding needed for each project or sub-goal and make improving the transparency and quality of investments a quantifiable outcome. Establishing a clear guide to govern investment activities in Work Plan projects would attract more investments and reduce the risk of corrosive capital or poor-quality investments.

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As with resources overall, special emphasis should be put on projects involving CLMV countries, which are relatively more vulnerable to corrosive capital and external influence.

- **Identify more diverse and innovative opportunities to incorporate ICT in education.**

The use of ICT in education has been proven to stimulate investments in education, as with large flows of venture capital into EdTech firms. However, this has not yet been addressed in the 2016–2020 Work Plan. Therefore, the ASEAN Secretariat should carry out a deeper analysis into more innovative ways through which ICT can be used in education in the ASEAN region in order to improve investment opportunities in education through ICT capacity building. The results of the analysis should then serve as a basis to include more variations of ICT capacity building projects in the future Work Plans, such as through partnerships with EdTech firms in the distribution of educational materials.

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