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Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has gained importance in the partnership between the United Kingdom and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ([ASEAN](#)) in recent years. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization has identified TVET as one of the seven priority areas for educational development from 2015 to 2035 and emphasised TVET's contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The establishment of the [ASEAN TVET Council](#) in 2020 and its work plan for 2021 to 2030 have further underlined the importance of TVET in the region.

The UK has been widely known as a long-term partner of ASEAN universities when it comes to higher education and research, but little is known about its involvement in TVET in the region.

There are many ASEAN-UK TVET partnerships between higher education institutions, particularly in curriculum development and research about TVET. Many post-1992 universities in the UK were originally polytechnics and they are often the most active partners in TVET in Southeast Asia.

Recently, the [PEER project](#), led by Coventry University and funded by the British Council, has mapped different models and changing patterns of UK TVET partnerships with ASEAN and identified factors that foster future cooperation.

In this project, TVET is understood as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods, from pre-employment to continuing professional development.

TVET diplomacy

TVET has been part of the UK government's international assistance programmes for low- and middle-income countries. As ASEAN looks to internationalise the TVET sector, the UK has responded by incorporating TVET in bilateral relationships with most individual ASEAN countries. Many governmental memoranda of understanding on TVET cooperation and large-scale development projects have been agreed by top-ranked UK diplomats to [Vietnam](#), [Cambodia](#), [the Philippines](#), [Malaysia](#) and [Indonesia](#).

While higher education diplomacy often involves student mobility, TVET diplomacy prioritises macro-structural reforms and policy development with the involvement of states.

The UK's bilateral TVET partnerships with individual ASEAN countries share a common goal of 'institution building', an approach primarily designed for emerging economies that have taken the path to modernisation, with their overriding goals being socio-economic progress and nation-building. In development studies, 'institution' often refers to sets of formal and informal rules enforced by the state and by relevant stakeholder groups.

The [2018 OECD report](#) on TVET in ASEAN, which was funded by the then UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, provided evidence that TVET is a powerful tool for enhancing the employability and productivity of the workforce, addressing multiple developmental challenges and fostering inclusive growth at the local level in the ASEAN region.

Improving the quality of TVET in Vietnam

In the same year, the British Council was selected as one of the delivery partners for the 'VET Toolbox' – a European Union-funded project to support Vietnam in implementing its [TVET strategy](#)

[2011-2020](#). This strategy set ambitious objectives to improve the quality of TVET in Vietnam to meet the standards of developed countries in ASEAN and to develop 70 high quality TVET colleges by 2025.

The British Council supported two projects that reviewed the quality of teaching and learning at four Vietnamese colleges in 2018 against UK [OFSTED](#) inspection standards and benchmarked the qualifications of a further five Vietnamese colleges against England's Regulated Qualifications Frameworks.

The first project assessed the robustness of the quality assurance mechanisms in place and developed a self-assessment tool for use by TVET colleges across Vietnam, while the second project helped identify a roadmap to gaining international recognition of their qualifications.

According to our respondents, the major challenge is to develop an inclusive internationalisation practice to ensure teachers and learners are also engaged in quality assurance, rather than only policy-makers. The UK benchmarking activity is nice to have, but Vietnam has not reached the objective of getting mutual recognition from other ASEAN countries.

Skills for Prosperity

In 2019, the four-year [Skills for Prosperity programme](#), funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was launched in nine middle-income countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The dedicated programme in Southeast Asia aims to increase the quality, relevance, equity and affordability of TVET systems and improve access to quality training for marginalised groups, including women and girls.

The UK-Indonesia partnership focused on TVET in the maritime sector, including logistics and international trade, global tourism management, seafaring engineering and shipbuilding engineering. As an island nation, the maritime sector has a critical bearing on Indonesia's economic growth and thus has been identified as a priority sector by the government in the Global Maritime Fulcrum master plan. This was also chosen due to the UK's expertise and reputation in this field.

Malaysia focused on the construction and food production sectors to promote the integration of STEM and digital skills into the TVET system.

The UK-Philippines partnership, in support of the Build, Build, Build mega programme of the Philippine government, focused on the construction and digital economy sectors, since they offer more job opportunities for marginalised groups.

A major shared aim of these partnerships was to support policy development, such as the Indonesian Presidential Regulations 68 on Revitalisation of Vocational Education and Training, launched in February 2023, with the establishment of sectoral skills committees paving the way for the Indonesian National TVET Committee.

There was also the development of the Malaysian National Skills Registry – an online database that contains comprehensive information about occupations and skills and supports forecasting and matching of future skills needs – and the creation of an area-based Labour Market Information system in the Philippines to better manage skills demand and improve regional TVET provision.

TVET Partnerships: from aid to trade

Other UK-ASEAN TVET partnerships in the past decade can be subsumed under the 'education export' model in line with the UK International Education Strategy. City & Guilds, Pearson, Training Qualifications UK, the National Open College Network and TVET UK have been noticeably active in Southeast Asia.

City & Guilds is the UK's largest vocational awarding organisation, with more than 140 years of experience in setting the global standards for skills and vocational qualifications. It offers more than 1,000 qualifications at all levels, from entry level to the equivalent of a doctorate, suitable for delivery by colleges, training providers and employers.

City & Guilds operates in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. One of its main revenue-generating activities is to license local colleges to deliver City & Guilds qualifications.

As of 2022, there were 51 such licensed centres in seven ASEAN countries, of which 30 centres were in Malaysia. Riam Institute of Technology in Malaysia is the largest City & Guilds centre in Southeast Asia, delivering programmes in mechanical, electrical and automotive engineering and culinary arts.

Another example is Pearson – a private education company that has offices in Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Pearson has received an official endorsement from the Thai government, which allows its Business and Technology Education Council ([BTEC](#)) qualifications to be delivered in all public and private vocational and higher education institutions in Thailand.

The pilot implementation began in December 2018 with the view to expand BTEC qualifications across 800 Thai vocational institutions to develop standards for vocational courses and to support the [Eastern Economic Corridor](#) – a flagship economic project of [Thailand 4.0](#), with an approved budget of THB861 million (US\$24 million) to develop human resources.

Pearson licenses local colleges and trains teachers to provide soft skills – such as English proficiency, problem-solving, critical thinking and communication skills – and qualifications in 10 targeted industries, including aeronautical engineering, smart electronics/robotics, infrastructure and logistics, and tourism.

The PEER project findings show that Pearson has received the Thai Ministry of Education's recognition for its BTEC qualifications, but is working on contextualising its curricula to secure their endorsement by employers.

City & Guilds qualifications are recognised by industry, although the study time is shorter compared to formal schooling in Malaysia. However, the challenge for local centres was that it took a long time for their application to be processed by City & Guilds and the fees were high.

The sustainability of the partnership depends on the demand for City & Guilds qualifications, which is impacted upon by the development of Malaysia's National Occupational Skills Standards (NOSS) – a specification of competencies required by the National Skills Development Act.

The engagement of local colleges with City & Guilds is limited to those programmes and qualifications that are not covered by NOSS. Similarly, in Brunei, the development of NOSS and the adoption of local curricula and certification will affect the demand for City & Guilds qualifications and a number of its approved centres.

Towards sustainable regional partnerships

UK-ASEAN TVET relations have also pivoted towards multilateral and regional partnerships, although they will not replace bilateral partnerships. In preparation for the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community in December 2015, there was an urgent call for the internationalisation of TVET systems to train a highly skilled workforce.

The British Council took the opportunity of this historical moment to work with the Thai government and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) to co-organise the High Officials Meeting on TVET '[Working Together Towards Harmonisation and Internationalisation](#)' in August 2015.

The meeting strengthened the network of national policy-makers and practitioners in Southeast Asia and proposed the launch of a [regional online portal](#) and the establishment of the [SEA-TVET Consortium](#) to facilitate student and teacher exchange and curriculum harmonisation.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the exchange programme also facilitates virtual exchange under the renewed [SEAMEO TVET Exchange Programme](#).

The Skills for Prosperity programme in Southeast Asia also seems to be moving towards region-wide partnerships. The recent completion of the programme could offer an opportunity for regional dialogue and knowledge sharing.

The '[blue economy](#)' (or 'ocean economy') has emerged as an ASEAN regional project that requires a skilled workforce in various occupations for post-COVID recovery across ASEAN.

The Indonesian new maritime sectoral skills committees will be a source of inspiration for mutual learning and South-South cooperation. A sustainable multilateral partnership model requires a move towards co-creating curricula and qualifications, customising practices and redefining success.

The advent of the ASEAN [Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution](#) and the post-pandemic recovery have profoundly changed the landscape of the world of work, making upskilling and reskilling a continuous pursuit for the ASEAN region if it wants to keep pace with the rest of the world.

Establishing sustainable international partnerships is seen as a solution for enhancing the quality of TVET, rebranding its image and developing a market-responsive workforce.

The UK became an ASEAN Dialogue partner in August 2021 and in the [2022 UK-ASEAN Plan of Action](#), most collaborative activities are proposed at the regional level, including a concrete proposal for the TVET sector: "3.2.6. Explore cooperation between the ASEAN TVET Council and the UK to support ASEAN's efforts in harmonising TVET and human resource development initiatives in the region".

One of the TVET Council's priorities is to support research into TVET and develop [Labour Market Information Systems](#), and this could be another area of shared interest for the UK and ASEAN.

About the authors:

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