Module 1: Overview and Context of Education Policies

1.3.a Comparative Analysis of National Education Systems: Education Sector Planning and Management

This reading material is reproduced for training purpose based on *Education Systems in ASEAN+6 Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Educational Issues*, UNESCO Bangkok Working Paper

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**Education Systems in ASEAN+6 Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Educational Issues**

**Introduction**

Countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), despite differences in political systems, ideologies, historical background, development priorities and education structure, share a common vision for ASEAN community. For ASEAN countries, education is core to development and contributes to the enhancement of ASEAN competitiveness. The ASEAN Charter, launched in 2007, clearly emphasizes the strategic importance of closer cooperation in education and human resource development among the ASEAN member countries. The critical role of education in promoting ASEAN social and economic development and the building a strong ASEAN community has also been widely recognized and repeatedly confirmed at various high level policy dialogues and in policy documents. In recognition of the need for greater cooperation in education, a number of regional activities have been initiated including the national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) which promote the recognition of qualifications and quality assurance in education provision based on a common reference framework for ASEAN.

ASEAN+6, which consists of the 10 ASEAN member countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea, is a regional cooperation framework established to create an East Asian version of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This enlarged ASEAN group aims to accelerate economic growth in East Asia and promote cooperation in areas and fields vital to economic activities which greatly benefit not only its members but also other countries of the Asia – Pacific region.

Examination of education systems in ASEAN+6 countries provides a useful combination of generally high performing systems (e.g. Australia, Republic of Korea, Singapore) and systems where much improvement may be needed (e.g. Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar). By comparison, the analysis provides greater scope for understanding why an education system performs better in one country than in another. At the same time, comparison also provides good evidence and thus lessons and practical options to help improve education system performance. To help inform this reflection, there is merit in examining the policies in any given education system, the ways in which they interact and impact upon system performance and the underlying factors that make policies work successfully.

**Scope and approach of the analysis**

This comparative analysis sets out the main areas where UNESCO believes policy dialogue and reform are critical for improving education system performance. Data has been collected and comparison has been drawn wherever possible for all of the 16 countries under analysis. Any implications drawn are mainly to serve education policy dialogue and reform efforts in the ASEAN countries but are also relevant for many countries in the region who wish to participate in, and fully benefit from, the regional cooperation and/or integration process.

The idea for compiling a comparative analytical report on ASEAN+6 education systems was initially conceived when UNESCO was called upon by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to conduct the Malaysia Education Policy Review (M-EPR) in April 2012 and the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in Myanmar in June 2012. In both cases, UNESCO was requested to review the
national education systems along with certain critical policy areas through a comparative lens. The preparation of the report is based on the work done previously with Malaysia with expansion to a wider group of ASEAN+6 countries and in support of CESR in Myanmar. The report is also based on the summaries of fact findings from various UNESCO staff missions and policy products and analytical work by UNESCO Bangkok such as the Asia–Pacific Education System Review Series, the online education system profiles (ESPs), secondary education country profiles, and selected country case study reports. The source of information is therefore not always cited explicitly but has been verified by UNESCO Bangkok staff from different sources. The report also builds on SABER, a diagnostic tool which aims to assess and benchmark education systems, and a brief literature review of academic articles, policy reports, and government documents examining the various topics covered in the report. Wherever possible, the report also uses the findings of research reports by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) and the ASEAN Secretariat. The policy areas are selected to reflect the most critical issues facing many education systems in the region and the areas where UNESCO has been asked to provide support on. It does identify a number of important policy issues that are relevant to many ASEAN countries.

The analyses presented in the report are informed by UNESCO’s knowledge base and understanding of the sub region’s main educational development challenges and priorities. They are also informed by the experience of UNESCO in the Asia-Pacific region, working closely with government counterparts, civil society and development partners to support the educational development needs of member countries and their aspirations in education. As a result, the report focuses on those areas and approaches that are closer to the mandate, comparative advantages, and country experience of UNESCO in the region, focusing less on issues that, although important for countries’ future educational development, fall outside those areas in which UNESCO has traditionally worked in support of national education policy and reform efforts, such as school infrastructure development.

Constraints encountered in the writing of this comparative report included a lack of reliable data in a number of countries as well as somewhat inconsistent and incomparable data from various data sources. Wherever possible, the report has relied on existing research or study reports available from international development organizations as well as internationally comparable and official government data sources. In some cases, however, the data available particularly from online sources, is different from data provided by government sources. In such cases, internationally comparable data has been used, and complemented or verified by findings from relevant research or UNESCO in-house expert knowledge. Development bank, academic and UN data sources have been used extensively in order to provide a triangulated analysis of the issues.

**Executive Summary**

This comparative analytical report reviews and analyzes a range of selected educational issues in ASEAN+6 countries (including 10 ASEAN member countries plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea) to help inform policy options for improving education system performance. The report was prepared as a contribution of UNESCO to the ongoing discussions and exchange of information on the education reform and development agenda in a number of countries in the Asia – Pacific region. In particular, it highlights the key issues, challenges and opportunities in improving system performance and reducing educational disparities across ASEAN+6 countries with a focus on sector legislation, planning and management, secondary education and technical and vocational education and training which are areas of critical relevance for formulating and operationalizing the education reform agenda in these countries.
A review of the current situation of education in ASEAN+6 countries indicates that:

- All ASEAN+6 countries have a legal provision for free and compulsory education for at least some levels of basic education
- Education system structures vary, however, 6+3+3 is the most common in the region, followed by 6+4+2 system
- Most of ASEAN+6 countries have decentralized key functions and responsibilities to lower levels of administration but remain rather centralized with regard to standard setting and teacher management
- Many ASEAN+6 countries have promoted alternative education and the use of equivalency programmes to help achieve MDGs and EFA goals, however, the way alternative learning programme is organized, delivered and certified differs
- There is widely recognised association between quality of learning and enabling factors for quality education such as curriculum and assessment, quality assurance, teaching and learning time, language in education policies and teacher quality
- Trends in TVET enrolment rates vary across the region: in most countries, the share of TVET has tended to decrease over the past decade
- All ASEAN+6 recognize the importance of TVET and many include it in their national socio-economic development plans, however, TVET continues to be “unpopular” and “demarcation” between general and vocational education tends to be increasingly blurred
- There are wide variances in the way countries prepare their workforce and perform educationally in TVET but most have attempted to put in place systems for TVET quality assurance and qualification framework

Reviewing these issues and the diverse options that countries have chosen to respond to them has shed some lights on the possible policy choices for any countries wishing to undertake education reform in these areas. Evidence starts to reveal that high performing education systems appear to:

- Commit strongly, both legally and financially, to education
- Spend more and better on education
- Devolve more management responsibilities to sub-national levels
- Produce and use more data
- Undertake frequent curriculum reforms to respond to changing needs and make education more relevant
- Train and utilize better teachers
- Provide alternative pathways to education on the basis of gender, ethnicity, poverty and geographical location

The analysis of countries’ experiences in implementing education reform and policy also provides some lessons learnt for any successful education policy development. Education policy, in particular reform policy, is best guaranteed to be successful if it is developed with:

- Visionary and consistent policy
- Focus on equity and learning
- Monitoring of progress and outcomes
- Partnerships under government leadership