The Asia-Pacific Conference on Education and Training concluded last week with the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, a transformative vision of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the region.

Ministers and heads of delegations responsible for education from 26 countries endorsed the declaration, which sets out actions to empower youth through TVET by making this form of education more responsive to the world of work and 21st century challenges.

The declaration was adopted on the third and final day of the conference in the Malaysian capital. About 1,000 people, including representatives from governments, multilateral organisations, the private sector, unions, youth organisations and researchers from throughout Asia-Pacific, attended the conference, the theme of which was "Making Skills Development Work for the Future".

UNESCO Bangkok director Gwang-Jo Kim said that the declaration comes at a pivotal time in global education planning following the Incheon Declaration adopted at the World Education Forum, which set out priorities for the post-2015 education agenda.

"The Kuala Lumpur Declaration has only confirmed this path set forward as part of the Incheon Declaration and its vision for education towards 2030," he said. "The declaration also highlights the potential of TVET in contributing towards more peaceful, sustainable and equitable societies, and particularly in achieving the sustainable development goals as part of the post-2015 global agenda."

Kim added that the declaration reflected a common point of consensus among delegates at ACET: that university education does not represent the only path forward for young people. "To unleash the true potential of TVET, we need to work towards strengthening TVET systems to enhance its relevance and attractiveness as an equally, if not better, learning path," he said.

Speaking at the conference’s closing ceremony, Malaysian Deputy Minister of Higher Education YB Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching said that countries in Asia-Pacific and around the world are faced with the challenge of high levels of youth unemployment due to a skills mismatch with labour markets.
"We need to ask ourselves this pertinent question: What can the governments in this region do to ensure that the graduates exiting institutes of learning are gainfully employed? It is crucial that every government seeks the right solutions to overcome this challenge," she said, adding that the declaration is a substantial step in the right declaration. "Today marks the historic launch of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration 2015, which will form the major policy framework for Asia-Pacific countries to move forward in TVET. A plan of action for a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable development in TVET is of great priority in the Asia-Pacific region."

In his keynote address delivered on the second day of the conference, UNESCO assistant director-general for education Qian Tang said that "2015 represents an opportunity for TVET transformation. It is meant to be a year of global action, the year we make history, the year we move the world towards a more sustainable and equitable future."

The consensus around the need to advance TVET in Asia-Pacific aligns with the proposed post-2015 sustainable development goals agenda, he said, specifically the goals to "ensure inclusive and quality education and promote lifelong learning".

"[UNESCO] is guided by a strategy for technical and vocational education and training, recognising the indispensable role of technical and vocational skills in sustainable development and particularly its importance in addressing unemployment, equity and income disparities, socio-economic development and, more broadly, quality of life challenges," he said.

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration sets out eight actions to advance TVET in Asia-Pacific: enhancing the quality of TVET and its relevance to the world of work; ensuring inclusive and equitable TVET; expanding lifelong learning opportunities through TVET; integrating greening skills for sustainable development in TVET programmes; adapting qualifications systems to facilitate learning and career pathways; strengthening governance of and investment in TVET; and fostering regional integration and labour mobility.

The declaration was endorsed and adopted by Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Fiji Islands, India, Iran, Japan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

The ministerial deliberations at ACET followed on from those at the Third International Congress on TVET in Shanghai and the subsequent recommendations issued on TVET in the Shanghai Consensus, as well as the World Education Forum held in Incheon, South Korea, earlier this year.