Closing the gap between education and the world of work

(Part II – Ladderized skills can now start in senior high school)

For the past 10 years Go Negosyo has glorified successful entrepreneurship of popular businesses and millionaires, failing to balance the message with how to uplift our poor countrymen with education for sustainable development. Philippine politics continue its dole-out policies led by the president’s “Pangtawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program,” blocking continuously the literacy efforts to eradicate poverty.

Despite tremendous economic growth in Asia-Pacific over the past decade, millions of the regions’ young find themselves unemployed or underemployed, lacking the skills they need to find meaningful jobs to contribute to more sustainable societies. Education ministers from throughout Asia-Pacific have gathered for a high-level policy discussion on how Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can change that.

‘Making skills development work for the future’

The Asia-Pacific Conference on Education and Training, held last week in Kuala Lumpur, was recently attended by an assembly of 1,000 participants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Fiji Islands, India, Iran, Japan, Kiribati, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, puzzling absence of the Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Vietnam. TESDA Secretary Joel Villanueva should have been with the TVET Ministers who put together a transformative vision of technical and vocational education and training in the region together with multilateral organizations, the private sector unions, youth organizations and researchers. This set out the priorities of “post UNMDG 2015” and post Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) agenda.

In his opening remarks, UNESCO Bangkok Director Gwang-Jo Kim noted how despite the region’s dynamic growth, young people are the ones “bearing the brunt” of inequality among and with countries in Asia Pacific, with 220 million of them unemployed as well as out of school or other formal training, and 300 million underemployed (earning little or stuck in jobs that do not make full use of their abilities).

“How do we ensure that 300 million youth can maximize their skill set to develop our respective economies in a sustainable manner? How can we encourage equality in skill acquisition, so that both men and women can have equal opportunities to excel in their fields?” Dr. Kim asked. “It is imperative that we work together to create strong TVET systems that will propel our economic growth in a sustainable and equitable manner.

“The overarching aim of this conference is to leverage the tremendous potential of TVET policies to better link the skills acquired by learners with those needed in the labor markets,” he said.

Malaysian Minister of Education Dato Seri DiRaja Mahdzir bin Khalid noted at the opening that “TVET is seen as a less attractive pathway compared to university education; therefore students, particularly high-performing ones, do not apply for TVET courses. Malaysia is taking steps to address the perception,” the minister said, “and this conference offers other countries in Asia-Pacific the opportunity to do the same.”

The Shanghai consensus

Countries in the Asia-Pacific engaged in numerous policy initiatives, where, in many cases have been observed as not transformative enough to respond to the changing socio-economic landscape, to the
aspirations for knowledge societies and the need for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. With its numerous diversity, there are experiences and lessons to be learned from within and outside the Asia-Pacific region, which can benefit countries in transforming their TVET policies and strategies in response to emerging socio-economic trends.

In response to the emerging challenges such as globalization, regional integration, demographic shifts, technological advances, environmental concerns, as well as persistent inequalities and youth unemployment, many governments in the Asia-Pacific strive towards green and sustainable development: this requires new skills, which are expected to replace or expand existing skills in the future and create job opportunities in particular for the youth.

**The Kuala Lumpur Declaration**

The signing of Kuala Lumpur Declaration outlines the concrete, action-oriented recommendations to develop and strengthen TVET in Asia-Pacific with the theme “Quality Education and Skills Development for a Sustainable Future.” The Kuala Lumpur meeting is a follow-up to both the Shanghai Consensus and the Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea.

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 reinforces the vision for education towards 2030. 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.”

Dr. 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.”

**The modern face of skills development in Asia-Pacific**

According to Dato Seri DiRaja Mahdzir bin Khalid, “Countries need to prioritize TVET and place it among the mainstream education to ensure the youths are equipped with skills, which will make them more employable for current and future job markets.”

Among the key areas of focus during the conference will be how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be better incorporated in TVET, a critical concern in Asia-Pacific, a region that is home to 44 percent of the world’s internet users, with internet penetration from mobile devices expected to grow by 10 percent over the next three years.

TVET’s potential in promoting sustainable economic growth will be another key focus of the meeting with ministers and experts determining on how this form of education can best be used to equip learners with the knowledge they need in this increasingly important sector.

UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education of Paris 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.”