

Asia-Pacific Thematic Working Group on Adolescent and Youth Education, Learning and Skills Development¹

DRAFT Terms of reference

December 2021

Background and rationale

The Asia and Pacific region is home to the majority of the world's young people. The more than 330 million lower-secondary age adolescents (10-14 year olds) and more than 660 million youth aged 15-24² in the region are an enormous potential asset for the region's current and future inclusive economic and social development.³ Realizing this potential requires their participation in inclusive, relevant and quality education and learning, training and skills development, and adequate opportunities for entrepreneurship and decent work. Two crucial periods can be distinguished in their preparation for work and life:

- (a) secondary-age education and skills development, and
- (b) post-secondary/tertiary education including TVET and work-based learning, be it through formal or non-formal pathways.

The massive disruptions due to the COVID-19 crisis in Asia and the Pacific have had disproportionate impacts on the prospects and aspirations of adolescents and youth across three dimensions:

- (1) disruptions to education, learning, and training;
- (2) increased difficulties for young jobseekers and new labour market entrants; and
- (3) job disruptions in the form of reduced working hours, reduced earnings and job losses, along with a deteriorating quality of employment.⁴

Regarding **secondary education**, even before the crisis, there were concerns in terms of access to, completion of, and learning at the secondary education level, in particular for vulnerable and marginalized adolescents. While overall, important progress in the provision and expansion of education to adolescents was made, there were significant disparities between and within countries. Importantly, completion rates significantly drop at upper secondary level. Of 17 countries researched in the Asia-Pacific region, 90% completion rates at primary level have been

¹ Even though there are various definitions of the types of skills or competencies required for school, life and work, typically, the four main categories of skills which are required are foundational, transferable-or 21st century, digital and job-specific skills (see UNICEF Global Framework for Transferable Skills). All four are closely interlinked and essential for entrepreneurship, employability and decent work.

² UN population estimates and projections, Nov. 2020, available in [ILOSTAT](#).

³ In the context of this working group, we will refer to the UN definitions of adolescents as those between the ages of 10-19 and to youth as those between the ages of 15-24 years.

⁴ [ILO \(2020\) Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2020](#)

achieved in 10 countries, at lower secondary level in 5 countries and at upper secondary level in 2 countries⁵.

As regards learning achievement, the AP region has a large number of high performing countries, as shown in the PISA results. However, there are very significant differences between countries in the region and how learning is, or is not measured. Based on evidence from primary school learning assessments, such as SEA-PLM 2019 for instance, it can be expected that poor learning levels and disparities will continue or even get worse at secondary education levels.

Disruptions to education and training due to COVID-19 have seriously worsened the situation, leading to important learning loss and drop-out in particular for the most vulnerable adolescents. The persistent digital divide under the 'new normal' contributes to further gaps in education, skills development and the employability of vulnerable adolescents and youth.

Youth unemployment has significantly increased due to the economic impact of COVID-19. Youth in Asia-Pacific have been particularly hard hit by job losses, with a 10.3 per cent decline in employment in 2020, compared with 2.4 per cent for adults.⁶ This exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities - even before the COVID-19 crisis, 160 million youth in Asia and the Pacific were not in employment, education, or training (so-called NEET) and nearly three quarters of NEETs were young women.

The deep 2020 economic recession - by far the deepest at the global level since the end of World War II and highly uncertain economic recovery prospects for 2021 and 2022, will have long-term impacts on learning and training, jobs and economies.

In addition to impacting education, learning and employment, the COVID-19 crisis has further raised the stakes, not only exacerbating the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, such as young women and young persons with disabilities, but impacting well-being and mental health, and amplifying persistent inequalities and exclusion in economic, political and social spheres.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically revealed the pre-existing fragility of education and training systems, including for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). There is now an opportunity to innovate, reflect and build more relevant and resilient systems, capable of addressing both the immediate recovery needs, as well as the required longer-term education, training and skills development reforms.

Tackling the adolescents and youth learning and skills development challenge must take into account the regional context of rapidly evolving economies and labour markets, as well as the uncertainty over the COVID-19 recovery. A comprehensive policy response is therefore required through multi-stakeholder collaboration to avoid long-term damage to this generation.

Learning and Skills development should be understood comprehensively – encompassing foundational, transferable, digital and job-related skills. In particular, transferable skills, also

⁵ UNESCO and UNICEF (2021) 5-Year Progress Review of SDG 4 – Education 2030 in Asia-Pacific

⁶[ILO \(2021\) World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021](#)

known as life skills, 21st century skills, soft skills, or socio-emotional skills⁷, have been recognized as being essential for life, society and work. The concept of transferable skills is based on the four pillars of learning⁸ conceptualized in the 1996 UNESCO Delors Report: Learning: The Treasure Within⁹ and has been further developed in the UNICEF Global Framework on Transferable Skills¹⁰

The COVID19 pandemic has also highlighted the urgent need to invest in young people's mental health and wellbeing by integrating health literacy into education systems to ensure adolescents and youth are equipped with accurate, up to date information and aware of support. T

Also, more than ever, the crisis has reinforced the need for individuals to become lifelong learners, as per the aspirations of the SDG4-Education 2030 agenda. SDG 4 calls for the establishment of multiple and flexible pathways and lifelong learning and training opportunities, both for general education and TVET, with individualized and adaptive pedagogies, pathways across types of education and training. It also calls for the recognition of prior learning and validation of skills, career guidance and counselling.

In response to COVID-19 learning recovery and building back better, means that education and training systems will need to be reimaged and strengthened to improve second-decade education. This will include TVET and diversifying education and training provision based on the needs of different target groups to provide opportunities for all adolescents and youth. This objective is in line with the commitments of countries across Asia-Pacific towards achieving SDG targets 4.1, 4.3, 4.4., which emphasize the importance of education and learning at all levels, as well as knowledge, skills and competencies for decent work, entrepreneurship and life. Targets 8.5, 8.6 and 8.h on youth employment and skills development are also highly relevant.

Focus of the work of the thematic working group

This thematic working group (TWG) addresses a critical gap for multi-stakeholder exchange and collaboration in Asia-Pacific on adolescent and youth education, learning and skills development for work and life.

The focus of work will be three-pronged:

1. In-school: Supporting secondary school access, completion and learning, as well as skills development of adolescents and their transition to the world of work, with a focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups; and

⁷ These terminologies are often used interchangeably and sometimes include differing sets of skills.

⁸ 1. Learning to know: Foundational skills for future learning;

2. Learning to do: Skills to participate effectively in the society and the economy

3. Learning to be: Personal and social skills

4. Learning to life together: Skills for active citizenship

⁹ Unesco (1996) Learning: The Treasure Within. Paris. 1996

¹⁰ UNICEF (2019) UNICEF Global Framework on Transferable Skills. New York. 2019

2. Alternative pathways: Supporting relevant equivalent learning as well as training and skills development of out-of-school adolescents and NEET youth including foundational, transferable and digital skills and skills for employability and entrepreneurship.
3. Post-secondary training and skills development: Supporting youth to access and complete work-based training or TVET or alternative non-formal and information training and skills development opportunities and acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies for life and decent work.

The TWG would also emphasize cross-cutting areas that support holistic development of adolescents and youth, such as mental health, comprehensive sexual reproductive health education, gender-based violence, and socio-emotional learning – across the 3 focus areas above.

The TWG is a sub-group of the A-P LED 2030+ and linked to the UN Asia-Pacific Inter-agency Network on Youth (APINY), which are both under the Regional Collaborative Platform (RCP). The RCP will be the central platform for collaboration and provides a responsive and coherent support to national level activities in support of the 2030 Agenda. This TWG also links with the work of the [UN Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth](#) and [Generation Unlimited \(GenU\)](#) at regional level. The two multi-stakeholder initiatives share a common vision to improve the livelihood situation and future prospects of young people around the world.

Purpose

The purpose of the thematic working group is to promote multi-stakeholder collaboration and exchange, as well as support capacity development and innovation in formal and non-formal adolescent and youth education, learning and skills development, including for employability and entrepreneurship, with an emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Main responsibilities and activities:

The TWG will:

- Facilitate collaboration and coordination of activities across partners and key stakeholders
- Undertake advocacy and partnership development
- Identify, organize and build knowledge and develop materials
- Serve as a platform for knowledge exchange, inspiration and innovation
- Facilitate system review and strengthening for secondary education, training and skills development
- Undertake capacity building of MS where relevant and feasible
- Regularly seek feedback and engagement of adolescents and youth to inform the working group strategy, as well as member's programmes, where applicable

Main areas of focus include (non-exhaustive list):

- Systems strengthening through rethinking of adolescents learning pathways, secondary education and training/skills development systems.

- Teachers' and trainers professional strengthening including in transferable, digital and employability skills and digital approaches to improve learning and skills development (both formal and non-formal)
- Curriculum and content (relevance, strengthening of transferable, digital and health literacy, and employability skills) and pedagogical approaches
- Assessment (formative and summative) and accreditation
- Monitoring, including non-formal education
- School-to-work transition and employability through promotion of transferable and digital skills, career and vocational guidance as well as employment services.
- Harnessing the potential of technology to provide information, education and training to all adolescents and youth

This framework provides the basis for the TWG to advance collaboration and exchange in more detail in each area, e.g. from promoting innovative solutions for skills and lifelong learning, to a focus on specific groups such as youth in fragile situations.

Membership

- Multilateral institutions and UN agencies
- Civil society agencies;
- Youth-based organizations
- Private sector companies (EdTech and others) and foundations
- Academia
- Members of the UN Asia-Pacific Inter-agency Network on Youth (APINY) (TBC) and the Asia-Pacific Learning and Education 2030+ TWG
- Partners of Decent Jobs for Youth and Generation Unlimited

Group operations and frequency of meetings

- The Group will function in a structured but informal manner.
- Meeting frequency will be determined by the groups in its first meeting.
- Face-to-face meetings will be considered when conditions permit, e.g. linked to regional events and meetings. The TWG may also be used as a mechanism to organize and convene regional meetings.

Governance, roles and responsibilities

- Initially UNICEF and UNESCO will act as co-chairs, and either or both, can convene a meeting.
- At least one of the co-chairs, should be a representative of a UN agency, given the link with the wider UN system; but the other could be another entity (e.g. a civil society organization).
- A member organization will provide the secretariat for the group on a rotating basis. The secretariat will prepare the minutes of the meetings and, in consultation with the co-

chairs, prepare and circulate the agenda and supporting documents; preferably at least one week in advance of meetings.

- The initial Co-convenors will be UNICEF and UNESCO, with UNESCO providing the Secretariat.

This TOR will take effect subject to the consensual agreement of the founding Group members and will remain in force until at least December 2022. However, the TORs can be modified during this period as the group understands its scope and role.

Role vis-à-vis other partnerships within the UN-ESCAP Framework including:

- The TWG will complement other existing working groups and networks that co-ordinate UN support for the roll out of the SDGs across the Asia-Pacific. These groups include: The Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC); UNGEI; Mother Tongue Education; Digital Transformation in Education; and Disability and Inclusive Education; this exchange will be facilitated through the A-P Learning and Education 2030+ TWG.
- The TWG will report to the meetings of the APINY and Education 2030+ groups, which occur on at least twice a year. This allows for exchange with the other aforementioned groups and networks;
- There will also be synergies to be established between the WG on Digital Transformation other groups within the UN-ESCAP architecture, including the WG on Disabilities, for example; and
- The group will also be linked to GPE Kix and the NORRAG Knowledge and Management Exchange Europe | Asia | Pacific Hub, for dissemination activities.

Short-term (6-9 months) Joint Tasks of the Working Group

- Develop one main knowledge product cum policy brief as a background paper on adolescents' education, learning and skills development for the upcoming Asia-Pacific Regional Education Ministers Conference to be held in Bangkok in June 2022, and organizing a panel on the subject.
- Explore identifying and curating an internal communication and document exchange platform for the Group.
- Mapping of key stakeholders in the region and activities in the area
- Collate a calendar of major events being organized by Member organizations on relevant events pertaining to the TWG (the calendar will be linked to the internal Group platform mentioned above).
- Developing a repository of materials on adolescent and youth education and skills development. It should be discussed if the group will develop its own website or add its repository to an existing website (e.g. joint site ILO & GenU, or under APINY).