

ASEAN-UK SAGE Evidence and Insights Forum: 2 – 3 March 2026, Jakarta

Overview

This two-day regional event brings together senior Ministry of Education officials, technical experts, and practitioners from across ASEAN to share and reflect on the findings from Phase 1 of the ASEAN–UK SAGE programme. The event presents results from pilot projects, research, and technical assistance to support evidence-driven policy dialogue on foundational learning and inclusion.

AGENDA - Learning for the future

Objectives: The regional dissemination event aims to:

1. **Strengthen regional collaboration** by sharing key findings and promising approaches from ASEAN–UK SAGE’s support to the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM), country pilot projects, and research and technical assistance on out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) and the use of technology in education.
2. **Facilitate policy dialogue** among ASEAN Member States on how these results and lessons can inform national and regional education priorities, processes, and plans.

Open Session

Speakers:

- **HE Helen Fazey**, UK Ambassador to ASEAN
- **Datuk Dr Habibah Abdul Rahim**, Director, SEAMEO Secretariat

The opening session of the ASEAN-UK SAGE: Evidence and Insights Forum, “Learning for the Future,” set a strong tone of partnership, urgency, and shared responsibility. In her welcome remarks, **HE Helen Fazey**, UK Ambassador to ASEAN emphasized the value of collaboration among governments, regional bodies, and implementing partners, highlighting that sustained progress in education depends on collective leadership, mutual trust, and continuous learning. She underscored that the forum is not merely a convening, but a platform for constructive exchange aimed at accelerating improvements in education systems and ensuring better learning outcomes for every child. The key lesson from her address is that meaningful reform requires long-term commitment, cross-country cooperation, and a shared vision grounded in evidence and action.

In her regional address, **Datuk Dr Habibah Abdul Rahim** framed the discussion within Southeast Asia’s broader economic and demographic transformation. While the region is experiencing rapid growth, digital expansion, and increasing global influence, she highlighted critical paradoxes: persistent foundational learning gaps, rising numbers of out-of-school children, and widening inequalities despite improved connectivity. Drawing on regional evidence such as SEA-PLM findings and recent studies on out-of-school children, she reinforced the lesson that economic

growth alone does not guarantee inclusive human development. Strong political will, coherent reforms, investment in teachers, and effective use of data are essential to translate progress into equitable learning outcomes. The session ultimately underscored evidence-informed policymaking strengthened foundational learning, inclusive access, and thoughtful integration of EdTech must go hand in hand to secure a resilient and human-centered future for ASEAN’s learners.

ASEAN-UK SAGE Phase 1 Overview

The session introduced global evidence for improving learning and provided an overview of the ASEAN-UK SAGE programme and the objectives of the two-day forum.

Speakers:

- **Ms Isla Gilmore**, Education Adviser to ASEAN, UK FCDO
- **Mr Craig Farmer**, Team Leader, ASEAN-UK SAGE Programme

Ms. Isla Gilmore, Education Adviser to ASEAN at the UK FCDO, expressed appreciation to key partners and emphasizing that the ASEAN Education Programme (SAGE) is not only about reporting achievements, but about collective learning and regional reflection. She outlined three core principles guiding the programme. First, regional integration and shared learning are central to SAGE’s value. While implementation occurs primarily at the national level, the real impact emerges when ASEAN Member States engage in cross-country dialogue, exchange experiences, and strengthen reforms together. Regional cooperation, including pedagogical exchanges and targeted learning initiatives, helps expand what is possible across education systems in ASEAN.

Second, she stressed that collaboration and social inclusion are embedded throughout the programme’s design and delivery. Equity—particularly addressing the needs of out-of-school children, tackling gender disparities, and expanding opportunities for women and girls—is not treated as a separate component but as a foundational principle. Third, she underscored the importance of evidence-informed action. The UK views evidence as a global public good and has invested in initiatives such as the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel’s “Smart Buys” framework, which identifies cost-effective, evidence-based interventions that improve learning outcomes. While context, systems, and implementation matter, strong global evidence provides guidance on what works. Through SAGE, proven approaches such as structured pedagogy in early grade learning and targeted instruction (Teaching at the Right Level) are being applied and adapted within the region. She concluded by encouraging participants to use the forum as a meaningful space for reflection, connection, and practical dialogue on accelerating learning through collaborative, inclusive, and evidence-based strategies.

Mr. Craig Farmer, Team Leader of the ASEAN-UK SAGE Programme, highlighted the programme’s progress over the past two years in advancing sustainable, inclusive, and quality education across ASEAN. He outlined three core pillars guiding SAGE’s work: strengthening foundational learning (literacy and numeracy), supporting vulnerable and out-of-school children, and improving access to skills and employability. Across these pillars, the programme integrates cross-cutting priorities such as gender equality, digital innovation, and emerging technologies including artificial intelligence. He emphasized the dual regional–national approach of SAGE,

combining policy dialogue, research, and practical pilot interventions aligned with country priorities. At the regional level, SAGE has supported research, ministerial dialogue, and regional assessments to reinforce shared commitments, while nationally it has partnered closely with ministries to design cost-effective, evidence-based reforms. In Cambodia, for example, the programme has piloted structured pedagogy, early-grade learning monitoring systems, and targeted instruction approaches to better support struggling learners.

Under its second pillar, SAGE has focused on addressing the needs of marginalized groups, particularly girls, children with disabilities, and rural learners, by strengthening data systems, clarifying definitions of vulnerability, and testing adaptable interventions such as Teaching at the Right Level. The third pillar advances gender-responsive skills development and employability, including the award of 23 ASEAN-UK scholarships and targeted skills training initiatives for rural youth, especially young women, integrating 21st-century digital and entrepreneurial skills. Mr. Farmer concluded with a personal reflection on his commitment to equitable opportunities for every child, stressing that meaningful progress has been made in a short time through strong partnerships with ASEAN member states, the UK Government, and development partners. He expressed optimism that the next phase of collaboration will further accelerate inclusive, evidence-based education reform across the region.

Session 1-Translating SEA-PLM Evidence into Action for Foundational Learning

Key topics included:

- Findings from the 2024 SEA-PLM results
- Regional trends and implications for national policy priorities
- Examples of how SEA-PLM data is used in Cambodia, the Philippines, and Lao PDR.

Presenters

- Mr Alejandro Ibanez, Assessment Specialist, SEAMEO Secretariat
- Mr Sar Sarin, Deputy Director, EQID, MoEYS, Cambodia
- Dr Kevin Carl Santos, Director IV, Bureau of Education Assessment, Department of Education, Philippines
- Ms Manoly Dongvan, Deputy Director General, RIES, MOES, Lao PDR
- Ms Sitthattha Taikeophithoun, Director, RIES, MOES, Lao PDR
- Ms Jeaniene Spink, Research Director, Education and Development Programme
- Ms Linda Jönsson, Education Specialist, UNICEF

Facilitator: John Arnold Siena, Deputy Director for Programme, SEAMEO Secretariate

The session highlighted the role of the **Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM)** as a regional initiative supporting ASEAN countries in strengthening **foundational literacy and numeracy** through evidence-based policymaking. Under the ASEAN-UK SAGE/UBCH programme, SEA-PLM serves as a regional public good that generates comparable data on student learning outcomes, helping countries monitor progress and identify challenges in their education systems. The 2024 SEA-PLM assessment marks the **second cycle of measurement**, allowing

countries to track trends since the 2019 cycle and understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning outcomes. Importantly, the assessment does not only measure how well children read or perform in mathematics, but also examines the contextual factors influencing learning, including teacher capacity, home environment, language, and school resources.

Regional findings show **modest progress in reading and mathematics across several countries**, with a shift toward higher proficiency levels. However, the improvements are uneven across and within countries. A significant proportion of Grade 5 learners remain at **low proficiency levels equivalent to Grades 2–3**, indicating persistent learning gaps. Socioeconomic disparities remain a major challenge, with children from poorer households, rural areas, or homes where the language of instruction is not spoken performing significantly worse. These disparities translate into real risks of **school dropout and limited transition to secondary education**. The assessment also highlighted systemic challenges such as insufficient teacher training in inclusive education, inadequate early foundational skills among learners, and the need for stronger diagnostic and formative assessments.

Country experiences from **Cambodia, Lao PDR, and the Philippines** demonstrated how SEA-PLM evidence is being translated into policy reforms and practical interventions. Cambodia emphasized strengthening early childhood education, teacher professional learning communities, and curriculum alignment using SEA-PLM findings. Lao PDR is utilizing the data to support curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and equitable access to education, particularly for disadvantaged students. The Philippines has integrated SEA-PLM evidence into its **K-10 curriculum reforms, learning recovery programs (ARAL), teacher training initiatives, and investments in textbooks, school feeding programs, and classroom infrastructure**. Overall, the session underscored the importance of transforming assessment data into actionable reforms that strengthen education system resilience, improve teaching practices, and ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children across Southeast Asia.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Evidence-based policymaking is essential.**
Large-scale learning assessments such as SEA-PLM provide critical data that help governments design targeted education reforms and monitor progress over time.
- **Foundational learning must be prioritized early.**
Strengthening literacy and numeracy in the early grades is crucial because weak foundational skills significantly affect students' ability to learn in later grades.
- **Learning inequalities remain a major challenge.**
Students from low-income families, rural communities, and non-dominant language backgrounds consistently perform worse, requiring targeted equity-focused interventions.
- **Assessment data should inform classroom practices.**
Translating assessment findings into practical teaching strategies, curriculum adjustments, and formative assessments can help teachers address learning gaps more effectively.
- **Teacher capacity development is critical.**
Continuous professional development—especially in inclusive and differentiated teaching methods—is necessary to support diverse learners in classrooms.

- **Early childhood education improves learning outcomes.**
Evidence shows that students who attended preschool perform significantly better, reinforcing the need for expanded access to quality early childhood education.
- **Learning recovery programs are essential post-COVID.**
Targeted interventions, remedial programs, and diagnostic assessments are needed to address learning losses caused by pandemic-related school disruptions.
- **Strengthening education system resources matters.**
Adequate learning materials, improved teacher-student ratios, better infrastructure, and school nutrition programs contribute significantly to better learning outcomes.
- **Regional collaboration enhances education reforms.**
Initiatives like SEA-PLM allow countries to share knowledge, compare progress, and collectively strengthen education systems through regional partnerships.
- **Data utilization at all levels is necessary.**
Assessment results should be disseminated beyond national policymakers to provincial, district, and school levels to support evidence-informed planning and decision-making.

Session 2-Monitoring and Evaluating Structured Pedagogy in Cambodia

The session presented monitoring tools and classroom observation methods used to improve teaching practices and instructional materials in Cambodian primary schools.

Presenters

- HE Dr Khuon Vichheka, Director General, Teacher Education and Teacher Development
- Dr Kann Puthy, Director, Primary Education Department, MoEYS Cambodia
- Ms Sreyni Set, Teacher Trainer, Siem Reap Provincial Teacher Training College
- Mr Chankakda Binchan, Teacher Trainer, Prey Veng Provincial Teacher Training College, Cambodia

Facilitator: Debbie Wong, Senior Research of ACER

The presentation by **Dr. Kann Puthy and colleagues** highlighted Cambodia's efforts to strengthen early grade literacy through the development and implementation of an **Early Grade Reading Package**. Recognizing that a large proportion of Grade 3 students previously struggled with reading and writing, Cambodia reformed its teaching methodology by integrating phonics with whole-word approaches and introducing structured instructional materials. The early reading package includes teacher guides, student supplementary books, storybooks, and textbooks designed to improve reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and critical thinking from the earliest grades. Pilot implementation began in selected provinces and was accompanied by classroom observations, learning assessments, and research on teaching practices and learning materials to better understand what works in improving literacy outcomes.

Research findings revealed that while literacy instruction strongly emphasized reading and writing, **oral language development, classroom interaction, and higher-order thinking tasks were often limited**. Classroom practices were dominated by whole-class instruction and repetitive activities, with fewer opportunities for group work or differentiated learning. To address these

issues, the Ministry of Education and partners are strengthening teacher training, mentoring, and classroom support while leveraging digital technology. Initiatives such as online teacher training platforms, digital learning management systems, and data-driven school management systems are being introduced to support teachers, monitor student progress, and improve evidence-based decision-making in education. These reforms aim to enhance teaching quality, strengthen foundational literacy, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes across Cambodia.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Adopt structured literacy instruction**
A well-designed early grade reading package with clear teacher guides, practice materials, and storybooks can significantly strengthen foundational reading and writing skills.
- **Balance literacy skills development**
Teaching should not focus only on reading and writing but should also strengthen **speaking, listening, and oral language development**, which are essential for literacy.
- **Promote interactive and student-centered learning**
Classrooms should incorporate more **pair work, group work, and collaborative learning activities** rather than relying mainly on whole-class instruction.
- **Encourage higher-order thinking tasks**
Learning activities should move beyond repetition and recall including **analysis, problem-solving, and critical thinking tasks**.
- **Strengthen teacher training and continuous professional development**
Initial training alone is insufficient; teachers need **ongoing mentoring, refresher training, and practical classroom support** to effectively apply new teaching methodologies.
- **Leverage digital technology and data systems**
Digital platforms for learning management, teacher training, and student assessment can support teachers, improve monitoring, and enable **data-driven education policy and school improvement**.

Session 3-Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in Cambodia

This session explored a catch-up literacy and numeracy programme designed to help struggling students improve foundational skills and remain in school.

Presenters

- HE Dr Bo Chankoulika, Under Secretary of State, MoEYS, Cambodia
- Ms Phalla Somalina, Khmer Technical Team Leader, Kampong Cham Provincial Teacher Training College
- Ms Son Naisim, Head of Department, Battambang Teacher Education College, Cambodia

Facilitator: Meera Tendolkar, Director of Math Content & Training, Pratham International

The session presented Cambodia’s efforts to strengthen **foundational literacy and numeracy through the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach**, an instructional strategy that groups students based on their learning level rather than grade level. The program was piloted in two provinces with Grade 4 and 5 students who were lagging in reading and mathematics. Implemented after school after over 70 hours over three months, the initiative involved government leadership, teacher training, tailored learning materials, and continuous assessment. Interactive and activity-based teaching methods—such as demonstrations, group work, and practical exercises—were used to help students develop core skills and actively participate in the learning process. Early results from the pilot showed promising improvements in student learning outcomes, particularly in numeracy and reading comprehension.

Speakers emphasized that Cambodia has already made progress in improving learning outcomes through policy reforms, teacher professional development, and student-centered pedagogy. However, challenges remain, as a significant proportion of students still struggle with basic reading and numeracy. The TaRL pilot demonstrated that targeted instruction, frequent assessment, and grouping students by ability can accelerate learning, especially for struggling learners. Successful implementation also depends on strong teacher support, adequate teaching materials, mentoring, and integration with the existing education system. Moving forward, Cambodia aims to strengthen teacher ownership, build institutional capacity, and use evidence from the pilot to inform potential scale-up of the approach.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Focus on foundational learning outcomes**
Strengthening basic literacy and numeracy skills is essential for students’ future academic progress and success in the labor market.
- **Teach according to students’ learning levels**
Grouping students by their learning ability rather than grade level helps teachers provide more targeted and effective instruction.
- **Use interactive and activity-based teaching methods**
Engaging activities, demonstrations, and hands-on learning can improve student participation, understanding, and retention.
- **Provide continuous assessment and monitoring**
Regular assessments (baseline, midline, and endline) help teachers track progress and adjust instruction to meet students’ needs.
- **Strengthen teacher training, mentoring, and ownership**
Teachers must be supported through practical training, mentoring, and professional development to effectively implement new teaching approaches.
- **Integrate innovations into the education system for sustainability**
Successful pilot programs should be aligned with national curriculum, policies, and school systems to enable effective scaling and long-term impact.

Session 4-Gender-Responsive Skills Training: Evidence-Based Pathways from Timor-Leste

Key focus areas included

- Connecting youth to employment opportunities
- Strengthening teacher capacity for digital and entrepreneurship education.

Presenters

- Mr Alfredo de Araujo, National Director of Recurrent Education
- Mr Simão do Rosario, Senior Staff for the Cabinet of Partnership and Cooperation, Ministry of Education
- Mr Tomas Pereira, STEP Project Focal Point
- Ms Nishtha Satyam, Head of Office, UN Women Timor-Leste
- Ms Flora Wai Shan Chan, Country Representative, UN Women Timor-Leste

Facilitator: Ms Rebecca Hales, ASEAN-UK SAGE Technical Lead

The presentation highlighted evidence from the **STEP (Skills Training for Economic Participation) project** in Timor-Leste, which aims to support marginalized youth—especially young women in remote areas—to gain digital, entrepreneurial, and livelihood skills that enable financial independence. Implemented through community learning centers and technical secondary schools, the project aligns with national policies on inclusive education, gender equality, and human development. The initiative addresses persistent gender gaps in employment and economic participation, particularly for rural women who face barriers such as limited access to markets, financial services, training opportunities, and supportive infrastructure. Through targeted training, community engagement, and institutional capacity building, the project seeks to create a more gender-responsive education and skills development system.

The pilot phase demonstrated encouraging outcomes in improving participants' confidence, employability, and economic readiness while also shifting attitudes toward gender equality within communities. The program combined technical training, mentorship for teachers, gender awareness activities, and partnerships with government institutions and the private sector. Evidence from the pilot emphasized the importance of strong monitoring systems, long-term impact evaluation, and policy alignment to support scaling up the program nationally. Moving forward, the government and partners aim to integrate digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and gender-responsive training into the national vocational education system while strengthening institutional capacity and partnerships to ensure sustainable implementation.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Promote gender-responsive skills training**
Skills development programs should intentionally address gender barriers and empower women and girls to access education, digital skills, and employment opportunities.
- **Target marginalized and rural populations**
Training programs should prioritize young people from remote and disadvantaged communities who face the greatest barriers to education and employment.

- **Integrate technical, digital, and entrepreneurial skills**
A combination of digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and vocational training helps young people become economically independent and adaptable to labor market needs.
- **Engage communities and families**
Community mobilization and awareness activities are essential to address cultural barriers, promote gender equality, and encourage support for women’s education and participation.
- **Strengthen teacher training and mentoring systems**
Teachers and trainers need continuous professional development, coaching, and mentorship to effectively deliver gender-responsive and skills-based training.
- **Develop strong partnerships with government and the private sector**
Collaboration with ministries, industries, and employers helps ensure that training programs align with labor market demands and create employment pathways.
- **Establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems**
Tracking outcomes such as skills acquisition, behavioral changes, and employment progression is essential for evidence-based decision-making and policy development.
- **Plan for sustainable scaling and policy integration**
Successful pilot initiatives should be gradually integrated into national education and vocational training systems through curriculum reform, funding mechanisms, and institutional capacity strengthening.

Session 5-Gender and Inclusion Gallery Walk

Topics presented included:

- Women in STEM
- Monitoring learning outcomes using a lifecycle approach
- EdTech and artificial intelligence for marginalized learners
- SEA-PLM Gender Report
- STEP project: From skills development to empowerment.

Session 6-Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY): Regional Insights

Topics included:

- Data governance for tracking out-of-school children
- The role of educational technology in reaching marginalized learners
- Mental health considerations for OOSCY
- Case studies from **Lao PDR and the Philippines.**

Presenters

- Ms Jeaniene Spink, Research Director, ACER
- Ms Anna Dabrowski, University of Melbourne
- Dr Silinthone Sacklokham, Director, SEAMEO CED, Ministry of Education and Sports, Lao PDR

- Representative, DepEd, Philippines (TBC)
- (Carlo Fernando)

Facilitator: Buyung Sudrajat

The session highlighted the urgent challenge of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) across Southeast Asia, where an estimated **11.8 million children and young people remain outside the formal education system**. Participants emphasized that behind this statistic are millions of individual lives and future opportunities that depend on inclusive and responsive education systems. The discussion was conducted by the **Rapid Scoping Study commissioned by SEAMEO and partners**, which provides regional evidence base on the scale, drivers, and patterns of exclusion during a period of global transformation shaped by economic uncertainty, climate change, and social disruption. The study served as a foundation for deeper dialogue through country case studies and thematic research, aiming to move beyond statistics toward practical solutions and policy action.

Country presentations, including insights from **Lao PDR and the Philippines**, demonstrated that although many countries have made progress in expanding access to primary education, significant challenges remain in ensuring retention, transition to secondary education, and equitable learning opportunities for marginalized populations. Key factors contributing to children leaving school include poverty, geographic isolation, language barriers among ethnic minorities, gender-related challenges, and weak foundational learning outcomes. Governance and data challenges were also highlighted, with research suggesting that the widely cited figure of 11.8 million may underestimate the problem. By integrating household surveys and socio-economic datasets, researchers estimate that **the real number could be closer to 18 million**, revealing a large group of “invisible children” who are not captured in enrolment-based education statistics.

The session also explored cross-cutting themes such as **education technology (EdTech), data governance, and mental health support** for out-of-school children. Evidence suggests that effective responses require coordinated systems rather than isolated programs, integrating ministries of education, health, and social welfare with community organizations and development partners. Flexible learning pathways, including hybrid and technology-enabled education, can help reach learners who face barriers related to work, caregiving responsibilities, or remote locations. Additionally, mental health was identified as a critical but often overlooked factor influencing school participation and learning outcomes. Overall, the session emphasized that addressing the OOSCY challenge requires stronger data systems, inclusive policies, multi-sectoral collaboration, and sustained political commitment to transform evidence into effective and scalable interventions.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Strengthen Data Systems to Identify “Invisible Children”**
Education systems must integrate enrolment data with household, socio-economic, and health datasets to better capture children who never enter school or are at risk of dropping out.

- **Harmonize Definitions and Monitoring of OOSCY**
Countries should adopt clearer regional definitions for categories such as “not enrolled,” “at risk,” and “dropped out” to improve comparability and policy targeting.
- **Address Structural Barriers to Education Access**
Poverty, geographic isolation, transportation challenges, language differences, and gender-related barriers must be addressed through targeted and multi-sectoral support programs.
- **Strengthen Alternative and Flexible Learning Pathways**
Accelerated education, hybrid learning models, and technology-enabled programs can provide accessible options for children who cannot attend conventional schools.
- **Institutionalize Alternative Learning Systems**
Legal frameworks and clear governance structures—such as the Philippines’ Alternative Learning System—can ensure sustainability, accountability, and scale.
- **Promote Cross-Sectoral Collaboration**
Effective responses require coordination between education, health, social welfare, and community stakeholders to address the multiple factors driving school exclusion.
- **Integrate Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Education Programs**
Mental health challenges, bullying, and social pressures significantly influence school participation and learning outcomes; preventive and supportive interventions should be embedded in education systems.
- **Use Evidence and Pilot Innovations to Inform Policy Action**
Research findings and pilot interventions should guide national strategies and regional cooperation to design scalable and inclusive solutions for out-of-school children and youth.

Session 7 -Innovative Approaches to Reach Out-of-School Children

Presentations included:

- **mEducation-Numeracy (ConnectEd)** model for the Philippines
- **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** implementation in Lao PDR.

Presenters:

- Ms Elaine Umali-Trinos, Policy Specialist, Country Lead, Youth Impact Philippines
- Dr Kiengkay Ounmany, Deputy Director, SEAMEO CED
- Ms Divya Arora, Associate Director for Programs, Pratham International

Facilitator: Carlo Fernando

The Session highlighted innovative and practical approaches to re-engage out-of-school children in marginalized and remote communities across Southeast Asia. A key example was the **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** initiative implemented in Lao PDR, which focuses on addressing foundational learning gaps in literacy and numeracy—one of the major drivers of school dropout. Through collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the National University of Laos, development partners, and local communities, the initiative introduced a low-cost, community-

based model within the non-formal education system. The program emphasized ability-based learning, contextualized teaching materials, community awareness workshops, parent participation in assessments, and the mobilization of local volunteers to support learning. Evidence from the initiative shows that strengthening foundational skills and community engagement can significantly improve the chances of reintegrating out-of-school children into learning pathways.

The session also shared lessons from a **phone-based tutoring pilot in the Philippines**, which demonstrated that simple and low-tech solutions can produce meaningful learning gains for disadvantaged learners. Implemented through collaboration between Youth Impact and the Department of Education, the program used basic mobile phones to deliver tutoring support to students who could not access formal schooling. While the pilot showed promising results, it also highlighted challenges such as learner attrition, connectivity limitations, and the need for stronger system alignment with school calendars and policies. Overall, the session underscored that effective strategies to reach out-of-school children must be low-cost, flexible, community-driven, and aligned with national education systems, while also empowering teachers and restoring learners' motivation and engagement with education.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Focus on Foundational Learning**
Addressing literacy and numeracy gaps through approaches such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is essential to help out-of-school children regain learning confidence and progress academically.
- **Use Ability-Based Learning Approaches**
Grouping learners by competency rather than age or grade enables more targeted instruction and improves learning outcomes.
- **Promote Community and Parent Engagement**
Involving community structures, local volunteers, and parents strengthens program ownership, improves monitoring, and increases learner participation.
- **Adopt Low-Cost and Low-Tech Solutions**
Simple and affordable approaches—such as community-based learning and phone tutoring—can effectively reach learners in remote and resource-constrained contexts.
- **Strengthen Teacher Capacity and Support**
Teachers and facilitators require training, digital readiness, and professional support to effectively implement innovative learning models.
- **Ensure Strong Monitoring and System Alignment**
Continuous assessment, evidence-based monitoring, and alignment with government education systems are necessary to ensure sustainability and scalability of innovative programs.

Session 8-High Frequency Words for Foundational Literacy: Lessons from Lexical Computing

- HE Dr Chhinh Sitha, Adviser to the Minister of Education, MoEYS, Cambodia
- Mr Hun Sovannara, Vice Chief of Office, Primary Education Department

Facilitator: Craig Farmer, Team Leader, ASEAN-UK SAGE Programme

In this learning forum session, Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) presented its innovative work on developing High-Frequency Word Lists (HFWL) and applying lexical analysis to improve early grade literacy. The presentation highlighted how research findings—particularly national assessments and PISA results—were transformed into practical policy and instructional tools. Recognizing that language performance lagged other domains, the team focused on building a core vocabulary foundation: approximately 3,000 high-frequency words can cover about 90% of daily communication, while 5,000 words can reach 95% coverage. By introducing five words per day and ensuring 5–10 cycles of repetition, students can accumulate a strong vocabulary “bank” by Grade 5 or 6. Using lexical computing tools such as Sketch Engine, the ministry analyzed textbooks, identified excessive cognitive load, and developed simpler, more learnable reading materials uploaded into digital systems rather than waiting for full textbook reform. The initiative demonstrates a systematic pathway from research → policy brief → product development → technology integration, with a strong emphasis on scalability, institutionalization, and sustainability through partnerships and ministry ownership.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Read Data with the Heart, Not Only the Head**
National and international assessment results (e.g., PISA) should inspire action and responsibility, not blame. Evidence must drive reform decisions.
- **Language Is the Foundation of Learning**
Weak literacy affects all subjects. If students cannot process language efficiently, they struggle in science, social studies, and mathematics as well.
- **High-Frequency Vocabulary Accelerates Comprehension**
Mastery of 3,000–5,000 high-frequency words significantly increase reading fluency and understanding of written and spoken texts.
- **Small Daily Gains Lead to Big Impact**
Teaching five words per day can result in 1,000 words per year—allowing students to reach 5,000–6,000 words by upper primary.
- **Repetition Is Essential for Retention**
Words must be recycled 5–10 times for internalization. Without sufficient exposure, vocabulary remains inaccessible during reading.
- **Materials Must Be “Learnable”**
Textbooks may unintentionally overload students with complex vocabulary. Lexical analysis helps ensure texts are developmentally appropriate.
- **Short-Term Actions Can Precede Long-Term Reform**
Instead of waiting to revise textbooks, Cambodia uploaded simplified materials into digital systems and LMS platforms for immediate classroom use.
- **Scalability Requires System Integration**
Sustainable reform depends on embedding innovations within ministry systems, building institutional capacity, and working with development partners and NGOs to ensure long-term ownership beyond project cycles.

Session 8-System level approaches to inclusive digital transformation: policy-level support in the Philippines and Indonesia

Presenters

- Dr Irsyad Zamjani, Head of the Centre for Education Standards and Policy, MoPSE, Indonesia
- Dr Maja-Leah Ravago, Centre Director of SEAMEO INNOTECH
- Representative, Bureau of Learning Delivery, DepEd, Philippines (TBC)

Facilitator: Ms Haani Mazari, Asia Lead, EdTech Hub

The session on *Multi-Level Approaches to Inclusive Digital Transformation* highlighted how evidence-informed policymaking can drive meaningful and inclusive education reform across Southeast Asia. Representatives from EdTech Hub, the Philippines Department of Education, Indonesia’s Ministry of Education, and regional education bodies reflected on their collaboration under the ASEAN-UK SAGE and AI in Education initiatives. A central theme was the importance of ensuring that evidence does not remain static in reports but actively informs policy design, implementation, and iterative improvement. Across national and regional contexts, speakers emphasized the need for structured policy processes, feedback loops, and monitoring frameworks that strengthen decision-making and align with national standards.

Indonesia shared its experience in strengthening policy quality through the Policy Quality Index (ITT), which encouraged ministries to adopt more systematic, evidence-informed, and well-documented policymaking processes. Through a sandbox approach, the ministry tested tools, gathered feedback, and refined policy toolkits—demonstrating that the policymaking process itself is as critical as the final policy product. Meanwhile, the Philippines described a rapidly expanding digital landscape characterized by numerous pilots and innovations. The challenge, however, lies in moving from fragmented initiatives— “a thousand flowers blooming”—to system-wide scale and standardization. Reforms now focus on building a digital backbone that integrates connectivity, devices, platforms, and competitive EdTech solutions while prioritizing transparency, equity, and teacher empowerment.

At the regional level, discussions emphasized the diversity of Southeast Asian education systems and the importance of balancing shared regional frameworks with contextual adaptation. The development of a regional AI in Education framework, supported by collaborative research and cross-country learning, underscores the value of regional solidarity while respecting national differences. Across all contributions, speakers stressed that technology is not a silver bullet. Without deliberate equity strategies, digital transformation risks exacerbating existing inequalities. Sustainable reform requires institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, stakeholder coalitions, strong communication strategies, and continuous relationship-building between researchers and policymakers.

Ultimately, the session reinforced that inclusive digital transformation is not merely about deploying technology, it is about transforming systems, strengthening institutions, and aligning political, technical, and social dimensions of reform.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Evidence Must Shape Decisions, Not Just Inform Reports**
Evidence becomes powerful only when embedded in policymaking cycles, implementation strategies, and monitoring systems.
- **Process Matters as Much as Policy Outputs**
Structured, transparent, and iterative policymaking—such as sandbox approaches—strengthens policy quality and sustainability.
- **Scaling Is the Real Challenge**
Moving from pilots to system-wide reform requires standardization, backbone infrastructure, and strategic long-term roadmaps.
- **Transparency Drives Accountability and Reform Momentum**
Publicly sharing learning outcomes and performance data can mobilize stakeholders and foster system-wide accountability.
- **Technology Can Widen Inequality Without Deliberate Equity Strategies**
Digital transformation must intentionally prioritize underserved regions and marginalized learners.
- **Internal Champions Are Critical**
Reform requires committed leaders within ministries who can navigate bureaucracy and sustain evidence-based change.
- **Regional Frameworks Must Respect National Diversity**
ASEAN-level collaboration works best when adaptable to varied economic, political, and educational contexts.
- **Communication Is a Reform Tool**
Beyond technical evidence, effective communication and coalition-building are essential to counter misinformation and sustain reform narratives.

Key Recommendations

- **Institutionalize Evidence Use Within Ministries**
Develop standardized toolkits, monitoring systems, and policy review mechanisms aligned with national quality frameworks.
- **Build a Coherent Digital Backbone Before Scaling Innovations**
Ensure foundational infrastructure (connectivity, devices, electricity, platforms) supports equitable expansion of EdTech solutions.
- **Prioritize Equity in Digital Investment Strategies**
Allocate targeted resources to remote and disadvantaged regions to prevent digital transformation from deepening disparities.
- **Strengthen Human and Financial Capacity for Implementation**
Invest in institutional capacity, teacher development, and sustained financing to operationalize reforms effectively.
- **Create Accountability and Clear Timelines**
Define responsible units, measurable indicators, and implementation timelines to prevent policy stagnation.

- **Leverage Windows of Opportunity for Reform**
Use major assessment results or political transitions strategically to advocate for evidence-based changes.
- **Strengthen Cross-Country Learning Platforms**
Continue regional collaboration to share innovations, amplify voices, and align AI and digital education frameworks.
- **Invest in Strategic Communications**
Engage teachers, parents, and communities through accessible narratives to build public support for reforms.

Closing reflection

Datuk Dr Habibah Abdul Rahim, Director, SEAMEO Secretariat

Datuk Dr Habibah Abdul Rahim highlighted the strong sense of commitment, collaboration, and shared ambition among ASEAN education stakeholders to ensure that every learner develops strong foundational skills and has equitable opportunities to succeed. Over the two-day forum, participants reviewed regional evidence on foundational learning, professional development for teachers, gender and inclusion practices, and innovative approaches to reaching out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY). Discussions emphasized the growing challenge of learning poverty in the region, with estimates showing between **11.8 million and 18 million children and youth out of school**. Participants stressed that while data from large-scale assessments is valuable, its real impact depends on how systematically governments use it to inform policy priorities, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms across education systems.

The forum also underscored the need for stronger alignment between policy, pedagogy, and classroom practice to improve learning outcomes. Successful initiatives such as **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** and flexible education models demonstrate the potential of targeted, evidence-based interventions to support struggling learners and reintegrate out-of-school children. However, participants noted that many promising pilots fail to scale due to limited institutionalization, insufficient system capacity, or weak policy alignment. Discussions further emphasized the importance of inclusive digital transformation, gender-responsive policies, and stronger data systems to identify marginalized learners. Ultimately, participants agreed that regional collaboration, evidence-informed policymaking, and sustained investment in foundational learning and early childhood education are critical to ensuring that **no child is left behind in ASEAN**. Finally, she comes with **Key Recommendations as follows:**

- Strengthen the use of evidence in policymaking by integrating assessment data and research findings throughout the education policy cycle—from planning and budgeting to implementation and evaluation.
- Institutionalize successful education innovations by embedding proven interventions (such as structured pedagogy and TaRL approaches) into national education systems, including teacher training, monitoring frameworks, and financing mechanisms.

- Improve identification and tracking of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) through stronger education data systems and coordinated governance to support effective re-engagement strategies.
- Scale education reforms with equity in mind, ensuring that interventions prioritize the most disadvantaged learners, including those in rural areas, marginalized communities, and learners with disabilities.
- Promote inclusive digital transformation in education, ensuring that technology initiatives are supported by teacher capacity development, equitable access, and safeguards that prevent widening learning gaps.
- Strengthen regional collaboration and knowledge sharing within ASEAN, enabling countries to exchange evidence, successful models, and policy lessons to accelerate progress in foundational learning and education quality.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Peter Rajadiston, Development Director, UK Mission to ASEAN and Indonesia

The closing reflection of the ASEAN-UK SAGE: Evidence and Insights Forum underscored both the urgency and the opportunity facing Southeast Asia’s education systems. Over two days, participants examined regional evidence on foundational learning, professional development, gender and inclusion, structured pedagogy, digital transformation, and the alarming rise in out-of-school children and youth (OSCY), now estimated between 11.8 and 18 million. While learning poverty has deepened due to the pandemic, climate disruptions, and demographic pressures, the forum reaffirmed a shared regional ambition: to ensure every learner builds strong foundations and thrives. Importantly, discussions emphasized that data—whether from large-scale assessments or national reflections—must move beyond reporting and instead be embedded systematically across the entire policy cycle, from planning and budgeting to implementation and evaluation.

The reflection also highlighted that sustainable reform requires coherence, scalability, and institutionalization. Foundational learning improvements depend on alignment between policy, pedagogy, and classroom practice, with teacher support systems, structured monitoring tools, and system-level feedback loops playing critical roles. Promising initiatives—such as targeted instruction approaches and flexible learning models for out-of-school children—demonstrate what is possible but scaling them equitably remains the core challenge. Gender equality and inclusive digital transformation must be embedded across reforms, not treated as add-ons. The forum concluded with a strong call for regional collaboration, institutional commitment, and evidence-driven decision-making to ensure that no child is left behind—not only in access, but in quality learning outcomes. Finally, the speaker shared key Lessons Learned, and Recommendations as the follows:

1. Evidence Must Drive the Entire Policy Cycle

- Data should inform planning, budgeting, teacher development, and evaluation—not just assessments.

- Ministries should institutionalize evidence use in education sector plans.
- Longitudinal and classroom-level data should strengthen accountability and decision-making.

2. Prioritize Foundational Learning with Coherence and Scale

- Align policy, pedagogy, and classroom practice.
- Design pilots with scalability, cost, and institutional capacity in mind from the outset.
- Ensure structured pedagogy and implementation monitoring are rigorous and consistent.

3. Strengthen Teacher Support Systems

- Invest in evidence-based teacher tools and professional development.
- Build feedback loops from classroom to district to ministry and back.
- Recognize that implementation quality determines impact.

4. Address Out-of-School Children and Youth (OSCY) Systematically

- Improve identification and tracking systems to make every child visible in data systems.
- Institutionalize flexible and second-chance learning models rather than treating them as isolated pilots.
- Ensure re-engagement strategies are data-driven and policy-backed.

5. Embed Gender and Inclusion Across Reforms

- Integrate gender-responsive analysis into policy design and monitoring.
- Ensure digital transformation is inclusive by design, especially for rural learners, girls, and marginalized groups.
- Recognize intersections between poverty, disability, migration, and mental health.

6. Focus on Institutionalization and Sustainable Financing

- Embed promising reforms into ministry systems, budgeting, M&E frameworks, and teacher training structures.
- Address education financing as a growing regional concern.
- Scale reforms with equity—prioritizing the learners furthest behind.

7. Strengthen Regional Knowledge Sharing

- Utilize ASEAN platforms as repositories and conveners of evidence.
- Promote collaboration over competition to accelerate shared progress.
- Encourage cross-country learning while respecting national contexts.

Mr Kamal Mamat, Head of Education, Youth and Sports Division, ASEAN Secretariat

In his closing remarks, the Head of the Education, Youth and Sports Division of the ASEAN Secretariat highlighted the key achievements and reflections from the ASEAN education forum discussions. He emphasized the strong regional commitment to improving foundational learning and addressing education challenges across ASEAN member states. The forum demonstrated how countries are increasingly using **evidence and data to guide education policy**, while also strengthening **regional cooperation and partnerships** among governments, development partners, and institutions. The discussions also highlighted the important role of **legislation and policy frameworks**, which not only guide reforms but also help mobilize financial resources to support education initiatives. The program's contribution to promoting **women's participation in STEM fields** and strengthening collaboration with partners such as the UK government and implementing organizations was also acknowledged as a key success. Finally, Mr Kamal Mamat has shared key Lessons Learned from the forum as follows:

- Sustain strong regional commitment to foundational learning
ASEAN member states should continue prioritizing foundational learning reforms to address persistent education challenges.
- Strengthen evidence-based policymaking
Education policies and reforms should be guided by reliable data, research, and monitoring systems.
- Promote regional collaboration and partnerships
Continued cooperation among ASEAN countries, development partners, and organizations is essential for effective education initiatives.
- Leverage legislation to support education reforms
Education policies and laws should be aligned with adequate financing and implementation mechanisms to ensure impact.
- Encourage gender equality and women's participation in STEM
Programs that support women and girls in STEM fields should remain a priority to promote inclusive and future-ready education systems.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The **ASEAN-UK SAGE Evidence and Insights Forum (2–3 March 2026)** brought together senior education officials, policymakers, researchers, and development partners across Southeast Asia to reflect on evidence generated during **Phase 1 of the ASEAN-UK SAGE programme** and to identify practical pathways for strengthening foundational learning, inclusion, and skills development in the region. The forum emphasized that while Southeast Asia has experienced strong economic growth and technological expansion, many education systems continue to face persistent challenges such as learning poverty, widening inequalities, and a significant number of **out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY)**. Evidence presented during the forum highlighted that between **11.8 and 18 million children and young people in the region remain outside the education system**, while many students who remain in school still struggle with foundational literacy and numeracy. These realities reinforce the urgent need for education reforms that

prioritize equity, data-driven policymaking, and system-wide transformation rather than fragmented interventions.

Throughout the two-day dialogue, participants explored how evidence from regional assessments, pilot projects, and research initiatives can inform more effective policy and practice. Key initiatives discussed included the **Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM)** assessment, **structured pedagogy reforms in Cambodia**, **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) interventions**, **gender-responsive skills training in Timor-Leste**, innovative strategies to reach out-of-school learners, and **inclusive digital transformation policies**. A central theme across all sessions was the importance of translating evidence into concrete policy action and classroom practice. While many promising pilot programs have demonstrated positive impacts on learning outcomes, participants noted that their long-term success depends on whether they are institutionalized within national education systems through teacher training, financing mechanisms, monitoring systems, and policy alignment. The forum therefore highlighted the need for stronger coordination between policy design, implementation processes, and classroom-level teaching practices to ensure sustainable improvements in learning outcomes across ASEAN.

Another major focus of the forum was **equity and inclusion in education systems**. Evidence from SEA-PLM and country studies showed that children from rural communities, low-income families, ethnic minority groups, and households where the language of instruction is not spoken face significantly lower learning outcomes and higher dropout risks. Similarly, gender disparities and barriers to employment opportunities continue to affect young women in many parts of the region. Programs such as the **Skills Training for Economic Participation (STEP)** initiative in Timor-Leste illustrated how integrated approaches that combine digital literacy, entrepreneurship training, and community engagement can help empower marginalized youth and strengthen pathways to employment. These experiences highlight that inclusive education reforms must address not only classroom learning but also broader social, economic, and cultural barriers that prevent children and youth from accessing and benefiting from education.

The forum also emphasized the transformative potential of **technology and digital innovation in education**, while cautioning that technology alone cannot solve systemic challenges. Presentations from Indonesia, the Philippines, and regional partners demonstrated that digital transformation must be supported by strong policy frameworks, teacher capacity development, and equitable infrastructure to avoid widening existing inequalities. Participants stressed that effective education technology strategies require coherent digital ecosystems that integrate connectivity, devices, platforms, and teacher training while maintaining a clear focus on learning outcomes. In addition, the forum underscored the value of **regional collaboration through ASEAN platforms**, which enable countries to share lessons, compare evidence, and collectively develop solutions to common education challenges. Such collaboration strengthens policy learning and accelerates reforms by enabling countries to adapt successful approaches from neighboring systems while respecting national contexts.

Ultimately, the ASEAN-UK SAGE forum reaffirmed that improving education systems across Southeast Asia require sustained political commitment, strategic investments in foundational learning, and stronger institutional capacity to implement reforms effectively. Participants concluded that evidence-informed policymaking, strengthened teacher support systems, inclusive

digital transformation, and coordinated strategies to address out-of-school children are essential for ensuring that every learner develops the foundational skills needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world. The forum therefore served not only as a platform for sharing evidence but also as a catalyst for deeper regional cooperation and long-term commitment to building more resilient, inclusive, and high-quality education systems across ASEAN.

Key Lessons Learned

○ Evidence must guide the entire education policy cycle

The forum demonstrated that data from learning assessments, research studies, and pilot programs is only valuable when it is actively used to inform planning, budgeting, teacher training, and evaluation. Education systems must embed evidence into decision-making processes at all levels—from national ministries to classroom practices—to ensure reforms address real learning challenges.

○ Foundational learning is the cornerstone of education reform

Weak literacy and numeracy skills in early grades limit students' ability to succeed in later schooling and employment. Evidence from SEA-PLM and national programs confirms that investments in **early grade reading, numeracy, and early childhood education** produce long-term learning benefits.

○ Teacher capacity determines the success of reforms

Even well-designed policies fail without effective classroom implementation. Continuous professional development, mentoring systems, and structured teaching tools are essential to help teachers adopt new pedagogical approaches and address diverse learning needs.

○ Targeted interventions can accelerate learning recovery

Programs such as **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** demonstrate that grouping students according to learning ability rather than grade level can rapidly improve foundational skills among struggling learners. Such targeted instruction approaches are particularly valuable for addressing post-pandemic learning losses.

○ Out-of-school children require systemic, multi-sectoral responses

Addressing the large number of out-of-school children requires more than education policies alone. Effective strategies must integrate social protection, community engagement, health services, and flexible learning pathways to address the structural causes of exclusion.

○ Gender and inclusion must be embedded in education policies

Programs targeting girls, rural youth, and marginalized populations highlight that equitable access to skills training and education is essential for inclusive economic development. Gender-responsive approaches help ensure that reforms benefit all learners.

- **Technology should support—not replace—education systems**

Digital learning tools can expand access and improve teaching efficiency, but only when integrated within strong policy frameworks, teacher training systems, and infrastructure development strategies.

- **Scaling successful innovations remains the biggest challenge**

Many effective education pilots fail to expand because they lack institutional integration, financing, or government ownership. Designing initiatives with scalability and sustainability in mind is therefore essential from the outset.

- **Regional collaboration strengthens national education reforms**

Platforms such as ASEAN and SEAMEO enable countries to share research findings, policy experiences, and innovative models, accelerating progress through collective learning.

Key Strategic Recommendations

1. Institutionalize evidence-based policymaking

Education ministries should integrate research findings, assessment results, and monitor data into all stages of policy development and implementation. Establishing structured policy review mechanisms and data systems can strengthen accountability and improve reform effectiveness.

2. Prioritize early and foundational learning reforms

Governments should invest in early childhood education, structured literacy programs, and early grade numeracy initiatives to ensure students develop strong learning foundations from the start of schooling.

3. Strengthen teacher professional development systems

Teacher training should move beyond one-time workshops toward continuous professional learning, mentoring networks, and classroom-based support to ensure effective implementation of new teaching approaches.

4. Improve identification and support for out-of-school children

Education data systems should integrate enrolment records with household and socio-economic data to identify “invisible children.” Flexible education pathways and second-chance learning programs should be institutionalized to reintegrate these learners.

5. Ensure equity-driven scaling of education innovations

Successful pilot initiatives such as structured pedagogy, TaRL, and community-based learning programs should be embedded into national policies and budgets while prioritizing disadvantaged populations.

6. Promote inclusive digital transformation in education

Governments should build strong digital infrastructure, develop teacher digital competencies, and implement policies that ensure technology benefits rural and marginalized learners rather than widening inequality.

7. Strengthen regional knowledge-sharing platforms

ASEAN education cooperation mechanisms should continue facilitating cross-country dialogue, research collaboration, and joint policy development to accelerate progress in foundational learning and inclusive education.

8. Secure sustainable financing for education reforms

Long-term education improvements require stable funding mechanisms that support teacher development, learning materials, technology integration, and inclusive education programs.

The ASEAN-UK SAGE Evidence and Insights Forum reinforced that the future of education in Southeast Asia depends on **strong foundational learning, inclusive education systems, and evidence-driven policymaking**. While promising innovations and research insights are emerging across the region, the central challenge lies in transforming these insights into **scalable, sustainable, and system-wide reforms**. Strengthening teacher capacity, improving data systems, expanding inclusive learning opportunities, and deepening regional collaboration will be critical to ensuring that every learner in ASEAN develops the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and digital world.