



VOICES OF YOUTH AND EMPLOYERS ON YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY IN THAILAND

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Policy recommendations to support youth to access meaningful work and to strengthen lifelong learning systems

INTRODUCTION

This working paper is a joint effort of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Thailand and the Sustainability & Entrepreneurship Center (SEC) of Sasin School of Management. The paper offers policy recommendations to improve the availability, quality and relevance of interventions to strengthen lifelong learning systems and youth¹ employability in Thailand. Its aim is to support the country’s ongoing national debates and policy-making process, including the development of Thailand’s 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) 2023–2027.

Education, training and labour market systems in Thailand are influenced and challenged by mega-trends such as demographic change, digitalisation, globalisation, climate change and global disruptions. Youth aged 15–24 years are among those most socially impacted by these changes. Moreover, since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed or in some cases exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, vulnerabilities and risks (UNICEF Thailand, 2021).

The current situation calls for a renewed vision of education, training and employment systems, offering an opportunity to: improve the skills, competencies and digital literacy of Thailand’s youth; enhance the flexibility and accessibility of the world of work, especially for vulnerable groups; and ensure that youth are equipped to successfully navigate the challenges of the fast-changing, twenty-first century job market.

Crucial to the successful navigation of global mega-trends and to the success of the 13th NESDP is Thailand’s ability to undergo national restructuring of its policies and systems in order to build the strength and resilience of its citizens, workers, industries and economy.

The Royal Thai Government’s Thailand 4.0 Strategy – the vision to unlock the country from its economic challenges and increase human capital development – provides a conducive framework to restructure the economy and promote innovation and creativity. The strategy focuses on four key objectives:

- 1. Economic prosperity**, building an economy driven by innovation, technology and creativity;
- 2. Social well-being**, developing a more equitable and inclusive society that leaves no-one behind;
- 3. Raising human values**, transforming citizens to become competent human beings for the twenty-first century; and
- 4. Environmental protection**, building a livable society, including a resilient and sustainable low-carbon economy to address climate change.

Likewise, the framework of the 13th NESDP (2023–2027) also includes human capital development as one of the key enablers for Thailand’s transformation.

To contribute to these national debates, UNICEF Thailand and SEC conducted a multisectoral consultative process from December 2020 to April 2021. The initiative used several data collection methods including desk reviews, stakeholder consultations,² in-depth-interviews with stakeholders,³ youth and employers, and focus group discussions with youth. This approach reflects the belief that multisectoral partnerships and coordination are key towards building more resilient and sustainable learning and employability opportunities for youth in Thailand and meeting the country’s targets for human capital development.

¹ Youth refers to individuals aged 15–24 years.

² With government agencies, TDRI, universities, international organizations, private and public sector, and NGOs.

³ With government agencies, educational institutions and private sector companies.

WHY YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY MATTERS

Demographically, **Thailand is an aged society**, with 1 in 5 people (18.76 per cent of the population) aged over 60 years (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), 2019). **This demographic shift brings opportunities but also challenges**, including an increase in the dependency ratio of younger and older persons, and a corresponding decrease in labour force participation rate. While skilled youth are crucial for Thailand's development and to meet the targets of the National 20-Year Strategy (2018–2037), **the number of young workers in the labour force has declined** from 49 per cent in 2008 to 41 per cent in 2020 (National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO), 2020). Although this decline could partly be due to youth staying longer in education, the latest figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO) show that nearly 1.4 million (or 15 per cent) youth aged 15–24 years are classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) (ILO, 2020). A total of 70 per cent of the NEET group are female, most of whom dropped out of school due to pregnancy (Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), 2020).

In recent years, **Thailand has been transforming from a predominantly rural country to an increasingly urban one** (Plecher, 2019), and many youth have migrated to urban centres in search for better employment opportunities. Thailand is also undergoing a shift in focus on **emerging industries**, including 10 targeted S-curve industries,⁴ to sustain the country's development and prosperity. However, in the **transition to a digital era**, technological progress such as the advent of robotics, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things has made many jobs vulnerable to automation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019). Moreover, a recent study found that **54 per cent of Thai workers will need significant reskilling and upskilling in both technical and soft skills**

to keep up with these rapid technological changes and adapt to the twenty-first century labour market (Saowanee and Pornpatanapaisankul, 2019). **Adaptability is also key to tackling the disruption of climate change**, a challenge that requires workers with resilient and flexible skills who can withstand any future uncertainty and discontinuity in the world of work.

Thailand also has a large informal sector. It is estimated that informal sector workers comprise between 43–54 per cent of Thailand's non-agricultural workforce (ILO, 2011; NSO, 2019). As highlighted in the framework for the 13th NESDP, **the future employment landscape in Thailand will increasingly feature non-standard forms of employment** (such as part-time work and self-employed roles). While the flexibility of the "anytime, anywhere" non-formal labour market may suit youth and provide opportunities for a work-life balance, it could also leave them vulnerable to job insecurity. Consequently, it is important to improve employment protections to strengthen the safety net for youth, especially to lessen the impact and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic uncertainty.

In all spheres, **there is a need to inspire and support the aspirations of Thailand's youth.** In a recent youth consultation conducted by UNICEF, only 8 per cent of youth felt that Thailand is moving in a direction that provides them with opportunities for the future (UNICEF Thailand, 2021).

⁴ The 10 targeted S-curve industries are: next generation automotive; smart electronics; affluent, medical and wellness tourism; agriculture and biotech; food for the future; robotics; aviation and logistics; biofuels and biochemical; digital; and comprehensive medical industry.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Following extensive desk research, academic policy analysis, and stakeholder consultations, the following key challenges were identified:

1 The quality of the education system (curriculum and teaching styles) is not aligned with labour market needs

The education sector has difficulty monitoring labour market trends, and without a timely response to labour market needs, the school subjects and skills being taught are increasingly out of touch with the demands of the labour market. Thailand's rapidly changing labour market requires workers who possess both hard skills (niche job-related knowledge, such as technology design and programming) and soft skills, such as analytical thinking, innovation, complex problem-solving, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, resilience and flexibility (Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020).

“Technological advancements bring about rapid labour market trend changes. It is difficult for the education sector to keep up.”

(Government stakeholder)

There was overwhelming consensus from participants that the current curriculum requires urgent reform to meet these labour market requirements. Stakeholders highlighted both a lack of focus on STEAM⁵ subjects, the knowledge of which will be key to achieve Thailand 4.0, and a lack of entrepreneurial and enterprise management skills, which are crucial to equip youth entering the non-formal sector.

“Companies today want technological skills. However, Thailand's educational curriculum...is out of step with what the market demands.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

There is also a need to strengthen foundational skills (literacy and numeracy). While Thailand has made steady progress in increasing enrolment in secondary education, the Thai education system today faces important challenges to improve the educational performance of students (OECD, 2021). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) trends for Thailand highlight an increasingly negative trajectory in reading performance, and stagnating scores in maths and science at lower secondary level. In 2018, around 60 per cent of 15-year-old students scored below the minimum proficiency level in reading, more than half (53 per cent) were unable to attain the minimum proficiency level in maths, and 44 per cent failed to reach basic proficiency in science (World Bank, 2020).

In terms of teaching quality, there is a reliance on learning by rote rather than engaging students to learn through practical investigation and experience, and teaching methodologies to support students to think analytically, creatively and independently are generally not utilized. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that many teachers lack the capacity to teach effectively online, including producing accessible content for all students, especially youth with disabilities.

“Many teachers, particularly those in rural areas, lack the ability to use online technology to run courses.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

In addition, a digital divide has become evident, as not all students possess the electronic devices, internet connectivity or quiet study spaces needed to access online lessons. For instance, only

5 Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics.

45 per cent of students living in rural areas have access to a computer at home, compared to 70 per cent of students in urban areas. The divide is even more apparent according to wealth quintile: only 17 per cent of the lowest income quintile households in Thailand have computers at home, while 91 per cent of the highest income quintile have a computer at home (Oxford Policy Management, 2020); and only 28.1 per cent of the lowest income quintile have access to the internet at home compared to 93.2 per cent of the highest income quintile (NSO, 2020).

“Not all students have access to internet, mobile phones, computers, or electronic devices.”

(Educational institute stakeholder)

Lastly, youth and other stakeholders highlighted that educational facilities at times fail to offer a safe and secure learning environment, which impedes students' ability to learn and reach their potential.

2 Youth have limited access to up-to-date labour market information and career guidance

Both youth who have dropped out of education and youth who have completed further education face challenges in trying to access careers guidance and further training opportunities. This points to a need to expand education, skill development, training and employment opportunities for all youth, address educational skills mismatch, and develop more effective links between graduates and jobs in the appropriate field.

Consultations with stakeholders and youth revealed that Thailand lacks accessible channels for youth of all ages to access up-to-date labour market information, career guidance and pathways to self-employment and entrepreneurship. In schools, there is a shortage of career counsellors to advise students on future career pathways.

“There is a shortage of staff within the Department of Employment who are able to provide [career] counselling and guidance that matches the aspirations of young people.”

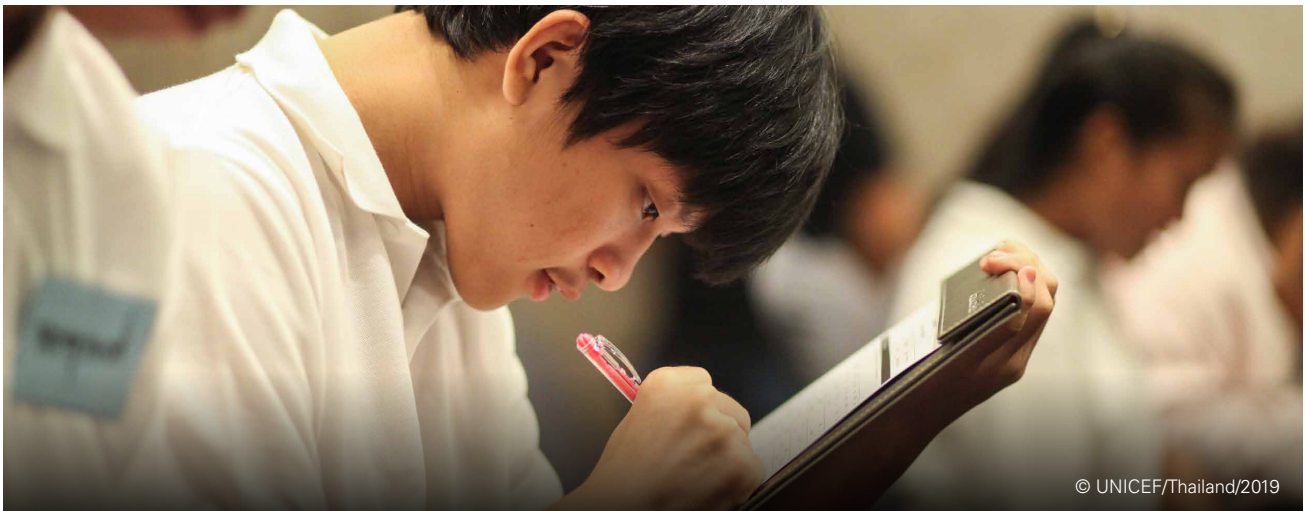
(Government stakeholder)

Career guidance is particularly difficult to access for those who have dropped out of formal education, including NEET youth, for whom it is vital if they are to re-engage with education and employment opportunities.

“NEETs and other underprivileged young people have little access to education opportunities and technologies.”

(Government stakeholder)

Furthermore, many graduates in Thailand struggle to find gainful employment: youth with bachelor's degrees have the highest unemployment rate compared to other education levels, at 17.2 per cent (NSO, 2020). This suggests a lack of support available for tertiary-level educated youth to capitalize on their newly gained qualifications, knowledge base and skill set, and may indicate that youth are graduating in subjects that fail to meet both existing market demands and their own career aspirations (TDRI, 2020). Significantly, many youth participants were not focused on a linear career path; while they wanted to be employed, the concept of a 'job for life' was less desirable. This suggests that career guidance itself may need to be adapted to the gig economy, supporting youth to gain the skill sets that will enable them to transition smoothly between jobs.



3 Internships and training opportunities are either unavailable, unaffordable, or ineffective for many youth

Quality internships and training opportunities are currently lacking in Thailand, which is seen as a missed opportunity for both youth and businesses. Although private sector interviewees expressed a desire to offer internship and training opportunities to youth, many were deterred by uncertainty surrounding youth employment regulations.

“Developing youth skills through internships is a better and more direct investment than recruiting youth after they have graduate.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

In general, stakeholder interviewees perceived current internship and training opportunities for youth to be limited, both in terms of who can apply (for example, some programmes only target adults and high-achieving students) and the content of learning opportunities offered (as the curriculum itself is inflexible and internships or training opportunities are only available in certain areas or industries).

“Several youth groups have been marginalized from skill training and employment options, especially vulnerable young people who have dropped out from compulsory schooling.”

(Government stakeholder)

When internships are offered, they can often be ineffective, assigning menial tasks to interns rather than offering youth tangible opportunities for skills development.

Youth focus group participants voiced their uncertainty on how to access further training due to a lack of sufficient information on internship and training opportunities. Scholarships are either difficult to access or unavailable for most youth, especially the most vulnerable, and the process to access funding was perceived by stakeholders and youth to be unnecessarily complex.

“Accessibility to scholarships and funding is complicated by ineffective promotion as well as unnecessary complications in the application process.”

(Migrant youth participant)

In addition, while free online training programmes do exist, many youth lack the technology and internet access needed to take advantage of digital learning to improve their skill set.

4 Youth employment options are impeded by legislative barriers and financial insecurity

Stakeholder consultations found that inconsistent interpretations of employment regulations discourage the private sector from offering internships or on-the-job training to the under 18 age group. The Royal Thai Government introduced the Labour Protection Act in 1998 to prevent child labour and exploitation of youth, prohibiting certain working conditions for 15–18-year-olds, but the legislation lacks clear guidance on what work young people in this age group can undertake legally (TDRI, 2020). Even hiring youth to work part-time or offering temporary summer jobs is seen as potentially exploitative by government agencies.

“Differing regulatory interpretations by various governmental authorities can discourage private sector youth initiatives.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

The lack of regulatory clarity and complex regulations are therefore discouraging companies

from offering both training and earning opportunities to young workers, especially youth under 18, even if they are keen to do so. This is also particularly the case when it comes to ethnic minorities, migrants, stateless youth, and youth in conflict with the law.

“Employers are afraid of recruiting stateless persons because they do not know how to legally register this group, and do not want to risk being fined or arrested by the authorities.”

(Stateless youth participant)

Furthermore, a lack of legislation providing protection and security for young workers in the informal sector remains a key obstacle to decent work in Thailand. These workers are especially vulnerable to interrupted earnings during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Female youth are held back by gender stereotypes

Gender inequality persists within the Thai labour market. Although female youth are more educated compared to male counterparts, they are not only more likely to be unemployed than male youth, but also tend to be paid less (TDRI, 2020). While the male youth unemployment rate increased from 3.6 per cent in 2015 to 4.3 per cent in 2019, the female youth unemployment rate rose from 4.9 per cent to 5.2 per cent in the same period (NSO, 2020). Gender inequality is even more pronounced in the older NEET group, in which 11 per cent of males aged 20–24 are NEET, compared to 27 per cent of female peers (TDRI, 2020). This points to the need for different approaches to support female youth employability at different stages of their educational and employment journey.

Gender stereotypes and cultural expectations can also potentially limit the choices of female youth. According to TDRI (2020), approximately 70 per cent of female NEETs aged 15–24 are household workers, perhaps reflecting Thai gender norms in which women are more likely to be expected to stay at home, become caregivers and perform housework. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage may also be contributing factors, as up to 70 per cent of NEETs are young females who dropped out of school due to pregnancy (NSO, 2020). Stakeholder interviews and youth focus groups noted that experiences of discrimination, gender bias and sexual harassment can impede girls and young women from continuing their education and/or making a successful transition into the world of work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address these challenges and make tangible, measurable improvements for youth education and employment opportunities, the following recommendations were identified by key stakeholders:

1 Make education systems more inclusive and relevant to labour market

To strengthen inclusion:

- Improve and expand online teaching provision so that it is accessible for all, including youth with disabilities (for example, ensuring content includes captions/audio description) and migrant children whose first language is not Thai. Online content will also enable schools and other education facilities to improve accessibility by offering flexible study arrangements for students who have dropped out of school, including young mothers.
- Increase provision of technological devices so that more students can access online educational content – this could include encouraging local authorities to provide public spaces dedicated to online educational access, and engaging the private sector to fund and/or donate devices to schools which lack technological capacity.
- Establish strong early warning systems to support students' retention in school, as well as their performance and well-being, through targeted or tailored interventions to improve their educational experiences and outcomes (for example, additional classes for low achievers, mentoring, or parenting programmes).
- Provide a safe and secure learning environment for all youth. Education settings should introduce robust safeguarding and reporting mechanisms to tackle all forms of gender bias, emotional and physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying and other barriers which impede the full participation and learning opportunities of youth, especially girls and young women.

To improve relevance:

- Reform the education curriculum to encompass more focus on soft skills, STEAM subjects, digital literacy, entrepreneurship and small business management. Improve the monitoring and evaluation system to assess learning outcomes as well as establish systematic policy feedback loops.

“Educational curriculum, policies, and regulations should be changed in response to the workforce's requirements.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

“It is time to integrate STEAM education, including foreign language abilities and IT skills, into school curriculums and courses.”

(Educational institute stakeholder)

- Improve collaboration between ministries and agencies, particularly the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, and engage the private sector in policy dialogue to understand the demands of the labour market. In addition, include private sector in the development of interactive educational content and materials for schools.

- Provide teacher training on: up-to-date pedagogical methods to engage students and develop soft skills; inclusive teaching styles to accommodate all learners; and digital literacy to deliver effective online content.

“[Updated] teaching techniques would stimulate youth and improve their soft skills, particularly problem solving and critical thinking.”

(Educational institute stakeholder)

“Digital literacy should be taught in school to educate students to be literate in media use and access.”

(Youth participant)

The Ministry of Education could also establish an online platform for teachers to share certified online education resources and share best practices.

“School teachers must assume facilitator and mentor roles, encouraging students to exercise their analytical and creative talents. Teachers should be trained in modern teaching methods using teaching materials relevant to today’s world.”

(Government stakeholder)

- Enhance the availability, quality and relevance of non-formal and informal learning, including their validation, as a key element of a lifelong learning ecosystem that offers second chance programmes and alternative pathways for the most marginalised youth.
- Ensure that the delivery of vocational educational and training corresponds with business needs, including with Thailand’s S-curve industries. This will require the use of high-quality information on skills demand and supply from a variety of sources, including employers’ surveys, labour force surveys and graduate tracer surveys.
- Promote quality work-based learning by improving links between local businesses and vocational education centres. For example, establish vocational education programmes that combine periods of study with part-time employment to enable youth to develop both technical and soft skills including communication, analytical thinking, adaptability, teamwork and problem-solving.

2 Enhance equity of access to labour market information and career guidance

- Improve labour market information systems and labour market intelligence by fostering collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders such as the Department of Employment, Department of Skill Development, academic and vocational educational agencies, the Federation of Thai Industries, and the Chamber of Commerce.
- Increase the number of career guidance counsellors in schools, ensuring that current and new counsellors receive up-to-date training on labour market trends and opportunities for youth.
- Adapt career counselling to focus not only on single career pathways, but also on opportunities to develop the flexible skills

associated with self-employability and entrepreneurship, in line with youth aspirations to access lifelong flexible work opportunities.

- Encourage educational institutions to host career day events, including presentations from local businesses and entrepreneurs as well as parents, to foster collaboration, inspire students, and promote positive attitudes towards lifelong learning.
- Improve coordination mechanisms and employment pathways between vocational colleges/universities and corresponding industries to ensure that graduate students are suitably employed after qualifying and to reduce the incidence of skill mismatch.
- Establish peer networks and in-person or online mentoring to connect youth who can support one another and share experiences of applying for jobs in a particular field/industry, to encourage lifelong learning and reskilling/upskilling.
- Enhance opportunities for youth to access job opportunities through mobile-friendly online platforms containing information on study and career guidance, scholarships, training courses, internships, legal rights, and part-time or full-time job opportunities.

“The best channel [through which to apply for jobs] is a job search website or application which provides filtering functions and job descriptions, as well as guarantees the applicants' security.”

(Youth participant)

Social media should be thoroughly integrated into any platform strategy in order to be relevant and impactful for youth, who tend to use their mobile phones and social media to access job information (see Box 1 for more on making the features/functionality of online job platforms more youth-friendly).

Box 1: Recommendations to make online job platforms more youth-friendly – insights from stakeholders:

- **Mobile phone functionality:** As most young people have access to a mobile phone, it is imperative that the functionality of online job platforms/apps are mobile-friendly in order to reach target groups (few of whom will own a computer).
- **Easy, free and secure registration and application process:** Youth applicants should be able to register and apply for jobs, training courses and internships after registering their personal information and uploading a CV.
- **Filtering functions and features:** Tracking and notification system for applicants and companies, including alerts for application status and notifications for new job listings.
- **Video call system and text chat box:** For employers to contact interview applicants directly and conveniently.
- **Accessible and attractive fonts and graphics and voice function:** To ensure app is user-friendly for all youth, including visually impaired youth.
- **Various language options:** Information should be available in Thai and English, and platform should be linked to Google translate so that migrant youth (e.g. from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia) can access other languages options.

3 Increase on-the-job training opportunities (apprenticeships, internships) and enhance availability and accessibility of financial support (scholarships, grants)

- Improve the development of standards for quality internships and conduct routine evaluation to monitor and improve impact.

“Curriculums, training and internship programmes should be periodically evaluated for feedback and further improvement by all stakeholders.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

- Provide subsidies or tax incentives to encourage private sector companies to offer apprenticeships and paid internship opportunities.

- Improve the availability and accessibility of scholarships for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, including simplifying the application process. For example, encourage private sector companies to offer scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who intend to enter a field of study relevant to the company's needs.
- Widen the geographical availability of apprenticeships/internships and improve outreach of information to create more opportunities for youth residing in different areas of the country, especially in rural areas.

4 Improve legislation and enhance financial support to provide a safety net for youth in informal employment

- Review the Labour Protection Act (1998) to facilitate more opportunities for under 18s to participate in the labour force and liaise with the private sector to enhance their understanding of the legislation and confidence in hiring youth employees.

“Governmental agencies and the private sector should arrive at a shared understanding of employability regulations to create more jobs and internship opportunities for youth. Moreover, governmental agencies should create effective, transparent, and clear policies based on the business context to support industries during the crisis to help sustain employment rate and provide opportunities for new graduates.”

(Private sector stakeholder)

- Enhance job protection for informal sector labourers. This could include, in the short term, providing low-interest loans to ease financial uncertainty, and launching long-term outreach strategies to track informal youth workers through a government database.
- Strengthen social protection measures and provide financial support (in the form of grants or loans) for youth engaging in entrepreneurship/self-employed roles to reduce their vulnerability to economic instability. For example, set up an enterprise development fund to support youth who have innovative start-up plans and provide seed-funding as required. Involve financial institutions in start-up funding with government-backed guarantees.



5 Foster a culture of gender equality to increase the number of young women in work or training

In schools:

- Improve the provision of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools to reduce incidence of adolescent pregnancy. In line with the need to develop soft skills in Thailand's youth population, CSE can actively promote critical thinking skills to increase the ability of youth to communicate and negotiate in their sexual lives, especially girls and young women.
- Provide up-to-date teacher training to deliver effective CSE, moving away from lecture-based learning and using active-based pedagogy to engage students.
- Establish school clubs and civic engagement opportunities to empower boys and girls to follow their aspirations and avoid being held back by assumptions about their capabilities and interests, including encouragement to study STEAM subjects.
- Improve provision of integrated support services to young mothers so that they can re-engage in education and access training.

In the workplace:

- Increase female participation in the labour market through employment initiatives such as: offering flexible working arrangements; increasing parental leave provision; expanding affordable childcare; and introducing equal pay for men and women.
- Encourage dialogue between stakeholders, employers and youth on social norms and values related to gender and the labour market to challenge stereotypes, reduce gender discrimination, and to foster a culture of gender equality in the workplace.
- Conduct public awareness campaigns targeted at youth which promote role models, both male and female, in non-stereotypical careers to challenge gender stereotypes and normalize the idea of women or men undertaking those roles.

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