

Quality of Basic Education in Southeast Asia Introduction

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Many countries have been investing heavily in education as part of their strategy to promote future competitiveness. Studies show that education investment contributes to higher economic growth and sustainable long-term development. In fact, education quality is strongly associated with higher economic growth, employment and earnings (Woessmann 2015). More educated individuals have higher living standards, pay more taxes, and invest more in health (Akresh, Halim, and Kleemans 2021). Also, education has intergenerational benefits. More educated mothers gave birth to healthier children (Currie and Moretti 2003). In turn, children of more educated parents complete more years of schooling (Lillard and Willis 1994). Education also raises support for democracy and good governance (Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer 2007).

As elsewhere in the world, Southeast Asian countries have been significantly investing in education. Government expenditure on education range from 2 to 7 per cent of GDP (Figure 1). As a share of GDP, public spending on education has remained relatively stable in the past decade. This pattern indicates higher nominal spending as these countries have all become more prosperous during the period. Spending on education increased from 1.6 per cent in 2012 to 2.2 per cent in 2018 in Cambodia. Similarly, spending increased from 1.8 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 2.2 per cent in 2020 in Lao PDR; while in Myanmar it increased from 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 2.1 per cent in 2019. However, only Malaysia and Vietnam spent more on education compared to the average global spending.

This sustained public investment has contributed to increasing school completion. Lower secondary school (Grades 7–9) completion rates have remained consistently high in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam

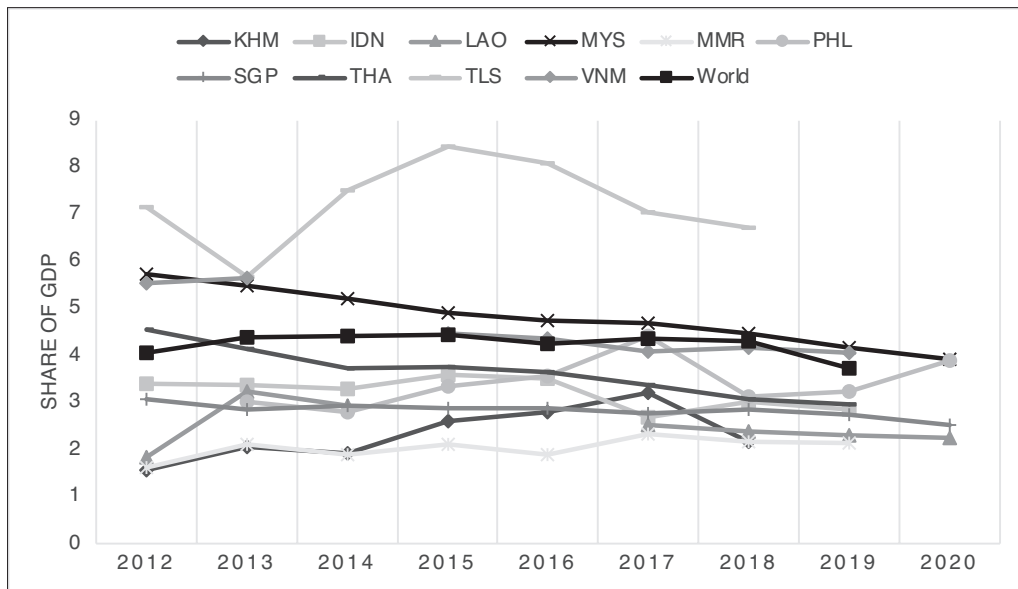
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FIGURE 1
Government Expenditure on Education, 2012–20 (Percentage of GDP)



NOTE: 2020 data for Cambodia is not available.

SOURCE: World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).

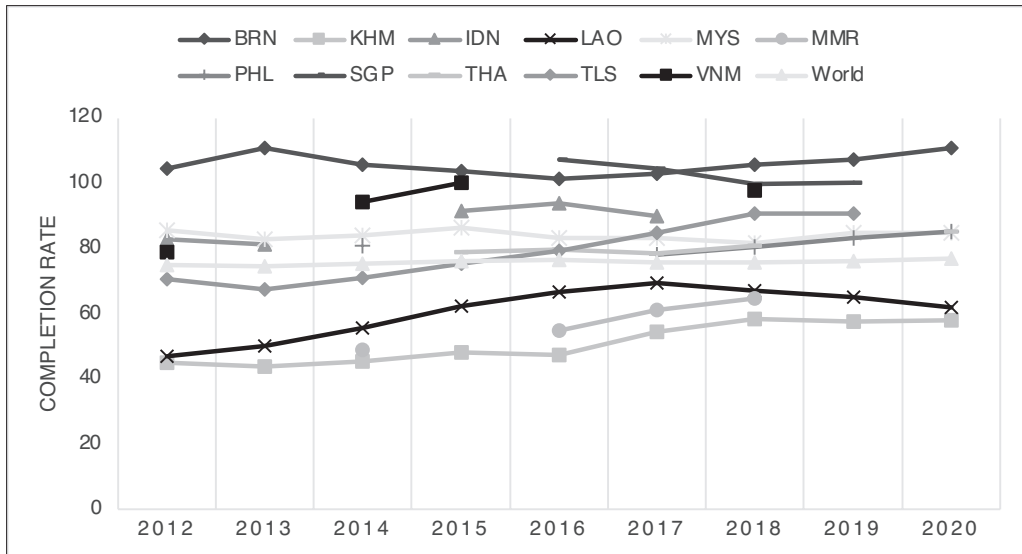
and significantly increased in the other economies (Figure 2). The most significant proportional gains over the past decade were in Lao PDR and Myanmar, followed by Timor Leste and Vietnam. Overall, the relative improvements in lower secondary completion in Southeast Asian economies were faster than the global average.

In contrast to the encouraging and converging results in public education investments and school completion in Southeast Asian countries, however, the gap in learning outcomes remains large (Figure 3). Between 2000 and 2015, learning outcomes in Thailand and Malaysia continued to lag Singapore, with no indication of catching up. However, it is also important to note that this pattern is the case in East Asia and the Pacific. In contrast, learning outcomes in lower-middle income Southeast Asian economies, which in Figure 3 include Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, are improving. There is a clear sign of catching up with Thailand and Malaysia.

However, note that absolute learning levels in many Southeast Asian countries remain low. Indonesia and the Philippines were in the bottom ten countries participating in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD 2019). More than 51 per cent of Indonesian fifteen-year-old students were in the low-achiever category in mathematics, reading and science. The figure was 72 per cent in the Philippines. The 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics surveyed fifth-grade students in Myanmar, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines (UNICEF and SEAMEO 2020). The survey finds that the learning outcomes between countries differ widely, despite all the students being in fifth grade. For example, 83 per cent of Vietnamese students performed at or above reading grade expectations, while only 8 per cent of Lao PDR students had the same competency.

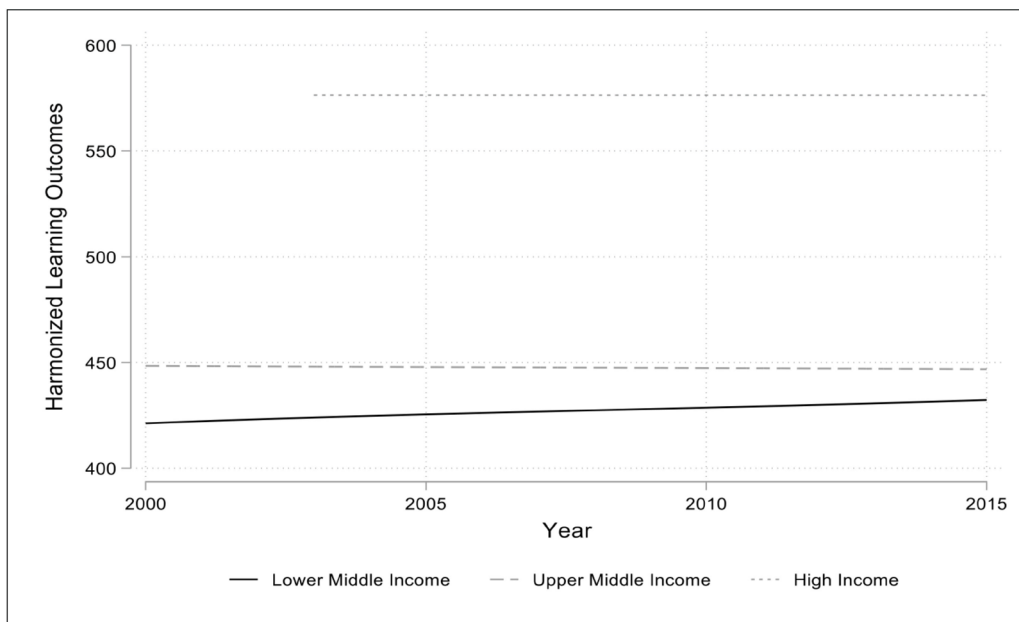
The efforts to improve learning outcomes faced a significant setback during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools in most countries were closed in March 2020 and began reopening only in late 2021. Gayares-

FIGURE 2
Lower Secondary Completion Rate (Percentage of Relevant Age Group)



SOURCE: World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).

FIGURE 3
Harmonized Learning Outcomes, Secondary Level, 2000–15



NOTES: High income: Singapore; Upper middle income: Malaysia, Thailand; Lower middle income: Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam. The learning outcomes are calculated as an unweighted average of reading, mathematics and science scores from international assessments in secondary schools.

SOURCE: Angrist et al. (2021).

Molato et al. (2022) calculate that schools in Southeast Asia were closed for an average of 292 instructional days, equivalent to 80 per cent of instructional days between February 2020 and October 2021. Schools were fully closed for half of this period. During school closures, teaching and learning moved online, interactively or using one-way methods such as television or radio-based instructions. Nevertheless, uneven access to mobile phones and the internet, poorly trained teachers and low parental support meant that the learning experience varied widely (Arsendy et al. 2020). As a result, significant learning losses took place in virtually all countries. On average, students lost six months' worth of learning (Patrinos, Vegas, and Carter-Rau 2022). School dropouts also increased during this period (Gayares-Molato et al. 2022). The World Bank (2022) estimates that learning poverty—the share of children who could not read and understand a simple text by age ten—increased from 57 per cent in 2019 to 70 per cent in 2022. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes is not yet fully known and will manifest in student performance in the coming years.

There are multidimensional challenges in improving the quality of basic education and ensuring that all students acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills. This has prompted various education-related reforms, programmes and non-governmental and non-profit organization-supported interventions. There are a few success stories but many more accounts of failure concerning educational reforms in the region. Amidst the situation described above, this special issue reflects the challenges and opportunities that Southeast Asian countries face in improving basic education quality. As a whole, this issue presents the latest empirical research on education in Southeast Asia. There are four country-specific papers, i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, and two regional papers. The six papers examine different areas in education policy using unique research methods.

Bich-Hang Duong and Ni Thi Ha Nguyen evaluate Vietnam's standardization policy. The standardization covers a competency-based curriculum, standardizing the teaching force, and standards-based quality management. They find that, while the suite of policies has significantly improved learning outcomes, challenges remain. One of them is based on overcoming the fundamental tension between standardizing education and students' highly varied family situations and learning needs. The national standard categorizes students based on age, and teachers must implement the same teaching styles across the country using the same textbooks, which could limit the ability of teachers to be creative. Therefore, the authors recommend that education officials provide more authority to school leaders to decide on school-specific policies. The government should also make pre-service teacher education more holistic and allow teachers to innovate their teaching approaches.

Specifically examining the recent developments in basic education in Thailand, Wannaphong Durongkaverroj finds a significant disparity in the quality of education between urban and rural areas. Rural schools are generally small, lack high-quality teachers, and have an insufficient infrastructure. In addition, education accountability and autonomy are lower in rural schools than in urban ones. He states that addressing these challenges is critical for Thailand to escape the middle-income trap.

Focusing on Malaysia, Niaz Asadullah asks how an upper-middle-income country with high Internet coverage designed and implemented a distance learning programme during COVID-19 school closures. He also compares the experience of students from low socio-economic status with more affluent students. He finds that almost half of the students did not receive regular online lessons, and a quarter did not receive any lessons. The low incidence of online lessons for low-income students does not mean that the pattern was due to a lack of digital infrastructure at home. Instead, the data show that the irregularity was related to poor governance and non-compliance by teachers and schools. Therefore, the implementation issues appear to originate from the supply side rather than the demand side.

Masyhur Hilmy's article evaluates *Indonesia Mengajar*, a non-government movement that sends top university graduates to teach in remote primary schools for one year. The paper addresses a broader question of how much improvement in student learning outcomes can happen when highly skilled and

motivated individuals take up teaching. This question is very policy-relevant as low teaching skills are a major constraint to improving education quality in Indonesia. The paper finds that the programme disproportionately benefits weaker students. Higher-quality classroom instruction is the primary driver of the impact. However, the effect on the average score remains small.

The modelling done by Sanchita Basu Das and Badri Narayanan estimates the economic benefits of improving the quality of education, using the Human Development Index as a proxy for quality, on the ASEAN economies. The authors show that, if all Southeast Asian countries achieve the same level of human development as Singapore, significant labour productivity gains will occur. Countries that have the most to gain include Cambodia and Lao PDR.

Finally, Sira Maliphol conducts a systematic review of mobile-assisted language teaching with three objectives: first, to understand what kind of research exists on mobile apps used in language education; second, to understand its integration into the classroom through teacher training and; third, to understand how to integrate mobile-assisted language teaching (MALT) into teaching and learning interactions. The study serves as a specific case of the potential contribution of education technology, focusing on Southeast Asia.

The six articles benefited from the conference organized jointly by the Asian Development Bank Institute, Asian Development Bank and ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute held on September 2021 in Singapore (<https://www.adb.org/news/events/improving-quality-basic-education-southeast-asia>).

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