

Education Report for Roundtable Implementation Meeting 2022

Since the 2021 RTM education report was produced, statistical data from the 2021/22 annual education census (EMIS) has been published and confirms many of the risks that were outlined in the 2021 RTM report. The education sector will implement a Joint Sector Review in early 2023 to identify causes of these increased risks.

Priority challenges for the education sector

- Universal primary education in Lao PDR is no longer in place. The substantial gains made in access to primary education over the last decade have been lost over the last two school years. In 2021/22 more than 20 percent of children who enroll in Grade 1 do not complete the full five grades. This is contrary to the Lao-signed UN convention on the fundamental rights of all children to education.
- Participation in some form of early childhood education is acknowledged as important for primary school readiness and learning. However, after years of increasing enrolments, 2021/22 saw a 6% decrease in public enrolments and a 22% decrease in private enrolments in ECE.
- Production of skilled workers is reduced with significant declines in enrolments in secondary education and TVET. This will threaten progress and achievements in broader national social and economic development, outlined in the NSEDP 2021-25.
- Gradual but significant decline in the teacher workforce is placing additional pressure on the education system with many small schools being closed in the recent school year. Continued reductions in the teacher 'quota' represents a high risk to education.
- Student learning outcomes are very low compared to other ASEAN countries. Teacher competency is low and there is insufficient investment in teacher professional development.
- Poor learning outcomes at primary level, possibly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, have a flow on effect to secondary and further levels of education. This compromises the development of human capital, necessary for transitioning to a modern and high growth economy.

Other key issues for the education sector

- Without increased and sustained support to teachers and schools, effective implementation of the new primary curriculum will be very challenging.
- It is necessary to carefully assess the feasibility of implementing digital expansion, taking into account resource and capacity constraints, the situation in rural and remote areas, and equity issues. Improved face-to-face teaching to improve basic literacy and mathematics knowledge and strengthening content knowledge of teachers are greater priorities for use of limited development funds.
- Budget allocation to the education sector is insufficient to address these considerable challenges. Education budget allocation as a share of the national budget, and as a percentage of GDP, is low and has decreased in recent years.
- Participation rates and learning outcomes are likely to deteriorate further if shortages of teachers and lack of resources to support quality improvements persist.

- Within this context, the recent Government statement¹ to gradually increase the share of the national budget, to meet the 18% benchmark set in the education law, is a key commitment that must be realised. Movement towards a greater share of GDP is also important to ensure overall adequate funding.

A. Actions/activities relating to the 2021 High Level RTM key recommendations²

- 1. Resume normal learning-teaching activities with preventive measures in place and recoup the damage caused by pauses of the activities, with special focus on disadvantaged groups to resolve the problem of low enrolment and high dropout rates**

Update on progress and performance

The Government responded well to disruptions to education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there were some necessary school closures in school years 2020/21 and 2021/22, detrimental effects were minimised through a number of measures. These included prevention measures (e.g. guidelines and supplies, such as soaps, hand sanitizers, face masks and digital thermometers) and strategies to minimise the loss of instructional time (e.g. extension of the school year, reduced vacation time, and compacted curriculum). Development of remote learning tools also helped, although access to digital learning is limited, particularly in rural areas.

However, participation in education declined significantly in the school year 2021/22. As a result, universal primary education in Lao PDR is no longer in place. The substantial gains made in access over the last decade are being lost. The primary cohort completion rate has decreased to 77%, a regression to the level achieved in 2015/16. Participation is declining in early childhood and primary education, including decreasing enrolment rates and increasing drop-out rates. This calls into question the fundamental rights of all children to education.

Similarly, access to secondary education has declined significantly, to levels of around seven years ago. This includes falling transition rates from primary, and from lower to upper secondary, and high and increasing drop-out rates. In addition, there has been a substantial decrease of over 41% in enrolment in public TVET institutions between 2020/21 and 2021/22 school years.

Following many years of significant progress, declining participation in education over the last one to two years, is alarming. Reduced participation is disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups and communities, in particular in remote areas. The decline is likely due more to economic difficulty, exacerbated by COVID-19, than directly by the pandemic. This represents a major setback in education development and threatens progress and achievements in broader national social and economic development.

Challenges, opportunities and way forward

While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were minimised, the pandemic has inevitably resulted in some of loss of learning (although noting that learning achievement was low pre-covid). In this respect, efforts such as targeted remedial instruction for those most affected should be implemented.

¹ Lao PDR National Statement of Commitment to Action, Transforming Education Summit. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education and Sports, September 2022.

² Education sector recommendations are taken from the *Prime Minister Instruction No.0320*, 11 February 2022, and RTIM 2022 Consultation Meeting presentation, 28 October 2022.

There is also a need to make the education sector more resilient to any future shocks and emergencies.

The decline in education participation in school year 2021/22 is a very serious concern. It is likely that increasing poverty, related to economic difficulty, is a major factor. Specific issues are likely to include opportunity costs of schooling (child labour/ work), insufficient teachers (see point 2), teacher absenteeism, limited operational funding for schools and poor quality of education.

The MoES is implementing a Joint Sector Review (JSRM) under the framework of the Global Partnership for Education, with development partners, in early 2023. The issue of declining participation is a priority focus, including sub-sectoral, gender and geographical differences. The review will include visits to DESBs and TVET colleges with the aim of better understanding the causes of reduced participation, and to feed into strategies to address the challenges. Enrolment data for school year 2022/23 is not yet available to assess whether or not there has been any recovery from the reductions in 2021/22. The JSRM will also seek any preliminary information about 2022/23 trends.

2. Increase the quota for teacher recruitment to meet the actual needs nationwide

Update on progress and performance

The number of new civil servant teacher appointments (the 'quota') has further decreased in 2022. Continued reductions in the quota in recent years³ is causing a gradual but significant decline in the teacher workforce. The number of new civil servant teachers (340 in 2022) is substantially less than the number of teachers lost through attrition (typically around 2,000 per year).

This is placing substantial pressure on the education system. Reductions in new teacher appointments, combined with challenges in achieving equitable distribution of existing teachers, is resulting in areas of undersupply, and higher levels of multigrade teaching in primary schools, particularly in rural and remote areas. The reduced quota also makes opening of new lower secondary schools challenging, given the subject-specific teaching approach that is applied.

Inevitably the declining number of teachers is having a detrimental impact on the quality of teaching and learning. It is also likely to be a significant factor in maintaining adequate provision of education services in some areas thus contributing to declining participation at all levels, including inability to maintain universal primary education.

Challenges, opportunities and way forward

There is significant inequity in the distribution of teachers, with areas of undersupply and areas of oversupply. This is largely due to difficulties in deploying teachers to rural and remote areas. Universal primary education therefore relies heavily on volunteer teachers since the majority of volunteer primary teachers work in schools in rural and remote areas. However, volunteer teachers are leaving the system in large numbers at all levels, primarily due to the large decline in new quota positions meaning less future likelihood of obtaining a permanent civil service position.

While it was planned in ESSDP that new teacher recruitment will be prioritized to ECE and primary schools, the largest proportion of the annual teacher quota is being provided to secondary education. This relates to the one subject teacher approach which results in low pupil teacher ratios in most lower-secondary schools (that are relatively small). Given resource constraints a lower secondary teacher covering more than one subject would be an important efficiency measure to enable more

³ During the period 2014/15 to 2017/18, the annual teacher quota was around 1,900 new positions. In 2022, the education quota allocation was only 340 of which 325 are ECE/primary/secondary teachers.

equitable teacher allocation (and increased allocation to primary education). Multiple subject teaching at lower secondary school is not uncommon.

A further challenge related to the reduced quota is the implications for pre-service teacher education. The substantial reduction in new teacher appointments brings into question the viability of teacher training colleges in producing graduate teachers⁴. Of the 2022 quota of 325 new teachers only 18 were new graduates, the others being volunteer teachers (although still a small proportion of the overall numbers of volunteers). There is a large backlog of qualified teachers who are either volunteers or outside the sector. There is no legislative framework for volunteer teachers. With current quota trends there is no demand for producing new teachers in the medium term. TTCs should focus on content and pedagogical skills upgrading over the next few years, except for areas such as mathematics and IT where there is an acute shortage of qualified teachers.

The education sector alone cannot plan to address or mitigate against the declining number of teachers. The Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for setting the teacher quota as part of wider civil service reform policy. As highlighted, there is an urgent need to reverse the reduction in the teacher quota. In addition, there is a need for a medium-term civil-service teacher staffing framework from the MoHA to enable effective MoES teacher workforce planning. Systems for contract teachers and replacing retiring teachers should be considered. At the same time MoES should continue to focus on improving equity in the allocation of teachers through redeployment of existing teachers, ensuring new teachers are deployed to areas of greatest need, improving efficiency of teacher usage and minimising transfers of teachers to administrative positions.

The declining number of teachers is also a priority area of focus in the JSRM. A key question is how DESBs and schools are managing teacher shortages.

3. Improve early childhood education and strengthen school readiness to reduce dropout rates and ensure the quality and effectiveness of education in all grades of schooling

Update on progress and performance

The steady progress of reaching more children with ECE programmes is under threat of being reversed, which will have substantial implications on repetition in primary Grades 1 and 2, and children's school readiness.

While the Government is offering ECE services for children 3-5 years old, a policy priority has been to expand access and participation for 5-year-olds. Enrolment of 5-year-olds in ECE has been steadily increasing from 70.9% in school year 2015-16 to 82.8% in 2020-21. This expansion can be seen across the country with 142 of the 148 districts now seeing age 5 enrolment rates in ECE of over 60%, with equal access for boys and girls. Enrolment rates for 3-4-year-olds have also been increasing, albeit at a slower rate.

However, enrolment rates in ECE programmes for both 5-year-olds and 3-4-year-olds have dropped in school year 2021-22 to 80.1% (2.7 percentage points drop); and to 46.6% (4.1 percentage points drop), respectively. There are about 30 districts with no pre-primary classes and the number of pre-primary classes decreased by 11% in the last year while the number of kindergartens classrooms increased by 2%. Thus, sub-national policies may not align with sub-national implementation.

The reductions in teacher quota as noted above is also constraining ECE expansion. The total number of public ECE teachers have dropped by 30% (a reduction of 2,315) from the previous school year,

⁴ The graduate output of TTCs has decreased from 7,262 in 2015/16 to 2,666 in 2021/22, a reduction of over 63%.

while the number of volunteer teachers fell by 15% (288). These significant reductions could mean the closure of some pre-primary or kindergarten classes, which could explain the recent decline in ECE enrolment rates.

Moreover, during the two years of the pandemic, ECE services were among the first to close and the last to open. This has been compounded with the fact that remote learning is much more difficult to be organized for young children.

Challenges, opportunities and way forward

Addressing the barriers that are causing the decline in enrolment rates for ECE is crucial. Consistent with global evidence, data from Lao PDR clearly shows that ECE experience has an impact on school readiness and children's learning outcomes. The SEA-PLM 2019 report shows that students who have attended two or more years of preschool have significantly higher average test scores in reading, writing and mathematics than students who did not attend preschool.

To support the continued expansion of ECE amidst declining Government budgets and reduced teacher quotas, the wider introduction of low cost delivery models like the pre-primary model, community-based school readiness programme and other community-based ECE services should be considered in the medium term.

The development of the National Decree for Early Childhood Education also provides an opportunity to strengthen the enabling environment and the expansion and quality of the ECE sub-sector. The decree, expected to be submitted to the Prime Minister's Office in 2023 will cover the organization and location of ECE services, the curriculum, educational activities, staffing, evaluation and supervision, quality assurance, promotion, management and administration, and sources of ECE funding.

The rollout of the new pre-primary curriculum also provides opportunity to improve quality of teaching-learning. The development of the Preschool Education Fundamental Quality Standards (FQS) to be introduced in school year 2023-24 will also help ensure ECE services meet quality standards and also get the support they need. An increase in the budget for the ECE sub-sector is critical for the intended impact of these reforms to be realized.

4. Continue development of the primary school curriculum to align with new normal lifestyle, with special emphasis on digital skills. Support teacher upskilling for quality impartation of knowledge to students.

Update on progress and performance

Primary education learning outcomes are low in Laos. The majority of students have levels of learning achievement significantly below the level expected of their school grade. Student learning outcomes are low compared to other ASEAN countries. While disruptions to schooling as a result of the COVID-19 has likely resulted in a loss of learning it must be acknowledged that learning outcomes were low prior to the pandemic.

Poor learning outcomes at primary level have a flow on effect to secondary and further levels of education. This compromises the development of human capital – the skilled workforce necessary for transitioning to a modern and high growth economy.

Key factors contributing to low learning include low competency of teachers in respect to both content knowledge and pedagogical skills, and insufficient investment in teacher professional development.

The current approach by MoES to the budget constraints is to rely on development partners to finance teacher professional development

The new primary curriculum focuses on the development of foundational skills, particularly basic literacy and numeracy, and promoting active learning, differentiated learning, and student-centred pedagogy. This is a major achievement that brings Lao in line with international good practice. However, the new curriculum introduces major changes to teaching practices. Evidence suggests that without increased and sustained support to teachers and schools, effective implementation of the new curriculum will be very challenging. Development partner assistance to train teachers for the new curriculum will not cover all of the 148 districts.

Laos recognises the increasing importance of expanding access to digital learning. This includes the benefit of lower costs of digital learning with increasing technological advancements. Significant progress is being made, in particular the introduction of the Khang PanYa Lao digital platform. However, it is necessary to carefully assess prospects and plans for digital expansion, taking into account resource and capacity constraints (including digital skills of teachers), and the situation in rural and remote areas (e.g. lack of infrastructure, electricity and internet connectivity), and other competing priorities for limited resources. There may be a risk that introduction of digital learning perpetuates inequities for disadvantaged and underserved areas. However, there is great potential for digital learning to be used to improve content knowledge of teachers.

Challenges, opportunities and way forward

In order to take full advantage of new teaching materials and improved pedagogy, a much greater investment in training (content knowledge and pedagogical skills) of the primary teacher workforce is required. This is the first priority expenditure programme in the ESSDP 2021-25. However, GoL budget constraints mean that quality improvements are highly dependent on support from development partners, including teacher continuous professional development (CPD), and provision of teaching and learning materials. Such support is necessarily limited and is largely targeted to selected districts.

In response to these challenges, MoES is currently developing a comprehensive teacher policy, and a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Strategy, with technical support from development partners. The strategy aims to introduce a more holistic and systemic approach to teacher CPD. This will include diversifying and improving teacher development approaches, use of blended learning, strengthening pedagogical support to cluster and school-based CPD, and improving cost effectiveness. MoES issued a Ministerial Decree on CPD in July 2022 to guide the CPD strategy and implementation.

In addition, the next phase of EU education sector budget support will aim to incentivise increased MoES budget allocation to CPD, creating opportunities for nationwide scaling-up of teacher development on a more sustainable basis.

5. Ensure sufficient budget allocation for the education sector

Update on progress and performance

Progress has not been made in moving towards a sufficient budget allocation for the education sector. As such, budget allocation is insufficient to address the considerable challenges highlighted in this report. While broader Government fiscal constraints are recognised as a key factor, education budget allocation as a share of the national budget, and as a percentage of GDP, is low⁵ and has decreased in

⁵ The education budget is 2.1% of GDP in 2021 (from 2.5% in 2019), below Lower Middle Income countries average of 3.8%, and regional countries (e.g. 3.3% in Cambodia). The share of education in the national recurrent budget has been steadily decreasing (from 17.4% in 2017 to 13.3% in 2022).

recent years. The budget shares are below internationally recommended levels and one of the lowest among ASEAN countries.

Cuts to the non-wage recurrent budget⁶, critical for education quality improvement, have constrained expenditure for key programmes and inputs including teacher training, textbooks and other teaching and learning materials, and school block grants. This has further increased reliance on limited development partner funding. Consistent with the reducing teacher quota, the education share of the national wage budget has also significantly declined⁷.

Budget limitations have increasingly affected the capacity of the sector to regain universal primary education and to improve the quality of education in line with national and sectoral objectives⁸. Participation rates and learning outcomes are likely to deteriorate further if shortages of teachers and lack of resources to support quality improvements persist.

Challenges, opportunities and way forward

The ongoing Public Expenditure and Institutional Review is an important initiative that will inform education financing policy and strategy, including allocative efficiency and aspects of public finance management.

In addition, there is a compelling case to undertake detailed analysis of the effectiveness and efficiency of national cross-sectoral budget allocations in relation to NESDP priorities, and with reference to international benchmarks and comparisons on public financing for education. Such analysis will highlight the need for a rebalancing of sectoral allocations (and by main categories of expenditure) resulting in increased funding for education.

It is important to emphasise that actions to mitigate the risk to education development, including universal primary education, are largely the responsibility of those outside the education sector. The Ministry of Finance is responsible for the education budget, and the Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for the teacher quota. However, failure to mitigate these risks will impact on broader GoL objectives, both inside and outside of the education sector.

Within this context, the recent GoL statement for the Transforming Education Summit - to gradually increase the share of the national budget, to meet the 18% benchmark set in the Education Law (2015) - is a key undertaking to provide adequate and sustainable financing of education. It will be important that this commitment is realised. At the same time, GoL should be moving to increase the education budget share as a percent of GDP.

B. Communication and outreach activities with the sector and across Sector Working Groups

The Education and Sports Sector Working Group (ESSWG) is well established. Its structure and TOR have been reviewed and revised in 2022 to improve its effectiveness. There is an Executive and

⁶ The education share of the national non-wage recurrent budget has decreased from 12.1% in 2018 to 9.3% in 2022.

⁷ The education share of the national wage recurrent budget has decreased from 25.4% in 2016 to 21.7% in 2022.

⁸ NESDP Financing Strategy diagnostics (MPI/UNDP, 2022) highlight insufficient education financing: “...public investments in human capital remain limited and appear contradictory to 9th NESDP policy”.

Technical Level Group, and also seven Focal Groups to facilitate technical discussion across the various sub-sectors.

MoES actively encourages participation at ESSWG meetings from MoF, MPI, MoH and members of the Social and Cultural Committee of the National Assembly. There is little communication with other sector working groups, but this may be something that the RTM Secretariat of MPI can facilitate.

C. Cross-sectoral thematic areas applied to all SWGs

Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (relevant to education sector)

- i. Greater aligning and tailoring development finance to the national development agenda and context through results-based planning practices

All Development Partners have endorsed ESSDP 2021-25 as the framework for all financing to align with identified sector priorities. DP supported interventions are prepared on the basis of evidence provided by the MoES, thus promoting a results-based approach. The reduced GoL financing to the education sector requires that the ESSDP is reviewed to identify targets that may no longer be achieved.

- ii. Strengthening linkages between national budget and national planning processes

Planning within the education sector is challenging due to uncertainties about the size and share of the civil service quota through to 2025. There is an urgent need for the Ministry of Home Affairs, in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance to develop a medium-term staffing framework to enable the education sector to plan future teacher numbers.

- iii. Within the national regulatory framework, strengthening country systems which are used by providers of development cooperation to extent possible: budget execution, financial reporting, audit, and procurement.

Development Partners are supporting further analytical and capacity development work on medium term budgeting reforms, public expenditure and institutional review, and financial management in the education sector.

- iv. Adopting Programme-Based Approaches (PBAs) and Sector Wide Approaches (SWAp) to support the implementation of the NSEDPs including SDGs

Development Partners involved in supporting ECE and primary education programs are aligned with a project supported by the Global Partnership for Education that will be implemented through to 2026. However, there is no broad pooled funding, except for the supervising DP. The European Union is providing most of its assistance through an education sector budget support modality.

- v. Under Government leadership, providers of development cooperation coordinate their strategies and actions, simplify procedures vis-à-vis the Government and enhance collaboration to avoid duplication.

The Informal Education Donor Working Group (IEDWG) meets to facilitate coordination of Development Partner funded interventions including mapping assistance against ESSDP 2021-25, and the 3-year ESSDP operational plans. This helps to identify any overlap and gaps.

- vi. Ensuring availability and public accessibility of information on development cooperation and other development resources (commitments, actual disbursements, and results)

ESWG Focal Group meetings provide an opportunity for Development Partners to outline how their work is supporting MoES. The Project Management Division of the Department of Planning maintains an ODA database and this data is used in MoES Annual reports. The ESSDP operational plan outlines inputs from development partners over a three-year period.

- vii. To the extent possible, ensuring adequate mobilization of government revenues which is required for leveraging development cooperation funds for investments in various development activities

Commitment of the Government to support and maintain sufficient budget allocation to the education sector is a key principle to receive grant funding from the Global Partnership for Education. Similarly, the general criteria of the education budget support provided by the European Union pertains to the credibility of the education sector policy including adequate financing. Currently, Lao PDR does not allocate sufficient budget in line with international benchmarks.

- viii. Improving engagement of private sector in national and provincial development planning and coordination, including the implementation, reporting and oversight of development results and outcomes through a proper analytical framework/mechanism.

Private sector provision in school-based education is expanding beyond Vientiane Capital and is now active in provincial capitals and in some larger district capitals.

The role of the private sector is increasing in TVET, including cooperation in developing occupational standards through Trade Working Groups, and cooperation between TVET institutions and private companies to deliver training. These initiatives are improving the relevance and quality of TVET.

Innovation and technology

The MoES digital teaching and learning platform Khang Panya Lao has been established with support of Development Partners for use in digital and blended learning. This was a response to school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic with plans to expand the platform use for teacher training and as a supplementary learning resource covering pre-primary, primary and secondary education with potential to expand to non-formal education programmes.

Several Development Partners are introducing digital tablets to assist DESB staff to monitor performance in schools.

However, lack of access to the Internet and smart devices (because of poverty and remoteness) means that not all children can access on-line learning, and this is creating further inequalities. This highlights the need for MoES to work with the Ministry of Telecommunications and with the private sector.

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and accelerating the adoption and implementation of the National Youth Policy

All programs in the sector have gender equality as an objective and all indicators collected by the MoES Statistics Centre disaggregate data by sex. More boys are dropping out and repeating in primary and secondary education, with boys also lagging behind in learning outcomes. Reasons behind this reverse gender gap needs to be fully understood and addressed.

There is a better understanding of the intersection between ethnicity and gender by MoES and Development Partners and this is being addressed in DP projects and in the identification of target districts (such as the MoES 40 priority districts) for enhanced support.

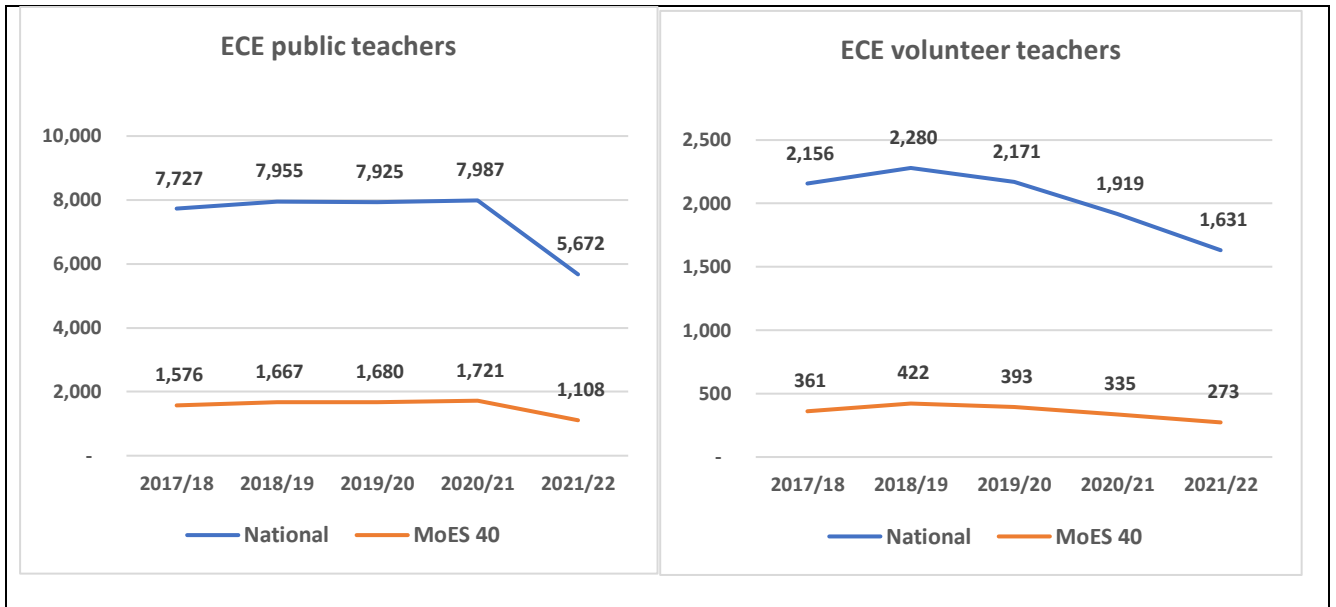
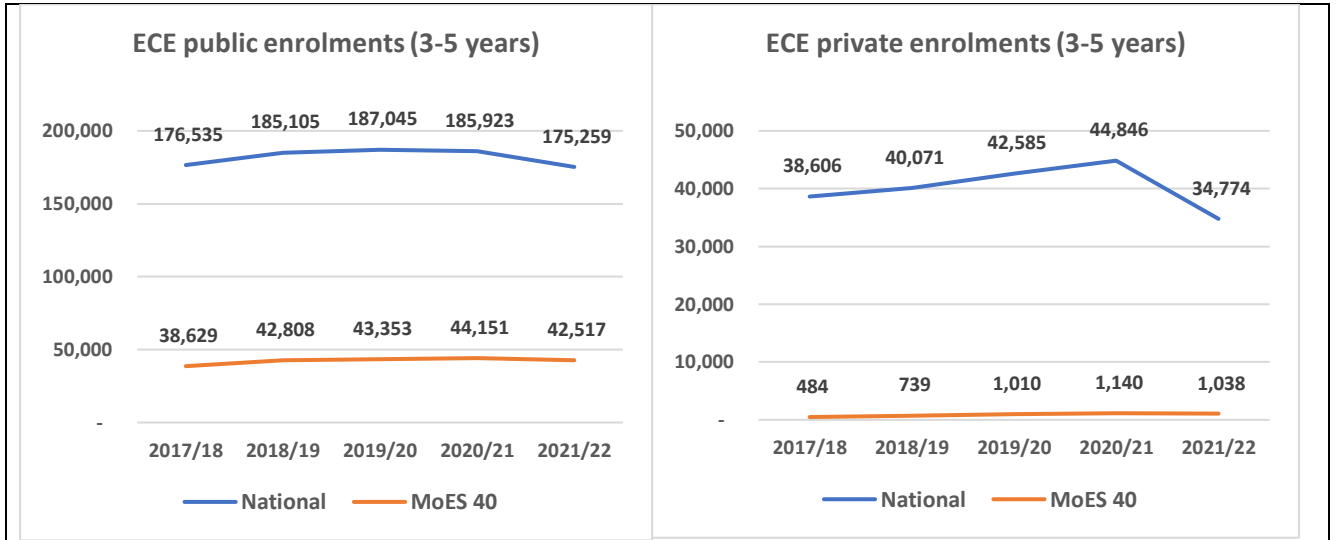
Priorities for 2023

- Regain Universal Primary Education - invest in strategies and programmes to reverse declines in education participation, particularly targeted to disadvantaged areas
- Improve School Readiness - accelerate efforts to increase ECE access and improve ECE quality
- Ensure Sufficient Supply of Teachers - increase the teacher quota in response to needs, including strengthening medium term teacher workforce planning
- Improve Teaching and Learning - scale-up teacher continuing professional development through increased GoL funding, including development and expansion of digital approaches for teacher content and pedagogical skills development
- Improve the Quality and Relevance of TVET - strengthen partnerships with the private sector and improve the employability of TVET graduates
- Ensure Sufficient Budget Allocation to the Education Sector – increase budget as a share of the national budget and as a percentage of GDP

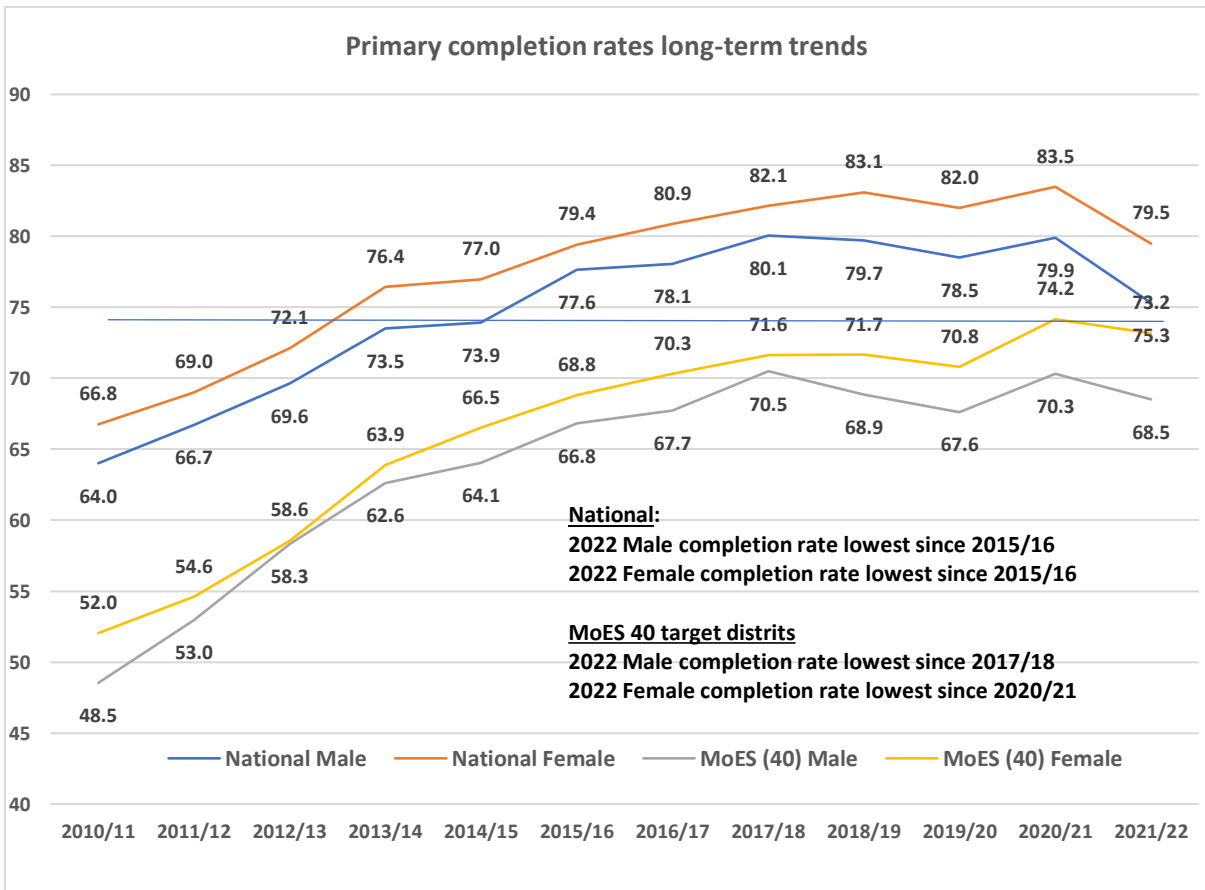
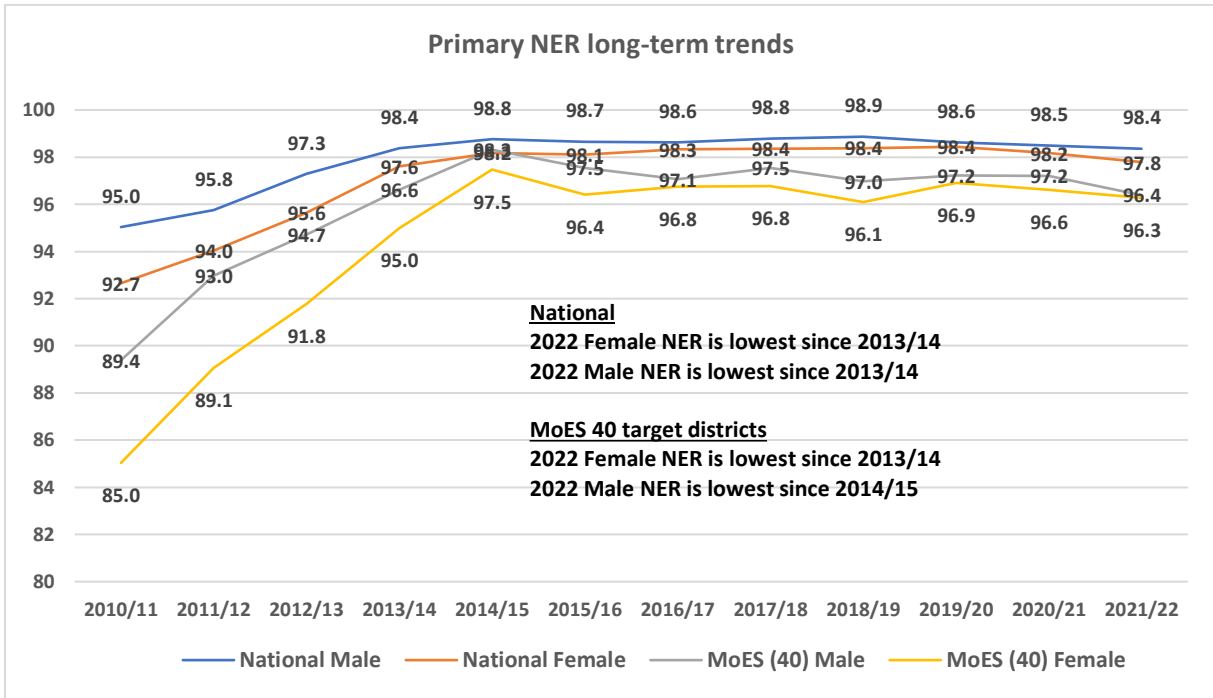
Annex: Statistical Data

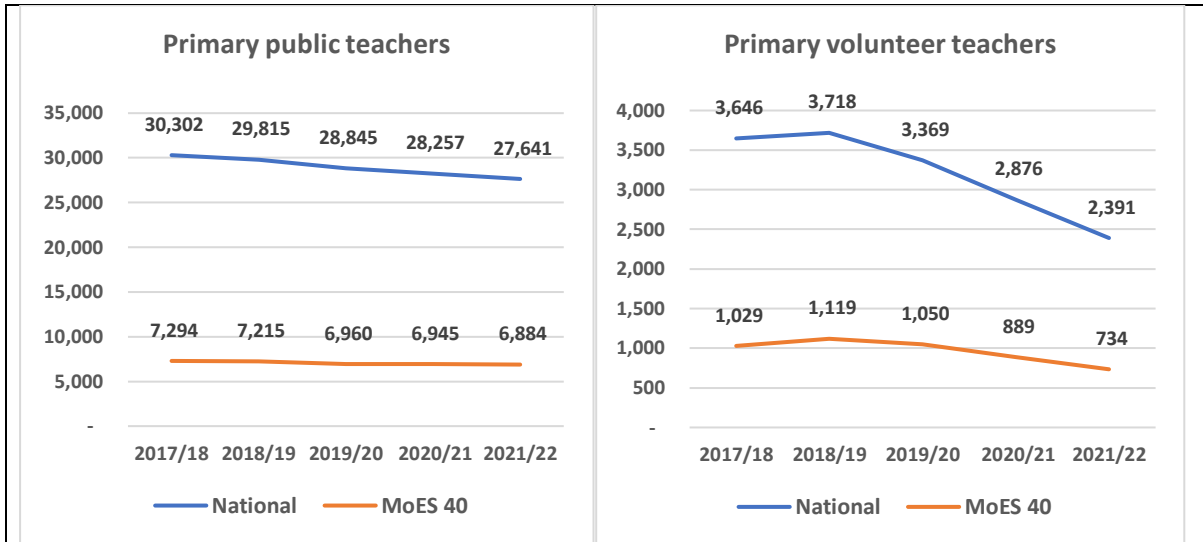
This annex provides data to justify statements in the 2022 RTM Education Report. It specifically examines the regression of student and teacher numbers that has occurred over the past five or more years. The trends shown in these charts are similar to those of other indicators at all levels.

Early Childhood Education

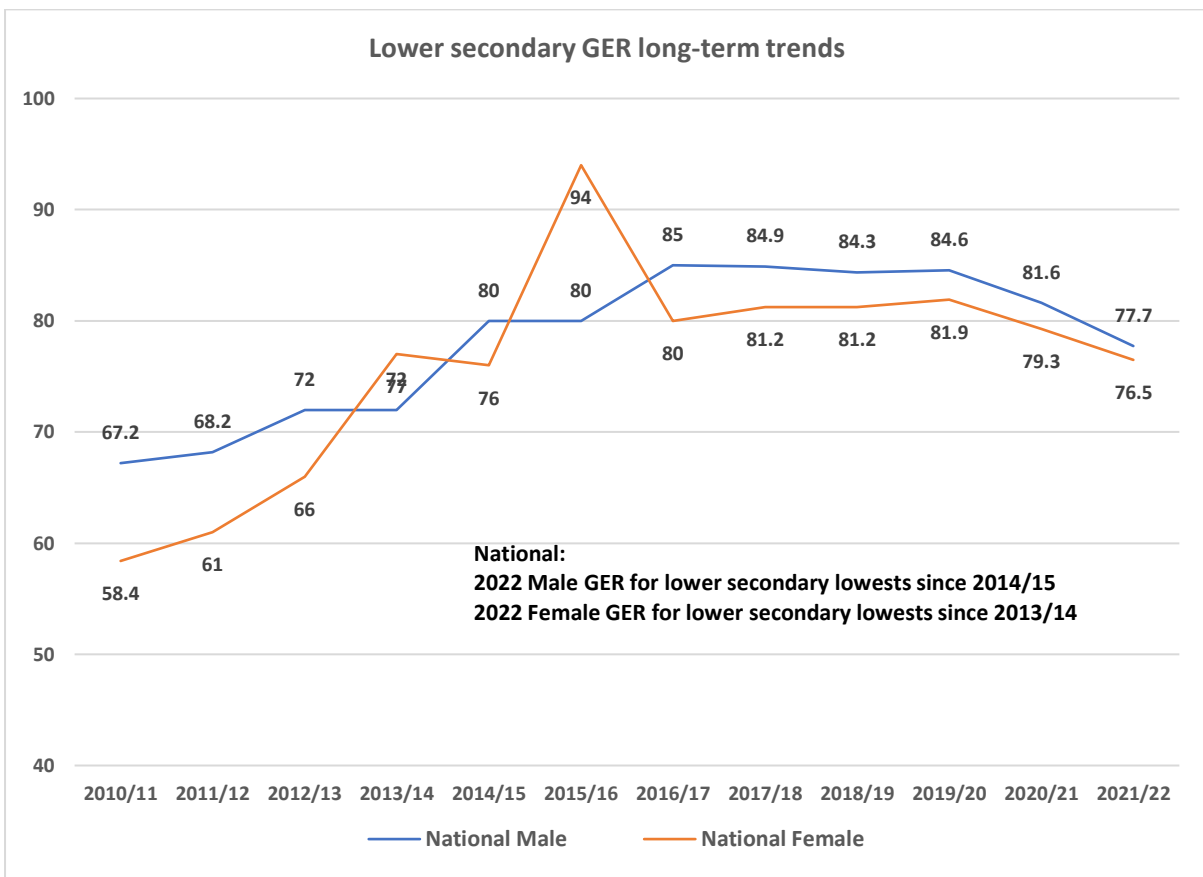


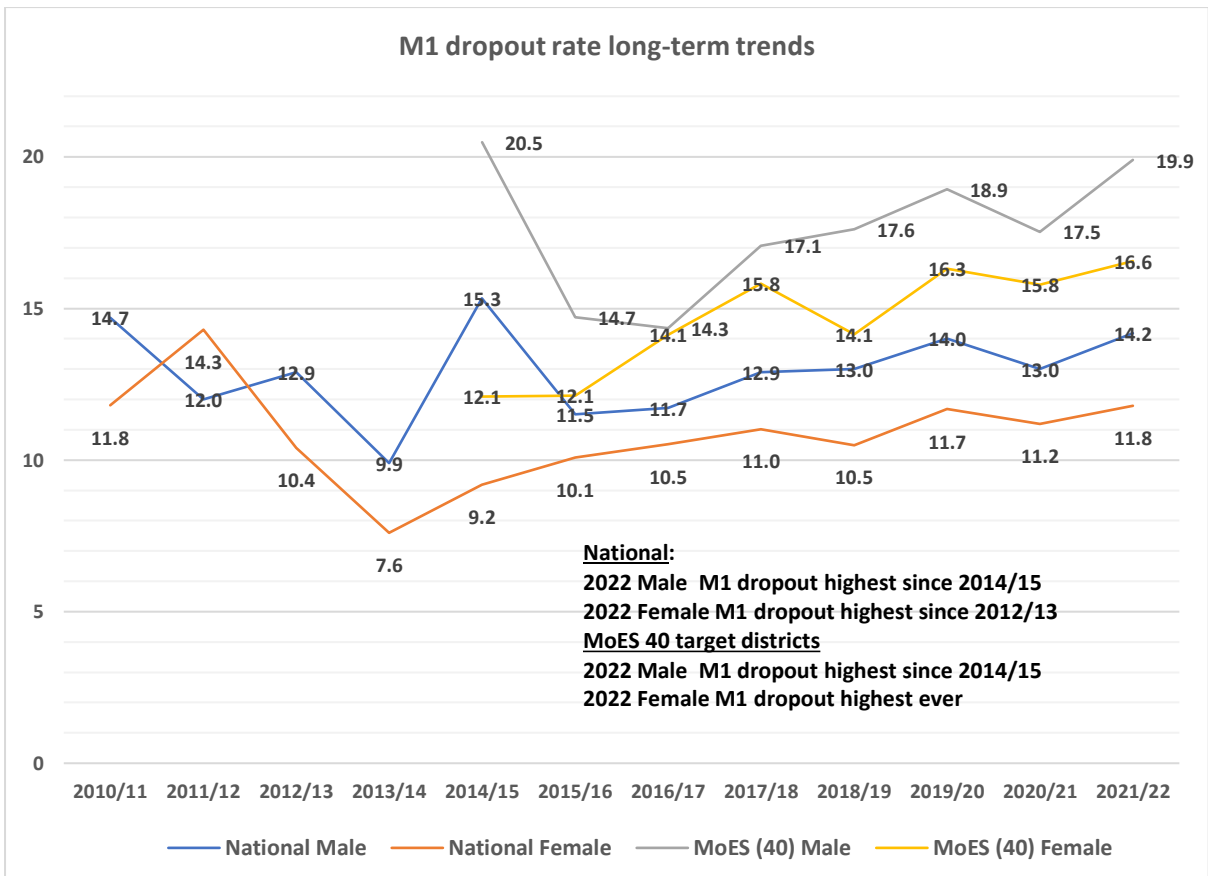
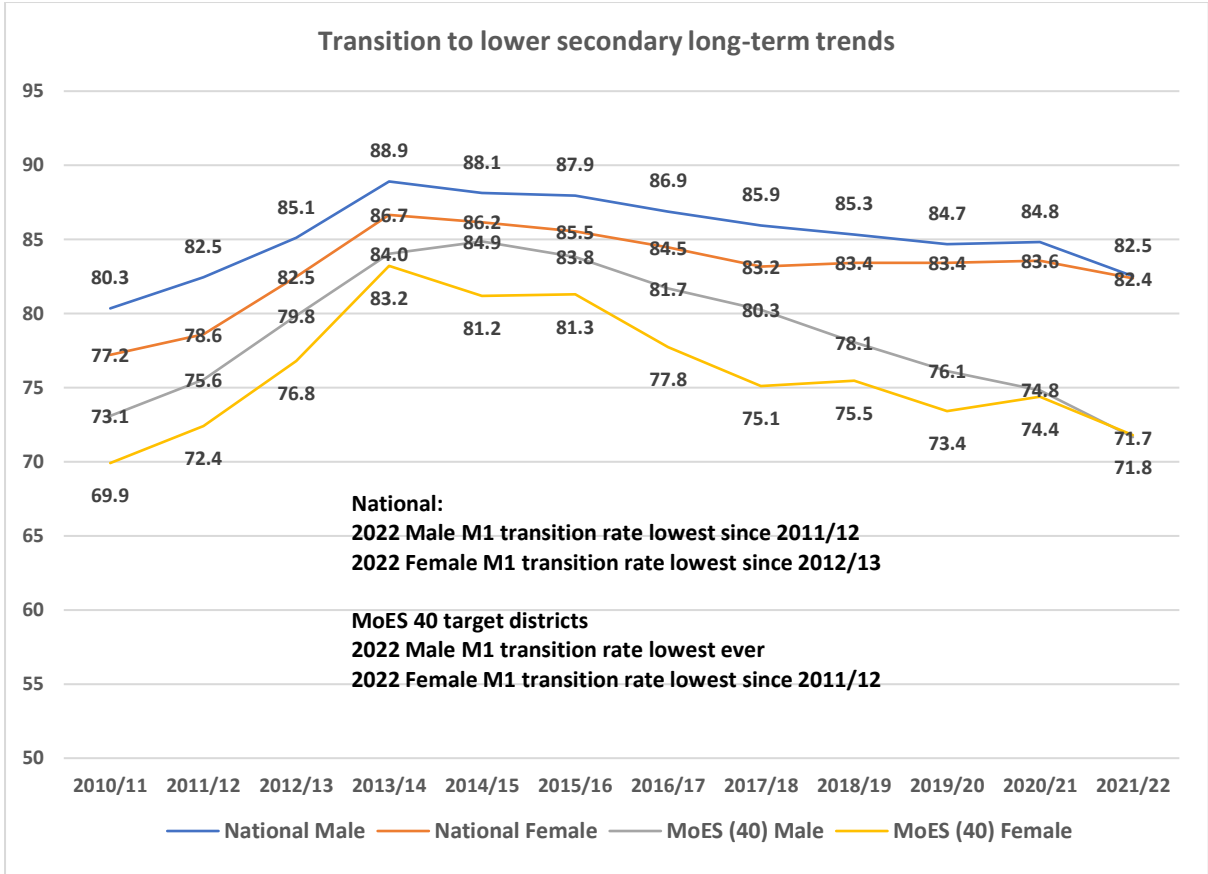
Primary Education



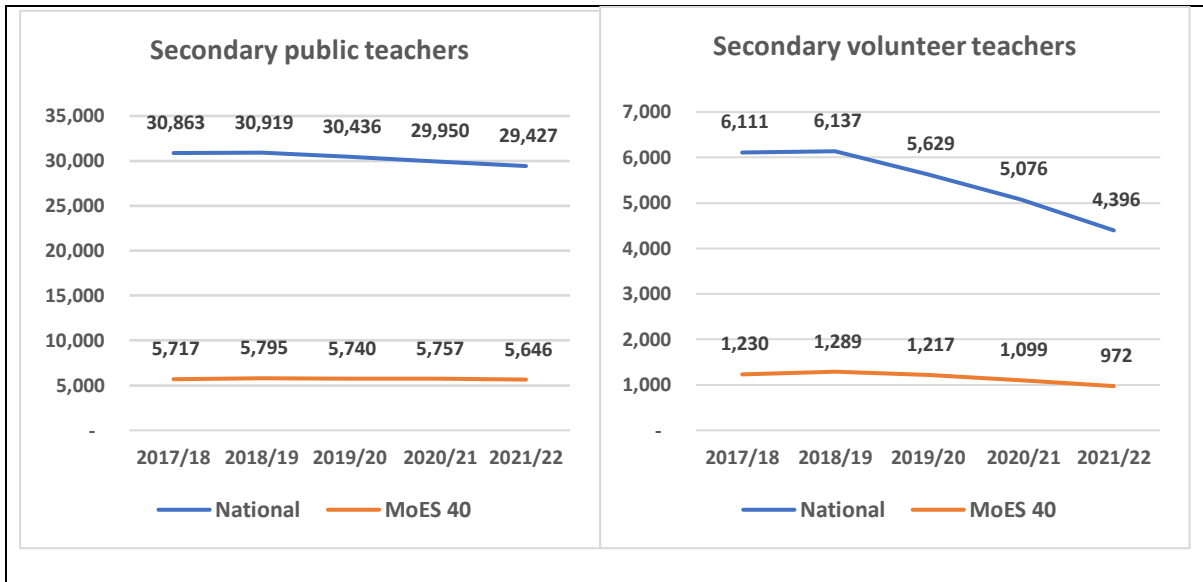
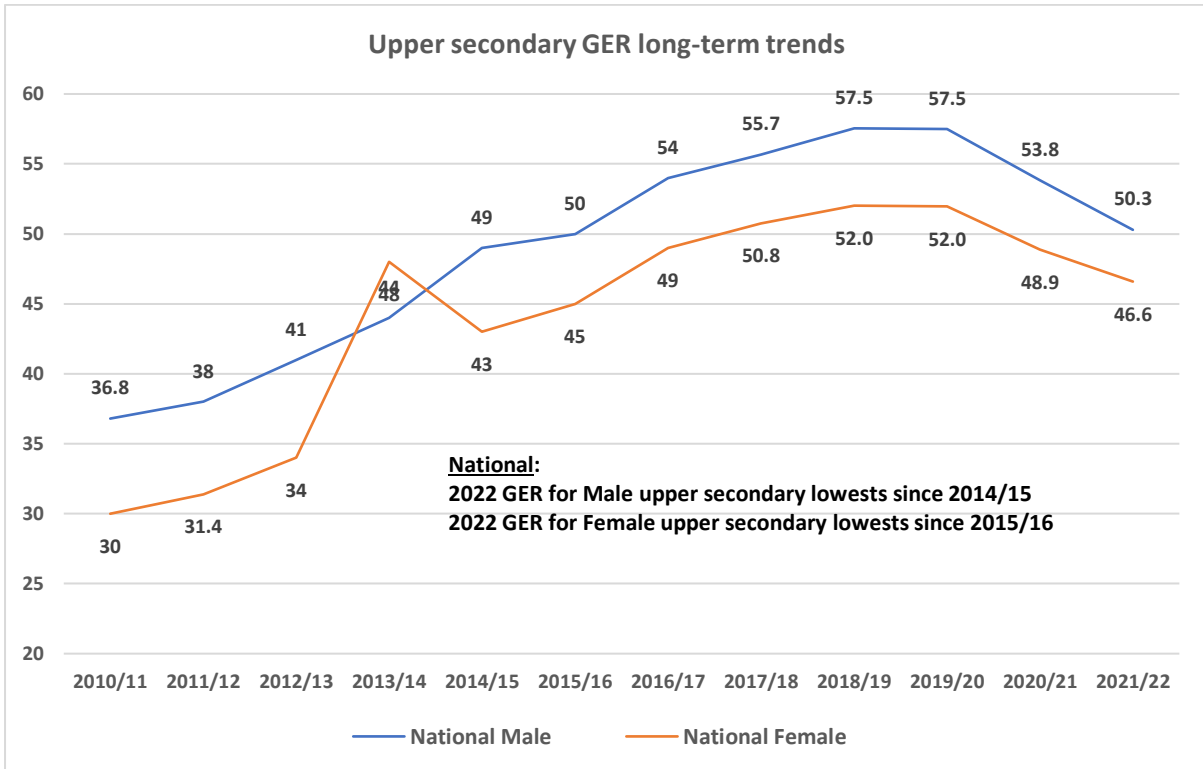


Lower Secondary Education



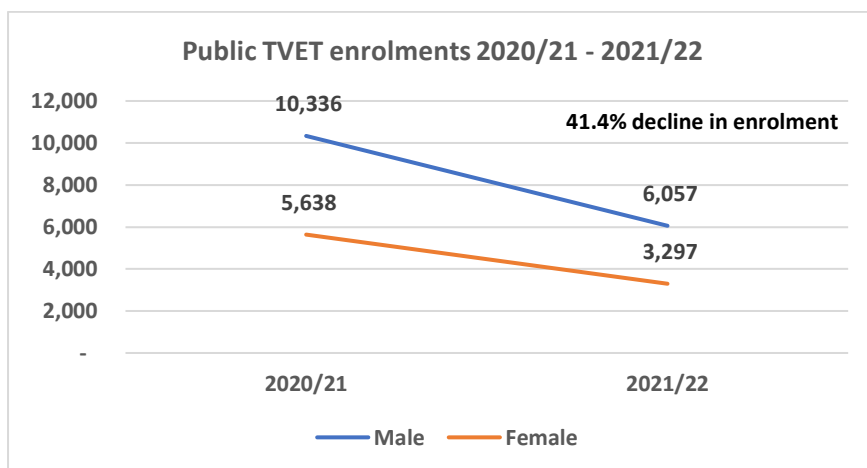


Upper Secondary Education



Note: Lower and upper secondary teachers

Technical & Vocational Education and Training



Primary Student Learning Achievement

Figures 1-3 show key results from a recent (2019) comparative study on what primary grade 5 students know and can do in reading, writing and mathematics, in six Southeast Asian countries

