

► PIONEERS

USAID

Project: US Agency for International Development Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training (USAID COMET)

Purpose: This five-year (2014–2019) workforce development program supports universities and vocational institutions in teaching Thai students 21st-century skills

In recent years, the Thai government and private sector have become increasingly focused on moving the country into its next stage of development through a program dubbed “Thailand 4.0,” a platform focused on increasing the kingdom’s competitiveness through more innovation, R&D and investment in emerging industries like robotics and the Internet-of-Things. While Thailand 4.0 makes sense on paper, without the human resources to make it a reality, it will most likely remain wishful thinking.

Enter USAID COMET, a project that recognizes the urgent need for better workforce development in Thailand and other countries of the Lower Mekong sub-region. With 70 percent of employers in the region looking to hire, but only 16 percent finding recent graduates who have the skills they need, USAID COMET prepares youth for employment by bridging the gap between education institutions and employers.

Observing a rise in innovative companies and startups in Thailand that are building up value-added products and services, for example, the project suggests ways to foster hybrid skills. As a recent labor market assessment by Bentley University noted, “the future of job skills is not one of hard science versus emotional intelligence. It’s one where hard and soft skills come together to create the hybrid.” The project also conducts an annual regional Labor Market Assessment to identify key growth industries and job market hiring trends. The businesses interviewed in

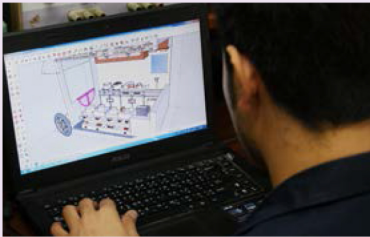


USAID COMET prepares students so that they can thrive in an increasingly tech savvy workforce.

the 2017 Labor Market Assessment, for example, highlighted the importance of the following skills for their employees: innovation, critical thinking, creativity, English proficiency, teamwork and adaptability to new work situations and technologies.

USAID COMET supports universities and vocational schools to adapt their curricula and teaching approach to better meet these private-sector demands, and engages enterprises to strengthen work-based (hands-on) learning opportunities, such as internships. Through the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook – USAID COMET’s set of online experiential learning toolkits – USAID COMET promotes innovative education with technology-based solutions. Instructors are trained in dynamic, student-centered learning approaches, such as exploring real-world problems through project-based learning, and in modern strategies for complementing online learning with in-person classes. Out of the twelve USAID COMET leadership institutions, or “Mekong Learning Centers,” in the region, two are in Thailand: Mahidol University in Bangkok and Maptaphut Technical College (MTC) in Rayong. MTC has a strong, symbiotic relationship with the Petroleum Institute of Thailand.

So what are the results so far? In 2016, over 34,000 students received training



based upon the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook, and over 600 ASEAN youth competed in the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative Innovation Challenge, pitching innovative solutions to some of the region’s most pressing food security challenges. In Thailand, the Ministry of Education’s Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC) has expressed interest in taking the program model to other vocational schools and applying it in other private sectors such as agribusiness.

By 2019, USAID COMET will help 15 post-secondary education institutions equip 120,000 youth with the workplace skills demanded by businesses in the Lower Mekong countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. These skills include adaptability to new technologies, working as a team, and communication and interpersonal skills – the 21st-century skills so often cited as lacking among Thai students and within the Thai workforce.

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World Wide Fund for Nature

History: Founded in 1961 as the World Wildlife Fund, now known as the World Wide Fund for Nature

Location: Based in Switzerland, operating worldwide

Key features: The world’s largest non-governmental environmental conservation organization, WWF strives to safeguard the natural world, take action against climate change and protect biodiversity. Operating in more than 100 countries, WWF is known for using the most current scientific research.

When Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands visited King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit in Thailand in 1982, the king and queen expressed their concern about environmental issues and their willingness to support conservation work. As a result, WWF started working with the Thai government on several projects, including one on tiger conservation at Khao Yai National Park. In 1995, WWF set up an office in Thailand.

Protecting forests and keystone species plays an important role in sustainable development, especially in



WWF works with Thai government agencies to support community-based wetland management and innovative wildlife conservation efforts.



The Grand Palace before (top) and after (bottom) its lights were turned off to mark Earth Hour.

Thailand, where only 28 to 30 percent of the country is still forest. Research indicates that forests provide ecological services that benefit local economies and communities – especially the poor.

In Thailand, WWF committed to protecting threatened key species like the tiger and the Asian elephant. It has implemented notable wildlife preservation projects in the Western Forest Complex and Kaeng Krachan-Kuiburi Forest Complex (covering a combined 22,546 square kilometers), as well as in Mae Wong-Klong Lan National Park in central Thailand.

WWF also worked with government agencies to launch its “Smart Patrol” project to provide new conservation technology in patrolling protected areas. The project has increased prey for tigers and decreased illegal poaching by 400 percent.

WWF has used community-based approaches to wetland management and restoration projects in Chiang Rai, Khon Kaen, and Nakhon Phanom provinces, where wetlands are important to local economies and employment. The lower Songkram River wetlands in Nakhon Phanom province, for example, have played a significant role in agriculture, tourism and transportation. WWF has co-hosted awareness-raising events in the community.

WWF also aims at increasing environmental awareness in its work with the general public. Bangkok has participated in WWF’s 60+ Earth Hour since 2007, when lights are turned off for an hour. The 2015 campaign broke records, saving 1,768 megawatts of electricity.

Thai celebrities also participated in WWF’s “Kill Ivory Trade” campaign in an effort to end Thailand’s reign as the world’s largest illegal ivory market. The campaign has been remarkably successful. Roughly 1.6 million people signed the petition against ivory trading, which ultimately led to the Thai government’s prohibition on trading African ivory.

