



# POLICY NOTES

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## Investing in Southeast Asian Teachers: Supporting Professional Growth and Career Development to Sustain Motivation

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### Salient Points

- Teachers' decisions to remain in the profession are shaped by a combination of core and contributing motivational factors.
- A key core factor is teachers' sense of growth and development, which shows a moderate positive link with motivation to stay in teaching.
- Teachers with a history of promotion report slightly higher motivation levels, highlighting the importance of career advancement opportunities within education systems.
- Teachers currently enrolled in graduate studies exhibit significantly lower motivation levels than those not pursuing further studies, suggesting that additional academic demands may increase workload and stress.

# TEACHERS GROW WHEN OPPORTUNITIES GROW.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Builds skills.  
Expands potential.

## CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Clear pathways.  
New opportunities.

## GRADUATE STUDIES SUPPORT

Deepens expertise.  
Strengthens impact.



## Teachers' Sense of Growth and Development

A **core driver** of teacher  
retention in Southeast Asia.

## Overview

Teacher shortages continue to pose a serious challenge across Southeast Asia. According to the *Global Report on Teachers* (UNESCO, 2023), the region will require approximately 3.05 million additional primary education teachers and 1.49 million secondary education teachers by 2030. This looming gap underscores the importance of understanding what motivates teachers to remain in the profession, particularly factors related to professional growth and career development. Sustaining teacher motivation is therefore critical not only for retention but also for maintaining education quality in the region.

## Graduate Studies in Southeast Asian Teacher Career Systems

Most Southeast Asian Ministries of Education (MOEs) actively encourage teachers to pursue postgraduate studies (Jawawi et al., 2014; Alifia & Pramana, 2021; TIMSS & PIRLS, 2025; Duc et al., 2022). In several countries, completing a master's degree is a prerequisite for promotion to higher teaching ranks or for access to alternative career pathways within the education system (MOEYS, 2019; DepEd, 2024; Punyasavatsut, 2019). Despite these incentives, findings from the Teacher Motivation Study in Southeast Asia indicate that teachers require stronger institutional support when undertaking graduate education (Bernasor et al., 2025).

## Professional Growth as a Core Driver of Teacher Retention

Recognizing the central role of motivation in retaining teachers, SEAMEO INNOTECH examined teacher motivation across ten Southeast Asian countries between 2023 and 2025 (Bernasor et al., 2025; Umali et al., 2024). The study identified both core and contributing factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. Core factors serve as fundamental drivers of teacher retention, while contributing factors strengthen or reinforce these core drivers (Umali et al., 2024).

Among the identified core factors is teachers' sense of growth and development, defined as their aspiration to improve professionally and become more effective educators. This sense of growth is closely linked to access to professional learning opportunities and was found to be positively associated with teachers' motivation to stay in the profession.



## Promotion Pathways as Incentive for Retention

The study of Bernasor et al. (2025) further revealed that teachers who had experienced promotion reported higher motivation levels than those who had not. This finding underscores the importance of structured career progression systems in sustaining teacher motivation.

While many Ministries of Education (MOEs) in Southeast Asia have established career progression frameworks, others are still in the process of formalizing such systems (MOEYS, 2019; Alifia & Pramana, 2021; MOES, 2020; Myanmar MOE, 2019; DepEd, 2024; Punyasavatsut, 2019). These efforts reflect positive steps toward recognizing teachers' professional growth and contributions.

The study also highlights the need for transparent and well-communicated promotion guidelines. Clear standards can help teachers better understand promotion requirements, while also supporting evaluators in making consistent and fair decisions.

## Balancing Graduate Studies, Workload, and Teacher Well-Being

Beyond promotion, the study examined the relationship between graduate studies and teacher motivation to remain in the profession. Contrary to expectations, teachers currently pursuing graduate degrees reported lower levels of motivation than those not engaged in further studies.

This finding suggests that graduate studies may add significant workload and stress, compounding the demands of teaching. Many teachers are compelled to complete academic requirements during personal time, negatively affecting work-life balance and overall well-being.

Given that graduate studies are frequently encouraged, or required, for promotion and career advancement (Alifia & Pramana, 2021; TIMSS & PIRLS, 2025; MOEYS, 2019; DepEd, 2024; Punyasavatsut, 2019), the findings call for closer examination of how MOEs can better support teachers undertaking advanced degrees.

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## Policy Options

Ministries of Education in Southeast Asia may consider the following policy options to strengthen teachers' sense of growth and development and sustain their motivation to remain in the profession:



### 01 Develop Structured Career Progression Pathways.

**Establish well-defined career pathways** that align with teachers' strengths and interests, whether in classroom practice, leadership, or specialized roles. Flexible pathways for mid-career teachers can address evolving priorities such as professional growth, work-life balance, and diversification of roles. Clear career stages enable teachers to plan purposeful development across different phases of their careers.



### 02 Create Transparent, Merit-Based Career Progression Opportunities.

**Transparent and merit-based promotion systems can strengthen motivation and professional commitment.** Clear criteria, regular promotion cycles, and fair evaluation processes encourage teachers to pursue continuous improvement while reducing perceptions of bias or arbitrariness in advancement decisions.



### 03 Support for Further Studies.

While graduate studies contribute to teachers' professional and personal growth, the added workload can undermine motivation and increase stress. **MOEs and schools should provide flexible arrangements**, such as workload adjustments, or recognition of study time as part of professional duties, to better support teachers pursuing higher education, particularly those with family or caregiving responsibilities.



***Effective teacher policies must balance opportunities for advancement with adequate institutional support to ensure that professional growth strengthens, rather than undermines, teacher motivation and well-being.***

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