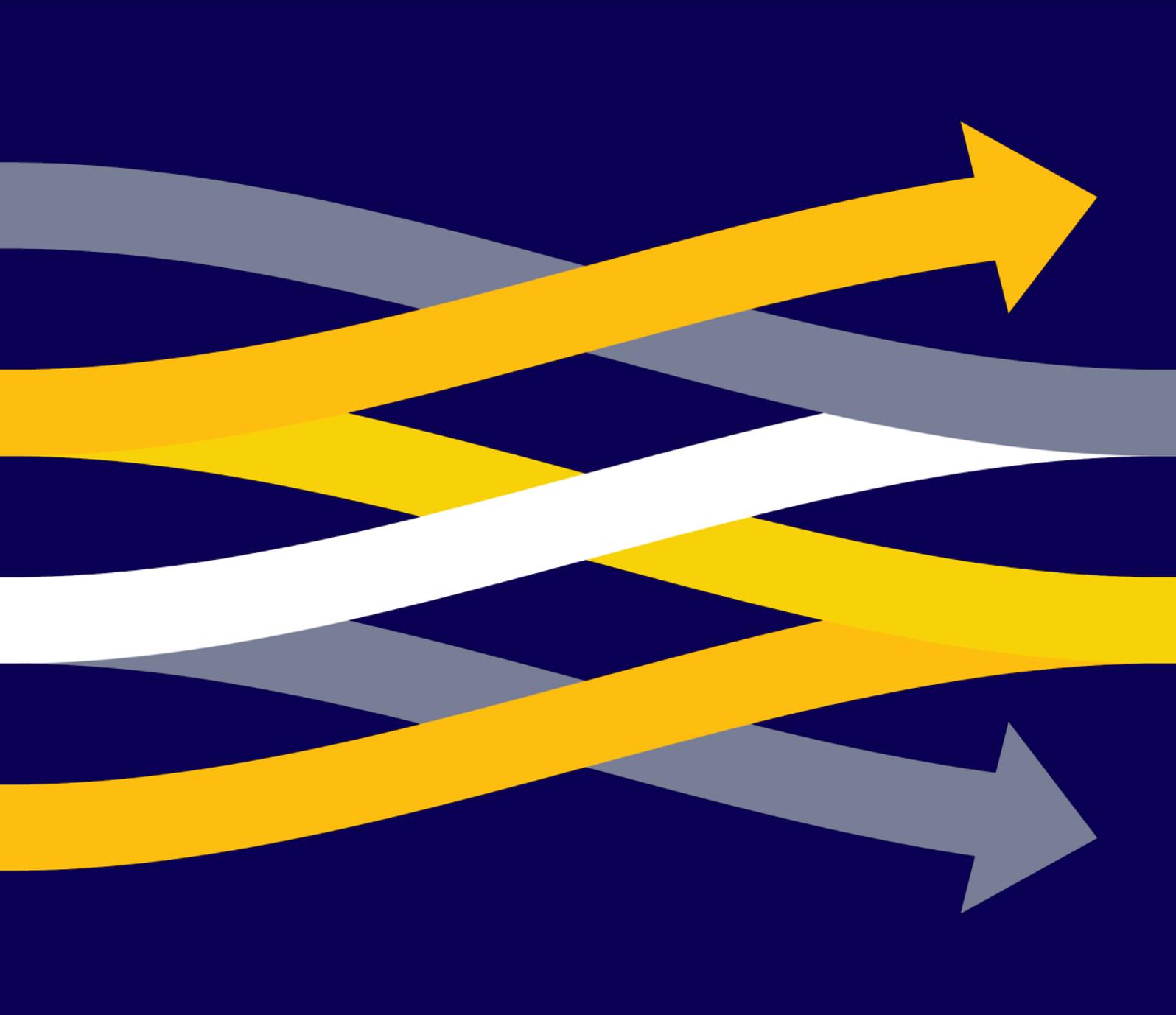




**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



# USAID COMET

Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training

## Annual Report 2014-2015

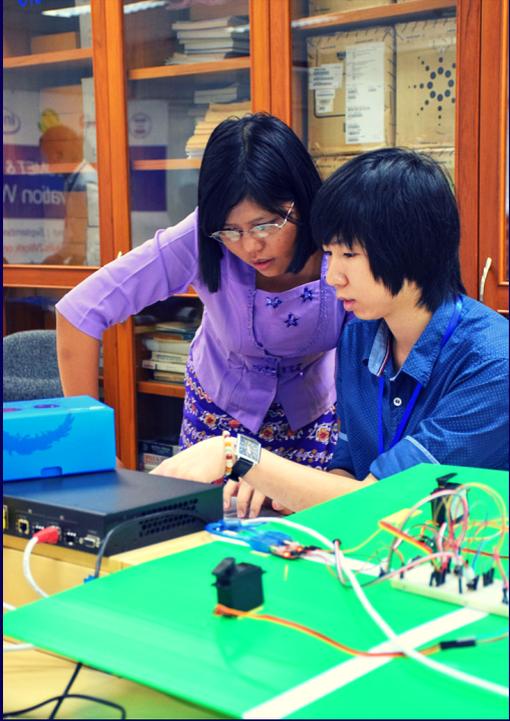
# USAID Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training

Year One Annual Report  
October 6, 2014 to November 5, 2015

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# Project Overview

Why we do what we do

The Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training (USAID COMET) project is a five-year, \$12.3-million workforce development program administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID COMET was launched as part of President Obama's Young Southeast Asia Leadership Initiative (YSEALI). USAID COMET aims to:



Improve **youth employment** with market-driven skills



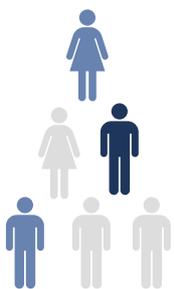
Promote **gender-balanced** employment in key growth sectors



Increase **technology-based learning solutions** in universities & technical colleges

USAID COMET, through the MekongSkills2Work (MS2W) network, fosters economic growth in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. It directly supports the goals outlined under Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI). MS2W also supports the ASEAN Economic Community's goal for greater integration, helping to deepen engagement of USAID COMET target countries in key growth sectors in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, accounting, and tourism (STEM + AT) through increasing availability of skilled labor and competitiveness of industries.

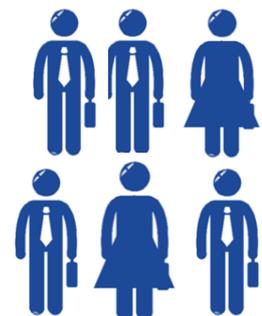
Students/Jobseekers



Universities and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions



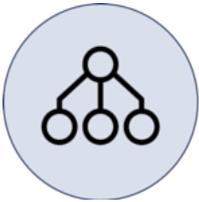
Employers in Key Growth Sectors



USAID COMET aims to link all three stakeholders, bridging the gap in the workforce talent pipeline of the Lower Mekong

# Key Achievements

Year One: October 2014 - 2015



## PARTNERSHIPS

**WITH ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS, REGIONAL ENTITIES & INDUSTRY PARTNERS**

USAID COMET includes a cadre of strong institutional and industry partners within and outside the ASEAN region who are committed to continued participation with USAID COMET. Current USAID partners include Cisco Systems, Google, HP, Intel and National Instruments. These relationships form the basis for a supply/demand driven approach to deliver USAID COMET's school-based training and work-based learning activities in years 2-5.

USAID COMET recruited a Senior Partnerships Manager and a Senior Institutional Specialist to strengthen and expand partnerships with educational institutions and industry partners. This demonstrates our strong commitment to promoting the adoption and scale-up of the USAID COMET model, and to further drive integration of activities and partners within ASEAN.

In March 2015, USAID presented the project to the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting for Education (SOM-ED) in Hanoi, Vietnam. ASEAN officially endorsed the project, allowing USAID COMET to use the ASEAN logo on all official project documents and for its online presence.



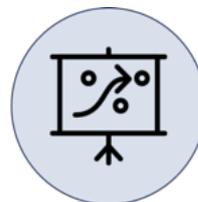
## LABOR MARKET ANALYSIS

**IDENTIFYING KEY SECTORS & SKILL GAPS**

USAID COMET invested in a baseline study to more fully understand the key economic growth sectors both sub-regionally and within each country. The analysis also identified skill gaps where there is a mismatch between employers' needs for skilled workers and the actual skills of graduates from STEM+AT training programs.

This understanding is critical to ensuring that USAID COMET's training approach and technical training content are optimally aligned with market needs and opportunities as articulated by regional employers in key economic sectors.

At the end of Year One, the project shared the study's evidence-based results with those interested in aligning their training with current industry needs.



## SOURCEBOOK

**MEKONGSKILLS2WORK SOURCEBOOK: A GUIDE FOR FACILITATORS**

USAID COMET integrated findings of the baseline study into the development of instructional materials and teaching practices contained in the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook for STEM+AT instructors, and piloted the teaching materials with an initial cadre of instructors in the Lower Mekong sub-region.

Utilizing the project's expertise in teaching and learning methodologies, the project acquired an in-depth understanding of the ways sub-regional instructors currently teach technical subjects and workplace skills – both the best practices they employ as well as areas for improvement.

USAID COMET worked with a select group of instructors at key sub-regional learning institutions to assess their institution's compliance with the USAID COMET nine pedagogical standards, and explored strengths and weaknesses of their own instructional approaches, looking for opportunities to foster improvement.



## MS2W ONLINE PRESENCE

**HUB FOR LEARNING, TRAINING, & EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT**

A basic USAID COMET website came online using the online presence of [MekongSkills2Work.org](http://MekongSkills2Work.org). The site was used as the main channel for disseminating the Labor Market Analysis.

Once fully developed, the MekongSkills2Work website will transform into an interactive digital convening space for job seekers, instructors, and employers. The website and portal targets three key audiences as well as external partners: jobseekers, instructors, and businesses, and include in its design ways for the audiences to actively engage with one another. A full portal development program is underway.

In addition to establishing a web presence for the project, the team developed social media to reach wider audiences through Facebook and Twitter under the MekongSkills2Work and Lower Mekong Initiative brand.

# Outputs Achieved Against Targets



## Universities

**375%**

Partner universities  
in training with USAID COMET  
compared to annual target

Annual Target: 4  
Actual Achievement: 15

**412%**

University instructors trained  
compared to annual target

Annual Target: 16  
Actual Achievement: 66



## Vocational Institutions

**100%**

Partner vocational institutions in  
training with USAID COMET  
compared to annual target

Annual Target: 1  
Actual Achievement: 1

**125%**

Vocational instructors trained  
compared to annual target

Annual Target: 4  
Actual Achievement: 5

# Understanding the Landscape

## The Challenge

# 16%

of employers believe schools are equipping students with relevant skills for the job market



## The Opportunity

# 80%

of businesses are currently looking for new hires

The Lower Mekong sub-region is undergoing rapid labor and economic integration and transition. In order to keep pace, industries are placing high demand on technical, work readiness, and foundational skills in STEM+AT fields.

USAID COMET with support from a regional research institute, the Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University, Thailand, conducted a Regional Baseline Labor Market Assessment at the start of Year One to identify and detail priority economic sectors, labor market trends, and occupations that are most relevant for instructors and learners. It also identified specific educational requirements and skill sets – both technical and cross-cutting ‘soft’ skills – that need strengthening for new workforce entrants.

The data from the study then informed the core direction for USAID COMET activities - focusing on the the most targeted economic sectors and critical workforce skills needed in the sub-region.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Employers across sectors felt recent graduates lacked sufficient technical, non-technical, and soft skills (e.g. **computer literacy, English, and teamwork**), keeping them from performing well on the job and requiring an additional three months to two years of additional training.
- More than than 70% of employers stated that job-seekers graduating from technical-vocational and higher education programs lacked sufficient technical skills, **work experience**, and maturity for on-the-job success.
- There was often a **mismatch in what recent graduates learned in school and what was needed on the job**. 57% of employers stated that educational institutions prepare graduates well in some areas but not others, and 26.5% believe educational institutions do not prepare their graduates well for the workforce.
- **Female participation is low** in the manufacturing, chemical, construction, agriculture, and tourism sectors.

Read the full report at  
[MekongSkills2Work.org](https://MekongSkills2Work.org)

### IPSR

IPSR is one of Asia's premier population research and training hubs. The Institute focuses on population and development and explores their relationship to the social, economic, reproductive health, medical and public health fields.

USAID COMET is working with IPSR to strengthen their capacity to plan and implement labor and workforce related research. The project will continue to collaborate with IPSR to implement the annual Labor Assessment updates during the life of the project. The project has introduced IPSR to prospective industry partners, donors and development agencies with similar interests and programs. These efforts support USAID's agenda to promote sustainable development through high-impact partnerships and local solutions.

# USAID COMET MODEL

USAID COMET utilizes three main approaches in its workforce development model:



**Partnerships  
across all sectors**



**Evidence-based  
decisions**



**Leveraging  
technology &  
innovation**

# Industry Partnerships



Leveraging expertise from the demand side of labor market



USAID COMET puts strong emphasis on collaborating with industry partners as a critical part of the solution to workforce development. Thus, our local and international industry partners are crucial constituents to the success of the project. Currently, the project collaborates with globally prominent multinational corporations such as Cisco, Google, HP, Intel, Microsoft, and National Instruments to leverage technology and innovative instruction in classrooms.

The partnerships can be grouped into three categories; supporting demand-driven curriculum; engaging in workplace learning and employment opportunities and sharing products and services including sponsoring USAID COMET events.

In 2015 these multinational partnerships participated in and sponsored five (5) multi-day events in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

To test demand-driven approaches, the project engaged faculty and administrators from Educational Advisory Institutions (EAls), representing all five USAID COMET countries. The EAls participated in industry-sponsored events allowing the institutions to find new ways to include real industry products and services in their training. It also generated mutual appreciation for supply and demand-side needs and interests. This collaborative partnering approach will be further developed during Year Two activities.



# Reaching Instructors & Institutions



Collaborating with universities and TVET institutions to enhance youth employment outcomes

To date, USAID COMET has trained 66 instructors in the STEM+AT field from education and training institutions in the Lower Mekong sub-region on the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook. Through their help to develop the Sourcebook, and receive training on its contents, instructors are now better able to:



Make curricular offerings more relevant to **employers' needs**



Take advantage of **existing high quality online content**



**Integrate tech** to better engage learners & prepare them for work



Give learners a **taste of the work world** before completing their training



Use learner-centered approaches to place learners **in charge of their own learning**



**Elevate the role of instructors** from a deliverer of content to a facilitator of learning

Instructors are in the process of designing and implementing their own instructional innovations using USAID COMET tools and approaches, and customizing them for the specific technical curricula that fit their institutional characteristics. USAID COMET is supporting these instructors to advance their academic interests and goals, and build self-reliance and autonomy to become leading educators in their fields in ways that maximize work readiness and future job success for their students. The USAID COMET model is underway in setting a new standard for job-focused instruction through cutting-edge instructional approaches that transform and modernize post-secondary education and training in the Lower Mekong sub-region.



# Defining What Works

Using evidence-based approaches to implementation

*Instructor from Myanmar researching about electrical circuits in a Technology Innovation workshop led by USAID COMET and Intel Thailand.*



USAID COMET has focused on defining an effective workforce development model for the Lower Mekong context. USAID COMET's approach to identifying the model was **flexible, inclusive, and innovation-oriented**. Rather than deliver prescriptive methods for upgrading instruction, USAID COMET tested a variety of approaches with instructors, jobseekers, and employers to find out what really works.

At the core of its first year, USAID COMET sought to define a contemporary method of teaching, learning, and connecting graduates to jobs that:

1. Responds to the specific **skills needs, employment opportunities, value chains, and potential growth areas of the ASEAN** regional market and the STEM+AT sectors;

2. Utilizes global best practices for learning and teaching methods to **leverage the existing strengths of higher education and vocational training institutions** in the region and make up critical gaps in technical curriculum and instructor capacity;

3. Offers jobseekers opportunities for practical and **work-based learning** to complement theoretical classroom instruction;



**Facilitating idea exchanges and learning.** USAID COMET created venues for faculty from institutions across the sub-region to interact and share experiences with USAID COMET tools and approaches, contributing to a regional body of knowledge.

**Piloting instructional tools and activities.** To put our ideas to work, USAID COMET facilitated hands-on testing of evolving teaching methods with students and instructors in the classroom.

**Testing work-based learning strategies.** USAID COMET undertook work-based learning simulations with students, instructors, and employers to identify the most promising approaches for giving students opportunities to develop real-world workplace skills.

4. Strengthens **connections between and within education and training institutions, students, and industry partners**;

5. Effectively **utilizes technology** to drive teaching, learning, and job-seeking in a scalable model;

6. Offers a **successful sustainable** approach through early cultivation and capacity building of lead education and training institutions.

USAID COMET undertook a variety of initial outreach activities targeting instructors, institutions, and employers to define needs and opportunities for enhancement of instruction to help close skills gaps for graduates entering key market sectors.

**Soliciting feedback from instructors** The project engaged instructors in responding to USAID COMET's content and delivery methods throughout their development.

# DEVELOPING & TESTING

Workforce development initiatives  
Year 1 - USAID COMET

## USAID COMET STARTS

### NEW GENERATION MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY ENGINEERS WORKSHOP

**June 11-12, 2015 | Thailand**

Together with USAID COMET, instructors in the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University tested the project's instructional skills and work-based learning components of the Blended Learning Toolkit. In the 2-day workshop, instructors delivered training in critical work-readiness skills such as leadership, teamwork, and presentations through the use of technology and innovative approaches. <https://flic.kr/s/aHskdodDzj>

### USAID COMET BLENDED LEARNING PILOT: TOT & STUDENT TRAINING

**March 30 - April 1, 2015 | Thailand**

Instructors in the Faculty of Engineering, Mahidol University were in a Training of Trainers (TOT) on learner-centered and industry-aligned classroom approaches from USAID COMET's Blended Learning Toolkit. This workshop introduced an initial suite of teaching and learning materials which formed the basis for further improvements to the curriculum. Students also had the chance to try workplace simulations with Google Chromebooks sponsored by HP! <http://ow.ly/TF3Z5>



### ORIENTATION TO EDUCATION ADVISORY INSTITUTION (EAI) PARTNERSHIP MEETING

**June 22-23, 2015 | Laos**

Instructors from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam collaborated to enhance USAID COMET Blended Learning Toolkit and learned about their roles as EAls and how to engage with each other and USAID COMET to maximize their institutions' capacities. <https://flic.kr/s/aHskeHZ5ht>

### MEKONGSKILLS2WORK TRAINING OF TRAINERS WORKSHOP

**August 3-7, 2015 | Cambodia**

Instructors from EAls engaged in a training to enhance learning in their classes using the *MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook: A Guide for Facilitators* - the most recent supplementary curricula using a set of pedagogical standards that transitioned from a prescriptive training approaches to more flexible, standards-based ones. Instructors are trained to be in the driver's seat with content identification and development in a learner-centered approach. <https://flic.kr/s/aHskhuinav>

### USAID COMET - INTEL TECH INNOVATION WORKSHOP

**September 22-25, 2015 | Thailand**

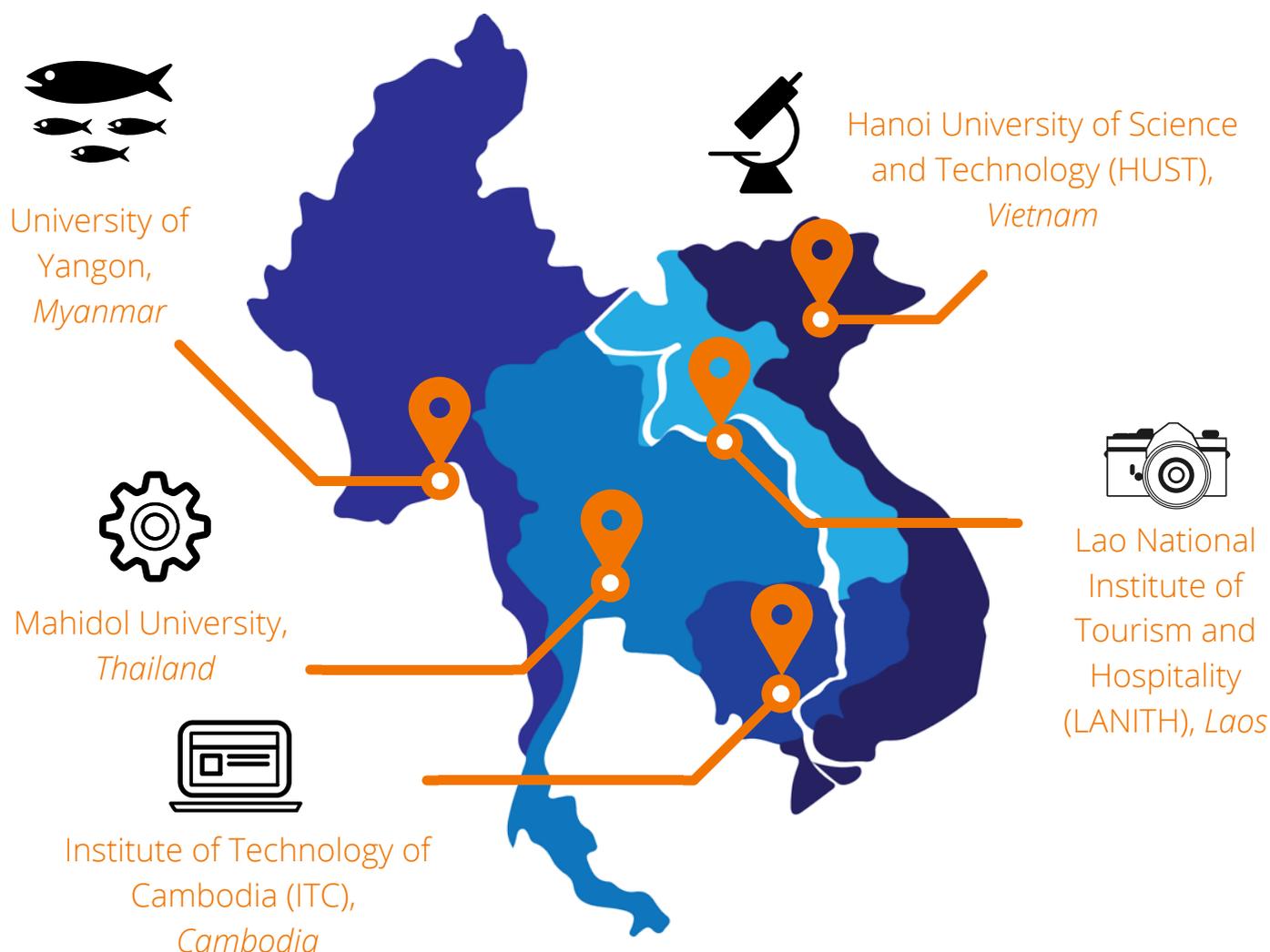
Through a collaboration with Intel Thailand, instructors the Lower Mekong sub-region learned to use Intel's Galileo processing boards to enhance participatory and innovative classroom instruction. Instructors got hands-on experience in project-based learning, and were able to take the boards back to their institutions to start utilizing them right away! <https://flic.kr/s/aHskhHGEfv>

# EAls: Learning from Early Adapters

Testing the model with pioneer universities and TVET institutions



USAID COMET worked with universities and vocational education and training institutions to test out the project's model of innovative education in the Lower Mekong sub-region. These Education Advisory Institutions (EAls) are in the process of implementing the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook in their classrooms and assist in improving both instructor capacity and student learning. These early adapters of the USAID COMET model have provided valuable inputs to guide the refinement of the model and approach for use with Mekong Learning Centers in Year Two.



# MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook

## A Guide for Facilitators



The MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook provides a set of teaching standards and tools designed to help instructors deliver instruction that effectively prepares students for the demands of the labor market. This cutting-edge toolkit is designed to be flexible to any education and training institution or technical sector in the Lower Mekong. The Sourcebook provides high-quality, standards-based tools and strategies that empower instructors to be experts in technical content while maximizing student learning through engaging, high-impact instructional approaches that will be the basis of USAID COMET's engagement with universities and vocational education and training institutions in the following years, both face-to-face and online interactions.

 <p><b>Building industry relationships</b></p>	<p>Provide guidance to institutions for how to build industry relationships through an industry advisory committee</p>	 <p><b>Linking curriculum to industry needs</b></p>	<p>Working with local employers to ensure that the content of training program meets current industry needs</p>	 <p><b>Blended learning</b></p>	<p>How to integrate technology into instruction and evaluating status on the blended learning spectrum</p>
 <p><b>Learner-centered instruction - Part 1: Facilitation Skills</b></p>	<p>Strategies &amp; techniques to help facilitate learner and facilitator discussions</p>	 <p><b>Learner-centered instruction- Part 2: Participatory Learning</b></p>	<p>Strategies and techniques to help design active learning activities that promote deep learning through collaboration</p>	 <p><b>Finding, Evaluating, and Using Online Resources</b></p>	<p>Get started on finding, evaluating, and using the abundant amount of curricular resources that exist online</p>
 <p><b>Workplace simulations</b></p>	<p>Designing and implementing a workplace simulation that is relevant to the target sector or industry</p>	 <p><b>Formative assessment</b></p>	<p>Strategies and techniques to help implement different types of learner-centered assessment strategies</p>	 <p><b>Community of practice</b></p>	<p>Strategies and techniques to help institutions begin to develop their own community of practice.</p>

AS OF OCTOBER 2015,

**208,000+****PEOPLE HAVE LIKED THE LOWER  
MEKONG INITIATIVE FACEBOOK PAGE!****AN AVERAGE OF  
OVER****9,000****SOCIAL MEDIA  
ENGAGEMENTS  
PER MONTH**

# ONLINE ENGAGEMENT



USAID COMET puts a strong emphasis on utilizing online technology to maximize the impact in the Lower Mekong sub-region.

The MekongSkills2Work.org website was launched to establish an online hub for job seeker learning, instructor training, and employer engagement - leveraging interactions between different audiences to match the needs and outputs of education and employment. The website is in the process of transforming into an interactive portal in the upcoming year.

As an innovative platform for professional development and building a community of practice, USAID COMET uses Facebook groups for participating instructors to share best practices and collaborate.

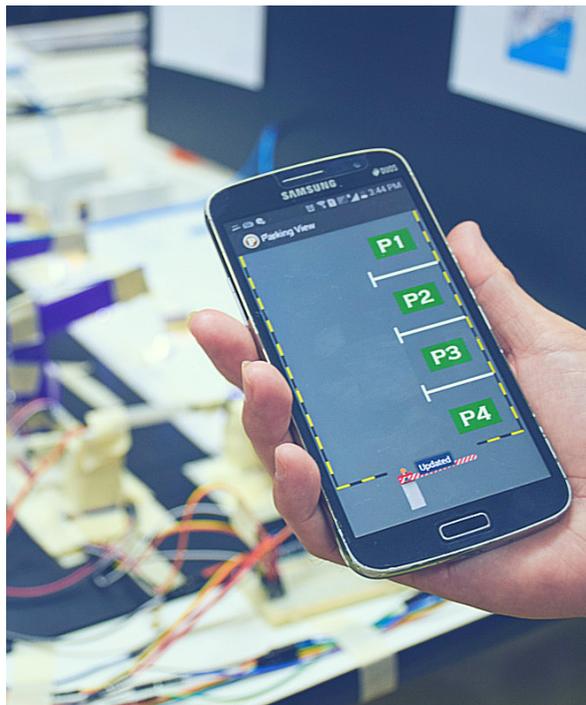
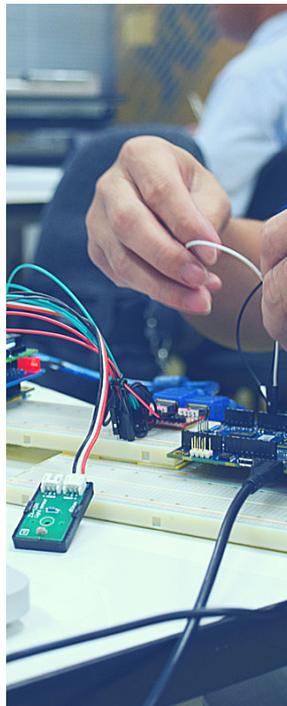
In addition to establishing a web presence, USAID COMET engages stakeholders through social media, namely, Facebook and Twitter.

The project oversees the *Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) Facebook* page and the *@MekongS2Work Twitter* handle, spreading word about education, employment, and technology news targeted at youth in the sub-region. Youth, instructors, and employers are able to connect across borders - sharing employment opportunities, improved classroom practices, and information on skills development in preparation for the workforce.

[twitter.com/  
mekongS2work](https://twitter.com/mekongS2work)[fb.me/  
lowermekong](https://fb.me/lowermekong)

# Enhancing Impacts through Technology

Using innovative approaches to integrate technology-based solutions in classrooms



Access to telecommunications is more than linking people to information. Across the board, businesses surveyed in USAID COMET's Baseline Regional Analysis stated that they expect employees to incorporate information and communications technology (ICT) into everyday workflows. From hotel bookings to handling sophisticated diagnostic computers on industrial assembly lines, ICT is becoming an increasingly integral part of the workplace. USAID COMET continues to identify pathways to expose students to various forms of ICT, through training, integration of new technologies as classroom learning tools, and online-based activities.

# Lessons Learned

Growing and improving for next year

## **Transitioning from Prescriptive Lesson Plans to a Standards-based and Toolkit Approach**

USAID COMET initially tested a prescribed lesson plan focused on core teaching competencies and approaches in Year One. Through the process of developing and piloting the Blended Learning Toolkit with the faculty of Mahidol University, USAID COMET was able to show that pre-defined, prescriptive lesson plans were challenging for instructors to integrate into their existing course structures. The team learned that a successful training approach would need to focus more on teaching methods rather than instructional content. As a result, USAID COMET moved away from developing prescriptive curricula to establishing a set of pedagogical standards with toolkits and guides allowing instructors to implement the standards in a variety of institutional and technical contexts. Through formative evaluation during the rollout of the revised MS2W Sourcebook with participating instructors, the project determined that this approach was more useful and appropriate to existing teaching practices. The decision to use first year activities to pilot and evaluate project systems may prove to be one of the project's most significant management decisions.

## **Private Sector Engagement and Work-Based Learning**

USAID COMET engaged industry partners to develop approaches for work-based learning (WBL) opportunities for students. In particular, USAID COMET partnered with Thailand's Dutch Mill Dairy Company to implement a WBL simulation focused on problem-solving a challenge in inventory management and customer service. It became clear that industries require consistent engagement to cultivate fruitful partnerships. The project also gained valuable insight from the Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC) and the Lao National Institute of Tourism and Hospitality (LANITH) on how to establish and maintain effective linkages with industry. These lessons have yielded improvements to the MS2W Sourcebook content on creating WBL opportunities. The project is working to develop a consistent, effective approach for engaging employers in designing and launching work-based learning activities.

## **Cultivating Partnerships with Education and Training Institutions**

While USAID COMET has obtained strong support from participating instructors at partner education and training institutions, the project recognizes that additional advocacy and partnership building are necessary to fully institutionalize and scale up improvements in teaching methodologies. The project's Institutional Specialist, brought on at the end of Year One, will focus on deepening partnerships with participating institutions, facilitating broader adoption of the MS2W Sourcebook, strengthening collaboration within and across teaching departments, promoting information sharing via social media and the MS2W portal, and supporting increased outreach to private sector partners and ASEAN value chains.

## **Integrating Technology**

The project had several key lessons learned on the road to effectively integrating technology into the USAID COMET approach. Stronger facilitation is required to increase instructors' use of Google Apps through HP's Chromebooks to develop and deliver instructional content, and training is required to ensure effective employ of technology products such as Chromebooks and Intel Galileo Boards. The project also underwent a process of trial-and-error regarding import of technology products into Thailand, but has established systems for addressing related issues.



# Future Forward

## Year Two Outlook

### **Roll Out the USAID COMET Grants Program**

USAID COMET will begin a grants program to establish an expanded cohort of Mekong Learning Centers. This competitive grants process will offer training and support for adoption of the MekongSkills2Work Sourcebook at a total of 15 education and training institutions within the Lower Mekong sub-region. Grants in Year Two will provide an estimated \$400,000 in financial support to educational institutions in STEM+AT target sectors, establishing them as leaders in delivery of market-relevant, learner-centered instruction. Facilitators from these Centers will eventually become Master Trainers in use of MekongSkills2Work tools and approaches, and lead instructors at other institutions in the process.

### **Deepen Buy-In among Partner Institutions**

USAID COMET has recognized the need to deepen buy-in among institutions in order to create broader leadership and organizational change to ensure sustainability and scale of instructional innovations. USAID COMET will work to strengthen educational partners' levels of effort to institutionalize the USAID COMET methodology and encourage institutions to reach beyond their traditional borders of academic groupings of faculty or departments and cross over further into multiple skills areas.

### **Strengthen ASEAN Regional Linkages**

USAID COMET will also work to link partners to institutions in the larger ASEAN region and supporting regional initiatives such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), encouraging exchanges among staff and students (ASEAN labor-sharing agenda) or providing internships outside the immediate locality of the institution; filling gaps in value chain via labor or inputs from other countries.

## **Expand Mobile Technology Platforms**

USAID COMET also identified a need to expand mobile technology platforms. Mobile technology has the capacity to be highly effective for the variation in learning modes among different institutions and learners. USAID COMET is currently awaiting results of a pilot study around use of mobile technology, to offer deeper insight into opportunities for using mobile technology to advance learning especially in countries where Internet connectivity is problematic. Specifically, study results will impact the project's understanding of how students are using mobile technology to learn and search for jobs, and offer pathways for institutions to capitalize on existing access and use patterns and teach around them. USAID COMET is working with LANITH to deliver skills development modules via mobile-accessible videos that teach practical hospitality skills. Google is providing its Edu Accelerator Box, a small device that enables schools to store, manage, and access digital content even in low bandwidth environments, to enhance the connectivity for the pilot with LANITH.

## **Address the Women in Technology Development Challenge**

The project plans to engage young women students and instructors from the Lower Mekong to provide a series of professional career building activities, technical skills building, networking, mentoring and career discussions. Additionally, a career-fair will be organized to allow the junior participants to learn more about job opportunities and to practice their communication and networking skills with local technical employees. USAID COMET will be collaborating with Wedu (<http://www.weduglobal.org/>), a social enterprise focusing on women's education and leadership. Young women students and instructors will be able to practice networking and communication skills with technical employees in their field.

