Introduction

The 4th RSTWG meeting was co-hosted by the TESDA, the Philippines and ILO. The meeting brought together national skills and SLOM focal points of ASEAN Member States, officials of the ASEAN Secretariat, members of the AQRF Committees, ATUC, ACE, and ILO to discuss a way forward for taking the work on Mutual Recognition of Skills (MRS) to a next stage with pilot implementation. Since 2014, the RSTWG meetings have been a forum for regional dialogue and mutual learning for AMS to progress on MRS, assisting national efforts for strengthening the skills and certification systems to preparing themselves for MRS implementation. The MRS initiative with a focus on low-to-middle skilled workers responds to the AEC’s vision of achieving free flow of skilled workers, and complements with the MRA that has a focus on high skilled profession.

The main focus of the 4th RSTWG Meeting was to explore a possibility of moving the MRS work from the preparatory to the implementation stage. By building on sharing of experiences and knowledge on: (i) recent development of AEC in relation to challenges and opportunities related to human resource development; (ii) the latest development of MRS and AQRF-referencing activities; and (iii) national level progress in strengthening the legal framework, institutional capacity and arrangements for MRS, the meeting has provided AMS representatives to discuss and comment on the draft roadmap for the implementation of the MRS and consider if they would support and be interested in participating in the pilot implementation.

Session 1: Evolving Context of the MRS

To effectively implement the MRS, information on the evolving context of the MRS implementation, including recent development and perspectives of AEC and related initiatives in ASEAN, notably the AQRF were shared. The perspectives from the AEC re-highlighted that ASEAN is a diverse region with different qualifications, skills standards, legislations and institutional structures. This very diversity is what make the initiatives like MRA and MRS more meaningful in addressing the gaps. Updates from the ASEAN Secretariat and AQRF Committee indicated the progress of AQRF referencing and adoption of several SLOM-pilot initiatives as well as progress on AQRF-TVET project. Tools, such as the AQRF, are developed to promote transparency and enhance zone of trusts. It was underscored that the AQRF referencing and MRS are mutually reinforcing. The TVET sector could participate actively in the national referencing efforts as the AQRF uses learning outcomes as the metrics of the referencing alignment. The speed of the NQF development and AQRF referencing process vary among the AMS, however. ILO has re-highlighted that MRS provides a short-term option for mutual recognition on the basis of specific occupational qualifications and certifications responding to specific labour market needs.

Sessions 2: National Level Initiatives and Actions Towards MRS Implementation

The national presentations covered the progress on the respective action plans drafted at the 3rd RSTWG Meeting (Yogyakarta, Indonesia where the focus was on AQRF-TVET discussion and referencing process); updates on the laws, mandate, regulations and major programmes related to skills training and certification; information on current referencing and benchmarking initiatives, especially on the MRS and AQRF; and information on the existing or planned bilateral and/or multi-lateral ‘government-to-government’ or ‘business-to-business’ mutual recognition of skills arrangement. All AMS in attendance presented the status of the qualifications framework and current efforts related to the MRS. All AMS have forwarded their
own initiatives for the recognition and competitiveness compared to that reported at the 3rd RSTWG Meeting.

ATUC and ACE provided comments and proposed areas requiring attention such as gender issues, decent work and productivity; recognition of prior learning for existing workers; learning from previous work experience; legal framework which needs to address sustainability for quality training; involvement of trade unions in the consultations; implications of standards in the workplace, and so forth. Importantly, there remains room for coordination and consultations and more active private sector’s involvement on skills and curriculum development.

Session 3: Introducing the Roadmap to the MRS Implementation

The experiences of MRS implementation of South Korea and New Zealand were shared. The former shared the MRS arrangements on ICT skilled workers with Japan whilst the latter with Australia. The two MRS arrangements were neighborhood agreements that address immediate filling up of labour needs from a country that is geographically and culturally related and whose education and training systems were known to each other.

The Roadmap for MRS Implementation in ASEAN was proposed. The roadmap recommends the sending AMS to collaborate with the receiving AMS, working through the 7 steps which are:

1. Identifying areas of skills for the mutual recognition
2. Benchmarking skills/competency standards
3. Defining and benchmarking the qualification
4. Assessing the assessment and certification arrangements
5. Assessing quality assurance of training assessment and certification arrangements
6. Drafting the migrant skilled work profile
7. Assembling and submission of the portfolio of evidence and/or level to level referencing of the selected qualifications between the NQF, NQRF (and NQF of receiving country).

The proposal was made to identify at least 2 corridors of countries for pilot implementation with specific occupational skills areas to guide all AMS and to demonstrate to the SLOM a pathway for promoting MRS and to the free flow of skilled labour.

Session 4: Advancing TVET in ASEAN and other Key Initiatives Linked with MRS Implementation

In support to the objectives of the ASEAN labour and education sectoral bodies, the ASEAN TVET Development Council focuses on the development of a progressive, comprehensive, and integrated regional work plan, as well as comparable qualifications systems, strategies, and policies. The proposed TVET Development Council is aligned with and supports the AQRF and MRS, and the implementation of the ASEAN Guiding Principles for Quality Assurance and Recognition of Competency Certifications Systems. Likewise, it will also support initiatives on developing the National Qualifications Frameworks of the ASEAN Member States and the AQRF for TVET levels. Further, the Council aims to provide a forum for exchange of views and best practices on skills development; and to support promising initiatives to raise the quality of skills and competencies. The other presentations under this session identified that “upskilling” is a key progressive factor in improving socio-economic outcomes for migrant workers.

ILO-IOM study identifies up-skilling as a key progressive factor in improving socio-economic outcomes for migrant workers (2017). In addition to MRS that supports the recognition of skills of migrant workers moving to a destination country, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that recognizes the skills that migrant workers would have acquired during the work overseas can help reintegrate returning migrants and maximize socio-economic benefits of labour migration in ASEAN.
South Asian countries look to ASEAN as a model and are looking into developing a system that enables comparison and recognition of qualifications across countries. The way forward for South Asia is to conduct feasibility in developing a Regional Recognition Framework and implement the Global Skills Partnership Model.

Session 5: Formulation of Corridors for Piloting the MRS Implementation

The following three pilot implementations are identified and agreed.

1. Thailand with Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar with masonry/bricklaying as the primary and cross cutting skills area of choice for the mutual recognition process, and in building electrical wiring, plastering and sewing machine operation, respectively, as the secondary skills area of choice.
2. Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines with transport and logistics skills development as the skills area for the mutual recognition process.
3. Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and the ASEAN Secretariat to work on the integration of the mutual recognition of skills processes with the “ASEAN Guiding Principles for Quality Assurance and Recognition of Competency Certification Systems”.

Conclusion

Building on the efforts in preparing for MRS in the past years, the MRS has come to a critical juncture. AMS has made significantly progress at the ASEAN level after efforts in several years to link the MRS with AQRF as well as other initiatives from the theory to the planning and now move to actual implementation of the MRS. Significant emphasis was placed on the roadmap at the 4th RSTWG meeting. The benefits of the MRS implementation outweighs the costs including the challenges. Based on the bilateral and trilateral discussions, the pilot implementations of the MRS, as guided by the roadmap, are agreed and will be initiated. The overall objectives of the 4th RSTWG Meeting were met. It is noted that the first hurdle towards the realization of the MRS is to strengthen the national training and education system, including the quality assurance of the TVET system. The integration of the MRS initiatives in the efforts of the ASEAN TVET Development Council have been noted and supported.

The draft roadmap and accompanying guidance note will be circulated for further comments.

The meeting thanked Vietnam for volunteering to co-host the 5th RSTWG Meeting in 2019.