

# Cross-border talent movement can greatly benefit Asean

**I** RECENTLY attended the Asean Talent Development and Future Technologies Toward 2045 Forum in Langkawi.

The gathering, part of the Asean Ministers of Education and Higher Education Roundtables, brought together ministers, scholars and industry leaders from across Southeast Asia.

It focused on one of the most pressing questions facing the region today, which is how to move talent forward in a way that benefits all.

This focus embodies the values at the heart of Asean's founding vision. Its ideals include cooperation, mutual respect, shared development and a commitment to a people-centred community.

Asean celebrates diversity while working towards a common regional identity. These principles are vital as the region confronts new challenges. One of them is ensuring that skilled people can move more freely and contribute across borders.

The forum offered forward-



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looking ideas alongside honest self-examination. It raised hard questions about systems that no longer deliver and acknowledged the need for change.

It was encouraging to see a ministerial platform that celebrated progress while remaining open to scrutiny.

The forum also explored how Asean countries were developing talent pipelines and responding to demand in fast-growing sectors such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

There was recognition of the need to bring greater consistency to how skills are defined and recognised across the region.

These conversations showed a

shared intention to move forward together and a recognition of the gaps between policy and implementation.

Malaysia continues to face shortages of high-skilled engineers, even with the development of new technology parks and a steady supply of graduates in the field.

At the same time, most Asean countries are producing many graduates.

The question is not whether Asean has talent. It does. The challenge is ensuring that talent can move across the region in meaningful and practical ways.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abdul Kadir addressed this directly in his keynote address. He reminded the audience that talent was not just about numbers or investment.

He said when young minds were forced to seek fulfilment elsewhere, it signalled that the systems were not working as they should.

He called attention to the many

young people whose abilities remained overlooked and spoke of the need for systems that recognised potential and created real opportunities.

Malaysia has launched Global-ASEAN.org, a regional platform to support learning, upskilling and collaboration. For efforts like this to have lasting impact, they must be supported by policies that make it easier for talent to move across the region.

This includes closer cooperation among countries, clearer processes for recognising qualifications and removing barriers.

It is also important to think about how regional mobility can support national development. Many governments have made significant investments in building up talent in their countries.

Making it easier for skilled people to move should not lead to one-way flows that benefit some countries more than others.

A two-way exchange is more sustainable. This means creating systems where people have the freedom to move but also strong

reasons to contribute at home, either by staying or by returning.

Several proposals were made at the forum to turn this vision into practical outcomes.

These included initiatives to streamline qualification recognition, support short-term employment across borders, strengthen partnerships between universities and industries, and improve the flow of information about talent supply and demand.

Participants also discussed the possibility of creating more flexible visa systems to help professionals respond to emerging opportunities.

These ideas show what can happen when countries move together with intention. They point to a future where a shared regional identity is supported by real pathways for collaboration and mutual growth.

Asean has the talent and now is the time to move forward.

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