

DFAT Management Response

Mid-Term Review of the ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standards (DTS) Initiative

DFAT commissioned a Mid-Term Review (MTR) of ASEAN-Australia Digital Trade Standards (DTS) Initiative from March to August 2022. The review was conducted remotely by Equity Economics, with online consultations and observations. The overall purpose of the MTR was to inform program improvement, assess effectiveness and efficiency of the program, including whether it has successfully pivoted to address the impacts of COVID-19 and inform decisions about future funding of the program.

The MTR assesses and provides recommendations regarding the Initiative's performance towards achieving outputs and outcomes under Year 2 and 3 (2020-2021) implementing activities including but not limited to the quality criteria of the Australian Aid Program and context specific issues.

The Initiative is assessed as being likely to achieve most of its End of Program Outcomes (EOPOs) by the end of the current program. The Initiative's strength is its capacity to build knowledge and awareness on DTS.

The review found that the DTS Initiative is relevant to Australia's priorities, valued by ASEAN Member States (AMS) and National Standards Bodies (NSBs), and well-integrated into ASEAN systems. The Initiative has effectively increased AMS knowledge of key international DTS and has contributed to the development of the Digital Trade Standards Conformance Working Group (DTSCWG). In turn, this has resulted in greater emphasis being placed on DTS adoption, and increased participation of AMS in international standards fora in recent years—which can also be partially attributable to the Initiative. The MTR found that the Initiative is managing its resources efficiently, however, there is more work to be done on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) implementation, and continued advocacy on gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) to the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) and AMS. Lastly, the DTS Initiative has proven highly adaptive and relevant in response to COVID-19.

Summary of DFAT Management Response

DFAT welcomes the findings of the review, which were on balance, positive and endorsing current approaches. DFAT agrees with recommendations aimed at further improving the program and partially agree to utilize them to inform possible future programming. The management response outlines planned actions by DFAT and partners in response to the MTR recommendations.

Key Recommendations	Response	Explanation	Action Plan	Timeframe
Recommendation 1: That a further phase of the Initiative be supported.	Partially Agree	DFAT notes the recommendation and will make a decision over the course of the coming 12 months. Close consideration would be required on the areas for improvement and recommendations to ensure the next iteration incorporated past lessons learned. Consideration will also be given to whether project objectives going forward could be delivered through a larger existing modality such as Aus4ASEAN Futures Initiative.	Consideration for a next phase will formally begin in 2023, in consultation with ASEAN.	From 2023
Recommendation 2: Establish a Steering Committee to improve Initiative	Agree	Stronger governance of the Initiative would also help maintain Australia's status as a committed, trusted and engaged partner on ASEAN trade and economic issues.	DFAT will establish a steering committee (Chair of DTSCWG,	By January 2023

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governance and strategic input.		It will be important for the Initiative to be recognised as an ASEAN program, aligned with ASEC's criteria, process, and governance systems.	Australian Mission to ASEAN, ASEC, DFAT Canberra) to help maintain Australia's status as a committed, trusted and engaged partner on ASEAN trade and economic issues. The Mission will update DFAT Canberra as needed.	
Recommendation 3: Communications for a non-technical audience requires more focus and potentially, more resources.	Agree	Better communication of project outcomes will help improve program visibility and recognition. The creation of tangible narratives will promote the Initiative's value both externally to ASEAN Member States and the ASEAN Secretariat and other interested parties through HOM and other senior leader communications and inwardly to other Australian programs and posts.	A program website will be developed and act as an accessible repository. DFAT will work with RMIT to strengthen the communications plan/strategy. This plan will make explicit the relevance of DTS support to non-technical audiences. This task is in collaboration with a M&E specialist engaged by DFAT.	Dec 2022-Feb 2023
Recommendation 4: Further work is required by RMIT in concert with DFAT and other partners to ensure the MELP provides adequate value to the Initiative.	Agree	More effective MEL capacity will ensure the program's overall impact is being monitored and documented adequately. It will enable clearer insights into what are the good practices and lessons emerging from the implementation.	DFAT will engage a M&E specialist to assist RMIT. Improvements could be made to ensure data is comparable across activities and year on year and the information collected promotes learning and	Dec 2022-Feb 2023

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			improvement more effectively.	
<p>Recommendation 5:</p> <p>Care needs to be taken in navigating the inclusion of GEDSI in a manner appropriate for this program.</p>	Agree	<p>Early, frequent and both formal and informal engagement with ASEAN on GEDSI can be helpful. DFAT's greater involvement in the Initiative (as per recommendation #2), will help provide the routine contact to enable these conversations. It will also help clarify how GEDSI can appropriately and proportionally be applied to the program with implementing partners.</p>	<p>DFAT will work closely with ASEC (formal and informal engagement), Chair of DTSCWG and implementing partners to ensure the appropriate incorporation of GEDSI principles through the Initiative.</p>	Ongoing
<p>Recommendation 6:</p> <p>A return to Australian Government representation at key meetings to demonstrate support and leadership is recommended now that COVID-19 restrictions have eased.</p>	Agree	<p>Travel and movement restrictions inhibited Australian Government attendance at key meetings. A return to in-person attendance will demonstrate Australia's support and leadership in the DTS space. It will also provide the opportunity to better understand the needs of specific AMS.</p> <p>COVID-19 travel restrictions also impacted the delivery of in-person workshops. Although it presented some benefits catering to a wider audience, it also presented challenges for established relationships. A return to in-person training at workshops is important to strengthen relationships and networks.</p>	<p>Subject to DFAT, ASEC and AMS protocols and settings, DFAT will resume in-person meetings.</p>	Ongoing