

Student Mobility in Lao PDR

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I. Introduction

Lao People's Democratic Republic is a land linked country in South East Asia. The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy is central to the National development agenda and encapsulates the essence of the Lao PDR's approach towards achieving the goal set in 1996 by the 6th Party Congress, namely, exiting the group of least developed countries by 2020.

The 7th Party Congress in March 2001 defined the following guidelines for poverty eradication and sustainable economic development :

- The Socio-economic development of the country must be balanced between economic growth, socio-cultural development and environmental preservation. These are the three pillars of the Lao PDR's development policy.
- Socio-economic development must be harmoniously distributed between sector and regional development, and between urban and rural development so as to fully and efficiently utilize human and natural resources.
- Socio-economic development must be based on sound macro-economic management and institutional strengthening in order to enhance national solidarity and cohesiveness and to promote democracy within society.
- The national development potential and strengths must be combined with regional and global opportunities in order to enable the Lao PDR to participate in regional and international integration.
- Socio-economic development must be closely linked with national security and stability.

To attain these objectives, the Government of the Lao PDR has outlined the following strategic priorities:

- Maintain an appropriate level of economic growth for the medium and long-term period in response to demographic trends.
- Enhance human resource development through education particularly basic education including higher education, including formal and informal sector.
- Develop and modernize social and economic infrastructure in order to facilitate economic development in each region of the country and to accelerate the Lao PDR's regional and international economic integration.

- Facilitate access to electricity for people in all areas and regions of the country in order to foster integrated economic development.
- Promote industries utilizing domestic natural resources, and actively promote small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and handicraft production
- Develop and promote all economic sectors, particularly the private sector, including foreign direct investment (FDI) in order to expand business opportunities, placing emphasis on export-oriented sectors that have a comparative advantage.
- Enhance market linkages and trade facilitation.
- Strengthen existing legal and regulatory frameworks.
- Create favorable conditions and mechanisms for improving financial institutions and further capital market development.
- Promote economic co-operation with all partners and countries.

II. Situation of Higher Education

The Education Strategic Vision by 2010 and 2020 , issued by the Ministry of Education in 2000, links education to the broader socio-economic development, as well as to the immediate local situation. It recognizes the need for lifelong education opportunities to ensure that all persons can continue to upgrade their level of education as circumstances change during their lifetimes. The vision document aims incorporate international trend and standards into the Lao education system and to develop all education level systematically and continuously, including strengthening the role of private sector in the provision of education.

In general, the Strategic vision document emphasizes education as a core component in overall human resources development or the development of the Lao PDR. The Sixth Five Year Development Plan , like its predecessor identifies three pillars of education in Lao PDR: (i) improving the equitable access, (ii) improving quality and relevance , and (iii) improving administration and management .

Education is considered as the main focus for human resource development. Reform of the national system is urgently required for the improvement of educational quality standards. The national education system reform strategy was approved by the Government in 2007. The aims of a reformed national education system will be to educate the Lao people to be good citizens, to be knowledgeable, to be creative and enthusiastic and to contribute to the development of both the country and themselves. Through education people will gain employment, will learn to protect their health and the integrity necessary to meet the demands of the socio-economic development of the country and its growing movement towards globalization.

The national education reform strategy consists of six directives as following:

1. The national education system reform strategy aims to develop human resources that are applicable to the strategic development of the country's economic components as well as the need to link the country with international goals.
2. Education reform should emphasize the national education structure. If change is to become a reality, then the attitudes and perceptions in society about the educational structural reforms need to be widely understood.
3. The national education system reform strategy should be implemented with the participation of society to ensure that education will continue to grow and develop.
4. The national education system reform strategy should expand the intellectual life, preserve the traditions and culture of the nation and inspire a spirit of solidarity amongst the population throughout the country.
5. The national education system reform strategy should expand access to education, promote the capabilities of people, improve their living conditions and compete and link with regional and international situations.
6. The national education system should enhance the status of teachers and uphold the importance of their roles and positions.

The development of the education, training and qualification system in terms of quality, efficiency, access and equity is to be done in a relatively difficult context. High demographic growth, ethnic cultural and linguistic diversity: scattered habitat, economic and financial constraints and low institutional capacity constitute a big challenge to the country.

To achieve the Government's goal of graduating from Least Developed Countries status by 2020 and to prepare for the country's regional and international integration, the Government initiated higher education reforms covering both public and private higher education institutions with the prime Ministerial Decree on the Establishment of NUOL in 1995, and subsequent decrees on private Higher Education in 1995, and Higher Education Curriculum profile in 2001. The decree establishing NUOL began to address the issue of a fragmented higher education system by amalgamating 10 HEIs under a unified structure of NUOL . Within the framework two regional universities were later established to broaden access to higher education: Champasak university in Pakse in the southern Lao PDR in 2002 and Souphanouvong University in Luangprabang in northern Lao PDR in 2003. Meanwhile , the Decree on Private Education defined a legal framework for the establishment and operation of private HEIs, and triggered the growth of private HEIs. In 2007, the Prime Minister's Decree on the Adoption and Implementation of the National Education System Reform Strategy 2006-2015 was issued. The Decree called for strengthened HEIs to move the higher education system towards regional and international standards and contribute to socio-economic development of the country. In 2009 the new decrees on the National Universities and respectively Champasak University and Souphanouvong University were promulgated to

promote the autonomous administrative authority. Due to the needs of the province, one new University was established in 2009 in Savannakhet province.

The immediate education policy is to develop quality human resources to meet the needs of the socio-economic development of the nation. The principal policy is to strengthen the education system as the cornerstone of a human resources to meet the needs of the socio-economic development of the nation.

Higher Education is an important integral part of the education system and contribute to the socio-economic development plan and to orientate to the industrialization and modernization of the country.

The main directives of higher education is as following :

- to train students for all economic sectors
- improve efficiency and quality of management and teaching activity of higher education
- develop higher education in pyramid shape
- improve access to higher education
- linking higher education to the production and research
- promote and establish the cost sharing, cost recovery and income generating.

At present , higher education in Lao PDR comprises the following institutions: 3 universities (National University of Laos), University of Champasak and University of Souphanouvong administered by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health administered University of Health Sciences, 5 teacher training colleges and 86 private higher education institutions. In 2009 new University was established in Savannakhet. In 2008, about 5.3 % of the tertiary education age cohort was enrolled at the mentioned higher education institutions. Though there is an increase in enrollment in higher education the quality of higher education in Lao PDR is a preliminary concern. The concept of quality embraces many factors such as the governance/management, teachers, students, teaching and learning programs, research, financial resources, instructional materials and equipment including the optimizing use of the information and communication technologies and institutional environment...

To facilitate the smooth functioning of quality assurance activities the university needs to develop and formalize a quality assurance system.

In the connection with the reorganization of the Ministry of Education , the Quality Assurance Center was set up in 2008 with the mandate to develop the standards of the institutions at all education level, the accreditation and the quality audit system..

In order to ensure the quality of higher education, the Ministry of Education had undertaken the following measures which leads to the education status and credentials at variance with generally acceptable norms for education levels:

- a. Improving the admission system to the higher education by setting the system of entrance examination through the non-quota system. The quota and non-quota students will be judged using the three decision criteria : (i) equity, (ii) merit, based on school-based academic performance and (iii) financial need.

Quota students : Assignment by the Ministry of Education through the authority of the provinces, the local provincial educational service, also called the entrance by quota. The students are selected by scrutinized of their transcripts of the studies at secondary school and the results of the leaving examination.

Non-quota students: selection by entrance examination. The student who are assigned by the above procedure can apply to the National Entrance Examination, which is organized at Vientiane Capital and all provincial examination centers at the same date and same time.

Besides the quota and non-quota system there is also special course or called fee paying system organized in the public universities with the aims to promote the entrance to the public higher education institutions and to generate income for the institutions.

It is to be noted that the private schools and colleges organized themselves the entrance examination with respect the regulations of the Ministry of Education.

- b. Great efforts in formulating legislation and framework have been to ensure the standards and objectives of the higher education system. There is a potential of proliferation of courses, program which stated in the promulgated Decree on the profile of curriculum of July 2001 to meet the requirements of quality of higher education. It is to be noted that the curriculum have to keep up date with the needs of labour market.
- c. Employer studies and career guidance counseling should be introduced to improve the relevance of the programs and meet the requirement of employers, the community and the labour market.

The Ministry of Education has the right to recognize the academic degrees or award certificates granted by an institution of higher education or external agency (state/professional body, etc..) According the education law, the universities has the right to confer the academic degrees and award certificates as accredited or approved by the Ministry of Education.

The University has the right to confer academic degrees and award certificates as follows :

1. Doctoral Degree
2. Master Degree
3. Post-Graduate diploma
4. Graduate Diploma
5. Graduate Certificate
6. Bachelor Degree
7. Higher Diploma.

The Ministry of Education has broad oversight of all educational development in Lao PDR, and the Department of Higher Education provides overall policy guidance to public universities, undertakes planning and coordination with other government ministries and agencies for developing higher education system, and cooperates with development partners in support of higher education .

Educational development in Lao PDR has not yet been implemented on a national strategy which is linked to a strategy development and economic structure.

The short term and long term educational development plan is targeted mainly on the quality of education, create favorable condition for a practical change in education at all levels from the kindergarten to university and has to be done in a systematically in order to guarantee the quality and sustainability at all levels of both public and private education.

Although there is a qualitative and quantitative development in higher education some problems and issues need to be addressed as following:

1. Administration and management
 - There is a lack of overall planning and management and monitoring within the higher education system.
 - There is a lack of coordination mechanism between the agencies concerned with higher education. In addition the higher education sector does not currently have a standardized system for the coordinated collection, dissemination and utilization of up-to date data and information to support policy development, planning, administration and management of higher education.
 - Lack of legislation framework to govern public and private higher education.
 - Lacks of strategy and master plan for development of higher education.
 - The investment in higher education is not sufficient due to budget constraints .The allocated budget from Government is not referring to the unit costs. The percentage of recurrent expenditure is almost 90 % of the total higher education budget, while the

capital investment is 10 %. Despite the extremely high proportion of budgetary funds allocated for salaries and student stipends, it is still insufficient to provide adequate salaries and other financial incentives to teaching staff in universities.

- Lacks of management information system and the number of students is not systematically recorded.

2. Quality and Relevance

- The quality of higher education is low due to under-qualified academic staff. Few faculty members have post-graduate degrees.
- There is phenomenon of lacks and over supply of teachers .
- There are no labour surveys or labour market projections.
- Lack of monitoring system and follow-up of graduates.
- Lack of tools to monitor the continuing programmes and bridging courses.
- Teaching and learning environment vary cross each campus or higher education institutions.
- Quality assurance and accreditation systems arte about to emerge and are not yet functioning due to the lack of expertise . The Quality Assurance Center is relatively new and its capacity needs to be greatly strengthened.
- The academic research capacity of faculty members is quite limited.
- International partnerships can be seen though the bilateral cooperation agreement but the implementation is not practical .

3. Equitable Access

- Socio-economic disparities in access still persist , resulting in low representation of women and ethnic students from low income families. The infrastructure is not sufficient to undertaken the number of students leavers of upper secondary education which have been increased from year to year.

III. Student Mobility

The types of higher education institution and programmes imported and exported out of the country public or private have to be accredited by the Ministry of Education with respect to the profile of the curriculum of higher education programme at the level of Higher Diploma, Bachelor Degree and at the Master Degree promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2001.

To promote the students mobility there was a decree on the continuing programme at the level of higher diploma promulgated in July 2006 by the Minister of Education .

The universities made also consensus on the promotion of the credit transfer and the student mobility between the three universities National University of Laos, Champasak University and Souphanouvong.

Students mobility have been promoted through the competencies of offering of some continuing programme or bridging course and can change the university through the credit transfer. At present many higher education institutions public and private have delivered the continuing programmes and bridging courses which is a short-cut of the learning programmes and endangers the quality of the teaching and learning since there is a lack of systematically monitoring and the quality audit in the higher education institutions.

The credit unit illustrated the study of each subject . In the theoretical subject by using one hour in a week and not less than 16 hours in one semester is equivalent to one credit.

In the practical subject by using 2-3 hours in a week and 32-48 hours in a semester is equivalent to one credit.

In the field work by using 3 hours in a week during one semester more than 48 hours is equivalent to one credit.

The number of credits is depending on the study subject which ranging from from 90 to 120 credits at the Higher Diploma , 150 to 265 credits at the Bachelor Degree , 36-54 credits at the Master Degree and 45 to 60 credits at the Doctoral Degree . It is to be noted that the curriculum will be reformed by the year 2011-12 in the connection with the on-going national education system reform

In terms of staff and students exchange there were and are academic and students exchange based on the bilateral, multilateral and projects cooperation.

In 2008-09 there are 556 foreign students at the National University of Laos coming from 12 countries of which 176 are students through the exchange programme.

Language barriers and the acceptance of the common use of credit transfer are the issues that need to be addressed.

IV. International Cooperation

Lao PDR places much importance on international cooperation through bilateral and multilateral cooperation and could benefit from these cooperation based on national , regional and international needs. The establishments strong relationships with higher education institutions in the SEAMEO countries has been promoted in order to exchange experiences and facilitating staff and student exchange, provide opportunities for teachers training and develop joint research and development programs. The Ministry of Education has signed the cooperation agreement with many countries which includes also staff and exchange students.

With reference to the bilateral cooperation agreement, number of scholarships have been provided for Lao students who have been or will be automatically recruited to the institutions of the receiving countries. The validation process has been recognized by the sending country after the completion of the study of the students. The recognition and validation of higher diplomas and degrees have been evaluated by the Ministry of Education referring to the consensus of the committee for validation of the diplomas, degree and certificates.

The Government of Lao PDR has signed the regional convention on recognition of qualifications in 1983 and ratified in 2003. The practices on the recognition of qualifications in higher education is needed for public and private higher education institutions because of the complexity of different education systems and the particularity and the specific of the country.

The National University of Laos, University of Champasak and University of Souphanouvong are cooperating with many foreign universities in training and students and staff exchanges, joint research and postgraduate program. The NUOL is member of ASEAN University Network (AUN) and involved in the committee for quality assurance, and also member of Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Greater Mekong Sub-region for Academic & Research Network (GMSARN) and the ASEAN Universities Network Society for Engineering Education Development Network (AUN-SEED-NET)

The Universities of Lao PDR has established more than 140 universities around the world in the areas of training, students and staff exchange, joint research and joint programmes.

Lao PDR will be launching a strengthening higher education project supported by ADB in January 2010 with the aims to strengthen management, financing and governance of higher education system; (ii) enhance relevance and capacity for quality improvement; (iii) increased equity and access in higher education and (iv) effective project management and implementation.

In this connection the project will support the enhancement of relevance of courses, curriculum and teaching materials; strengthened quality assurance, accreditation and credit system; (iii) enhanced teaching and research capacities of public university faculty; (iv) improved teaching and learning environment; and (v) strengthened regional and international dimensions.

Lao PDR is seeking a university partner to support the strategic program: (i) international and domestic degree program; (ii) international matching scholarship grant scheme; (iii) short term training; (iv) on line degree programs; professional development programs and administrative skills upgrading.

Academic\student exchange programs with neighboring countries will be expanded, and the Ministry of Education supported to strengthen its cooperation with SEAMEO and its particular SEAMEO RIHED.

Students exchange relationships will be sought with universities like Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia. The principal areas of cooperation are expected to be twinning agreements, sandwich study programs and academic exchange arrangements.

V. Way Forward

The Government of Lao PDR seeks to achieve economic growth and reduce poverty in order to meet the Millennium Development goals by 2015 and graduate from the status of Least Developed Countries by 2020. The Sixth Socio-Economic Development Plan 2006-2010 provides a coherent and cohesive development framework, identifying education as one of the four pillars of its poverty reduction strategy. It recognizes that education is fundamental to socio-economic development since it equips citizens with skills and attitudes required in a rapidly changing society. Continued modernization and the shift towards a more knowledge- and technology based economy places growing pressure on the Lao PDR to expand and improve higher education system and institutions. Cross-border higher education and students mobility through bilateral and multilateral cooperation and agreement will be promoted in order to move closely to regional and international standards.

Higher education in Lao PDR is at a nascent stage of development. It is clear that the higher education system and institutions need to be further strengthened and upgraded by improving (i) the management and administration including governance of higher education; (ii) quality, efficiency and relevance and (iii) equity and access. Appropriate governance reforms (including clarification of their governance structure and status) represent an essential precondition for the implementation of further higher education reform strategies. Development of a coherent regulatory framework is urgently required to ensure their quality standards and relevance to labour market demand.

In order to achieve the goals of the country to orientate the country to industrialization and to modernization and to exit the status of the least developed country , higher education will play an important role in contributing to human resource development and to socio-economic development. As emphasized in the policy of Government the human resource development should be planned to meet the development strategy and the structure of national economy. In order to resolve the mentioned issues and problems there is a need to develop strategy and Master Plan for development of higher education.

The vision is to build the higher level cadre and researchers , to acquire the professional knowledge, have good initiatives , good moral and behavior and active for socio-economic and individual development .

Strengthening the existing universities will be the priorities to improve the quality of higher education in Lao PDR.

In the connection with the national education system reform strategy the curriculum for higher education should be reformed since there is an increase of one more year at the upper secondary education and the foundation study will be phased out by 2012. The continuing curriculum , bridging courses and distance education should be reviewed to promote the lifelong learning.

The quality and standard of higher education should be ensured to prepare for regional and integration .

At present the Ministry of Education is being is formulating a strategy and a Master Plan for the Development of Higher Education until the year 2020 by following three educational programmes and seven strategic options as following :

1. Improving, Construction and Expansion of Higher Education Institutions
2. Reform of Higher Education System
3. Training and Development of higher education staff
4. Quality Assurance of higher education
5. Promotion of scientific research and technology
6. Development and Management of higher education information system
7. Governance and administration of higher education.