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Lao PDR

Contributor

ENFP for Lao PDR: Viengdavong Luangsitthideth
Department of Higher Education

This national policy review provides a detailed analysis of Lao PDR's educational policies and their alignment with the Erasmus+ programme. It offers official, first-hand information into the country's engagement with Erasmus+ from 2021 to 2024, highlighting opportunities for improvement and identifying strategies to enhance integration and outcomes. Prepared and submitted by the Erasmus+ National Focal Point, this review contributes to ongoing efforts to strengthen international cooperation and to maximise the benefits of the Erasmus+ programme in Lao PDR.

Reviews of policies, initiatives, projects, and/or stakeholders

In the past, the European Union has supported partnerships with HEIs in Laos to enhance and expand cooperation in education. Programmes like Erasmus Plus and Erasmus Mundus have played a key role in shaping education policies, improving education quality, training personnel, boosting research capabilities, and building networks between Laotian and European universities.

Additionally, the EU has helped Laotian HEIs internationalise, foster collaboration with foreign countries, and provide scholarships and study exchange opportunities for European students.

Improving Curriculum, Higher Education Institutions, and Human resources for industry revolution in ASEAN

In the 21st century, rapid changes in society, the economy, and culture affect education. HEIs are crucial in developing skilled human resources to support socio-economic growth. To address these needs, there has been a focus on collaborating with international organisations, governments, and other stakeholders. The goal is to enhance the quality and relevance of education to prepare students for the evolving job market and align with international standards. The Lao PDR government aims to ensure that higher education supports the development of capable workers for the 4.0 era.

Rapid changes have also happened in socio-economic development, culture, and education. This has made the Higher Education sector increasingly important, as it plays a crucial role in developing high-quality and efficient human resources to meet the goals of the human resource and socio-economic development plans for 2021-2025. Recently, there has been growing interest in developing the HE sectors from development partners, international organisations, the government, and various stakeholders, including students and the public.

The Higher Education sector has implemented policies and activities to support educational institutions, ensuring that the ecosystems for promoting education are sustainable. This will lead to the creation of innovative knowledge and align with the Lao PDR government's efforts to produce a workforce with better skills and capabilities to meet the demands of the 4.0 era labour market and international standards.

Establishment of credit transfer regulation on HEIs

The aim is to strengthen HE by improving credit transfer regulations. This will enhance the quality of education, making institutions more competitive regionally and internationally. Effective credit transfer systems facilitate student mobility within and between countries, align with national curriculum standards, and reduce confusion for students.

The goal is to enhance the quality of HE so it can compete regionally and internationally. A key part of this is improving credit transfer systems in higher education institutions, which is crucial for human resource development. This will enable students to easily transfer credits and participate in exchange programmes at universities both within the country and abroad, which is in line with national curriculum standards. Currently, students face confusion when transferring credits, so addressing this issue is essential.

Agreement/decree on international accreditation and recognition of HE qualifications

Establish National curriculum standard Handbook guild for Associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, Master's Degrees and Doctoral degree

Legislative reforms and/or policies that have been put in place in the past three years or that are still being discussed

Lao PDR, a landlocked Southeast Asian country bordered by Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam, has a population of 7.8 million, with 68 % still living in rural areas. Despite being a least developed country, Lao PDR has made notable progress in reducing poverty, dropping rates from 46% in 1992 to 23% in 2015. The challenge now is to ensure that all citizens benefit from ongoing development.

In Lao PDR, primary and secondary education still face unresolved issues. However, the country recognises the need to strengthen its tertiary and higher education system due to globalisation and the knowledge economy. The government aims to create a balanced education system that improves basic and higher education to help reduce poverty.

Over the past twenty years, the government of Lao PDR has made significant changes to improve education. These include better teacher training, creating new systems to supervise schools, improving decision-making within schools, and developing programmes to train education officials. They've also updated the curriculum and textbooks and streamlined postsecondary institutions. As a member of ASEAN, Lao PDR sees education as a key to catching up with neighbouring countries in social and economic development.

The Department of Higher Education (DHE) in Lao PDR is responsible for managing the country's HE system, both public and private. It operates under the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) and handles the overall direction and policies for HE. The DHE supports the Minister in overseeing and promoting HE, aiming to produce qualified professionals, researchers, and scientists to help the country's socio-economic development.

Higher education follows upper secondary or vocational education and offers different levels of degrees:

- Associate Degree and/or Advanced Diploma
- Academic Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- PhD Programme

While the Lao PDR is working to align its National Qualification Framework with ASEAN standards, this is the country's current structure of higher education.

The HE sector in Lao PDR is awaiting the approval of a new Law on Higher Education. This law will specifically address the development of a comprehensive National Qualifications Framework encompassing general education, vocational education, and higher education.

From 1959 to 1975, the Ministry of Education and Service, Information, and Culture governed higher education in Lao PDR. Over the years, the Department of Higher Education has periodically changed its name to reflect better its role in enhancing Lao PDR's HE system and to integrate it into regional and international frameworks.

These modifications are detailed below in line with the different periods:

- 1975-1988: Department of University and Vocational Education
- 1989: Department of Higher Education Section
- 1990-1997: Department of Vocational Education and University
- 1998-2007: Department of Vocational and Higher Education
- 2008 to date: Department of Higher Education (DHE)

The Department of Higher Education (DHE) in Lao PDR was established by a decree from the Prime Minister on 7 April 2008 (Decree No. 62/PM) and further defined by an agreement on 8 July 2008 (Agreement No. 1416/Lao.2008). These documents outlined the organisation and functioning of the Ministry of Education and Sports, with the DHE serving as a key body for managing the country's HE sector.

According to the regulations, the DHE initially included the following divisions: Administration, University and Tertiary University, Research Science and Technology, and Student Affairs. In 2011, when the National Assembly approved a plan to restructure the government, the Ministry of Education was renamed the Ministry of Education and Sports, incorporating sports into its scope. The DHE was then reorganised by a decision on 26 March 2012 (Decision No. 913/MoES), expanding to five divisions: Administration, Technical Division, Scientific Research and Development Division, Standards, Monitoring, and Inspection Division.

In 2018, the DHE was again reorganised under Decision No. 1661/SOK, dated 27 April 2018, reducing the number of divisions to four: Administration Division, Technical Management Division, Scientific Research Management Division, and Inspection, Monitoring, and Evaluation Division. The current organisation and operation of the DHE are guided by the latest decision from the MOES, issued on 5 October 2020 (Decision No. 4512/SOK).

A series of Prime Ministerial Decrees have been issued to establish the current framework of the Lao PDR HE system. These decrees initiated public and private HEIs reforms. Key decrees include:

- The establishment of the National University in 1995
- Regulations for Private Higher Education and Higher Education Curriculum in 2001

The Prime Ministerial Decree of 1995 established the National University of Laos (NUOL) to address the fragmented HE system by merging ten institutions into a single entity. This decree also planned for the creation of regional universities as the next step. Following the establishment of NUOL, two regional universities were set up in the South and North of the country to expand access to higher education.

In 2002, Champasak University was founded in Champasak Province in the South, and Souphanouvong University was established in Luang Prabang Province in the North in 2003. Both cities are becoming key hubs in the Great Mekong Sub-region. In 2007, a Prime Ministerial Decree created the University of Health Sciences by separating the Faculty of Medicine from the National University. In 2009, Savannakhet University was set up in Savannakhet Province. Additionally, a range of private institutions, teacher training colleges, and other public institutions in the country offer higher education degrees.

The Lao PDR government has been investing in higher education using its resources. However, it still relies on loans and grants from foreign agencies like the Asian Development Bank and other international organisations (DAAD 2019). The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), which oversees higher education through the Department of Higher Education, is focusing its resources on developing infrastructure at the five public universities.

This investment has improved the quantity and quality of higher education, including better teaching, research, technical services, and cultural conservation. However, challenges remain, such as inadequate funding for salaries, insufficient facilities, and a shortage of qualified staff. Additionally, the increase in upper secondary school enrolment has created a surge in demand for HE services, which the public sector cannot fully meet.

Higher education is valued as a public good by national authorities in Lao PDR. It is crucial for the country's development and economic growth by enhancing workforce skills and fostering R&I. In this context, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Department of Higher Education have been responsible for developing policies in the field, including:

- The Prime Ministerial Decree on the establishment of the National University of Lao PDR in 1995
- The National Education System Reform Strategy (2011-2015)
- The second phase of the education system reform strategy, focused on higher education institutions, started in 2013
- The prime ministerial Decree on higher education (2016)
- National Qualification Framework (NQF)
- National Curriculum standard
- Minimum institutional standard for higher education
- AUN Quality Assurance (for the programme)
- Law on Education (Amended Version) no. 62/NA, 16 August 2015
- Decree on Higher Education no. 177/G, 5 June 2015
- Agreement on the Management of Scientific Research of Higher Education Institutions no. 3085/MOES, 5 July 2019
- Lao PDR - 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020)
- 8th Five-year National Education and Sport
- 9th Five-year National Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2020-2025), 2 November 2020

Initiatives and/or programmes that have been launched in the past three years

- The second Phase Higher Education Strengthening Project (SSHEP) under the support of the Asia Development Bank (ADB)
- The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Special Fund Project (LMC) under the support of the Chinese government
- OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to the internationalisation strategies under the Erasmus+ Programme supported by the European Union
- Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) project under the support of the Thai government
- Strengthening Higher Education Institutions for Social and Economic Development in Laos, working together with the RTI Institute under the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Project to improve the building and provide laboratory equipment in the Faculty of Engineering, National University, a grant project from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
- Strengthening human resources development of engineering and technology for industrial in Lao PDR. Under the support of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency
- The BABSEACLE organisation strengthens and develops legal education programmes in clinical form at the Faculty of Law and Political Science, under the support of the Asia Foundation, and the USAID)

Projects which are examples of good practice that have been launched in the past three years

The second Phase of the Higher Education Strengthening Project, under the support of the Asia Development Bank (ADB), implemented in 2019-2023

This project aims to enhance the connection between higher education services and socioeconomic needs. It focuses on improving the quality of higher education, expanding access to modern programmes, and strengthening the governance and management of HEIs. This project builds on the successes and lessons from the previous Strengthening Higher Education Project (SHEP1), which introduced innovative methods to improve the higher education sector in Lao PDR.

A preparatory technical assistance phase allowed for extensive consultations with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), public and private higher education institutions, employers, and the private sector. These consultations helped define the project's scope for improving access, quality, and relevance in higher education.

Second Strengthening Higher Education Project (RRP LAO 48127)

<https://www.adb.org/projects/48127-002/main>

OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to the internationalisation strategies under the Erasmus+ Programme

This is a capacity building project to support Lao universities in developing appropriate structures, such as International Relations Offices, and aligning their internationalisation practices with those proposed by the MoES. The project focuses on improving the quality of study programmes through international cooperation, enhancing student exchange opportunities, and facilitating the recognition of study periods abroad and the credit system.

OPEN-ing targets various stakeholders, including the Ministry, top-level management, leaders from partner HEIs, International Relations Office staff, teaching and administrative staff, students, and small-scale entrepreneurs in Laos. The project aims to enhance their capacities to strengthen the internationalisation of the HE system in Lao PDR. It also seeks to improve cooperation between different national actors on internationalization issues and increase the number of international activities in the country.

Specifically, the project aims to:

- Strengthen internationalisation structures and build personnel capacity at five HEIs through targeted training programmes.
- Support government reforms in managing the Ministry of Education and Sports and improve the international network through strategic actions in key areas of the Lao higher education system

<https://www.open-laos.eu/about>

Strengthening human resources development in engineering and technology for industrial use in Lao PDR, with the support of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

The project focuses on improving the quality of undergraduate engineering education by incorporating essential experimental and practical work and fostering collaboration between industry and universities.

Key players and networks (stakeholders) at the national level (or at the regional level with a national component)

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) invests in infrastructure development at four universities under its jurisdiction, focusing on the public and private sectors. This includes teaching, research, technical services, and cultural conservation improvements. The government is also investing in the construction and renovation of five public universities, enhancing facilities for teaching, research, and technical services. Additionally, there is support from various domestic and international stakeholders, including organisations such as:

- Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- World Bank (WB)
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)
- Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
- EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (EU-SHARE)
- Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO)
- Regional Centre specialising in higher education and development (SEAMEO RIHED)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- European Union (EU)