




The state of internationalization in Laos: Needs Analysis and Mission Sharing

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE STATE OF INTERNATIONALISATION IN LAOS: NEEDS ANALYSIS & MISSION SHARING

The OPEN project (OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to internationalisation strategies) is a Structural Capacity Building project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme. The project aims at supporting the establishment of appropriate IRO structures in the five public universities of the country, harmonizing at a national level internationalization practices and policies and ensuring the quality of study programmes by enhancing international opportunities and granting students a framework for the recognition of their experience abroad and a credit transfer system.

Considering the Lao Ministry of Education and Sport's (MoES) recent policies and strategies on the internationalization of Higher Education, the aim of this document is to describe the current state of HE internationalization policies and practices in the country. This study will also focus on the credit transfer systems, the international partnerships and international research collaborations which the partner universities have currently in place. This will allow a better understanding of the main needs and priorities in these areas and thus devise actions and practices for the internationalization of the Higher Education in Laos.

The project needs to be seen in the context of the current challenges facing the Lao PDR and neighbouring countries. These are best summed up in the UN report on the High Level Consultation Meeting on the 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan, held in Vientiane on 11th December 2020:

“As noted by His Excellency Dr. Kikeo Chanthaboury, Vice Minister of Planning and Investment, ‘The development of this 9th NSEDP which will guide policymaking for the next 5 years, comes at a time when our country continues to face with a number of challenges. One of them is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has already imposed a major shock on Lao PDR

and our neighbors, with effects that are likely to be felt for years to come. The impact of this pandemic comes on top of existing challenges due to the two consecutive years (2018 and 2019) of natural disasters seeing both heavy flooding and drought affect the country.' He also added the imperative of remaining vigilant to the continued forces of the pandemic and regional and global developments as the finances of the country, which already saw a slowdown prior to the COVID – 19 outbreak, remains severed by its impact.”¹

Notwithstanding these concerns, the OPEN project team is confident that the project will be able to meet its objectives, even if some of the activities are delayed as a result of the COVID-19. Furthermore as universities around the world recover from the pandemic, the need for international collaboration will be greater than ever, and the new channels of communication and data-sharing developed during the emergency will be increasingly important. OPEN is well-placed to contribute to facilitating this recovery.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The analysis adopted a mixed-method strategy which included desk analysis and a consultation phase.

The study revolved around the following key questions:

- What are the barriers to inbound and outbound student and academic mobility in the Lao HE system?
- What are the barriers to credit recognition?
- What are the barriers to international research collaboration?

Desk Analysis

The analysis was carried out through the collection and the study of the documentation related to the policies and the strategies for internationalization

1. <https://laopdr.un.org/en/105110-lao-pdrs-development-policy-priorities-next-5-years-high-level-consultation-9th-nsedp-under>

which have been established at national level. Our main sources have been the policy documents issued by MoES such as the 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2016-2020 and the Education Sector Development Plan 2016-2020. The analysis is also informed by the recently published 9th Five-year National Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2020-2025). These documents have been examined to identify which actions and measures have been devised first to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and then to promote the internationalization of study and research in the Lao HE system. The desk analysis also includes the description of the international profile provided by each Lao partner with a specific focus on international mobility, credit transfer system and international research.

Consultation

The second stage was constituted by a consultation analysis aimed at gathering qualitative and quantitative data by collecting feedback of involved stakeholders through different means:

- Online questionnaires
- Five Focus groups

Target Groups

For the consultation phase two main target groups were identified: students and academic/administrative staff. Partners selected their own informants in the two target groups in a way that each group represents a fair, inclusive sample of each academic community. Finally, the Consortium tried to seek feedback from external stakeholders by submitting questionnaires to the representatives of five international organizations and associations.

Data Collection

Two different questionnaires were addressed to MoES and members of international organizations operating in Laos. Questions were designed for the collection of qualitative data about the challenges and opportunities which the universities are facing in their internationalization process. The response from these key informants contributed to the formulation of a set of general recommendations for the internationalization of the Lao HE system and a set of specific suggestions and actions for the development of the project.

Two further questionnaires were then distributed to a sample of 50 students and 50 research fellows/lecturers per partner. These questionnaires aimed at collecting both qualitative and quantitative data with a specific focus on the existing obstacles towards credit recognition and international opportunities as perceived by their ultimate recipients.

Five Focus groups were held to examine and discuss the data and to identify the major areas of intervention with reference to international strategies, international partnerships, mobility schemes and credit transfer. Each partner provided a written analysis of the questionnaire data to the WP leader.

Final Report

The data collected and the outcomes of the Focus Groups have been used to build this report which analyses the main needs and priorities with reference to the three key areas. This report represents an essential tool for setting the conditions for the future development of the project's implementation activities.

2. THE LAO HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: STEPS FORWARDS TOWARDS INTERNATIONALIZATION

2.1 A GENERAL OUTLINE

The Lao higher education system consists of five public universities. Four are under the MoES: the National University of Laos, Souphanouvong University, Savannakhet University and Champassak University. One, the University of Health Science, is under the Ministry of Health. Along with the five public universities, there are other 39 public institutions and colleges under line ministries, 10 Teacher Training Colleges, 45 private colleges. In general these institutions deliver formal two-year post-secondary qualifications or longer. Three private institutions have been allowed to award bachelor degrees: Rattana Institute of Business Administration, Saengsavanh Business Institute, Sutsaka Institute of Technology. The first one delivers joint programmes with Thai institutions whereas the second one is linked to Vietnamese universities. Finally it is worth mentioning the only international university, Soochow University, a branch campus of the university in Southern China.²

In 1995, a Prime Minister's Decree established the National University of Laos (NUOL), merging the 10 HEIs that existed before; the formerly independent universities now constitute the NUOL faculties. This process was considered a landmark of Lao higher education. Before the foundation of NUOL, the existing HEIs were under different ministries, making it difficult to have uniform management of the higher education system. In addition, this decree envisaged the creation of regional universities as the next phase of higher education development. Two regional universities were therefore established to broaden access to tertiary education; Champassak University (CU) was founded in Champassak Province in the south of the country in 2002, and Souphanouvong University (SU) was established in Luang Prabang

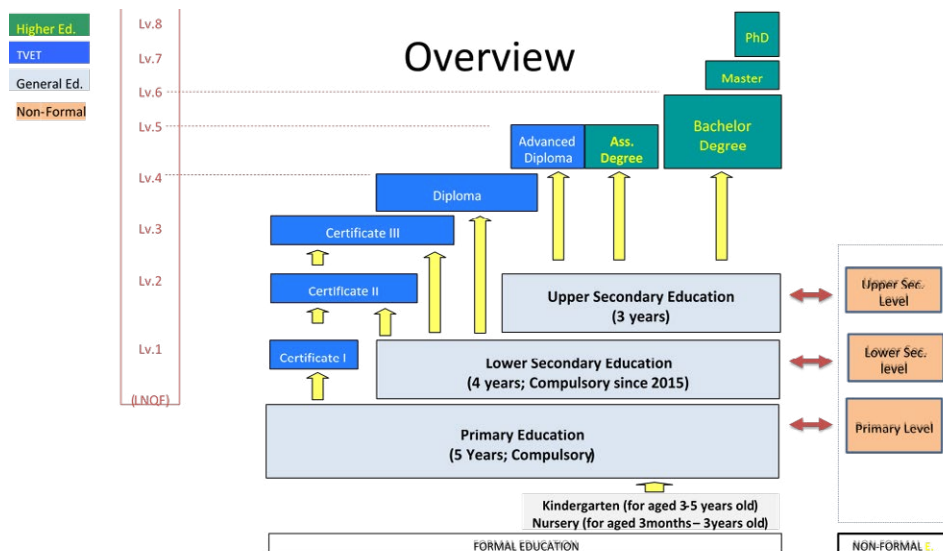
2. Elizabeth St George, *Higher education quality and autonomy—a case study of Lao PDR*, in “Higher Education” 2020, 753-771

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in the north in 2003. In 2007 there was a new Prime Ministerial Decree to establish the University of Health Sciences by splitting the Faculty of Medicine from the National University. Finally, in 2009 Savannakhet University was founded in Savannakhet province to serve as an HE centre for the population from the central area of the country.

In 2007 the Prime Ministerial Decree on the Adoption and Implementation of the **National Education System Reform Strategy (NESRS)** (2006-2015) was issued. This decree aimed at strengthening HEIs in order to move the higher education system towards regional and international standards, thus contributing to the socio-economic development of the country. NUOL was granted autonomous administrative authority, while Souphanouvong University and Champassak University were given autonomous administrative authority two years later, in 2009.

The LAO education system can be described as follows:



In 2019, according to UNESCO Data analysis³, the gross enrolment ratio in secondary education was 65.77 (63.57 female) while the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education was 14.5. In the 2019/20 a.y. the overall number of students enrolled in the five public universities was 35,462 (female 16,442 or equivalent to 46.80%). Government expenditure on education was 13.1% of total government expenditures (2020 plan). The total budget including capital expenditure for the four MoES universities is forecast at LAK 166,604m in 2021, equating to PPP\$59.75m, or \$1,653 per student based on the 2019/20 enrolment of 36,144 in the four universities. New enrolments in HE are planned to grow from 12,579 in 2020/21 to 15,218 in 2024/25, an increase of 20% over four years.

It is planned that the **National Qualification Framework** will be developed in alignment with the ASEAN Qualification Framework. The current framework of different diplomas and degrees is described in the above table (from level 4 to level 8). After completing the upper secondary education, students have access to a regular bachelor programme (4/5 years) alternatively they can enrol in an associate diploma (2/3 years) and later complete a bachelor degree with 1 or 1.5 year of continuing education. Master's degrees last 1 or 2 years and give access to Doctoral programmes (3/4 years). The Bachelor in Medicine lasts 7 years, but other professional Bachelors last 4-6 years depending on the curriculum design.

According to the last 8th Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2015-20), the Lao academic offering consists of 456 curricula, including 19 pre bachelor programmes, 352 bachelors, 66 masters and two doctoral programmes. The tertiary education comprises also nine first level specialist curricula and two second level ones.

Only 7% of academic staff at Lao universities have PhDs. Of 3,591 academics 1,602 are female (equivalent to 44.60%); 256 of them (58 females) hold a PHD whereas 1,458 have master's degrees (565 females). 1,634 hold a

3. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/la>

bachelor's degree (759 females), 156 a pre-bachelor (92 females) and 175 lower certificate levels (44 females). As far as academic positions are considered, there are 7 full professors and 171 associate professors of whom 31 are women.

In general, the recruitment of professors and lecturers in the four public universities is based on a quota system managed by the MoES; the selection process consists of written examinations and interviews and is carried out at national level. Once selected, those professors who do not have a qualification in pedagogy are provided with a teacher training which is delivered by the Faculty of Education at the National University of Laos and lasts 2/3 months. In addition, thanks to ADB funding, the Department of Higher Education has supported the public universities in implementing 12 training modules for employed professors and lecturers in order to strengthen their teaching skills. Academic recruitment is slightly different at the University of Health Science. In this case the departments select their own lecturers and their appointment is approved by the dean of the faculty. All lecturers have to attain a Medical Education and Pedagogy training.

2.2 QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Educational Standards and Quality Assurance Center (ESQAC) was established in 2008 (Executive Decision No. 1438 dated 10 July 2008). ESQAC reports directly to the MoES and is responsible for two main technical functions:

- educational testing evaluation, including review of teaching-learning assessment, evaluation of learning outcomes, issuance of entrance examinations;
- review of quality assurance procedures and standards at all educational levels for public and private institutions for accreditation purposes.

ESQAC is also responsible for developing and implementing criteria and methods for both the external quality assurance and the internal quality

assessment of learning objectives and outcomes at any educational level. This approach allows to carry out a comprehensive quality appraisal of each educational sector and institution.

The MoES has redefined ESQAC functions (divisions) and responsibilities through different executive decisions. The Education Law (2015) is the fundamental source for the definition of QA. Through this Law it has been acknowledged the necessity of both internal and external quality assurance. All educational institutions shall be externally assessed at least once every five (5) years and the results of these evaluations shall be submitted to relevant agencies and made available to the general public. External QA refers to the monitoring and assessment process based on quality standards set by MoES or by international authorities which have competent EQAAs.

Under the 9th Five-year Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2020-2025) it is an objective to set up an internal quality assurance team in NUOL to assist other inexperienced universities in internal and external assessment. The Department of Higher Education in collaboration with ESQAC will conduct training in quality assurance for the three new universities.

Following the amended Education Law (2015), on February 28, 2018, the MoES issued the Executive Decision No. 920 on Functions and Responsibilities of ESQAC, which is the one currently being used. Article 2 of this decree states that ESQAC is responsible to the Minister as a secretariat to define the quality standards of every educational level of both public and private institutions. ESQAC is also responsible for developing the national qualifications framework which has to clearly describe the different qualification levels, their entry requirements, the years of studies and knowledge, skills and competences to be achieved. Through this redefinition of ESQAC technical functions, four main areas of intervention have been identified:

- learning outcomes testing;
- QA in early childhood and general education;
- QA in TVET and HE;
- NQF development.

On July 17, 2020, MoES issued its Executive Decision No. 2923 on Functions and Responsibilities of Department of Legislation and Education Quality Assurance which merged the ESQAC and the Legislation Division from Department of Organization and Personnel (LEQA). As a result, now the LEQA consists of five divisions:

- Administration,
- Legislation Development,
- Quality Assurance,
- Qualifications Framework Management,
- Evaluation Publicity and Monitoring.

The Lao National Qualification Framework is still being developed. Its formulation started in 2012 when a first draft for vocational qualifications was created. Since 2015, ESQAC has been assigned as the coordinator for the development of a National Qualifications Framework which includes General Education, Vocational Education and Higher Education. At beginning of 2020 a draft of a comprehensive NQF was submitted to Ministry of Justice so that the Prime Minister's Office could approve its issuance by decree. Since the government is about to promulgate a new Law on Higher Education the issuing of NQF has been postponed to assure an alignment with the new guidelines on Education.

The drafted NQF defines the learning workload (including student self-study) to be used as a standard measure; according to this definition one credit should correspond to 48 hours of student's workload.

The former credit definition (based only on the teaching/contact hours) consisted of 3 different types.

- 1 credit corresponded to 16 hours of lectures
- 1 credit corresponded 32 hours of practices or laboratory, and
- 1 credit corresponded 48-96 hours of fields work

As already pointed out, MoES has modified the Lao credit system by introducing the concept of student's workload. Resembling other credits systems, now one credit represents all the hours a student needs to achieve a learning objective through self-study, laboratories, lectures and other learning modes. In this way there is only one single standard measure: one credit is worth 48 hours of a student's workload. The proportion of self-study varies according to the learning objectives and teaching modes. Thus

- 1 credit is 16 hours of lecture and 32 hours of self-study
- 1 credit is 32 hours of practices or laboratory, and 16 hours of self-study
- 1 credit is 48 hours of field work

Now it is of the upmost importance to develop and describe each qualification in terms of credits, students' workload, learning objectives at least for vocational and higher education, first for each level of study (BA; Master; PHD) and then for each specific programme. To this purpose the MoES has drafted guidelines on how to write learning outcomes for degree programmes and single courses and how to measure a student's workload. A complete, clear, consistent NQF is a crucial tool to enhance internationalization since it is through NQFs, credit definitions and course descriptions (in terms of learning outcomes) that degree programmes can be compared and judged compatible. This transparency in the description of degree programmes will favour students' mobility, both vertical and horizontal, and international academic offering such as joint/double degrees.

At the same time ESQAC is preparing the referencing report for ASEAN Qualifications Framework. This report is planned to be submitted to ASEAN members by 2021. After the assessment by the ASEAN members, the Lao NQF will be recognized in the Region and employed to promote internationalization and recognition of studies.

ESQAC is also drafting the Programme Quality Standards guideline, which will include general/specific standards and indicators to support higher education institutes in designing and updating their degree programmes.

2.3 POLICIES AND STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The MoES has developed its strategic vision on higher education around three pillars:

- equitable access to higher and life-long learning,
- quality improvement,
- improvement in planning and management capacity.

The general policies concerning the education sector are defined and thoroughly explained in the Education and Sports Sector Development Plans. It is therefore important to examine these documents if one wants to understand the directions and the context of the Lao reforming policy on HE. As a source for this analysis, we chose the **8th Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP 2016-2020)**. Before our report was finalised the 9th ESSDP (2020-2025) was issued. The 9th ESSDP consists of ten Education Development Sub-Sector Plans including the one dedicated to Higher Education.

- Although the HE has seen impressive improvements since the issuing of 7th plan, the 8th plan still highlights several challenges:
- Public and private higher education institutes do not deliver courses based on labour market studies;
- Curricula are not consistent with the demands of the labour market, as a result graduates' competences and skills do not meet the demands of employers;
- The poor quality of higher education is also linked to the qualification limitations of the academic staff and lecturers;
- Scientific research is still inadequate. On one hand this is due to the limited capacity of academic staff and lecturers. On the other, there is a lack of budget, equipment and incentive policies for lecturers to conduct research;

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- The government funding is employed only for administrative work and staff salaries, so there are not enough funds for professional development.
- Policies and regulations need to be further implemented to properly manage HEIS. The capacities of administrative management, planning and leadership of higher education administrators need to be enhanced.

In order to address these challenges, the MoES has defined 3 overarching objectives, several targets and key strategies to be pursued as showed below:

Education and Sports sector Development Plan		
3 MAIN GOALS		
Promote human resource development with quality, consistent with the demands of socio-economic development that can compete and link with regional and international areas.	Provide scientific research, technology development and innovation for the nation.	Improve governance and higher education management

9 TARGETS		
1.200,000 students study at higher education institutes both public and private by 2020.	The proportion of females studying at higher education institutes reaches 45% of total students in higher education institutes.	Five professional curricula in foreign languages.
The percentage of graduates who get jobs reaches 85%.	Build one technology university and one private university.	Upgrade lecturers at each course at ratio 1:6:3.

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All higher education institutions have quality assurance and implement internal and external assessment.	All necessary legislation is available	Research papers are published in national and international journal
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6 STRATEGIES		
1. Develop higher education to meet the demands of the labour market and the National Socio-Economic Development Plan	2. Improve the quality of teaching and learning	3. Support science research, technology development and technical services to meet socio-economic development needs
4. Improve higher education quality assurance	5. Improve higher education governance and management	6. Increase internal and external cooperation

The aims of OPEN project relate specifically to Strategy 6 (increase internal and external cooperation:

Aims of the OPEN project:

- To **consolidate Internationalisation structure, & build human capacities** of HEIs by means of targeted training programmes in 5 HEIs;
- To **accompany the governance reforms** of MoES and **enhance international networking** through strategic actions in key areas of the Laos higher education system.

However, it is clear that through international cooperation improvements can be made to teaching and learning (strategy 2), support for science research (3) quality assurance (4) and higher education governance and management (5). International partners may also be able to provide advice for strategy (1), developing higher education to meet the demands of the labour market. OPEN can therefore be considered as an enabling project and its success

will facilitate international contributions to the full range of strategies for higher education in Laos.

Looking in more detail at strategy (2) we can see that the quality of teaching and learning can be improved by cooperating with international partners; some of the key actions listed for this strategy could involve international stakeholders who could provide technical support and share expertise and best practices. For example:

- HEIs review and upgrade their curricula and learning materials in collaboration with employers to align the national curricula standards and National Qualifications Framework and employers' requirements.
- Provide and improve facilities in priority sectors (e-library, Internet resources, laboratories and workshops for agriculture, science, technology, engineering, mathematics and STEM).
- Teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills (including IT) upgraded through classroom and online training, especially in priority sectors.
- Improve teaching-learning curricula to enable graduates to have skills and knowledge that respond to the needs of employers and industry. Graduates should also possess transversal skills such as entrepreneurship, leadership and foreign language competence.
- Use ICT to upgrade the quality of teaching-learning.

The Development Plan for HE also envisages the upgrading of research and technology as fundamental to address the needs for the socio-economic development of the country (strategy 3). The main goal is raising the capacity for research and technology innovation in terms of human resources, facilities and infrastructure and international networking. In order to reach this general goal, the plan identifies a number of key actions such as:

1. Provide training in research methods and publishing for research to higher education researchers.
2. Propose to government to consider the policy and strategy for science research and research management.
3. Encourage HEIs to set up centres for scientific research.

4. Collaborate with industrial sector in joint projects related to scientific research or technology innovation, including through the use of PPPs with businesses and the establishment of incubator centres.
5. Increased funding for scientific research, technology and innovation from government and non-government sources.
6. Support dissemination of research findings to be printed in domestic and international journals.
7. Support social technical services based on research findings to inform socio-economic development planning.
8. Conduct review of regulations in order to identify barriers to research development and make recommendations on how reducing them.

It is also worth mentioning that some research fields are considered strategic for the socio-economic development of the country and thus have been identified as priority fields in national structural projects such as the one funded by ADB. They can be clustered into five groups: 1). Education, 2). Linguistic, 3). Economic, Tourism, Business, Law and Social Science. 4). Science, Engineering, Architecture, Technology, ICT and Sports Science. 5). Agriculture, Forest, Environmental Science, Foods technology and Water Resources.

The 9th ESSDP acknowledges progress since the 8th Plan was formulated but also identifies a number of ongoing challenges.

1. High quality STEM graduates require improved foundation skills at least in the lower and upper secondary schools, skilled teachers and appropriate learning resources.
2. The quality, skills and knowledge of HE staff is also a key challenge.
3. Development of Quality Assurance systems at programme and institutional level is challenging. However, it is an essential element for the sub-sector to become a competitive member of the ASEAN regional network of Universities and offer opportunities for student mobility.
4. The student affairs department has some issues that need to be addressed, such as the management of scholarships for staff and students to study abroad has not been centralized, the development of

human resources abroad of some specialized fields is not yet in line with the national socio-economic development plan.

The focus on STEM subjects, quality assurance and staff upgrading is carried over from the 8th plan. There is an increased focus on employability and establishing systems for tracking graduate destinations. The emphasis on the development of Quality Assurance to support student mobility and management of study abroad opportunities speaks directly to the objectives of the OPEN project. All of these objectives should benefit from the international connections and collaboration structures developed under the OPEN project.

For the Higher Education sub-sector the following policy objectives have been identified in the 9th ESSDP:

1. To enhance higher education to contribute to and support the social and economic priorities of the 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSED).
2. To promote and develop technology related programmes, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) study programmes for university students, especially those undertaking natural sciences programme so that the number of natural sciences students increases;
3. To strengthen Centres of Excellence in both public and private universities;
4. To conduct regular tracer studies to identify employability of graduates;
5. To strengthen the quality of lecturers, especially lecturers in natural sciences programmes;
6. To develop the university scholarship budget allocation formula; and develop a framework to prioritize scholarships to students for further studies in foreign countries in line with the country's socio-economic development.
7. To provide science research, technology development and innovation for the nation.

2.4 THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

This report aims to provide information on trends, opportunities and challenges concerning internationalization of HE at national level as well as within each partner institution.

The national context has been described through the analysis of the policy documents issued by MoES and a consultation with its officers, as the MoES is a partner of OPEN Consortium. In order to complete the first stage of the needs analysis, each partner university answered a survey developed during the activity for the preparation of the WP1 desk analysis. The data collected include a brief description of each partner university which is mainly focused on its international dimension. This will enable the Consortium to identify shared challenges and opportunities among partners and, at the same time, to see how international activities are planned (governance) and managed by peer institutions.

2.4.1 NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LAOS

The National University of Laos was established in 1996 with the aim to create a comprehensive National Institution, which could reunite under a common structure the pre-existing higher education institutions operated by different ministries. Currently, NUOL embraces ten institutions, which allow the University to be a comprehensive institution and provide an extensive educational offer for its students: the Pedagogical University of Vientiane, Polytechnic University, Medical Science University, Nabong College of Agriculture, Dongdok College of Forestry, Tadthong College of Irrigation, Institute of Architecture, Institute of Transportation, College of Electricity and Electronics and the Centre for Establishment of Veunkham Agro-Forestry University. In the academic year 2016-17 NUOL modified its internal structure, which is today composed of 13 faculties, two institutes, one central libraries, three centres and the School for Gifted and Ethnic Studies. In addition, included in the university infrastructure, there is one hospital and eleven offices. In its

eight campuses, located in and around Laos' capital city, NUOL hosts 23,000 enrolled students and 346 members of academic and administrative staff.

As the first-ranking National University, NUOL is a centre of excellence in higher education, research and cultural preservation and contributes to capacity building, to the strengthening of human resources by fostering intellectuality, promoting knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, loyalty, dignity, good physical and mental health. The University's mission is to meet Laos development objectives in a suitable, efficient and equitable manner. This includes a plan to educate and equip the country's people, to develop and promote the economic and social development, alongside preserving and expanding the arts, culture and traditions of Lao multi-ethnic nation, while acknowledging and respecting world culture.

Internationalization Strategy

In compliance with the Education Development Plan of the MoES, NUOL has developed a strategic plan to provide the University with high capacities in human resource development and to respond to the national socio-economic development priorities and to approach regional and international standards. The overall university plan includes actions intended to develop the centre of education and provide it with higher quality academic offer, thus including the expansion of international curricula and courses. In addition, NUOL wants to become an international hub of scientific research. This will enhance faculty and student development and will allow them to meet the national strategy and the international standards. Among the objectives it is also worth mentioning the enhancement of its international dimension in order to raise academic capacity through international networking and cooperation. Major importance is given to the increase of internal and external collaboration with both regional and international organizations and to the construction of an effective communication network with international organizations worldwide. One of the key actions will be to provide activities and training to staff and students so that they can actively take part in the internationalization of their institution.

Currently the University is going through a process of renovation and updating of its international strategy. The plan has not been published yet in the University's website. The international strategy focuses on the reform of the internal systems regulating international agreements and the improvement of information-gathering in order to build up a complete and accessible database with the aim to better monitor the cooperation agreements in each of their phases. NUOL is also planning to improve its academic and faculty services, to provide better quality facilities for students and staff wishing to take part in international programmes.

In the internal dimension, NUOL's objective is to improve the international educational offer and broaden the programmes of internationalization, such as academic mobility for students and staff and research collaborations. Currently, only one international course is offered by the Faculty of Economics and Business Management. The expansion of international programmes, taught in English, for students, researches and faculty members is a main priority of the internationalization plan, so to promote international exchanges within the ASEAN region at first and then with the rest of the World. NUOL is planning to create an ASEAN study programme with the curriculum and resources shared among the AUN and other ASEAN countries' universities, for example in Thailand. Moreover, NUOL is looking at a general improvement of its infrastructures and facilities, to meet international standards and attract international students. In order to realize its international strategy plan, NUOL will have to improve its management capacity and enlarge its financial capability.

Governance and IRO

The mobility schemes and international projects are managed by the International Relations Office (IRO). The IRO is an administrative office affiliated to the presidential office and composed of three units and seven divisions. Its role is to ensure the effective coordination and cooperation with external partners and networks at different levels. The IRO is also in charge of reinforcing and strengthening internationalization policies within the gov-

ernment's development plans. It is led by the Vice President for International Relations and has the following roles:

- Coordinate, develop and promote cooperation and partnership between NUOL and international partners;
- Provide assistance to NUOL's Administrative Board and relevant bodies for international cooperation and foreign affairs;
- Administer documentation processes and procedures (e.g. Memorandum of Understanding, Agreements);
- Work with faculties, institutes, centres and offices affiliated to NUOL to promote and implement activities and tasks on international cooperation and partnership (staff and student mobility, participation in academic events, workshops, seminars, trainings, conferences).

The IRO is also designated as the NUOL's focal point for ASEAN affairs. ASEAN cooperation's main tasks include providing information on ASEAN (ASEAN University Network – AUN) to NUOL's faculty members and students, dealing with contact and coordination as part of ASEAN regional cooperation in line with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), with other ASEAN member countries in the areas of human resource development, academic cooperation, language and cultural exchanges.

Apart from the main responsibility of international affairs, the IRO works and cooperates with other faculties and offices affiliated to NUOL in relation to selection of staff and students for international exchange, full-time study abroad programmes and scholarships.

International partnerships

NUOL has signed 302 MOUs with overseas universities, international organizations, and NGOs from 30 countries around the world. The over three hundred international collaborations worldwide are carried out through different international projects and university agreements. NUOL is a member of seven international education projects and programmes,

namely: Erasmus Plus, DAAD, IPS Sweden, HR4Asia, REACT, TOOLKIT, OPEN. The activities carried out through MOU and international programmes aim at collaborating and strengthening the University's development programme. Moreover, through international agreements, NUOL has established various exchange programmes for faculty members, research scholars and students. The University is carrying out some significant research projects aiming at standardizing educational levels in an effort to respond to the country's social and economic development. Here some details about NUOL's partnership in international projects and international donors that finance its international programmes:

- Erasmus Plus International Credit Mobility projects with Romania, Portugal, Sweden, Lithuania. The Erasmus Plus provides NUOL with student and staff exchanges in Europe, in order to improve its educational offer at home and the study curriculum of its students;
- DAAD funds projects which aim at fostering curriculum development for staff and teaching members. It helps to improve teaching and research in the University;
- IPS Sweden has a programme to strengthen research development in the field of geophysics;
- HR4ASIA is a Erasmus + CBHE project addressed at University staff, in order to achieve a better management of the University;
- REACT is an Erasmus + CBHE project with Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam aimed at monitoring and study climate change;
- TOOLKIT is an Erasmus+ CBHE Project involving HEIs from EU and Laos Myanmar and Sri Lanka with the aim of supporting the enhancement of partners international dimension.
- OPEN is an Erasmus+ CBHE Projects which aims at supporting Lao HEIs in building up internationalization strategies and increase the academic quality and research of universities in Laos through the development of internationalization capacities.

For its overall functioning, being a state university, NUOL mainly relies on government funding. Although this revenue is expected to be extended

according to the national higher education development plan, this subsidy is not sufficient and the university lacks facilities and infrastructure. For this reason, internationalization activities are funded, to a great extent, by international projects involving, among others, the Japan Foundation, Japan's International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Sweden's International Development Agency (SIDA/SAREC), the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS), the Rockefeller Foundation as well as various overseas universities and international organizations.

Mobility

The University has in place several exchange programmes both for its staff and students. Between 2015 and 2019, 390 students took part in exchange programmes of variable length, going from one week to a full academic year. NUOL's mobility scheme includes agreements within four continents, which can be resumed as following:

- Student Exchange with ASEAN/AUN. These programmes take place in many universities within the ASEAN members, partly for short-term mobility programmes, but they also include various semester mobilities, some of which developed under the SHARE project, as in the case of the project with Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines. In Singapore NUOL has various partner institutions, thanks to which 119 (68 females) students took part in mobility projects. In this country, NUOL has established some long-term and short-term programmes with remarkable institutions such as the National University of Singapore (6 semester mobilities), the Nanyang Technological University, which hosted 7 students, the Ngee Ann Polytechnic and the Singapore National University for short-term programmes. 44 students carried out their mobility in Thailand, the longest exchange taking place in Chulalongkorn University for one semester, with some remarkable short-term programmes at National Institute of Development Administration, Rajamangala University of Technology Tanyaburi and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)

among others. NUOL has also established a variety of programmes in Malaysia that allowed the mobility for 26 students (12 females), some of which under the Share programme. Among those, two students were hosted at Taylor's University, 5 students were hosted at the National University of Malaysia and three carried out their mobility at University of Malaysia, Sabah for one semester. Thanks to the SHARE project it was possible to set up all exchange programmes in the Philippines for 4 students, where NUOL has cooperation agreements with the Ateneo de Maila University, the Ateneo de Santo Tomas and the University of the Philippines. Another country where NUOL has a considerable amount of mobilities is Indonesia, the destination of 9 students (3 females). Here the University of Indonesia, Binus University and Universitas Diponegoro are the main partners. In Vietnam one student carried out his mobility at the Vietnam National University. Other short-term mobilities, lasting from 1 to 3 weeks, are taking place in Brunei and Cambodia.

- Student Exchange within ASEAN and Japan, Korea, China. Japan represents an important outgoing destination for NUOL students, with an exchange offer that includes 19 institutions and hosted in the past 4 years 80 students, among those, 30 females. NUOL provides outgoing semesters and full years mobilities with a number of prominent Japanese Universities, such as the University of Tsukuba (11 students), Kumamoto University (5 semesters), Nagoya University (1 student under the programme JASSO), the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (9 students) and the Daito Bunka University with one MEXT scholarship. NUOL is also sending various students to South Korea, most of which are females (31/40). Among the partners there, the Seoul National University (13 students), the Jeju National University and the Chonbuk National University. Chinese Universities host mostly short-term programmes, but they represent the destination of many students (51). Moreover, Dali University is hosting 17 students for a full year programme.

- Student exchange in Middle East. Israel represents the top destination country for NUOL students, hosting 200 full year programmes. The two partner institutions in Israel are the Agrostudies and the AICAT, hosting respectively 60 and 140 students.
- Student Exchange with Europe. 21 students had the opportunity to study in Europe, also thanks to different programmes such as the Erasmus Plus at Uppsala University (13 students), in Sweden, and the SHARE programme with University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria (1 students) and the Tomas Bata University in Zlin (2 students), in Czech Republic. Moreover, NUOL has MoU with the University of Minho and of Porto, in Portugal (3 students) and the Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service (2 students) in Russia.

Prospective exchange students receive a decree letter issued by the Vice President for International Cooperation which is a formal document for the recognition of the course units they will attend abroad. With this reference, the Academic Affairs Division of their faculty will grant recognition for the credits earned at the hosting institution.

After their exchange, students have to submit the transcript of record, issued by the hosting institution, to their department which is in charge of the credit transfer procedure. No formal credit transfer system has been established so far. NUOL is a member of the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) hosted by the University of Indonesia (<https://acts.ui.ac.id>). ACTS is a student-centred system applied to student mobility among AUN (ASEAN University Network) Member Universities. This system was developed to facilitate student mobility under AUN Student Exchange Programme. ACTS has been designed to accommodate differences in the implementation of credit system among the member universities without any requirement to modify the existing institutional or national credit system.

Staff mobilities include a consistent number of professors (1046) and has as its top destinations China, Vietnam and Thailand. The programmes for the staff mobility are previously checked and approved by the Vice President

in Charge of International Cooperation. This allows the staff to have their mobility recognized for the development of their career.

Regarding incoming mobility, there is little offer for long-term programmes at NUOL. However, during these years, the University has organized and hosted some short-term cultural and academic exchanges, such as the EU Higher Education Roadshow 2018, the 17th ASEAN and 7th ASEAN +3 Youth Cultural Forum, 26-31 October 2019 and the 16th Lao-Thai Universities Friendship. The University has hosted so far 851 exchange/visiting students, most of them coming from China, Vietnam and Cambodia, and 81 academic staff members, mostly from China, Japan and Thailand.

NUOL has encountered several challenges and barriers in extending its international dimension through the participation and expansion of exchange programmes. For what concerns outgoing mobilities, the University has not established a formal credit transfer system which can allow student to have their grades and credits recognized once they have completed an exchange programme. Moreover, financial constraints make NUOL unable to implement or join self-funded exchange programmes, relying almost totally in funds provided by host universities or international organizations. Most of the students have a weak command of English. The use of English is not widespread in the country and within the university, therefore students do not have the opportunity to improve their competence in the language which is mainly employed in exchange programmes. Regarding the incoming programmes, the academic offer in English is not sufficient to attract international students. On the overall, the exchange programme management across faculties is inadequate, lacking experienced staff, dedicated services and facilities.

2.4.2 CHAMPASAK UNIVERSITY

Founded in 2002 as a branch of the National University of Laos in Pakse (Champasak Province), Champasak University was officially recognized as an autonomous institution in 2004. The creation of a new institution in the province responded to a regional policy of setting up a centre for higher

education, scientific research and academic services within that province. The Mission of CU is to provide high quality education and promote scientific and academic research in Lao PDR, while improving the quality of the administration system. Moreover, the University wants to be an inclusive academy, allowing access to higher education to disadvantaged, marginalized population. CU does not only offer academic activities, but it is also inclined to the enlargement of extra-curricular activities, for the promotion of sports, arts, cultural and traditional preservation. Among the objectives of CU, there is also the enhancement of academic cooperation at the international level.

CU currently has six faculties, with an educational offer in various fields: Agriculture and Forestry, Education, Economics and Management, Engineering, Law and Political Science, and Natural Sciences. Among the infrastructure and facilities there are the ICT Center, the Agriculture and Food Industry Product Quality Testing Center, one Laboratory, three integrated agricultural demonstration centres, a Library, a Vietnamese Language centre and a Lao Language centre. CU offers several academic programmes at different levels, undergraduate (27), continuing undergraduate (13) and master level (2). 6,006 students are enrolled in these programmes, half of which are females.

The University is administrated through six main offices, employing 44 staff members: Administration, Academic Affairs, Students Affairs, Research and Academic Service, Personnel and Organisation, Planning and International Cooperation Office. It can count on 359 professors and lecturers for its educational offer.

Internationalization Strategy

Champasak University has the enlargement of international cooperation in the objective of its mission. Overall, the priorities of CU can be resumed as follows: expanding academic cooperation with international institutions, in order to be more intensive, comprehensive, active and effective.

CU has developed a strategic plan to achieve this objective, which includes a number of key actions. The University wants to encourage both students

and staff in taking part in international projects, to achieve a greater impact in the academic offer and management. Here the steps to be taken:

- Increase the number of cooperation agreements with other institutions both internal (domestic) and external (foreign country) in Asia and Europe;
- Increase the funding support from international projects;
- Develop short-term international programmes (beginning with one week programme for 1 credit) to attract international students. If this programme proves to be successful then international long-term programmes will be implemented (from 1 month programme up to 1 semester programme)
- Develop international human resources training programmes and research focused exchange programmes;
- Develop lectures/professors' capacities so that they are able to teach in international environments;
- Increase professors' and researchers' capacity in gaining access to research grants and in publishing academic research
- Encourage lecturers and researchers to participate in international conferences.

The main goals for this to happen should include the development of the university infrastructure and human resources. CU needs a process of internal renovation of its internet system, and its communication management in order to be more modern, faster and to give plenty access to learning and teaching materials. This process should also include the improvement of the university website and the publication of its strategies. Considering internationalization, the university aims to create a network of partnerships and exchange programmes.

Governance and IRO

The management of internationalization entails the active involvement of different people at different levels. The Vice-president for Academic Affairs

is responsible for leading the process, however international activities are carried out and monitored by other leading figures such as the Deans/Vice-deans of the faculties, the directors of administrative offices. The IRO, formally named “Planning and International Cooperation Office (PICO)”, is in charge of the operative tasks for international projects and is made up of seven staff members. It is responsible for the outgoing and incoming mobility for staff and students, its duties concern documentations, reports, coordination and relations with partners. In particular, the PICO:

- Drafts all documents of cooperative agreements with international institutions and partners
- Facilitates all document drafting and procedures for students, lecturers, staff and university leaders to join international activities such as conference, exchange programmes, study visits and research collaborations
- Coordinates with partners and other guests to implement cooperation activities
- Plans international cooperation activities with partners and other supporting organizations
- Plans for welcoming university's guests
- Follows up and facilitates international guests to visit and work at Champasak University
- Plans and collects monthly, 3 months, 6 months and annual planning and reporting of the offices and faculties to finalize the University's plan
- Searches opportunities for networking to be more internationalized
- Assigns staff to work on the mobility schemes and international projects
- Distributes documents of application calls from partners and international organizations to staff, teachers, researchers and students at the offices, faculties and centres
- Collects data from the Champasak University side and submits them to partners

- Searches opportunities for students, teachers, lecturers and researchers to apply for scholarships or funding for research and exchange
- Follows up the work schedules or roadmap of the projects to complete the tasks on time.

International partnerships

CU has established 30 MoU and 9 Agreements with international partners. It is also partner in 8 International Educational projects: 3 Erasmus+ Capacity Building projects, SIDA MEKARN project, the Studies of Asian Community by One Asian Foundation, MEICC Endowed Course with the Association for Overseas Technical Cooperation and Sustainable Partnership-AOTS, The Development of Business Administration Programme of Champasack University in cooperation with Kasetsart University, Strengthening Higher Education Projects (ADB). International collaborations are held at country-level, university-level and activities-level. International collaboration at country level focuses on projects related to infrastructure development, curriculum development, human resource development, sharing of learning and teaching equipment/materials, and exchange programmes. International collaboration at university level focuses on providing scholarships for Masters and PhD, participating in international conferences, in learning and teaching exchange programmes or in sport and cultural exchanges. International collaboration at activities-level focuses on short training programmes and Educational Exhibitions.

Through its MoU, CU receives scholarships for teacher/lecturers and for Master and PhD programmes. Moreover, through these MOU CU can provide opportunities for training, learning and teaching exchanges, joint research programmes, academic visits and sport and cultural exchanges.

The most significant international educational projects and research collaborations are meant to increase and enhance mobility among the University's students and staff, to enhance equality in opportunities and improve edu-

cational quality, to strengthen the ties between institutions and expand the network of partner universities.

International collaborations are funded in different ways. At a national level, the main support comes from The Strengthening Higher Education Project (supported by ABD grant). These funds are used for the infrastructure development, such as buildings (classroom, offices, ICT, library, laboratory, Centre of Excellence, dormitory), road construction within university campus, furniture, learning and teaching materials, laboratory equipment at Champasack University and scholarships for Master and PhD programmes in order to upgrade teachers/lecturers qualification, scientific research, curriculum development, and management system. At the regional level the University can rely on MoU and agreements with other universities, which finance scholarships for Masters and PhDs, for sport and culture exchanges and for short and long-term training. From partners in Thailand and Vietnam, CU receives financial support for infrastructural improvement of the integrated agriculture demonstration and research centre and the Vietnamese language centre. On an international level, CU has an international funding schemes that come from international projects devoted to skills development related to academic fields through study visits, workshops and trainings, equipment for laboratory and equipment for facilitating on working in the office, curriculum development supported by Erasmus+ project with the total amount 200,000 Euro and for Scientific research supported by ADB grant 32,570 Euro.

Mobility

CU counted 52 students and 25 academic staff members in its outgoing programmes from 2015 to 2019. Students are involved in six mobility projects:

- SHARE Scholarship programme, which lasts 1 semester and is financed through European Union's funding. This programme is designed to contribute to the harmonisation of ASEAN higher education area through the formulation of ASEAN higher education frameworks taking into

account the EU experience; and to support mutual recognition and student mobility among higher education institutions in ASEAN in order to strengthen people-to-people connectivity;

- YSS-ASEAN, it is a 2 weeks volunteering project for students. It is designed to promote the spirit of volunteerism and camaraderie among the students of tertiary education and to produce global students volunteer icons. YSS is committed through YSS' five thrusts; to create volunteer leadership, to organise high impact volunteer programmes, to fortify the ecosystem of volunteerism, enhance strategic linkages, and reinforce volunteer training.
- JENESYs is a programme financed by the Japanese government which lasts 2 weeks and involves students over three main topics: (1) Community Youth Network; (2) Female Entrepreneurship; (3) Peace Building;
- ACNET-EngTech (ASEAN-China Network) which promotes academic and students' mobility and provides partner universities with mobility programmes, double degree programmes, accessibility of courses and information sharing. It is funded by member Universities;
- Academic Exchange programme between Champasak University and Ubon Rajathani University (Thailand), it provides academic and students mobilities funded by partner Universities in the law study field.

Students receive a certificate of participation in the exchange programme from host universities or programme, through which the mobility period is formally recognized at CU in the students' curriculum Although Champasak University does not have regulation for the credit transfer, it refers to the international credit transfer system as a tool for credit recognition. The policy of the university involves a discussion with the faculty member who approves the transfer of credits on the basis of similarities and compatibilities between syllabus/content of the course taken at host university and the one offered by the home country. More than 70% of faculty members accept the transfer of credits for their students. If the syllabus or content of the course from Host University is not similar to a course of the home country,

the faculty member cannot approve its recognition. In this case, the faculty member has to schedule a new exam for the student to pass.

Staff mobilities are in place mostly with China, Vietnam and Thailand. The staff mobility is formally recognized for the development of the academic career.

The University does not provide quantitative data for incoming mobility, as it varies depending on the number of application and scholarships provided. Incoming students are exclusively from Thailand and the number is around 10.

There are several challenges to the internationalization of CU. First of all, students, teachers, lecturers and researchers have limited English proficiency and they often lack the opportunity and expertise to participate in mobility programmes. Secondly there is a budget issue: CU has no enough funding to allow an enlargement of its international activities.

2.4.3 SOUPHANOUVONG UNIVERSITY

Souphanouvong University (SU) is a public university in Luang Prabang, the old capital of Laos, located in the northern part of the country. It was established in 2003 and was named after Prince Souphanouvong, who was the first President of the Lao PDR and an Engineer by profession. The University accomplishes its three main functions (Education, Research and Knowledge Transfer) and aims at: 1) preparing graduates, specialists, researchers and scholars with a multidisciplinary approach towards knowledge, 2) fostering scientific research, 3) protecting and promoting Lao unique, multi-ethnic arts and culture and delivering academic services to society.

The vision of Souphanouvong rests on three key words that epitomize its main goals for the future: specialization, localization and globalization. SU aims at reaching the standards of high ranked universities, promoting its members' well-being and moving towards international standards. On one

hand its mission is towards quality teaching and learning, on the other SU is committed to conduct and disseminate scientific research in society.

Souphanouvong University has two campuses. The main campus in Ban Donmay hosts five faculties, nine offices, one Confucius Institute, one library, one IT Center and one Lao-Korea Business and Incubation Center. The second campus hosts the Faculty of Education and is located in Ban Nasang-Veuy, much closer to the city. In addition to the Faculty of Education, SU includes the Faculty of Economics and Tourism, which is the oldest and most important together with the Faculty of Engineering - in particular for Civil Engineering inspired by the Red Prince Souphanouvong - the Faculty of Agriculture and Forest Resources, Faculty of Architecture and Faculty of Languages.

The six Faculties deliver 35 programmes at different levels (33 bachelor degrees and 2 Master Degrees). The University has over 7500 graduates and today counts 3054 students (739 females), 34 of them at a Master level. The staff is composed of 126 women and 301 men.

Internationalization Strategy

The main priorities for Souphanouvong University in the development of its international dimension concern the improvement of its staff capacities, the development of new curricula and the reinforcement of infrastructure. In this regards, researchers and lecturers should be provided with qualitative capabilities in the areas of management, teaching and research. Moreover, it is crucial to expand external cooperation, outside the university and the country. These priorities are meant to upgrade the quality of management, education and research within the university. In order to reach these objectives SU should be able to attract and take advantage of the support from international organizations and institutions. Thus, Souphanouvong University has undertaken a series of important steps. First, it has set up the office of international relations in charge of external affairs, research and academic matters. Furthermore, it has created a 5-year plan and vision to 2030 for the development of the university. It has signed several MOU with internal

and international institutions and organizations, co-established a Confucius Institute, a Lao-Korea Business and Incubation Center, and developed several courses with international institutions. SU has also joined the ASEAN University Network and has been sending its staff abroad to receive trainings or to complete their studies. In addition, SU is committed to send its students to take courses, do internships and sport activities in partner universities. The University is establishing an English Language centre and receives international students, volunteers, experts and internship students.

Aligning with the university 5-year (2020-2024) development plan, SU has established its internationalization strategy. This strategic planning includes actions/goals which are not strictly linked to the internationalization but are more related to course offering, university management, human resources and infrastructure. However, these key actions are pivotal to the upgrading of the university and its opening towards the international education panorama. At the same time, they may be accomplished through the support of international stakeholders. Initially SU aims at increasing its curricula offering (5 more bachelor programmes and 3 more master programmes) and establishing a Faculty of Tourism and 3 centres (Excellence Centre in Civil Engineering, Excellence Centre in Tourism, and an English Centre). Regarding its management and governance, the university aspires to become autonomous in terms of finance and international affairs. To enrich its academic community, SU intends to increase the number of researchers for each department to a minimum of two and improve the qualifications of lecturers and teachers in order meet the national higher education standard of a ratio of 1; 6; 3 (1 Ph. D holders, 6 Master holders and 3 Bachelor degree holders). Finally, as far as infrastructure is concerned, the University is planning to construct eight buildings for classrooms and laboratories, and also two student dormitories.

The strategic plan encompasses actions that are strictly linked to the internationalization:

- signing at least 30 MOU with internal and external organizations and institutions;
- receiving at least 20 international volunteers, experts and visiting lecturers every year;
- receiving 100 international students to study at Souphanouvong University every year;
- sending 120 students to do internships abroad every year, and also sending students to do academic, sports and cultural exchanges at least 3 times a year;
- co-establishing at least 2 programmes with international institutions;
- establishing at least one international course;
- increasing foreign languages proficiency, especially English, for staff, lectures, researchers and students to a profitable level;
- co-conducting 5 research projects with the social and economic sector and 10 projects with international organizations;
- publishing in at least 20 journals internally and internationally each year.

Governance and IRO

Currently, even though SU does not have an efficient and effective system and adequate human resources to manage mobility schemes and international projects, the University has set up some offices in charge of these activities. In particular, the Office of Scientific Research and Academic Services manages all research activities, whereas the Office of Organization and Personnel is responsible for staff training and development in long-term periods of 6 months and longer, and the Office of International Relations is in charge of staff and students' short-term mobility (shorter than 6 months). This Unit is also responsible for coordinating the inbound mobility of international experts, volunteers, students and international projects.

For the management of university internationalization, the main actors are the President, who holds decision making powers, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs, who acts as an assistant for the President and replaces

him/her in making decisions when the President is absent from the office. The faculties and departments are the structures mainly involved in international activities

SU does not have a Vice President in charge for international relations yet. The Office of International Relations reports directly to the President of the University. The office consists of three divisions with 10 working staff. IRO is managed by the Office Director, in charge of the overall affairs of the office, of reporting to the President, and attending meetings with the leadership board of the University. The Deputy Director for Protocol and Administrative Affairs, in charge of the overall work related to protocol, deals with office administration and international relations, and reports to the Director of the Office. The Deputy Director for International Relations is in charge of the overall work related to external affairs, lateral and multi-lateral agreements, university project accumulation, experts, volunteers and students, reporting to the director of the office. Managerial positions and responsibilities in IRO are divided as following:

- The Head of Administration and Protocol Division (with the team in the division) is in charge of the overall work related to protocol, office administration and internal relations like drafting official documents in Lao Language and contacting with related ministries and local authorities in Laos and in Luang Prabang; preparing meeting rooms before and after receiving delegations; managing the office budget. The Head of Administration and Protocol division reports to the Deputy Director for Protocol and Administration Affairs.
- The Head of international Relations and Project Management Division (with the team in the division) is in charge of the work related external affairs, bilateral and multi-lateral agreements such as contacting overseas universities and organizations, drafting official documents in English, receiving guests with the leadership board of SU, drafting SWOT analysis and official documents when submitting MOU to Lao government, being an interpreter and an MC for meetings and translating documents both from Lao to English and English to Lao when

required; accumulating university projects. This manager reports to the Deputy Director for international relations and project management and international experts, volunteers and students' management.

- The Head of International Experts and Volunteers and Students' Management Division (with the team in the division) is in charge of the work related to the inbound mobility of international experts, volunteers and students. This includes supporting experts and volunteers working for SU with their VISAs and ID Cards, solving problems they may have while working for SU and keeping relationship between SU and the volunteers; accommodating international students with their registration, holding their national events and festivals. She/he reports to Deputy Director for international relations and project management and international experts, volunteers and students' management.

International partnerships

Currently, Souphanouvong University has 51 valid MoU, MoA, and MoD with international partners. It is actively involved in various international programmes and projects, such as:

- FORHEAL - Forestry Higher Education Advancement in Laos, Erasmus + CBHE project ;
- BRECIL - Building Social Research Capacities in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia, Erasmus + CBHE project;
- TOOLKIT - Designing and managing international relations, educational projects and mobility schemes in Asian universities, Erasmus + CBHE project
- OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to internationalization strategies, Erasmus + CBHE project;
- Laos-Korea Science and Technology Center supported by Korean Government;
- Confucius Institute co-establishment with Kunming University of Science and Technology, China;

- Material Engineering Programme establishment supported by Pai Chai University, Korea;
- Student internships in Israel in the areas of Agriculture with Agro-Studies;
- Student scholarship programme supported by Shanghai Institute of Technology, China;
- Human resource development and research projects supported by ADB.

In the field of research, the main area of interest for SU is related to social sciences disciplines, in particular social and economic issues. Currently SU has six international research collaborations. One with a Korean partner, one with a university in Malaysia and four with partners from Thailand.

The cooperation themes of the MoU are based on the official format and templates that are provided by the Lao Government and are employed throughout public universities in Lao PDR. This MOU template includes the exchange of scholars and faculties (professors, lecturers, administrators or researchers), the exchange of students, the exchange of arts and culture, academic information and materials of mutual interest and the organization of joint research programmes. MoU are mostly used to reciprocate scholars and faculty members while the other activities foreseen in these memoranda are rarely implemented. To foster its outbound mobility SU has to rely on partners' funding; in some cases SU receives partial and full scholarships from its partner universities for its academic staff and lecturers in order to upgrade their qualifications, or funding to sponsor study visits and trainings for SU administrative staff and lecturers.

Souphanouvong is both a hosting and a sending University. Usually, it receives experts and volunteers who cooperate in the teaching of SU courses and sends its students on exchange. Mostly, SU sends its students to its partners in Thailand and China to exchange arts, culture and sports as these universities provide a partial financial support. Moreover, SU has gained some teaching-learning materials, computers and laboratory equipment from

some of its partner universities from China, Korea and Thailand. International collaborations depend heavily on external funding since Souphanouvong University, as a public university, has a very limited budget. At the present, the University receives funding mainly from ADB, Korean Ministry of Education through its partner university in Korea, Confucius Institute Headquarter in China and the European Commission through Erasmus+ Programme for capacity building of staff, lecturers and researchers.

Mobility

Students' mobility includes both inbound and outbound schemes. The top three receiving countries are: China (15 students per year), Israel (20 students p/y) and Thailand (10 students per year). The principal students' outgoing mobility schemes at SU are:

- Student internships in the areas of Agriculture in Israel for 10 months, student self-support;
- Students to complete bachelor degrees at Shanghai Institute of Technology, China, supported by Shanghai Institute of Technology;
- Student sports exchange at Kunming University of Science and Technology, China, for two weeks, partially supported by Souphanouvong University and Kunming University of Science and Technology;
- Student art and culture exchange between Lao and Thai universities for one week, partially supported by Souphanouvong University and the host University.

Souphanouvong University does not formally recognize studies and credits acquired during mobility periods in the students' curriculum. The only formally recognized mobility is within joint degree programmes. In any case, credit transfer is still a challenge, since SU has not established a standard procedure to recognize credits acquired during their mobility period.

In 2019, 110 staff members of SU have been involved in programmes abroad: 38 with China; 28 with EU 15 with Korea, 2 with Indonesia and 27 with Thailand. SU does not formally recognize staff mobility for the development of

their academic career. Each year SU also receives 17 experts and volunteers from America, Australia, China, Korea and Vietnam. Incoming staff mobility (for administrators, staff, lecturers and researchers) consists of 1/2 days visit to exchange experiences in university management, teaching-learning and research and is funded by sending institutions. Staff mobilities (incoming and outgoing) include:

- Visiting teachers to teach Lao Language at Pu'er University, China, for one academic year, supported by Pu'er University;
- The university human resource development programme (Masters and Ph. Ds) at partner universities in Thailand for 2-4 years, partially supported by ADB and the host universities in Thailand.

Incoming students at SU come from different areas, such as China (30 students per year), Korea (100 students per year) and Thailand (150 students per year). In addition to that, SU is currently hosting 23 Vietnamese students provided with scholarships offered by the province of Lao PDR government in order to study at SU. This is a specific programme set up for Vietnamese students seeking for Bachelor Degrees for 4 years, supported by Lao local government.

Here follow other examples of mobility schemes for incoming students at SU:

- Mobility flows from Korea through PAS to exchange art and culture, teach Korean and do community services from three days to two weeks, supported by Korean Government or home institutions;
- Students study tours from Thailand for one or two days, supported by their home institutions.

Souphanouvong University is still facing several challenges in the internationalization process. First of all, a limited funding to send administrators, staff, lecturers, researchers and students to partner universities and to co-conduct research with partner universities. In addition, the University staff, lecturers, researchers and students have limited proficiency in a for-

foreign language, especially English, and academic staff has limited skills in research and in seeking and applying for funding. On the overall the university management and staff does not fully understand the importance of internationalization in education areas. There are also infrastructural problems, as the university cannot provide accommodation for international students and does not offer international courses. On the administrative level, SU does not have a proper system to manage mobility, to recognize degrees, previous studies, and credits from a foreign university. Moreover, there are no guidelines for lecturers, researchers and students to apply for a visa to work and study at a university in Lao PDR. The process of running documents for an approval for lecturers, researchers and students to work and study at a university in Lao PDR is complicated and time consuming.

2.4.4 SAVANNAKHET UNIVERSITY

Savannakhet University (SKU) is a very young institution, as it was founded in 2009. SKU has a regional mission, that of aligning with the socio-economic development strategy of the three provinces (Savannakhet, Khammouane and Bolikhamxay). Within this area, Savannakhet aims at providing equal access to higher education for both the urban and rural people, in particular, underprivileged people from rural and remote areas.

The upgrading of SKU must be closely related to the national strategy of education development, so to gradually approach the national and international standard.

In Lao PDR, SKU represents the centre for human resources development located in the central region. The University has an educational offer covering different fields and consists of eight faculties: Agriculture and Environment, Business Administration, Education, Food Science, Linguistics and Humanities, Education, Natural Sciences and the Information Technology (IT Center). The University has recently established a preparatory committee in the Faculty of Engineering for the development of Electrical Engineering and Logistics Engineering degrees, since one of the main goals for SKU is

to enhance international and regional linkage on the territory, emphasizing excellence in logistics engineering and management fields in order to create a modernized foundation for the university and the whole country.

SKU consists of two campuses, Naxeng Campus and Nongpue Campus, both of them located in Kaisonephomvihan City, Savannakhet Province. The University counts 332 members of the academic and administrative staff; a great importance is given to female employment (145). These administrative and academic staff hold different degrees of education: 2 Assoc.Prof.Dr, 11 Ph.D, 145 Master and 33 Bachelor and Diploma. 4.555 students are currently enrolled at SKU, more than a half of those (2,679) are female.

Internationalization Strategy

SKU has formulated its plan to enhance its international dimension, which is regarded as pivotal to meet the criteria for the development of education. The main priorities in this fields concern the creation of a net of international collaborations to set up international programmes in different areas. The strategic actions include: the creation of platforms that allow mobility schemes for students and staff; the development of joint degree programmes with partner universities and the establishment of joint research projects.

The strategic plan for internationalization is published in the university website. The internationalization strategy aims at two important objectives. The first would broaden the academic collaboration with partner universities and enhance the educational offer for students of the region. The second would establish profitable collaborations with public and non-public agencies in order to expand the cooperation with all areas of industries and large companies in order to create more internship opportunities. This second one is important to strengthen human resources capacities for the development of the region.

The overarching goal for SKU is promoting the university recognition at international and regional level. This will require providing more mobility

opportunities for staff and students, both inbound and outbound, and easing the processes for academic and international exchanges.

Governance and IRO

The actors engaged in the international dimension of SKU are the Vice Rector for International Relations, the Head of International Relations and the International Relations Office. The IRO is run by the Presidential Board, which assigns duties and priorities. SKU-IRO is responsible of planning collaborations with foreign partners and international organizations in order to gain aids and establish academic and technical cooperation. The IRO is also in charge of the creation of an international cooperation legislation, adapted to the university level. In this context, the IRO prepares the themes and contexts for meetings, contracts, agreements and memoranda of understanding between SKU and prospective partners; it coordinates the financial capability and establishes relations with internal and external scholarship donors. Regarding the management of projects, some more responsibilities of the IRO are:

- Request for official approval for staff and students who go on exchange and welcoming delegation from foreign partners.
- Facilitate for and coordinate with foreign volunteers, trainers and sports people who attend seminars, trainings or competitions in Laos.
- Manage, inspect, monitor and evaluate the foreign affairs at the university level.

The IRO is also in charge of providing services for students and staff participating in international programmes: it provides guidelines for visa application, support for incoming students accommodation and assistance in documentation submission.

International partnerships

SKU is a very young institution with a regional focus, therefore it has a limited number of international partnerships and collaborations. So far SKU has signed Memoranda of Understanding and Agreements with 10 international universities and 4 regional organizations. These projects were all signed under international programmes financing and developing internationalization for SKU and other national universities. In fact, SKU is partner to 7 projects of Erasmus Capacity Building and 2 projects of Erasmus International Credit Mobility. These programmes embrace different fields of the University's education and development, such as capacity building and human resources development. Top three partners for SKU are:

- Kasetsart University, in Thailand, where projects concern capacity building and human resources development;
- Khon Kaen University, in Thailand, with collaborations focused on human resources development;
- Hue University, in Vietnam, where the focus is on human resources development and curriculum development.

The MOU are implemented mostly at a faculty-level, where the activities programmed by the agreement take place. The faculties are in charge of running the projects, according to what has been established by the agreements. Faculties at home and host University are consulted while drafting the activities for collaboration. Most of international collaborations are funded by the donors, such as EU, SHARE, DAAD.

Among the international collaborations, it is worth highlighting:

- EU Projects:
 - ◆ From Automation and Control Training to the Overall Roll-out of Industry 4.0 Across SouthEast Asian Nations (ASEAN AFACTORY 4.0): Capacity Building Project in the field of Higher Education. Curriculum development and staff training

- ♦ Sustainable Farming (SFARM): Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. Sustainable farming and agro-environmental technologies and Vet Course development.
 - ♦ Forestry Higher Education Advancement in Laos (FORHEAL): Training on capacity building and master degree curriculum development
 - ♦ Partnership for Forestry Higher Education Cooperation in Myanmar (PARFORM)- Forest, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation: Training on capacity building and curriculum development
 - ♦ Enhancing Digital Capacities in Higher Education for Asian Universities (Digi-CHE-Asia): Capacity building, curriculum development and Vet Course development.
 - ♦ Strategic Environmental Assessment for Capacity Development in Higher Education (SEA-ASIA): Master degree curriculum development on Environmental and capacity building
 - ♦ OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to internationalisation strategies/OPEN.
- Memberships:
- ♦ Le projet de la politique de la démarche qualité appliquée à la gouvernance de l'Université de Savannakhet (AUF): Quality Assurance in learning and teaching French, training, curriculum development, scholarship.
 - ♦ EU-SHARE Program: student mobility
 - ♦ IMPARK Project: student mobility and capacity building
 - ♦ SEAMEO-RIHED: Academic Credit Transfer Framework for Asia (ACTFA) technical workshop
 - ♦ SEAMEO-SEARCA: the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture: Training and scholarship

Mobility

SKU takes part in different international projects designed to enhance outgoing mobility programmes for Students and Staff. The two main mobility

schemes go under the SHARE programme and the Erasmus+, which are also the principal funding resources for internationalization, in addition to self-funding from SKU. Under the SHARE programme the University runs only students' mobility, with exchanges lasting 4 months. The Erasmus+ offers the opportunity for Inter-Institutional agreements for both staff and students' mobility. Students' mobility to Europe is a semester-long programme, while the teaching mobility lasts for three months. Both are financed through the Erasmus+ project and the home university funding. Furthermore, Erasmus+ also provides teaching mobility programmes from Europe to Asia for a short-term period of one week. The partner countries receiving most of the students are, in order, Italy, Germany, Malaysia, Cambodia and Indonesia. However, the outgoing mobility does not involve a high number of students at SKU. The students' mobility can be recognized up to one term by SKU. During this period the courses attended which are related to the regular programme offered by SKU will be recognized and graded for the students' career. Nevertheless, SKU does not have a formal system of credit recognition for students completing an exchange programme at a university-wide level. Some faculties have established a procedure for credit validation, and through this procedure they have recognized courses in the past. Credit transfer is based on the similarity of courses offered by the home faculty with those passed by the students in the partner university.

The staff mobility is more frequent within the Asian context and top destinations include Vietnam, Thailand and Germany. This kind of mobility is formally recognized by SKU and it is extremely valuable, as it helps to broaden the knowledge and understanding of the international management, which ultimately is essential to achieve better performances in providing international services.

Also, the incoming mobility schemes are based on the donors such as Erasmus+, SHARE programme. Through these programme SKU manages to host exchange and visiting students from different countries, such as Vietnam, Germany and Japan. In addition, SKU also hosts professors' mobility from Italy, Vietnam, Germany, Spain and Japan. With regards to incoming mobilities, SKU

reports many issues during the process for the Visa application, mainly due to documentation. In fact, in order to invite incoming students and professors, a Lao University has to request approval by different authorities such as the Department of Higher Education and Department of International Cooperation under the MoES. Only after these two approvals visitors can apply for a Visa.

The main challenges for SKU in running mobility programmes are related to funding, credit recognition and language barriers. SKU has at its disposal very limited budget for internationalization, as it only relies on insufficient government funding. In addition, this budget is not autonomously managed by the university, which means that the decisions on its allocation are not in the hand of the University's management. As mentioned before, there is no official credit transfer system, which makes it difficult for students to participate in exchange programmes and get reliable and official information over their courses recognition. Finally, both students and staff do not possess a good command of the English language, which represents an important challenge when applying and involving in a mobility project.

2.4.5 UNIVERSITY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

The University of Health Sciences of Lao PDR (UHS-Laos) is currently the only university for health professional training in the country. Unlike the other OPEN partners, UHS is under the Ministry of Health. Since 1958 the Medical School had been issuing a four year degrees in Medicine under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In 1968, the name of the School was changed into Sisavangvong University and was provided with a new curriculum for training medical doctors, which was extended to six years. In 1975, this institution was changed again into the University of Medicine in Vientiane. Then, from 1996 until 2006, the institution was affiliated to the National University of Laos as the Faculty of Medical Science. In 2007, the University of Health Science was finally established as independent higher education institution.

UHS is located in Vientiane and is divided in four campuses. This young university comprises six faculties: Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Pharmacy, Faculty of Dentistry, Faculty of Nursing, Faculty of Medical Technology, Faculty of Public Health. UHS comprises also the Institute of Research and Education Development and two cabinets, the Administration Cabinet and the Academic Affairs Cabinet. In the 2019/20 year, the number of enrolled students was 3,149 (FM: 1,945); 2,773 undergraduates (FM: 1745) and 376 (FM: 200) postgraduates.

The UHS is a part of a wide network “Complexe Hospitalo–Instituto–Proyecto–Universitaire” (CHIPU) gathering the national and regional hospitals where the students follow their practice training. The vision of the UHS is to be recognized in the region as an institute of higher education that is contributing to the production of knowledge and the education of high-quality health personnel who is motivated to serve the people of Lao PDR and committed to lifelong learning.

Internationalization Strategy

The University is committed towards the development of its organization and structure. Concerning the international dimension, UHS aims at improving its reputation in research and education. The process requires time and dedication, for this reason UHS is establishing collaborations and partnerships in the fields of research and learning, which will allow for a boost in the upgrading of the University.

UHS has developed an internationalization strategy which aligns with the overall university strategic plan. The key actions envisaged by this strategy are: 1. to increase the number of collaborations (MOU, Conferences, etc.); 2. to strengthen the existing ones; 3. to facilitate process and procedures for welcoming international volunteers and experts. This will help the organizational setting of the university to achieve higher standards and gain some expertise in the field of internationalization. At the same time, UHS seeks to

be involved in international projects that can upgrade its research outputs and educational offer.

Governance and IRO

The internationalization process involves different actors within the university management and administration. The governance resides with the Vice-president in Academic Affairs, but international activities and actions require the commitment of the Deans/Vice-deans of the faculties, the directors of administrative offices.

The administration office and the academic affairs office have also an active role in the internationalization strategy. Under the supervision and direction of the administration office, an International Relations Division was established (IR). The IR Division has 5 members, namely the Head of Division, the Vice-Head and 3 staff members. The main activities of the IR Division are:

- Collect information on and facilitate MOU and Agreement processes and to inform all parties involved
- Facilitate, follow up and manage the international volunteer initiatives
- Organize international meetings or MOU/Agreement signing ceremonies
- Participate in international projects activities.

International partnerships

UHS has 169 Memoranda of Understanding and Agreements with international partners. It is also taking part in 5 international projects and 8 research collaborations. The main collaborations are:

- Health Frontier, USA: a project to strengthen postgraduate curricula in the medical field
- Pierre Fabre, France: a project designed to put in place educational development and research activities

- KOFIH, Dr Lee-Jong-Wook Project, South Korea, whose aim is to strengthen individual capacity and laboratory equipment support

Agreements pursue a series of goals and objectives in different academic areas. This includes:

- Exchange of faculty and administrative staff
- Exchange of students
- Conducting collaborative research projects on issues of interest
- Conducting lectures and organizing symposia
- Exchange of academic information and materials
- Promoting collaboration in fields of mutual interest
- Promoting other academic co-operation as mutually agreed

UHS does not have sufficient self-funding support, therefore, almost the whole funding for international collaboration comes from international projects and partners (Universities, NGOs, Others).

Mobility

UHS is involved in some international projects, which allow students, staff, and researchers to take part in exchange programmes throughout Europe, Asia and North America. As a general trend, outgoing students are mostly directed to Thailand (30 students), Singapore (25 students) and EU countries (10 students to France, Italy).

There were three projects dedicated to long-term mobilities of degree-seeking students, lecturers, and researchers, all funded through Erasmus:

- MAHEVA Erasmus Mundus Project,
- PANACEA Erasmus Mundus Project
- TECHNO Erasmus Mundus Project.

The average duration of the exchange is 10 months, and the project duration is 3 years. Two other Erasmus+ projects are addressed to the staff and offer

short term trainings and research activities. Those are the Erasmus+ CBHE Projects, Catalyst and ASEAN FACTORY 4.0.

Some other collaborations are in place with the Pierre Fabre Foundation, Health Frontiers, and KOHFI, Dr Lee-Jong-Wook. These international organizations offer scholarships for short/long term trainings in postgraduate studies (3-6 months) and degree completion scholarships for staffs and lecturers (6-10 months).

Students encounter many problems in the recognition of credits acquired abroad since a credit transfer system is not in place at UHS.

Professors from UHS are also involved in mobility schemes with Thailand (112), Vietnam (37) and France (10). The staff mobility is formally recognized by UHS for the advancement of their academic career.

UHS is also receiving students and staff from partner universities. Most students come from

Singapore (25), France (25), Sweden (20). Exchange and visiting professors are also hosted at UHS, many come from Thailand (10), France (5), Vietnam (3). The mobility schemes for incoming are related to those for the outgoing, but they also include some more collaborations. Among those:

- The Pierre Fabre Foundation, France
- Institute of Research & Development
- Melbourne University, Australia.
- Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (KOHFI)

The above projects are dedicated to academic exchange and research, the average duration of the exchange is around 1 year.

There are several challenges in running mobility schemes and enlarging the international dimension of the University. The first issue is a financial one, as the University does not have sufficient resources to fund international projects. Secondly, there is still a language barrier, because students and staff

are not sufficiently proficient in English. Then credit transfer and different academic calendars still hinder the setting up of exchange programmes. Credit transfer system is not in place yet. Main obstacle is represented by the differences in the curricula at home and abroad; curricula structures might not be comparable since the number of years can be different (especially for bachelor's degrees), syllabi and teaching modules are not the same or are delivered in different years.

3. INTERNATIONALIZATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES

3.1 CONSULTATION PHASE: RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The Consortium elaborated two different questionnaires (see annex), one circulated among students and the other among faculties members and administrative staff. Each partner committed to interview a sample of 50 students and 50 academic/administrative staff. Each partner formed a Focus Group that carried out a thorough analysis of the collected data highlighting the main obstacles and constraints that hinder mobility of students and staff, international research collaborations and consequently the internationalization of their own institution. Although each partner has detected specific features, this consultation has shown common trends that are in line with those already pointed out by the project teams in the first phase of the desk analysis. However, this does not undermine the work carried out, on the contrary, it confirms that these barriers are felt and acknowledged by their communities. Moreover, we believe that the study of the delivered responses may provide further inputs and insights to the Lao partners in reviewing of their internationalization objectives. This is why it had been decided to include the analysis of the consultation phase which each partner has produced in the annexes. Nevertheless, for the project aims, a comprehensive overview of the results is necessary so that feedback and identified trends may guide partners in the development of the future trainings and tools that may facilitate student/staff mobility and enhance international collaborations in research and education.

Profile of the Students

265 students from different faculties and fields of study answered the questionnaire. Among the respondents 48.0% are males and 52.0% are females. 30.0% of them are in the age group of 17 to 20 years old, about 60.0% are between 21 and 24 years old. Only 10% are over 24 years old. Around 47%

of the respondents are studying in their fourth year, followed by 2nd year students (27.0%), 21% are in their 3rd year, the remaining 5% are 1st year students. This last percentage refers to the four universities under the MoES. The sample differs for UHS where 32% are 2nd year students, 26% are in their 3rd year, 22% in their 5 year, 14% in the 4th year, 4% are 6th year students and 2% are 1st year students.

Most of the respondents indicates English and Thai as a foreign language in which they are proficient. Percentages vary according to the universities but, in addition to English and Thai, the other popular spoken languages are Chinese, Vietnamese. On the European side, French is the most widespread language among students. When considering the percentage of the students who have taken advantage of an exchange programme, NUOL and UHS show the highest figures (44% and 40%), for the other partners this percentage does not reach 25%.

Students point of view

According to the collected responses, a good number of students seem to be aware of the mobility opportunities that are offered by their institutions: almost half of them gave a positive answer. They were also able to suggest some exchange programmes as examples. However, it is not easy to find a trend in the exchange programmes since they vary largely from one university to another. This feature can be verified in the analysis produced by each partner. Most of the survey participants specified that they learnt about the mobility opportunities from their professors (around 55%) followed by college mates and friends. The other channel of communication highly represented is the university website. However, in this case, the percentage varies significantly among the partners: whereas NUOL has 60% of its respondents in this category, the other universities report percentages not higher than 20%. This suggests that all partners need to improve their web site as a means to promote international opportunities and reach their students. Likewise, it appears that international week/days and orientation meetings are not quite spread as tool to raise awareness about internationalization among

students. It is also interesting to point out that the first response for those who did not have a study abroad experience is that they were not aware of this opportunity, then language is the second main impediment where lack of funds is the third one.

A few questions aimed at understanding the general perceptions towards mobility: where and why going on exchange. The top destination countries where students would like to study are grouped as follows: 1. USA, 2. Australia, Japan, 3. England, Singapore, China, 4 Korea and 5 Thailand. The reasons why they chose these specific countries are: high quality education system, exposure to high developed environment in terms of technology and industry, opportunity to improve their English proficiency. It is quite unexpected that Thailand is not one of the first destination, although Thai is one of the most popular language. This may happen because Thailand is not considered to be abroad, because the Lao language and Thai, especially in northern Thailand, are mutually comprehensible and most Lao people watch Thai television.

Those who indicated neighbouring countries such as Singapore, Korea and China gave as main motivation the similar lifestyle and cultural environment. Most students would like to have a long-term exchange because this kind of experience would allow them adequate time to adjust to the new culture and education system, to improve language competence and build long lasting relationships. On the other hand, the main disincentive for a long term exchange is insufficient funding and fear of dropping out of studies since no credit transfer is guaranteed.

Perceived Benefits and Barriers to Mobility

Students regard a study abroad experience as an opportunity for personal development in terms of self-confidence, leadership skills, cross cultural competences, and language proficiency. Academically, they are eager to experience different teaching and learning modes, to know different education systems and study curricula. They believe that a study abroad experience may

expose them to more advance curricula that would enable them to acquire diverse competences especially in research methodologies and applied technologies. The main obstacles to joining an exchange programme seem to be lack of funds and inadequate language competence. Another concern is the uncertainty in credit recognition that might slow down their study pace or even cause study drop out. Some also highlighted difficulties in adjusting to a different culture, climate, and environment and, academically, to new teaching and learning modes.

Feedback after A Study Abroad Experience

When analysing the data related to the students who have gone on exchange some trends have been confirmed. It is interesting to observe that a low percentage has studied abroad more than six months, whereas the evenly spread option among all the partners is a short-term mobility (less than a month).

How long did you stay abroad	NUOL	SU	SKU	CU	UHS
	No./%	No./%	No./%	No./%	No./%
Less than 1 month	13 (26.0)	4 (6.6)	19 (38.0)	5 (9.10)	9 (18.0)
Between 1 to 6 months	1 (2.0)	-	29 (58.0)	7 (12.72)	6 (12.0)
More than 6 months	8 (16.0)	-	2 (4.0)	-	7 (14.0)

All students identified the International Relations Office as their main support before and during their exchange period, however no details are provided about the recognition process. Thailand and Japan are the most represented destinations, followed by Singapore, USA, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Korea. In this case, students' expectations seem to partially correspond to what they can in fact choose as a destination for exchange. European Countries are less frequent. Only in the case of NUOL some students spent their exchange in Sweden and Belgium, whereas some students from Champasak went to Italy. Having scholarship is a precondition for joining an exchange

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programme, the following are main donors and exchange programmes that students indicated as their source of funding:

NUOL	SU	SKU	CU	UHS
JASSO	YSEALI	YSEALI	Champasack University	Temasek Foundation
Temasek Foundation	US Scholarship	MEXT	personal budget	Erasmus
QUEST	Cultural & educational exchange	Chulalongkon University, Thailand	scholarship programme	Global Korea
Erasmus+	Global undergraduate Exchange Programme USA	EU SHARE programme	JENESYS project	Embassy Scholarship
University partner	Israel project to exchange in 6 months		ChiengMai University (Thailand)	
MEXT	Lao- Korea exchange students' programme		EU SHARE	
ADRF Laos	GKS for Asian Country		Government scholarships	
YSS Foundation	LANS			
Japan ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF)	Marathon project to help disable children			

After their exchange period, students believe they have acquired more experience both academically and culturally. They have enhanced their language command and acquired the ability to adjust to different cultures and lifestyles. Thus, gains are related not only to the academic sphere but also to personal development, which goes from self-confidence to leadership and

time management skill. There is a correspondence between what is perceived as potential benefit and what students elected as actual gains after their exchange period. A relevant information gathered through this survey is the successful recognition of the credits earned during the exchange period. The results confirm that partners need to further work on this matter.

Were the credits that you acquired at the hosting University recognized into your student's curriculum by your university?	NUOL	SU	SKU	CU	UHS
	No./%	No./%	No./%	No./%	No./%
Yes, all of them	-	-	14 (28.0)	-	2 (4.0)
Yes, some of them	3 (6.0)	2 (3.3)	17 (34.0)	7 (12.7)	19 (38.0)
No	19 (38.0)	-	19 (38.0)	5 (9.1)	1 (2.0)

Students were also asked how their institutions could improve their students exchange programmes and what services should be set up. Among the different suggestions and recommendations, the most recurrent were:

- Improve promotion of mobility programmes through different channels (IRO website, university website and social media)
- Assist students in looking for scholarships;
- Provide information in time so that students can manage to complete all the different procedures (applications procedures, study plan, visa);
- Organize orientation services and language preparatory courses;
- Improve coordination and communication mechanism with hosting institutions;
- Study the needs and interests of students;
- Plan preparatory activities to develop students' transversal skills.

Profile of the Academic Staff

A total of 250 senior staff, professors and lecturers answered the questionnaire distributed by the Lao partners. Among them, 57% are male and 43% are female. The age goes from 26 up to over 55 years old, the highest percentage being reported in the age range between 31 and 40 years old (around 52%).

The majority of the respondents are faculty members (60%), where 22% work in offices and university units and the remaining 18% are affiliated to different structures such as Institutes, Centres, Divisions. Around 38% hold a position as a Dean, Vice Dean, Director or Head of Department, while the 3% is represented by the University leadership. The highest percentage of the participants has a master's degree (around 54%), followed by those with a Bachelor degree (27%), only 19% holds a Ph.D. The results show that those with a working experience between 6 and 10 years and between 11 and 15 years are the majority, covering respectively 27% and 23%. Those with over 20 years of working experience follow with 20%, while the other respondents are evenly distributed in the last two ranges: between 1 to 5 years and between 16 and 20.

The demographics shows that the sample of the participants is comprehensive and representative of the university communities; it comprises professors, lectures and staff working in various faculties and university structures, having different working experience and holding different positions.

Internationalization: Significant Benefits, Barriers, and Bottlenecks

In the questionnaire, participants were asked to rank the benefits of internationalization from 1 to 5 where 1 is the lowest value and 5 is the highest. Based on the survey results, academic staff seem quite aware of the potential of internationalization. They regard it as beneficial for their institution but also for their members: students, instructors and administrative staff. Respondents give a highly positive feedback on an international exposure

for students with a mean value of 4.3. Mobility opportunities are viewed as much as relevant for lecturers and researchers (mean value 4.4) whereas an abroad experience for administrative staff is perceived a little less significant with mean value of 4.05.

When asked to rank the potential benefits of Internationalization for their institutions, respondents indicated as the most relevant: “Enhanced international cooperation” (4.34) and “Strengthened institutional research and knowledge production capacity” (4.33). In any case, responses are evenly distributed among the range of identified benefits and all the statements have been ranked over 3. Internationalization is therefore perceived as pivotal to the enhancement of research and education, to the upgrading of human resources and of the university prestige; its positive impact can reach all the diverse components of an institution: its curricula, services, management and mainly its community.

Survey responses show that signing agreements is perceived as the first measure to foster internationalization with a mean value of 4.4. However, in the desk analysis, partners have pointed out that MOU and Agreements are often operative only when the partner university can provide funds to implement mobility schemes or other actions which are anticipated in the agreement. Respondents also believe that an empowered international relations office would boost international cooperation. In this sense a fully operational IRO would strategically contribute to the establishment of new partnerships and would effectively disseminate information about international funding schemes among faculty members and students. As a matter of fact, easily access to information about international funds is viewed as equally important to promote mobility (mean value of 3.7).

The survey shows that internationalization is not an objective that partners can easily reach. Different barriers slow down the process of realizing and shaping an international dimension within an institution. Among the main constraints, insufficient financial resources and language proficiency are acknowledged as the main barrier, internally and externally.

Internal Barriers

Although the responses are evenly distributed among the different items, a limited faculty capacity and expertise is one of the main obstacles, preventing internationalization to move forward (with a mean value of 3,57). Equally ranked barriers are “lack of exposure to international opportunities” and “too rigorous/inflexible curriculum to participate in internationally focused programs” (mean of 3.56). Professors also perceive that an inadequately organized, understaffed IRO together with excessive, difficult bureaucratic procedures discourage them to engage in international collaborations.

External Barriers

Data collected prove that credit transfer and recognition of qualifications is a central issue (mean 3.46). Most of the respondents also think that there are few potential partners interested in their institutions and that their country is perceived as not safe enough. Finally, it is worth mentioning that many respondents argue that internationalization cannot move forward since it is not a national policy priority (3.36).

Barriers to Mobility for Students and Academic staff

A few questions of the survey were aimed at understanding what professors perceive as major obstacles in implementing mobility schemes. Although each partner has set up an IRO, some respondents suggested that each faculty should allocate one staff in charge of international activities who should be working closely with the IRO staff. This might help to better disseminate information about exchange opportunities and provide a close support to potential beneficiaries. It seems a shared opinion among the respondents that all Lao universities suffer from a limited academic human resource, as a result, each professor is assigned several duties. They must cope with an overload of teaching hours, administrative tasks and responsibilities, so they find it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in activities related to internationalization. As already stated, financial resources, language proficiency, a

poor self confidence in their professional/studies background discourage students and academic staff from taking advantage of an international exposure. Unfortunately, there are other issues that IROs and academic staff face when promoting mobility opportunities among their peers and their students. The following ones seem the most impacting.

Incoming student mobility

According to the survey responses, one of the main difficulties in recruiting international non-degree and degree seeking students is a poor international academic offering, which is somehow connected to the language proficiency of the students and academic staff. Lao project partners have very few curricula that are taught in English or in another foreign language; this is quite understandable, since delivering a whole curriculum in a foreign language is quite challenging. However, respondents claim that Lao universities do not have even resources to increase the number of international classes so as to improve the incoming mobility flows. Setting up short term programmes, with specific syllabi for incoming students, is perceived as much as problematic mainly because professors find they are not well equipped to lead such initiatives. In addition to the insufficient offer of international courses, universities do not have international dormitories, dedicated services and staff that might help international visitors to adjust to the new academic and living environment. Visa application is quite complex and time consuming. Finally, credit transfer is not an easy process in the sense that Lao universities have difficulties in providing transparent information about Lao grading scales, credits, syllabi and content of their courses to partners universities and prospective incoming students.

Outgoing student mobility

Survey participants identify the same difficulties in recruiting local students for exchange programmes. Visa procedures comprise so many steps and approvals that students fail to complete them in time. Respondents also suggest that students are often unable to prepare and collect all the supporting

documents of the hosting institution application. Also, they complain that the timeframe of the calls for application is too short, again, as a consequence, students are unable to submit them by the due deadline. Credit transfer and recognition of study abroad remain the main concern. It is a shared opinion among the instructors that national guidelines for credit transfer would increase outgoing students flows.

Staff mobility

Once again, poor financial resources, visa procedures, not well-timed information on calls for application seem to be the major reasons why professors are not willing to join mobility programmes. Survey participants pointed out that they do not have relevant international collaborations that they can rely on in order to plan mobility periods for training and research. On the other hand, if they decide to submit their applications for international scholarships, they feel their academic profiles are not enough qualified. A few respondents also mentioned that university internal procedures to apply for a mobility are complex and discouraging.

International Research Collaborations

Respondents to the survey did not highlight any relevant international research collaboration in which they are involved with international higher institutions. Most of the professors, however, are aware of the funding schemes related to international research collaborations. In some cases, they are also able to specify the main sources available at their institution such as co-funding from partnerships, external funds from international organizations (World Bank, Asian Development Bank – ADB) or international projects for example within Erasmus+ framework. The list of funding opportunities regarding international collaborations is provided in the following table:

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NUOL	SU	SKU	CU	UHS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erasmus+ programme • World Bank • UNEF/UN • AUN/AUN SEED Net within ASEAN University Network (AUN) • Asian Development Bank (ADB) • Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) • IRD • International Science Program, Sweden (ISP) • Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) • SSHEP.Laos • KFAS • Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) • Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) • Government of Luxembourg • Government of China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian Development Bank (ADB) • EU • Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) • Lao Government • Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) • United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian Development Bank (ADB) • Fund from government • Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) • Erasmus+ (OPEN Fund) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International projects • SIDA MEKARN, • Asian Development Bank (ADB) • Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erasmus+ programme • World Bank • IRD • Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) • Korea Foundation for International Healthcare (Kofih) • Dr Lee-Jong Wook Project (Seoul Project)

Although there are some funding sources for staff and lecturers to join international research, there are still several obstacles that they face when applying for international research grants. Lao scholars feel they have inadequate expertise and research skills, when compared with the skills of their international peers. They cannot show a solid research publishing profile, which is often one of the first criteria in any selection for research scholarships. Calls for application are arduous and professors cannot count on the support of dedicated staff in the IRO or other office units. Moreover, some of the respondents experienced poor motivation because they are not endorsed by an institutional approach towards international research collaborations. Within their institutions there are no good practices in international research, insufficient dissemination about international collaborations and scholarships. Indeed, due to the limited budget of the university, there is a general concern towards the co-funding mechanism of several funding schemes.

With regards to this analysis, respondents suggested some measures and recommendations for the development and improvement of international research collaborations. First, lecturers and researchers should be encouraged to improve their language proficiency and research skills and also a proper budget should be allocated for university's infrastructure, including research facilities. Furthermore, it would be advisable to allocate and train dedicated staff to deal with research activities and create working groups to develop research projects proposals.

Feedback from International Organizations in Laos

International organizations operating in Laos involved in this analysis were: the Asia Foundation (AF), Education for Development Fund (ADF-Lao), Southeast Asia Ministers Education Organization (SEAMEO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and European Union in Laos (EU).

Their representatives contributed to the needs analysis by submitting responses to the questionnaire prepared for them, since face-to-face inter-

views cannot be carried out. Their feedback were correspondent to the results highlighted by students and academic staff since the information given were in line with the outcomes emerged in the analysis of the challenges and opportunities on the internationalization of Lao HE system.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of government policies, university strategies, and the responses from students and academic and administrative staff a remarkably consistent picture emerges across the five institutions of the current level of internationalisation, the opportunities for further development, and the challenges to this process. While clearly NUOL is already much more advanced on the road to internationalisation than the other universities, NUOL accepts its role as a national leader and the need to share their experience and provide training and support for the more recently founded institutions. It is apparent from our analysis and OPEN project meetings and training activities that a sense of common purpose and shared goals is developing across the Lao higher education institutions which will be of benefit to all those involved in internationalisation.

The OPEN project comes at a time of both crisis and opportunity for Lao HE. As Dr. Kikeo Chanthaboury, Vice Minister of Planning and Investment has noted, both the prevailing regional economic conditions and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have imposed extra stresses on the education system, and have constrained the ability of government to invest in higher education to the level that they would like. The opportunities arise from the willingness of international donor and lending agencies and partner universities from around the world to continue to support Lao universities, the extraordinary advances in the use of online conferencing teaching and training channels as a result of the suspension of international travel during the pandemic, and the clearly stated enthusiasm of both academic staff and students to engage in international partnership activities. These developments provide the OPEN project and the participating teams with a sound basis on which to facilitate increased cooperation and achieve the objectives of the project.

This report identifies a number of priority areas where the OPEN project may make a direct or indirect contribution towards the achievement of the

national and institutional goals for internationalisation in addition to the stated project outcomes. These are:

- **International agreements.** While all five universities have signed numerous MOUs and other international agreements, it is clear that many of these agreements have resulted in no activity at all. There are a number of reasons for this, many of them outside the control of the Lao HEIs. Through capacity-building activities the OPEN project can support Lao HEIs to analyse and review existing agreements, challenge partners to turn the promises in the agreements reality, apply for funding for partnership activities, and close down agreements that no longer meet their purpose.
- **Website.** None of the universities currently has an internationally-facing website, which is an essential pre-requisite for internationalisation. OPEN partners can provide advice and guidance on developing websites so that Lao HEIs can raise their international profiles. It is suggested that the MoES might be able to develop a university website template in Lao and English that could be adopted by all the Lao HEIs.
- **Communications.** To internationalise effectively, especially at a time when the pandemic restricts international travel, it is essential that the Lao HEIs have good internet connectivity, and an efficient use of @xxx.edu.la email accounts. While Facebook may be important for internal communications, particularly with students, international contacts work largely through email, and increasingly through video-conferencing facilities such as Zoom, Teams, Webex etc. The University of Alicante provided an analysis of the different video communications systems during the November OPEN training: this needs to be elaborated further so that the Lao HEIs can adopt a common platform with the necessary software and training to facilitate future international communications.
- **Information management.** It is reported that it is very difficult for university senior management and international relations offices to have

a full grasp and up-to-date reports of all the international activities and opportunities. To support this vital function IROs will need advice on the development of file-sharing and internal communications so that records are kept and relationships with international partners consolidated and deepened, and all opportunities for mobility and other types of collaboration disseminated to faculty and students as appropriate.

- **English language skills.** All the HEIs reported a lack of English language skills among academic staff and students as a major factor inhibiting international communication. Working in English on OPEN and other capacity-building will enhance individual skills, but for system-wide improvement the Lao HEIs and the Ministry should approach regional organisations like the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Language Centre (SEAMEO-RELK) and universities in countries in the region where English is widely used like Singapore and the Philippines for advice and support. The British Council is another organisation committed to supporting English language teaching around the world.
- **Support for student exchange including credit transfer.** An effective credit transfer system not only supports student exchange but can be a driver for enhanced quality assurance within an institution. The ASEAN regional credit transfer system (AUN-CTS) was established in 2011 but is still being further developed. Lao HEIs with support from the Ministry should join AUN-CTS and become part of this important regional initiative to stimulate student exchange and partnership development across the region. Being part of the regional credit transfer system will also make it easier to develop exchanges outside the region to Australia, Japan, Korea, Europe and North America. At the same time procedures to support Lao students applying for international mobility should be developed by the IROs so that students do not miss out on opportunities.
- **Arrangements for incoming visiting academic staff.** All the participating HEIs have indicated that they wish to increase the number of

visiting teachers and researchers. To do so the Ministry should establish a standard system to support recruitment, invitations, visas and work-permits to develop incoming academic exchange. International academics are often willing to take up short-term teaching or research assignments, but usually require a formal invitation as a visiting professor to allow them to do so. Having a Ministry-supported process for this will reduce bureaucracy, increase transparency and enable visiting professors and their hosts to focus on the scholarly activity they are undertaking. The processing of applications and support for visitors can then be managed by the IRO.

- **Support for outgoing staff exchanges.** As with incoming exchanges there is a need for clear procedures and approval processes for staff wanting to attend study assignments, research activities or conferences outside of Laos. As some of these invitations come at short notice, IROs should have templates and procedures ready to fast-track the opportunities.
- **Inter-university cooperation.** NUOL is already taking a lead in providing training for faculty across the other universities in Laos. This role needs to be further developed to enable collaboration with the IROs in each of the universities. This may take the form of common procedures for managing student and staff exchange, and collaborative participation at international conferences and exhibitions. Through regular meetings of the five IROs it should be possible to develop common materials for attracting international students ('Study in Laos') and for one institution to represent all the others at major international events where it might be too costly to send a representative from each university. In many countries it is the Ministry that facilitates this type of cooperation.
- **Funding.** Although all HEIs point out that the lack of funding is a major barrier to further internationalisation, there is a lot that can be done with little or no additional funds. If the Ministry is willing to work with the IROs of the five universities they should be able to set up a schedule of further actions arising from the experience of the OPEN

project which will consolidate and sustain the achievements of OPEN. Such a platform of collaboration between the Lao HEIs will also serve as an excellent basis on which to bid for funds from international donors and partners.

ANNEXES

The tools used to conduct the analysis and the aggregated collected data can be consulted in *Annex: The state of internationalization in Laos: Needs Analysis and Mission Sharing*, available to download on the OPEN website resources page: www.open-laos.eu/resources

The OPEN project (OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to internationalisation strategies) is a Structural Capacity Building project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme. The project aims at supporting the establishment of appropriate IRO structures in the five public universities of the country, harmonizing at a national level internationalization practices and policies and ensuring the quality of study programmes by enhancing international opportunities and granting students a framework for the recognition of their experience abroad and a credit transfer system.

This report identifies a number of priority areas where the OPEN project may make a direct or indirect contribution towards the achievement of the national and institutional goals for internationalisation in addition to the stated project outcomes.



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