




OPEN- International Relationship Offices MANAGEMENT GUIDE for Lao PDR HEIs

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Coordinated and edited by MoEs & UA

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Project coordinator



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MANAGEMENT GUIDE for Lao PDR HEIs**

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1. INTRODUCTION

OPEN project structure

“OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to internationalisation strategies” is an Erasmus + programme project. OPEN is devised within the framework of the Key Action 2: Cooperation for Innovation projects for Capacity Building in Higher Education and co-funded by the European Union (University of Alicante 2019).

OPEN carries out its activities around the priority action of improving management and operation of Higher Education, working specifically on the issues of internationalization. Particularly, OPEN is a structural project which strives to attain systemic impact within the national Higher Education system by involving the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) from Lao PDR in all project activities.

OPEN general objective aims at enhancing internationalization practices of Higher Education in Lao PDR via institutional and capacity building actions, with a view to improve the quality of teaching and research. In order to generate this ultimate impact, OPEN will direct its efforts to achieve the following specific objectives:

- ◆ Consolidate Internationalisation structures and build-up human capacities of the Higher Education Institutions partners by means of targeted training programmes within each institution.
- ◆ Reinforce the governance reforms of the MoES and enhance international networking through strategic actions in key areas of the Lao PDR higher education system.

OPEN Consortium

OPEN project consortium is integrated by 5 Higher Education Institutions from Lao PDR:

- ◆ National University of Laos (NUOL)
- ◆ Champasack University (CU)
- ◆ Savannakhet University (SKU)
- ◆ Souphanouvong University (SU)
- ◆ University of Health Sciences (UHS)

Together with the involvement of the public national body responsible for policy in the field of Higher Education:

- ◆ Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES)

As well as the interaction with 2 Higher Education Institutions from Europe:

- ◆ University of Alicante (UA) which acts as coordinator of the project.
- ◆ University of Bologna (UNIBO)

Goals of the document

The “**Task.2.2. International Relationship Office Management Guide for Laos Higher Education Institutions**” aims at formulate policy orientation to guide specific actions of the International Relationships Offices (IROs), rooted in the contextual conditions of the Lao PDR Higher Education system.

This task is comprehended within the framework of the **Work Package 2 – Institutional Policy & Planning** of the OPEN project, focused on articulating the necessary policy change at institutional level to foster internationalization activity at Higher Education level in Lao PDR. This guide will provide crucial policy guidance to orientate subsequent activities of the OPEN project by:

- ◆ **Analyse the specific status, practices and capacities of the IROs at each one of the OPEN partner institutions.** It will foreground the overview on the contextual challenges that Laotian HEIs face on their day-to-day experience on internalization. As such and bringing the focus exclusively to the IROs activities, this document rounds-off the analysis conducted within the “*Task.1.1. Study Analysis of barriers for credit*”

recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff and International research activities”.

- ✦ **Define policy direction to orientate further institutional framework development** in field of internationalization at Laotian HEIs. Therefore, this document will lay the groundwork for posterior action within the OPEN project, becoming the cornerstone to elaborate individualized “T.2.3 Internationalisation Strategic Plans” for each Lao PDR HEIs and contributing to formulate

Executive summary

The “*International Relationship Office (IROs) Management Guide for Laos Higher Education Institutions*” initiates the study by providing an accurate depiction of the **current legal framework** under which internationalisation activities are conducted within the Lao PDR Higher Education system. This section outlines the recently promulgated **EDUCATION AND SPORTS SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2021-2025)**, in order to examine the impact of this policy within the international realm. By gaining understanding of the policy framework in which internationalisation operates, the document leads to **overview the specific situation of the IROs** within each one of the partners institutions, analysing their structures, competences, staff allocation and role within the Universities.

Afterwards, the Guidelines explores the **general challenges** of the Lao PDR Higher Education system through the lenses of its international dimension and the undermining of its capacities for global interaction. It continues by closing the focus on the **specific obstacles** that IROs experience on their day-to-day activities, elucidating the inadequate means and scarce resources that compromise the development of internationalization within the Lao PDR Higher Education system.

The Guidelines conclude with **concrete policy proposals** to orchestrate the action of the IROs, rooted in a nuanced awareness of the fragile context in

which they function. Nevertheless, Guidelines provided policy pathways to structure IROs activity around the following **priorities**:

- ◆ Enhancement of institutional, infrastructure and human capacities of the International Relationships Offices
- ◆ Reinforcement of the international dimension of the specific actions foreseen on the Lao PDR Higher Education Subsector Plan – 2021 - 2025.
- ◆ Intensification of the engagement with international stakeholders.

Therefore, the Guidelines provide feasible solutions to address the most pressing shortcomings of the services provide by the IRO, aligning its activities with national policy strategies and institutional capacities.

This document has been elaborated with contributions from the following institutions

- ◆ National University of Laos (NUOL)
- ◆ Champasack University (CU)
- ◆ Savannakhet University (SKU)
- ◆ Souphanouvong University (SU)
- ◆ University of Health Sciences (UHS)

The final version of this document has been edited and coordinated by the following institutions:

- ◆ Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) in Lao PDR
- ◆ University of Alicante (UA)

2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALISATION ACTIONS IN LAO PDR

Lao PDR is a landlocked country bordering Myanmar, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. This South-East Asian country is inhabited by 6.5 million people, with a big portion of the population still living in rural areas (68%). However, urbanisation is occurring at a rate of 4.9 percent each year. Despite still being a least developed country (LDC), Lao PDR has made significant progress in poverty alleviation over the past 2 decades with poverty rates declining from 46% in 1992 to 23% in 2015. The country achieved the Millennium Development Goal target of halving poverty; however the challenge now is to ensure that all Lao people benefit in the country's development. (UNDP 2020).

Particularly within the education sector, relevant and pressing issues are still pending to be solved at primary and secondary education level. However, due to globalization and the introduction of the knowledge economy, Lao PDR fully recognises the importance of strengthening and developing its tertiary and higher education system. As such, it is necessary for the government to ensure the establishment of a well-balanced education system that covers both basic and higher education with the ultimate goal to contribute to reduce poverty (MoES 2020).

Over the past two decades, Lao PDR Government has implemented several important educational reforms. These transformations involve the development of teacher education, introduction of a supporting supervisory authority and responsibility, internal decision-making structures, building of programmes for officials in education planning, administration and management, curriculum and revised textbooks, and programmes consolidating postsecondary institutions (MoPI 2016). As Lao PDR is an ASEAN member and in order to catch up with neighbouring countries socially and economically, education is considered to be one of the most important engines for the country to achieve its development goals.

The legal framework of the Lao PDR HE system is articulated by the Department of Higher Education (DHE). This body is a technical department under the Ministry of Education and Sports, primarily responsible for the macro-management of higher education in both public and private sectors, as an academic administrative body with policymaking direction in the field.

The DHE plays a key role as the secretariat to the Minister in supervising, controlling and promoting Higher Education in order to produce academics, specialists, researchers, and scientists, aiming to meet the demands for socio-economic development in the country. Within the Lao PDR educational system, Higher Education continues from Upper secondary education or vocational education, and provides undergraduate, bachelors, master's, and PhD education. In Lao PDR, while National Qualification Framework is still in process of consolidation in order to become aligned with ASEAN Qualifications Frameworks, the current structure of the different levels of the Lao PDR Higher Education is organised as follows:

1. Associate Degree and/or Advanced diploma;
2. Academic Bachelor;
3. Master Degrees;
4. PhD programme.

In fact, Lao PDR Higher Education sector is awaiting the approval of the upcoming Law on Higher Education which will specifically address this issue by fully developing a comprehensive a National Qualifications Framework which includes General Education, Vocational Education and Higher Education.

In terms of governance of the sector, from 1959 to 1975, higher education was under the Ministry of Education and service, Information and Culture. The Department of Higher Education has periodically changed its name to suit its administrative role at the service of improving Lao PDR higher education so that it can be integrated into the region and internationally.

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

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

In the past, the Department of Higher Education was established by the decree of the Prime Minister on the organization and functioning of the Ministry of Education and Sports, No. 62 / PM, dated 07 April 2008 and the agreement of the Prime Minister on the organization and functioning of the Department of Higher Education No. 1416 / Lao .2008, dated 08 July 2008 as an aide for the management of the higher education sector in Lao PDR.

According to this regulations, the DHE encompassed the following bodies (or Divisions): Administration; University and tertiary university; Research Science and Technology; and Student Affairs. In 2011, the National Assembly formulated a plan to improve the government's administrative structure and approved the inclusion of sports in education and renamed the Ministry of Education and Sports. For the department of higher education is organized and operates in accordance with the Decision of the Minister of the Ministry of Education and Sports No. 913 / MOES, dated March 26, 2012, which consists of 5 divisions: Administration , Technical Division, Scientific Research and Development Division, Standards, Monitoring and Inspection division. Subsequently, it was organized and operated in accordance with the Decision of the Minister of the Ministry of Education and Sports No. 1661 / SOK, dated 27 April 2018, which rearranged DHE in 4 divisions: Administration Division, Technical Management Division, Scientific Research Management Division and Inspection, Monitoring and Evaluation Division. At present, the Department has organized and operated in accordance with the Decision of the Minister of the Ministry of Education and Sports No. 4512 / SOK, dated 05 October 2020, which integrates 1 office and 4 divisions:

- ◆ Office of the Higher Education Council,
- ◆ Administrative Division,

- ◆ Academic Management Division,
- ◆ Research and Evaluation Management Division.

In particular, a series of Prime Ministerial Decrees have been issued to set up the current framework of Lao PDR Higher Education system. The Government initiated higher education reforms governing both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) with the following Prime Ministerial Decrees: the establishment of the National University in 1995, Private Higher Education and Higher Education Curriculum in 2001.

The Prime Ministerial Decree on the establishment of the National University of Laos in 1995, tackled the issue of a fragmented higher education system by amalgamating 10 HEIs under the structure of NUOL. The Decree envisaged the development of regional universities as the next phase of higher education development. After the NUOL's establishment, two regional universities were established in the South and North regions of the country to broaden access to higher education. In 2002, Champasak University was established in Champasak Province in the South and, in 2003, Souphanouvong University was established in Luang Prabang Province in the North. Luang Prabang and Champasak are becoming core provincial cities in the Great Mekong Sub-region corridor network. In 2007 there was a Prime Ministerial Decree to establish a University of Health Sciences by splitting the Faculty of Medicine from the National University, and in 2009 the Savannakhet University was established in Savannakhet province. The country counts also with the presence of a wide variety of private institutions, teacher training college and other public institutions which also award degrees in the field of Higher Education.

Lao PDR government has been investing in Higher Education with their own resources but still depends on funding for this purposes from loans and grants from foreign agencies like Asian Development Bank and other international cooperation agencies (DAAD 2019). The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), in charge of HE under the Department of Higher Education, is spending these resources on building infrastructure at the 5 public

universities that compose the public sector. As a result, Higher Education has increased both in quantity and quality in teaching-learning, sciences research, technical services, and national culture conservation. However, the education sector still suffers from the lack of funds for salaries, inadequate facilities and scarcity of qualified personnel (Siharath 2007). Additionally, the rise of upper secondary enrolment has resulted in an explosion in the demand for Higher Education services, which cannot be completely satisfied by the public sector.

Higher Education is highly regarded as a public good by national authorities, acknowledging its potential to contribute to the country development agenda and promote an economic growth through upgrading skills within the national workforce and boosting research and innovation within the economic domain. In this regard, MoES with DHE, has led policy articulation in the field as follows:

- ◆ The prime ministerial Decree on the establishment of the National University of Lao PDR in 1995
- ◆ The national education system reform strategy(2011-2015)
- ◆ Second phase education system reform strategy, focused on higher education institution started form 2013
- ◆ The prime ministerial Decree on higher education(2016)
- ◆ National qualification framework(NQF)
- ◆ National Curriculum standard
- ◆ Minimum institutional standard for higher education
- ◆ AUN Quality Assurance(for program)
- ◆ Law on Education(Amended Version) no. 62/NA, date 16 August 2015
- ◆ Decree on Higher Education no. 177/G, date 05 June 2015
- ◆ Agreement on the Management of Scientific Research of Higher Education Institutions no. 3085/MOES, date 05 July 2019
- ◆ Lao PDR - 8th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020)
- ◆ 8th Five-year National Education and Sport

- ◆ 9th Five-year national Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 5 years (2020-2025), date 02 November 2020.

Lastly, MoES has promulgated the **EDUCATION AND SPORTS SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2021-2025)** - ESSDP 2021-2025, which sets the foundation for the comprehensive policy action within the field of Education and sports in Lao PDR, defining Higher Education as sub. This document has been developed under extraordinary circumstances due to impact of the COVID-19 crisis at national and global level. In fact, due to the aforementioned disruption, preparations for the overarching formulation of **9th Five-Year National Socio-economic Development Plan (2020- 2030)** – 9th NSEDP have been delayed, affecting the elaboration of the ESSDP 2021-2025. Policy directions of the 9th NSEDP will become officially available in early 2021. However, the current ESSDP 2021-2025 is based upon Lao National Development Priorities, discussed in diverse round of consultations with different stakeholders as well as the lessons learnt from the previous ESSDP 2016-2020 (MoPI 2016).

As an important caveat, the brand-new ESSDP 2021-2025 acknowledges that the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector will come from an exacerbation of the scarcity of public resources to provide financial support for the education sector and from the reduced capacity from poorer families to afford the economic cost of keeping children and youth enrolled in education programmes. Therefore, the ESSDP 2021-2025 is drafted based upon 2 different scenarios defined as follows:

- ◆ **“Steady state scenario”** that provides the basis for merely maintaining the current level of quality and service provision with no improvements in performance. It articulates strategy (Intermediate outcomes) by delineating only the ‘budget floor’ to achieve these sector requirements. Nonetheless and considering the impact of the COVID-19 in Lao PDR and its compounded macroeconomic vulnerabilities, the achievement of this scenario may even be unfeasible.

- ◆ **“Enhanced quality scenario”** that will be only achieved if the national budget allocation and international donors resources to the education sector are substantially increased. The strategy is framed (High-level outcomes) under the assumption of higher levels of funding for the sector. However, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic makes funding of the “enhanced quality” scenario unlikely in the earlier years of the 2021-25 period.

This differentiation between the divergent scenarios and its corresponding outcomes is illustrated in the following result chain extracted from the ESSDP 2021-2025:

EDUCATION AND SPORTS SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2021-2025)		
1 GOAL		
The Education Sector is appropriately structured, managed and resourced to create opportunity for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and support Lao PDR graduating from Least Developed Country status by 2025 and support progress of SDG-4		
8 HIGH LEVEL OUTCOMES		
HLO 1: Increased number of graduates at all levels with improved learning outcomes with special focus on disadvantaged and gender equity	HLO 2: Increased number of knowledgeable and competent teachers and principals meeting the teaching standards with regular performance assessment	HLO 3: All schools have the financial and human resources to function effectively alongside strengthened management to improve student learning outcomes
HLO 4: Increased adult and youth literacy rates with reduced disparities.	HLO 5: The quality and number of school leavers and post-basic graduates entering employment is aligned with the needs of the 9th NSDEP	HLO 6: Education Sector is appropriately organised, managed, resourced, monitored and assessed at all levels to efficiently and effectively further improve sector performance

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HLO 7: Disparities are reduced through a supporting ESSDP financing plan	HLO 8: Lao citizens are healthy both physically and mentally; sports personnel, amateur and professional athletes contribute to the sport's quality standards, contribute to promoting the status of role in the international stages	
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44 INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

IO 1.1 Improved and more inclusive curricula is implemented at all levels	IO 1.2 Improved student learning outcomes measurement at G3, G5, M4 and M7	IO 1.3: Increased intake and progression rates at all levels leading to increasing graduation rates
IO 1.4: Promote extension of vocational classroom training at upper secondary school	IO 1.5: Reduced gap in education performance between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas through establishing school clusters	IO 2.1: Strengthened capacity of teachers through support from clusters and PAs.
IO 2.2: Pre-service and in-service teacher training curricula aligned with the new school curricula and teaching standards.	IO 2.3: Enhanced teacher performance assessment system, linked to teaching standards, to identify priority training needs.	IO 2.4: TTCs are professional development centres for all pre-service, in-service, and PA training.
IO 2.5: Strengthened capacity of principals for improving teaching and learning	IO 3.1: FQS for school education forms the basis for school self-evaluation and development planning.	IO 3.2: A school self-evaluation and development planning process that informs district level planning and targeting of support
IO 3.3 School Block Grants are more responsive to school level needs to reduce disparities	IO 3.4 Teacher Allocation is more responsive to school level needs to reduce disparities	IO 3.5 Textbook provision is more responsive to school level needs to reduce disparities

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IO 3.6: All schools are supported to achieve basic WASH facilities	IO 4.1: A targeted action plan for literacy programmes for 15 to 40-year-olds to reduce disparities	IO 4.2: Sample monitoring of NFE literacy programmes to assess the impact on functional youth literacy.
IO 4.3: Non-formal services (FEC and CLC) are well established and contribute to increased adult and youth literacy rates	IO 5.1: Improved quality of upper secondary education to meet the needs of the labour market and higher education	IO 5.2: Increased number and quality of natural science teacher trainee graduates leading to improved natural science teaching at secondary level.
IO 5.3: Increased number and quality of graduates in agriculture and industry related fields at TVET	IO 5.4: Improved relevance of TVET programmes to demands of the 9th NSEDP	IO 5.5: Improved quality of TVET programmes.
IO 5.6: Improved quality of TVET teachers.	IO 5.7: Strengthened TVET cooperation with public, private and international organisations	IO 5.8: Strengthened TVET management.
IO 5.9: National Qualifications Framework links non-formal and TVET qualifications and is aligned with the	IO 5.10: Strengthened university teaching and research programmes in 9th NSEDP priority areas,	IO 5.11: Universities and quality assurance units conduct annual self-assessments
IO 5.12: Legislation for a performance-based funding formula for the provincial Universities	IO 6.1: Strengthened MoES organisational structure at central, provincial and district levels including institutionalisation of SBM and role of VEDCs	IO 6.2: HRD strategy is implemented, including DESB and PESS staff allocated according to need and provided with appropriate capacity building
IO 6.3: Strengthened central TAC and PBC, using evidence from ASCEPs and integrated LESMIS	IO 6.4: M&E framework for ESSDP 2021-25 is implemented on an annual basis	IO 6.5: Education system emergency preparedness to disasters strengthened

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IO 7.1: The ESSDP financing plan includes an explicit expenditure policy that reflects the need to address disparities and improve learning outcomes.	IO 7.2: ESG reviews and endorses the updated mid-term financing plan for ESSDP.	IO 7.3: Development partners provide predictable financial support aligned to ESSDP priority targets and that proposed new interventions are sustainable
IO 7.4: Resources mobilised through more active international cooperation, including with private philanthropic Organisations	IO 8.1. Increased the number and quality of Sports Club, public and social in Village, district and province/capital level, public and private organizations, companies, factories. And develop the sport with disability to be increased in quantity, quality into international level maintain and utilize sports infrastructure to maximum	IO 8.2. Learning-teaching physical and arts education has been widely implemented, the number of the teachers/technical personnel of physical education, the number of students attending sports competition at national, regional and international level are increased
IO 8.3. Talented Athletes, National Athletes and Professional Athletes are equipped with Sub-Regional, Regional and International Standards	IO 8.4. Executives, coaches, referees and sports scientists are competent in line with international standards; maintain and utilize sports infrastructure to maximum	

The **ESSDP 2021-2025 overall goal** is set to ensure that:

“The Education and Sports Sector in Lao PDR is appropriately structured, managed and resourced to create opportunities for all Lao citizens to have equitable access to quality education and sports and to contribute to, and benefit from socio-economic development and support Lao PDR graduating from Least Developed Country status by 2025 and support progress towards attainment of SDG-4 (MoES 2020).”

This encompassing goal is contextualised and adapted to a wide array of subsector plans, including early childhood education, primary education,

upper and lower secondary education, technical and vocational education training as well as Higher Education.

According to ESSDP 2021-2025, the Higher Education Subsector Plan orchestrates

Policy Objectives as follows (MoES 2020):

1. To enhanced higher education contributing to and supporting the social and economic priorities of the 9th NSEDP.
2. To promote and develop technology related programmes, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) study programmes for university students, especially those undertaking science, technology, engineering and mathematics STEM programmes so that the number of students within this field increases;
3. To strengthen Centers of Excellence in both public and private universities;
4. To conduct regular tracer studies to identify employability of graduates;
5. To reinforce 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.

These policy objectives materialise on the following set of **baseline targets** and indicators for the Higher Education sector in Lao PDR (MoES 2020):

1. The number of STEM graduates (Bachelors or Higher) from public Universities reaches 20,000 by 2025;
2. The Gender Parity Index for the number of graduates (Bachelors or Higher) from public Universities reaches at least 0.90 by 2025;

3. A feasibility study to establish an Institute of Technology is conducted;
4. Students enrolled in STEM programmes increases by 50 percent compared and teaching and learning quality in this field is improved;
5. Four Centers of Excellence are appraised;
6. A graduate employment tracing team in each faculty is established;
7. Internal Quality Assessment conducted once a year assessment every 5 years at all 4 public universities;
8. A pilot of university autonomy in financial management is conducted at NUOL;
9. Academic titles of higher education institutions teachers are conferred based on quality and standards stipulated in the Decree on Teacher Academic Titles no. 03.

To accomplish these targets, ESDDP 2021-2025 will develop the following **strategies** (MoES 2020):

- ◆ A feasibility study will be implemented to establish a new Institute of Technology, including an Artificial Intelligence Centre. This study will outline the staffing allocation and recurrent budget needs and an action plan for expansion over the 5 years of the sector plan.
- ◆ Agreement will be reached on ToRs for an independent appraisal of all four Centres of Excellences. These ToRs will focus on identifying processes to strengthen these four centres, particularly to improve linkages to 9th NESDP priorities.
- ◆ Department of Higher Education and the Scholarship Office of the Department of Student Affairs will develop a proposal to weight the scholarships allocations in favour of students who enroll in priority programmes and disadvantaged students. The approved proposal will be discussed at ESWG to gain endorsement by development partners to ensure alignment of their scholarship programmes to government priorities.
- ◆ NUOL will lead the development and implementation of a higher education website promoting scientific research by university lecturers and post-graduate students.

- ◆ Ministerial instructions to prioritize natural science infrastructure and gender-responsive teaching materials at TTCs and universities for budget priority utilization are approved and disseminated.
- ◆ Agreement with prospective donors concerning upgrading of the Faculty of Engineering. Priority is given to students entering and continuing to study in natural sciences programmes. A Ministerial instruction will mandate this priority.
- ◆ The policy for scholarships will be updated to prioritize natural science students.
- ◆ The Joint Technical Working Group (MoES, Ministry of Labour Social Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, private sector and development partners) under the Post-Secondary Focal Group will issue guidance for universities and TVET institutions on how and when to conduct effective tracer studies and use the results as a basis for future decision making on curricula enhancement. Education Sector Working Group will endorse this guidance.
- ◆ The NUOL Quality Assurance Unit is mandated to support other public universities in developing and implementing best practice in conducting annual self-assessments.
- ◆ A Ministerial Instruction will direct all public universities to conduct these assessments with reports submitted to the Minister and the Education Senior Administrators Annual Conferences.
- ◆ A teaching performance assessment framework for higher education lecturers at differing levels of qualifications and experience is developed and endorsed.
- ◆ A Ministerial Instruction will direct all higher education institutions to undertake such teaching assessments on a regular basis.
- ◆ A Ministerial instruction and regulatory framework will be issued to manage lecturer academic titles at higher education institutions.
- ◆ Ministerial approval will be provided to develop a proposal for development and modelling of a performance-based funding formula for the provincial Universities (flat rate, per student, per natural science,

disparity-based). The proposal will provide recommendations and guidelines for Ministerial consideration.

In line with the structure of the ESSDP 2021-2025 and within the “**Steady state scenario**”, strategies aim at the achievement of the following **Intermediate Outcomes** (MoES 2020):

- ◆ Strengthened university teaching and research programmes in 9th NSEDP priority areas, including natural sciences, engineering and technology.
- ◆ Universities and quality assurance units conduct annual self-assessments, with external assessments conducted every 5 years.
- ◆ Legislation for a performance-based funding formula for the provincial Universities are disseminated (flat rate, per student, per natural science, disparity-based).

If these intermediate outcomes are reached and within “**Enhanced quality scenario**”, the following **High-level Outcome** will be accomplished (MoES 2020):

1. The quality and number of university graduates entering the world of work, both nationally and regionally is aligned with the needs of the 9th NSEDP, helping to graduate the country from Least Developed Country status.

Lao PDR’s higher education system faces serious challenges to implement the international strategy that will accompany this plan. MoES and the public universities have an urgent need to work together to produce a detailed roadmap to accompany the above-mentioned activities. The roadmap should give clear instruction and reference to the department involved (External Relations, Students Affairs and Planning and Investment). These departments and institutions should not be left alone in the implementation of international cooperation activities such as student exchange, research collaboration and academic networkingl aligning with the strategies outlined in the ESSDP 2021-2025. However, due to the scarcity of national financial

resources available for the education sector, Lao PDR has relied heavily on foreign assistance and it would be a tremendous challenge to implement a sustainable education development plan in line with the goals above described.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS OFFICE (IROS) IN LAO PDR

This chapter focuses on the current status of the International Relationships Offices (IROs) of the higher education institutions in Lao PDR, providing a detailed overview of their capacities, strategic design, available resources and main areas of action. It helps to delineate the strengths and weaknesses of the work carried out by the IROs within the Lao PDR HE system.

3.1. National University of Lao PDR (NUOL)

Institutional situation of the IRO (NUOL 2020)

IRO of the National University of Lao PDR was established on 5 November 1996 under the Prime Minister decree no. 50/PM, dated 9 June 1995 for establishment of the National University of Lao PDR. It is integrated by 3 divisions: 1) Service and Protocol Division; 2) International Cooperation Division; 3) International Mobility Division.

Responsibilities

The specific responsibilities for IRO of the National University of Lao PDR are:

- ◆ The International Relations Office (IRO) is in the front line of the National University of Lao PDR to connect with the regional and international stages and promote development of domestic and international cooperation by enabling international engagement at all levels of the University community.
- ◆ The internal and external relations and cooperation is regarded as its key role and functions. The IRO ensures the effective coordination and cooperation with the external partners and networks in different levels. Meanwhile it strengthens the NUOL's strong roles in its international affairs and in line with the Government's policy on external

relations which is based on mutual benefits and non-interference in internal affairs.

Staffing

NUOL-IRO is integrated by 12 staff members divides as follows:

- ◆ **1 Director:** Coordinates all works of IRO office, reporting to the president board, and attending meetings with the leadership board of the university.
- ◆ **2 Deputy Director:** Assists director duties and direct day-to-day operation of each of division.
- ◆ **1 Head of Division of Administration and Protocol + 1 Officer:** Manages incoming and floating documents, ID and VISA, equipment/budget needs planning, and meeting/ conference conduction and protocols.
- ◆ **1 Head of Division of International Cooperation + 1 Officer:** Coordinates with partner institutions, drafts the invitation letter and arrange the visits of international guest, drafts and considers MOU & MOA for signing agreement, manages international project.
- ◆ **1 Head of Division of International Mobility + 1 Officer:** Announces/ forwards programmes' information to NOUL's staff/students, proceeds selection candidates for applying/participating programmes, coordinates for inbound and outbound exchange programme and facilitates international students and management.

Role and activities

Role and activities of the NUOL- IRO is structured within the University's Strategic Planning. It foresees specific actions to foster its participation in regional/international initiatives related to both research and international cooperation as the following details:

By decree of the Lao PDR National Assembly, NUOL is defined as the Higher Educational Institution in the country with high capacities on human resource

development to generate national socio-economic development and achieve the regional and international standards. As such, National University of Lao PDR has defined its functions, visions and strategic plans as follows:

In the Program VII of NUOL Development Strategic Plans, specific instructions are provided to develop **National and International Cooperation as the following:**

National collaboration with international institutions and organizations is a priority for building communication networks and providing facilities, knowledge, cooperation and benefits. As such, NUOL is able to strengthen its capacities with the collaborations of the region and international sector, under the Win-Win Policy without non-interference on internal affairs. Therefore, NUOL has committed extra efforts on leading the implementation of these actions with collaborations of international organizations worldwide. As such, IRO aligns with NUOL institutional strategy as follows:

- ◆ Evaluate the existing regulations on internal collaboration, functions and collaborative frameworks of NUOL with other national and international organizations;
- ◆ Reformulate and improve the systems and regulations in conformation with the interests of NUOL;
- ◆ Evaluate the existing regulations on international collaboration and formulate new regulations in conformation with national's policy on international relations and the needs of NUOL;
- ◆ Improve the data-base, gather needed information and international assistances for the development;
- ◆ Closely monitor any agreements and MOUs to implement them efficiently; and
- ◆ Evaluate the implementation of each phase for better improvement.

NUOL- IRO strategic plan is developing the internationalization activities for the future as follows:

- ◆ NUOL will offer or provide more international programmes, with courses taught in English. Currently, NUOL had only opened 1 international course in Economic and Business Management;
- ◆ NUOL is planning to create ASEAN studies programmes within the curricula and resources shared among the AUN and other ASEAN countries' universities, Thailand for example;
- ◆ NUOL will promote and increase international exchange programmes for both students and faculty members as well as researchers and scholars first within ASEAN region, and then worldwide.

NUOL - IRO main goals, actions and strategic plans for internationalization will be:

- ◆ Development programmes for internationalization;
- ◆ Staff and student mobility programmes;
- ◆ Joint-development projects with domestic and international partnerships;
- ◆ Academic exchange programmes;
- ◆ Research collaboration projects;
- ◆ Educational visit projects; and
- ◆ Information exchange.

During the last 5 years IRO of the National University of Lao PDR has been involved in the following international programmes:

Type of funds: Research & Training

Donor: Erasmus+

Duration: 2019 - 2022

Budget: 999.618,00 €

Title: TOOLKIT Project

Topic: Designing and Managing International Relations, Educational Project and Mobility Schemes in Asian Universities

Link of the project <https://site.unibo.it/toolkit/en>

3.2. Souphanouvong University (SU) (SU 2020)

Institutional situation of IRO

IRO of Souphanouvong University was established under the decree of the Minister of Education and Sports Ref.No: 4251/MoES. DP, dated on: 7th November 2011. SU's IRO consists of three divisions: 1) Ordinance and Administration Division; 2) International Relations and Project Management Division; and 3) International Experts, Volunteer and Student Management Division.

Responsibilities

The specific responsibilities for IRO of Souphanouvong University are:

- ◆ Cooperate with Internal and external institutions (bridging SU to other universities and organisations);
- ◆ Consider to sign bi-lateral and multilateral agreements (MOUs, MODs, and MOAs);
- ◆ Welcoming internal and external delegation and leadership board of SU;
- ◆ Accompanying leadership board of SU when visiting other universities and organisations;
- ◆ Searching for funding for the university and managing international projects;
- ◆ Carry out complementary tasks assigned by the university leadership board

Staffing

There are 10 staff working in different divisions as follows:

- ◆ **1 Director:** is in charge of overall affairs of the office, reporting to the president board, and attending meetings with the leadership board of the university.

- ◆ **1 Deputy Director of Ordinance and Administration Division:** Assist director to manage all work related to protocol and administration of IRO office.
- ◆ **1 Deputy Director of International Experts, Volunteer and Student Management Division (this deputy director is incharge of 2 divisions) and International Relations and Project Management Division:** Assist director to manage all work related to external affairs, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements, international project accumulation, international experts, volunteers and students' VISAs, and ID Card, and hold welfare party and draft letters of appreciation for experts and volunteers after they have finished their working term as SU.
- ◆ **1 Head of Ordinance and Administration Division:** work together with deputy director of the division and other team member related to the work tasks assigned such as drafting official documents in Lao language and contacting with related sector in regional and local authorities, prepare for welcoming guests and manage office budget
- ◆ **1 Head of International Relations and Project Management Division:** work together with deputy director of the division and other team member related to the work tasks assigned such as drafting official documents in English, welcoming international guests with leadership board, accompanying while visiting SU, drafting SWOT analysis and propose documents to get approval from Lao government), translate document Lao into English and English into Lao and monitoring international projects, experts, volunteers and students.
- ◆ **1 Head of International Experts, Volunteer and Student Management Division:** work together with deputy director of the division and other team member related to the work tasks assigned such as the work related international experts, volunteers and students management like 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, and holding welfare party and drafting letters of appreciation for experts and volunteers after they have finished their working term as SU; accom-

modating international students with their registration, holding their national events and festivals.

- ◆ **4 Staff members** who support and implement all the aforementioned activities according to the strategies and decisions made by the Director, Deputy Directors and Heads of Division.

Role and activities

Role and activities for IRO of Souphanouvong University of Lao PDR are implemented depending on the University's Strategic Planning. It foresees specific actions to foster its participation in regional/international initiatives related to both research and international cooperation as the following details:

In order to strive towards its vision of “Specialisation, Localisation, and Internationalisation”, Souphanouvong University is implementing its 5-year strategic plan (2020-2025). The strategic action plans of the University for the Next 5 years are:

1. Expanding and promoting students admission

In order to increase opportunities for students who newly graduated from high schools to pursue their education and produce high quality human resources for the national development and the labour market, Souphanouvong University will define and improve the university entrance exam standard, expand infrastructure (buildings for classrooms), revise and expand curriculum.

2. Developing and improving education quality

Teaching and learning development is one of Souphanouvong University core missions. The university is aiming at being the center for higher education in the Northern part of Lao PDR, reaching international education standards, having internal and external evaluation systems that can work with all faculties within Souphanouvong University and all public universities in the country, and connecting with regional and international education institutions.

3. Promoting scientific research and academic service

To further develop and move university closer to the regional and international education standards, Souphanouvong University is promoting research and innovation within the university. It has plans to develop and improve its researchers, co-conduct research with social and economic bodies and international institutions and organisations, and publishing research results nationally and internationally.

4. Develop administration and management system

In the next five years, Shouphanouvong University will improve the mechanism of its governance, administration and management for more accuracy, transparency, less time consuming and modernity. It will also improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of its education, research and academic service. In order to achieve these targets, Souhanouvong University will revise and improve its existing charters, policies and regulations; and allocate staff in the positions that are vacant.

5. Expending infrastructure and facilities

Infrastructure and facilities are crucial physical environments for quality assurance of education, especially higher education. They indicate progress and development of a higher education institution. By the year 2025, Souphanouvong University plans to construct a certain number of buildings for offices, classrooms and dormitories expansion; and establish excellence centers in some faculties and an English center.

6. Promoting internal and external cooperation

Cooperation with internal and external institutions and organisations is a crux for the development of Souphanouvong University. In order to facilitate and promote teaching and learning, academic exchange, scholar and student exchange and research exchange, the university has a plan to cooperate with institutions and organization internally and internationally. To make this happens, the university needs to

improve the capacity of staff working for international relations of the university as well.

Souphanouvong University is planning to internationalise its action through the work of the SU-IRO by means of the following activities:

- ◆ Currently, Souphanouvong University does not have any international courses, and it will provide some international courses in the near future;
- ◆ Souphanouvong University will expand more office, classrooms and dormitories;
- ◆ Souphanouvong University has a plan to expand international cooperation;
- ◆ Souphanouvong University has a plan to improve language proficiency, especially English, for its administrators, staff, lecturers and researchers;
- ◆ Souphanouvong University has a plan to strive towards the AUN standard;
- ◆ And Souphanouvong University will improve its researchers' capacity and co-conduct research with institutions and organization internally and internationally.

SU - IRO main goals, actions and strategic plans for internationalization

- ◆ Infrastructures and facilities for internationalisation;
- ◆ Programmes for internationalisation;
- ◆ Staff and student mobility programmes;
- ◆ Joint-development projects with domestic and international partnerships;
- ◆ Academic exchange programmes;
- ◆ Research collaboration projects;
- ◆ Educational visit projects;
- ◆ Culture and sports exchange; and
- ◆ Information exchange.

During the last 5 years IRO of the Souphanouvong University of Lao PDR has been involved in the following projects:

1. Type of funds: Grant

Donor: Vietnamese Government

Duration: 2017-2018

Budget: 980,000 USD

Title: Infrastructure Development

Topic: Construction of one Classroom and Staff-office Building for the Faculty of Languages

2. Type of funds: Grant

Donor: KOICA (Korea)

Duration: 2015-2018

Budget: 3,000,000 USD

Title: SU Development Face II

Topic:

- Infrastructure development (An extension of two dormitories and a construction of a mini-printing shop);
- 45 Master Scholarships;
- Development of curriculum for 14 departments;
- Development of 131 textbooks;
- And equipment for faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Architecture

3. Type of funds: Grant and Loan

Donor: ADB

Duration: 2017-2023

Budget: Grant: 23,470,000 USD and Loan 16,450,000 USD

Title: Second Strengthening Higher Education (4 public universities in Lao PDR)

Topic: Higher Education in Lao PDR

Link of the project : <https://www.adb.org/projects/48127-002/main>

3.3. Champasack University (CU) (CU 2020)

Institutional situation of IRO

IRO of Champasack University is currently known as Planning and International Cooperation Office. It was separated from the Administrative Office in 2010 (previously it was a unit of Administrative Office). There is not specific regulation of Planning and International Cooperation Office yet. In the near future, it is drafted to propose getting approval from the Ministry of Education and Sports and it expects to change to become exclusively International Relation Office with its regime and autonomy. There are 2 divisions of Planning and International Office: 1) International Cooperation Division, 2) Planning and reporting Division.

Responsibilities

The specific responsibilities for IRO of the Champasack University are:

- ◆ Draft all document of cooperative agreement with international target institutions and partnership.
- ◆ Facilitate all document and procedure for students, lecturers, staff and university leaders to join international activities such as conference, exchange programmes, study visit and doing research with partners
- ◆ Coordinate with partners and other guests to implement cooperation activities
- ◆ Plan international cooperation activities with partners and other support organisations
- ◆ Plan for welcoming university's guests
- ◆ Follow up and facilitate international guests to visit and work at Champasack University
- ◆ Plan and collect monthly, 3 months, 6 months and annual planning and reporting of the offices, faculties to finalise for University's plan
- ◆ Search opportunity for networking to be more internationalisation

Staffing

There are 7 staffs members working in Planning and International Cooperation Office, Champasack University, whose profiles are as follows:

- ◆ **1 Director:** Covers all works of the office, and be representative to do the task under direction of university board. Director of the office is responsible for the results and losses in the implementation of the rights and duties of the office.
- ◆ **1 Deputy Director for Planning and reporting Division:** The Deputy Director for Planning and reporting has the authority to be responsible for various tasks as assigned related to planning and reporting division, in case the director is not there; the Deputy Director who has been assigned has the right to manage the various tasks of the Office instead.
- ◆ **1 Deputy Director for International Cooperation Division:** The Deputy Director for International Cooperation Office has the authority to be responsible for various tasks as assigned related to international cooperation division, in case the director is not there; the Deputy Director who has been assigned has the right to manage the various tasks of the Office instead.
- ◆ **1 Head of International Cooperation Division:** has the authority to be responsible for various tasks related to international Cooperation division such as draft all international cooperative document/agreement with international target institutions and partners, facilitate all document and procedure for students, lecturers, staff and university leaders to join international activities such as conference, exchange programmes, study visit and doing research with partners, coordinate with partners and other guests to implement cooperation activities.
- ◆ **1 Head of Planning and reporting Division:** has the authority to be responsible for various tasks such as plan international cooperation activities with partners and other support organisations, plan for welcoming university's guests, follow up and facilitate international guests to visit and work at Champasack University, plan and collect

monthly, 3 months, 6 months and annual planning and reporting of the offices, faculties to finalise for University's plan and annual report.

- ◆ **2 Staff members** assist to do the work task as assigned by both divisions related to international cooperation division's duties and planning and reporting.

Role and activities

Role and activities for IRO of Champasack University are implemented depending on the University's Strategic Planning. It foresees specific actions to foster its participation in regional/international initiatives related to both research and international cooperation as the following details:

Champasack University has set out the strategic planning development with vision, mission, programmes and key actions plan to 2030 as follows:

Vision

Develop Champassak University to be a center for education, scientific research and quality academic services, a green and environmentally friendly institution in the Southern part of Lao PDR, regionally and internationally.

Mission

1. Improve the quality of education and consistency
2. Promote scientific research and academic services in accordance with the national and local socio-economic development plan in each period.
3. Promote disadvantaged and poor people living in remote areas and women to receive more education.
4. Develop management and administration to have more quality
5. Increase internal and international cooperation
6. Build the university to be a green and environmentally friendly institution

There are 8 programmes and 30 projects of the strategic development plan of Champasack University from the year 2020 to 2030. CU-IRO works specifically within the following programme:

Programme 7: Increase internal and international academic cooperation

- ◆ **Project 1:** Strengthening internal and international cooperation project.
 - **Key action plan 1:** Improving organization structure and legislation system related to strengthen relations and international cooperation
 - **Key action plan 2:** Visiting and exchange with various internal and international institutions
 - **Key action plan 3:** Improve coordination to be consistent and agile
 - **Key action plan 4:** Improve inspecting and evaluating system to implement cooperation activities regularly and solve the deficiencies in a timely manner.
 - **Key action plan 5:** Promote internationalization information for faculty members and international organization to implement successfully.
- ◆ **Project 2:** Expanding network internal and international cooperation project.
 - **Key action plan:** Plans to expand technical cooperation, research, curriculum development and Develop staff and universities and institutions, both domestic and foreign Diagonal, proactive, effective and in line with the Party's guidelines

Currently, IRO of Champasack University does not have specific strategic plan for internationalisation. However, its actions are fully aligned with the institutional planning.

During the last 5 years IRO of the Champasack University has been involved and/or is involved 4 international projects as the following information:

1. Type of funds: Student Exchange programme

1. Donor: EU Commission
2. Duration: 2015 - 2019
3. Budget: 8000 EURO
4. Title: International Mobility
5. Topic: SHARE Scholarship Programme Batch 3, 4 and Batch 5
6. Link of the project : <https://www.share-asean.eu/activities/scholarship>

2. Type of funds: Curriculum Development

- Donor: Erasmus+ programme-European Union
- Duration: 2017-2020
- Budget: 78,179 EURO
- Title: Joint project
- Topic: Sustainable Farming (SFARM) project
- Link of the project : <http://www.sfarm-project.eu/>

3. Type of funds: Curriculum Development

- Donor: Erasmus+ programme-European Union
- Duration: 2018-2021
- Budget: 96,920 EURO
- Title: Joint project
- Topic: Enhance Digital Capacities in Higher Education for Asian University/Digi-CHE-aSAI project
- Link of the project : www.digi-che-asia.eu

4. Type of funds: Training

- Donor: Eurasia Foundation from Japan
- Duration: 2020-2022
- Budget: 25,000 USD
- Title: One Asian Studies Programme
- Topic: Studies of Asian Community Project 2020_Champasack University
- Link of the project : <http://www.eurasia.or.jp/en/>

3.4. Savannakhet University (SKU) (SKU 2020)

Institutional situation of IRO

IRO of Savannakhet University is known as the External Relation Division under the General Affairs and Cooperation Office. It is planning to be separated from the General Affairs and Cooperation Office to become an autonomous IRO. SKU is also drafting the regulation for new IRO in the near future.

Responsibilities

The specific responsibilities for IRO of Savannakhet University are:

- ◆ Prepare the content and coordinate for academic exchange, draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) for national and international cooperation with organizations and partner universities.
- ◆ Collaborate on academic cooperation on bilateral and multilateral with partner universities and international organization and govern and evaluate the activities.
- ◆ Process the relevant document for an approval from the president of Savannakhet University for the staff and students to carry out activities abroad.
- ◆ Support and facilitate experts, volunteers, researchers, foreign students that operate workshop, training, exchange and study at Savannakhet University.
- ◆ Inspect and assess the operation of MOU, MOA and the cooperation with international organizations.
- ◆ Upgrade and provide information on international relations
- ◆ Perform other duties as assigned by the members of the University.

Staffing

There are 4 staffs working International Relation Office with one Head of the Division and 4 staff members. The tasks and responsibilities of IRD staff are described as the following:

- ◆ **1 The Head of International Relation Division:** is in charge of overall affairs of the office, reporting to the Director of General Affairs and Cooperation Office and also assist director to manage all work related to administration for international relation works.
- ◆ **1 staff member responsible for administrative task** such as, protocol, drafting official documents in Lao language and contacting with related sector in regional and local authorities, prepare for welcoming guests and manage office budget
- ◆ **1 staff member responsible for** managing all work related to external affairs, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements, compose and process the MoU, MoA and another official agreement in both local and national level.
- ◆ **1 staff member responsible for** managing all work related to international project accumulation, international experts, volunteers and students' VISAs and ID Card. and propose documents to get approval from Lao government), translate document Lao into English and English into Lao and monitoring experts, volunteers and students.

Role and activities

Activities for IRO of Savannakhet University are conducted in line with the University's Strategic Planning. According to the SKU Strategies 2016-2020-2025 and vision in 2030, SKU – IROs develops its activities around the strategy priorities set on collaboration, which are as follows:

Strategy 6: Develop and extent the collaboration with internal and external partners , 5 action plans:

- **Action plan 27:** Creating and developing a guidance for international cooperation
- **Action Plan 28:** Creating and developing a guidance for external cooperation
- **Action Plan 29:** developing cooperation mechanism system for internal and external relations

- **Action Plan 30:** Creating and developing legislations of cooperation mechanism system for internal and external relations
- **Action Plan 31:** monitoring and evaluating implementation of the internal and external relations effectiveness

For the moment, **SKU – IRO does not have a specific plan** to articulate its actions but it pursues to achieve the strategic goals set by the University and add an international dimension to all actions.

SKU does not report specific involvement in international projects during the last 5 years.

3.5. University of Health Science (UHS) (UHS 2020)

Institutional situation of Division of Cooperation

The Division of Cooperation is under direction of the Administration Cabinet which is one among nine organizations in the structure of the University of Health Sciences which established under the Prime Minister Decree No. 349/PM, dated 16/11/2017. The academic specificity of the institution, the University of Health Sciences is controlled by the Ministry of Health.

Responsibilities

The specific responsibilities for Division of Cooperation of the University of Health Science are:

- ◆ Cooperate and connect with regional and international stages.
- ◆ Management and monitoring of International volunteers and experts.
- ◆ Facilitate the international activities process of student and staff of UHS.
- ◆ Facilitate for the approving process of agreements and other legal document related to international affairs.
- ◆ Monitoring support of implementation of activities for signed agreement with concerned organizations.

Staffing

There are 4 staffs working for Division of Cooperation with one Head of Division, one Deputy Head of Division, 2 staff members. The tasks and responsibilities of Division of Cooperation staff are described as the following:

- ◆ **1 Head of Division:** is in charge of overall works related to cooperation affairs, and also assists director to manage all work related to administration for division of cooperation works.
- ◆ **1 Deputy Head of Division:** Assist Head of Division to work on related to division of cooperation works.
- ◆ **1 staff member** works on agreement and international volunteer-expert work.
- ◆ **1 staff member** works on administrating, planning and secretary work.

Role and activities

UHS international actions have been developed to align with the institution strategy to expand our international collaboration in terms of education or research which means to increase the number of cooperation (agreement, conference, etc.), facilitate the process to receive international volunteers and experts.

The content of Division of Cooperation's Strategic Plan, the University of Health Science is described as follows:

Vision:

The University of Health Sciences is to be recognized in the international dimension as an institute of higher education and research that is contributing to serve the development of the country.

Mission:

All related organizations have a common mission to improve the living condition especially the healthcare condition of the population by developing the education, research and serving to the population.

UHS – Division of Cooperation main goals, actions and strategic plans for internationalization activities in line with UHS policy priorities are:

- ◆ Exchange of student and staff.
- ◆ Conducting collaborative research projects on issues of interest.
- ◆ Conducting lectures and organising symposia.
- ◆ Exchange of academic information and materials.
- ◆ Promoting collaboration in fields of mutual interest.
- ◆ Promoting other academic co-operation as mutually agreed.

In this 5 years strategic plan of UHS, the following actions are included:

- ◆ Promoting internal and external cooperation.
- ◆ Developemt program for internationalization.
- ◆ Human resource development including staff, faculties and student.
- ◆ Promoting collaboration research project.

During the **last 5 years Division of Cooperation of the University of Health Science has been involved and/or is involved 1 international project as the following information:**

Type of funds: Bilateral Project

Donor: Seoul Project

Duration: 10 years

Budget: confidential information of the project

Title: KOHFI, Dr Lee-Jong-Wook Project

Topic: Human Resource Development

Link of the project: <https://medicine.snu.ac.kr/en/node/649>

4. GENERAL CHALLENGES OF THE LAO PDR – HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

This section overviews the main challenges for the HE system in Lao PDR, analysing how the general constraints that sector experiences also pose serious obstacles to the day-to-day operations of the IROs. These challenges undermine the capacity of the IROs to increase their capacity to conduct internationalization actions:

- ◆ **Limited infrastructure: facilities, equipment and laboratory.** The requirement of resources and teaching materials is one of the main struggles which Lao PDR students face on daily basis. The impact of inadequate teaching infrastructure such as a computers, other IT support including fast network connection to Internet, a well-stocked library or laboratory equipment in the classroom significantly influences students' proficiency level. From the teachers' perspectives this shortage of resources makes difficult to engage and command the student's interest, affecting teaching quality. This difficulty can be seen across the whole country. Even when universities have resources available for students, those are often outdated or in need of repair (Hayden 2019). The students would benefit from more practical and hands-on approach to learning as oppose to simply theoretical learning, which will be facilitated by the improvement of the infrastructure.

However, in order for this to take place, substantial investment in educational resources improvement should be undertaken at Higher Education level in Lao PDR. It is necessary not only focusing on acquiring and updating physical resources but also developing and updating professional skills of the academic and administrative staff as well as the students, enabling them to make use of these resources (SKU 2020).

- ◆ **Constrained resource allocation for public Higher Education.** The shortfall in budget allocation for the education sector in the last few

years needs to be urgently reversed. At the same time, the education sector will need to reprioritize education sector interventions to make sure limited resources are used to address most critical needs. To this end, the priorities are to (a) strengthen linkages between planning and budgeting, (b) increase the operational budget at provincial and district levels and allocate it more equitably, with increased allocations for pedagogical advisers and school monitoring, and (c) strengthen and modernize the planning and budgeting capacity and the accounting capacity of MoES (MoES 2020).

- ◆ **Insufficient capacities and skills of teaching, academic and administrative staff.** In Lao PDR historically the average students and teacher ratio has been appropriate (12:1 in academic year 2012-2013). Unfortunately, the teachers are often burdened with many additional administrative duties. All academic staff are expected to contribute to administrative duties and that affects their ability to be prepared and deliver high-quality teaching and education to their students.

The national goal of Lao PDR' average ratio of students and teachers set up by the government is 1- 6-3. For every one teacher there is one Doctor-six masters and three bachelors (MoES 2015). However, in comparison with the international standard Lao PDR has insufficient qualification as less than 5% of teaching and academic staff hold doctor's degree (Hayden 2019)

Another major factor that affects qualification of academic staff members is language competence in particular the ability to apply English in their professional career. English is economically used as a communicative language within South-East Asian countries. Those teaching staff who can use English will get more opportunity in networking actions and international collaboration. While Lao teaching staff is devoted to enhance their English language proficiency level to be able to apply it academically (Peak, et al. 2018), currently, instructors use inappropriate teaching strategies, which curtail this willingness to

improve language creation. Moreover, some of these English teachers do not have the necessary knowledge (Souriyavongsa, Rany and Jafre 2013). Therefore, the teachers cannot influence and foster student development and engagement with the subject (Souriyavongsa, Rany and Jafre 2013).

- ◆ **Evolving but immature national and institutional HE Quality Assurance systems.** The Higher Education Quality Assurance framework in Lao PDR has been growing for a number of years, but still has a long way to progress. The Ministry of Education and Sports created the Education Quality Assurance Center (EQAC) in 2008 for the proposes of regulating instructional assessment, by both internal and external parties. The EQAC was created due to perceive need at national level as well as the international pressing demands in the field of Quality Assurance at Higher Education level, but it was established without a clear framework, lacking specific purposes and capabilities to implement its duty. As such, this new body struggles to provide transversal services of Quality Assurance to its Higher Education community, being, for example, incapable of monitoring and advising on standards and quality in Lao PDR in all areas of expertise and academic fields (DAAD 2019).

At the university level there are foreign and domestic programmes but they remain unregulated. Plans to set up develop further current regulation are still unclear in the near future. The regulation that is in place is not properly communicated to stakeholders and further work should be committed to raise awareness on Quality Assurance issues among the teaching, academic and managerial staff at Lao PDR Higher Education level (DAAD 2019).

- ◆ **Outdated curricula programme design.** An appropriate course syllabus and an adequate curriculum design are also key issues which should be taken into account. Presently, the universities in Lao PDR are on the way to prepare students' professional skills required by their future

workplaces because these students have not yet met the criteria for national and international operation. (SKU 2020). For instance, in language learning student demand for technology driven teaching is high. Nevertheless, teachers are using outdated textbooks, inappropriate instructional materials, ineffective teaching methods and obsolete learning strategies, causing Lao students poor performance in their learning (Souriyavongsa, Rany and Jafre 2013). To meet the needs of the employment in industrial sectors, the curricular should be upgraded based on the qualification requested from the labour market and in alignment with the national strategy (UNDP & Gov Lao PDR 2003). Furthermore, the reform should focus on students' capacity building, professional skill and soft skills so that they can be ready for the jobs that Lao PDR requires (Siharath 2007).

- ◆ **Curricula not coordinated with labour market needs and absence of university-industry cooperation.** Numerous graduate students plan to apply to labour markets which are located in the capital and the bigger provinces, but their professional competence directly affects their capacity to find jobs. This means that this problem has a negative effect on the internationalization of the whole country, because the economic sectors such as tourism, industry and business require skilful employees with a proficient skill level of graduates. The result of employers surveyed in 2014 showed that the quality of graduated students at higher education institutions did not meet the demand of employers due to the lack of professional, analysis, management and team-work skills and competences (MoES 2015). It is worth noting that the employers are not just unsatisfied with the academic knowledge of students but they also request modern practical communication and teamwork skills.

Instead, Lao PDR students get to spend more time gaining theoretical knowledge but less time on practicum or apply those skills into professional life. These enable them to face the difficulties putting the approaches learnt from the course to the workplace. Need analysis is

considered the most important component as it is a part of building learner's awareness and autonomy. As for this reason, the ministry should determine the need of students and the market as well as to measure the quality of higher education system (SKU 2020).

- ◆ **Lack of funding and capacity for research activities.** According to the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan, the requirement of the administrative budget for research from 2016-2020 remained stagnated around levels of the previous plan (500 million kip). This is considered inadequate compared with the increasing of needs in improving the qualification in terms of both researches and equipment (MoES 2020). These dynamics render a Higher Education system in which many researchers are inexperienced especially in conducting research and data analysis. The academic staff can only conduct research which can serves the purpose of teaching but they are not yet in the level of being able to conduct research that contributes to advance their work-fields or disciplines in science and technology. More efforts should be committed to train lecturers on research skills as well as involvement in international research cooperation. The exchange of experience will help increasing capacity for research on new methods, literature review and data analysis (SKU 2020).

The equipment available in research is not sufficient due to the limited budget which is crucial factor determining the low output of the Lao PDR research production. Additionally, low-income incentives and scarce rewards that Lao PDR Higher Education system provides to research activities also reduces their motivation and possibilities to conduct research and develop academic careers in this direction (Siharath 2007).

5. SPECIFIC OBSTACLES FOR LAO PDR – HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALISATION

An in-depth analysis of the specific obstacles for internationalisation activities within the Lao PDR HE system helps to outline the barriers that IROs deal with on their day-to-day practice. By better understanding these struggles, IROs can plan realistical and feasible actions that can be fully implemented with their resources constraints.

The international scenario at Higher Education level in Lao PDR is characterized by the following recurrent problems:

◆ **Weak capacity among students and academic staff in foreign languages, specially English.**

- All funding and scholarships for staff and students require a certain language skills especially English otherwise languages of the countries where the sources of funding or the host institutions are located in are required. These languages include Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and French. This creates a big challenge for Lao PDR staff and students as most of the staff working for Lao PDR universities, especially regional universities like CU, SKU and SU, are young and most of them graduated from Laotian universities and/or Thailand where they take courses in Lao and/or in Thai (SKU 2020). For students learning at regional universities, most of them are from remote areas where they have limited chance to be exposed to other international languages, which makes it challenges for them when mobility is concerned at the tertiary education level.

◆ **Lack of comprehensive and homogeneous credit recognition and transfer system.**

Credit recognition and transfer are still a big issue within the Lao PDR HE system. Even between Laotian Universities, for Laotian universities some of the reasons for that includes (DAAD 2019):

- Lack of a clear system to recognise and transfer credit between higher education institutions;
- The quality of teaching-learning of most of Laotian Universities is not recognized regionally and internationally;
- There are differences in contents of courses offered between Laotian Universities and other international universities and even between Laotian universities;
- There are differences in workloads and time used for teaching and learning;

◆ **Internationalisation standards and financial support schemes for student and staff mobility.**

Lao PDR universities have limited budget. Almost all of the financial support for mobility is from international organisations. Laotian universities limit their support to cover expenses for visa costs for staff. As such, students bear all the costs themselves unless international organisations or host institutions contribute to fund the expenses:

- Nevertheless, funding sources are conditioned to the achievement of a certain requirement or criteria in language proficiency. Lao students and academic staff struggle to meet these criteria.
- Most of funding sources have a policy of co-funding from the universities receiving the fund. With a limited budget, it is difficult for Laotian universities to mobilise resources to partner in these mobility programmes.

◆ **Imbalance between inbound & outbound students flows.**

The rationale behind this disparity is as follows:

Inbound students:

- Scarcity of international courses –teaching and learning, in a foreign language (most universities);
- Lack of accommodation facilities for international students; (most universities);
- Insufficient IT equipment;
- Learning sources are limited;
- Inadequate library system;
- Non-existent application frameworks for international students;
- Unavailable guidelines for students to apply for visas and other official documents to enter Lao PDR;
- The quality of education (teaching and learning) is still low comparing to other universities in the region (ASEAN) and worldwide, and is still not recognized by many international universities;
- Information dissemination system of universities is not adequate (less information, mono language-Lao Language, and mostly only through the university's websites and Facebook);

Outbound:

- The Laotian universities lack budget to support the students;
- Most of the sources of funding are from its international partners and organisations with a requirement of language proficiency (mainly English and/or the native language of the country where the host university is located) while the level of language of most of Lao students is still low;
- Knowledge and awareness of internationalization in higher education among students are low, which may lead to a low interest in joining mobility;
- There is a difficulty in credit transfer. Students who join a mobility program have to retake the courses they missed during the time they join the mobility. This can make students reluctant to join a mobility program.

- Most of the students can join only mobility programmes that have a full financial support from international organisations and/or the host institutions as they lack the economic resources to afford it.

◆ **Lack of awareness on international funding sources for research**

Most of the research funding is from the government, international organisations and partner universities as lecturers and researchers lack information on international funding sources. There are a number of reasons why they are not aware of international sources of funding for research.

- The lecturers and researchers at Laotian universities have limited time to search for sources of funding as they are overburdened with administrative and clerical work;
- Information about international sources of funding is in English while lecturers' and researchers' English proficiency is low;
- Many lecturers and researchers have limited skills in research, which makes them reluctant to search for sources of funding and apply for them;

Besides the IROs, Laotian universities have the Office of Research and Academic Service, and a Research and Academic Service Unit in each faculty. However, these offices (including the IRO) and units impact on the Lao PDR Higher Education system is unsatisfactory because:

- Personnel has limited time to search for sources of funding as they are overburdened.
- Staff have low English proficiency;
- Units not follow articulated and harmonised plans and strategies set by the University to achieve specific goals in internationalisation,
- Units lack human resources.

6. PRIORITIES FOR IROs ACTION

Based on the insights obtained from the previous sections, OPEN consortium has formulated concrete policy proposals that can be implemented by the IROs of the Lao PDR Higher Education system. These suggestions for action at IROs level are embedded within a scarcity context in terms of resources and funding availability for Internationalisation within the Lao PDR Higher System.



Nonetheless, OPEN consortium believes that willingness and strategic thinking could overcome shortage of the resources and allow for *action around the edges* to tackle some of the challenges and pressing concerns described above. In light of the forecasted struggle that the education sector in Lao PDR seems to be heading towards during the 2020-2025 period and due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, harnessing international cooperation in the right direction could turn out to be transformational for the sector. Achieving the “*enhanced quality scenario*” foreseen within the **ESSDP 2021-2025** seems only feasible if significative international partnerships are established among the different Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR. In this endeavour, IROs should position themselves as the channels for change, by bridging the Lao PDR Higher Education system to the global stage, tapping into its potential for innovation and development for the country and harnessing their capacity to network with international actors which could contribute to the ultimate goal to graduate from Least Developed Country by 2025.

The strategies to be implemented by the IROs are organized around the following **priorities for action**:

- **Priority for Action N°1:** Enhancement of institutional, infrastructure and human capacities of the International Relationships Offices:
- ◆ **Improvement of English language proficiency** across the whole University of community, but prioritizing IRO and academic staff.
 - **STRATEGY 1.1.** Search, apply for and enroll in English language courses programmes (specially online) offered by international institutions (ASEAN, British Council, other HEIs cooperation programmes, etc.). This action should also promote retraining and update of English language skills for all the IROs personnel. Approaching for collaboration institutions such as the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Language Centre (SEAMEO-RELc) and universities in countries in the region

where English is widely used like Singapore and the Philippines is crucial to ensure real impact on this task.

- ◆ Development of **project management and fundraising skills** for IRO personnel.

→ **STRATEGY 1.2.** Engagement with international cooperation capacity building programmes (ASEAN, Erasmus +, other international cooperation agencies, etc.). This action also involves **reinforcement of training actions for the IRO staff in order to become familiar with funding framework and work methodologies of international cooperation within their own region and at international level.** Revamping capacities and enriching experiences of the IRO personnel on proposal drafting, programme execution and rigorous reporting is crucial to ensure competitive functioning of the service.

- ◆ Consolidate **planning, legitimacy and coordination of the IROs** within the institution.

→ **STRATEGY 1.3.** Establishment as differentiated service within the University should be a priority for 5 OPEN consortium HEIs. 2 out of 5 institution still do not have in place an autonomous framework for the IRO services, which curtails its potential to attract funding and engage with other stakeholders. On that account, framing a tailor-made International Strategic Plan for each one of the IROs of the OPEN consortium is crucial to organize, coordinate and systemize international actions at HEI level. Consequently, obtain official endorsement and approval from the institution of this plan is critical to facilitate long-term planning and sustainability of the IROs. Within this domain of action, OPEN project will offer specific solutions, allowing and enabling the formulation of comprehensive planning for each institution. It is important to note that IROs should improve their liaison with the different faculties of their own universities. This could be achieved by maintaining

close contact with selected academic staff of each faculty of their own institution.

- **STRATEGY 1.4. Coordination between the 5 IROs from the 5 public Universities and the MoES - Directorate General for Higher Education is essential to guarantee a coherent approach to international cooperation actions.** Constant and strategic communication should be maintained between IROs from the 5 public Universities and Directorate General for Higher Education. IROs should be able to register all international cooperation projects that are being implemented within their institutions and inform the MoES - Directorate General for Higher Education in order to set up a coherent strategy of internationalization within the whole Higher Education sector in Lao PDR.

This coordination will be facilitated by the creation of **shared datasheet** in within IROs from the 5 public Universities keep track and monitor current and past projects. This datasheet will become a useful resource to search for international partners, identify topics and areas of related cooperation and develop trust and mutual understanding of their internationalization strategies in partnership with the MoES - Directorate General for Higher Education.

This active synchronization will also help to better articulate effective entry points to the Lao PDR Higher Education system. By following this course of action, IROs will become enablers and the gateways for international organisations which aim to fund cooperation projects in the South East Asia region. This will become also relevant to coordinate funding and allocate resources effectively among the different partners. The OPEN project aims at the creation of Network to coordinate international action of the members of the Consortium, partners could build upon this experience and sustain this action in the long-term.

- ◆ Upgrade **facilities and equipment** endowment of each of the IROs.

→ **STRATEGY 1.5.** Guarantee that IROs upgrade infrastructure will facilitate operations of the international endeavors. **Improving Internet connectivity and substituting outdated equipment is mandatory to engage with international stakeholders.** This necessity has become even more glaring during the COVID-19 crisis, which has forced all international actions to be conducted strictly online.

Particularly important in this field is the creation of institutional websites for each University with an English version constantly updated to facilitate linkages with international partners. Additionally, IROs should make use of their @xxx.edu.la email accounts, providing institutional legitimacy to their own actions.

- **Priority of Action N° 2:** Intensification of engagement with international stakeholders:

- ◆ Convergence with Higher Education System within the ASEAN region

→ **STRATEGY 2.1.** One of the main goals of the ESSDP 2021-2025 is to continue providing higher education that is relevant to the requirement of Lao PDR socio-economic growth in each period and can be integrated into and compete with labour forces within ASEAN member countries. In order to pitch in this process, **IROs should reinforce their engagement with the different programmes and initiatives offered by ASEAN and other partners working in the same region.**

- ◆ Engagement and familiarization with other international donors in the field of Higher Education (UNESCO, EU and other national cooperation agencies).

→ **STRATEGY 2.2.** Up to this moment, experience with relevant international donors among Lao PDR IROs is limited. While some experiences and partnerships with other international organ-

isations have been conducted in the past (KOICA, JICA, Asian Development Bank, TICA, ASEAN, etc), **IROs must intensify and diversify their international actions** to becoming more attractive partners for these institutions.

- **Priority Action N°3: Reinforcement of the international dimension of the specific actions foreseen on ESSDP 2021-2025 – Higher Education Sub-sector Plan.** 5 Lao PDR HEIs present in the ACCESS consortium agree upon the great benefit of building up synergies with the different actions encompassed within the guidelines for Higher Education policy drafted by the MoES. As such, IROs should strive to leverage their position and spearhead the search for international donors which can provide funding for each of the lines of action defined by the MoES. Therefore, the strategies are organised as follows:

- ◆ Undertake a feasibility study to establish a separate Institute of Technology
- ◆ NUOL strengthens Artificial Intelligence (AI) programme and capacity strengthening.

→ **STRATEGY 3.1.** IRO of NUOL under the guidance of the MoES, supported with the other OPEN partners, must facilitate the **exploration of partnerships with other international HEIs and companies from the private sector which may be interested in bridging academics and applied research in the field of AI.** A cutting-edge and innovative area of research such as AI demands international alliances which incept the development of research capacities in this field within Lao PDR.

- ◆ Improve infrastructure and facilities at Faculty of Engineering of NUOL
- **STRATEGY 3.2.** Similar than the previous strategies, the **IRO from NUOL expedites the access of NUOL to the necessary resources** and funding to undertake this process of enhancement.

- ◆ Review and analysis of natural sciences provision at upper secondary level, with recommendations for increasing student participation in natural sciences.
 - ◆ Higher Education funding formula includes additional funds for natural sciences students.
 - ◆ Weights the scholarships allocations in favour of students who enroll in natural sciences and technology-based programmes
- **STRATEGY 3.3.** In parallel with the MoES prioritisation of STEM teaching and learning at Higher Education level in Lao PDR in order to respond to the demands of the workforce and the international economy, **IROs must engage with international donors that share this interest for funding on the field of natural sciences and technology-based programmes.** Additionally, IROs should channel the coordination and organization of scholarships for international mobility and student exchange, prioritizing this type of studies.
- ◆ Develop and implement a higher education website promoting scientific research by university lecturers.
- **STRATEGY 3.4.** In order to boost attractiveness and competitiveness of this portfolio website for Lao PDR researchers at Higher Education level, **IROs must ensure that institutional website content is offered in English.** This website should be linked to their own institutional website.
- ◆ Strengthened Quality Assurance of higher education.
 - ◆ ESQAC and the NUOL Quality Assurance Unit support other public universities in developing and implementing best practice in conducting annual self-assessments
 - ◆ Teaching standards for university level lecturers are developed and implemented.
- **STRATEGY 3.5.** Accreditation and Quality Assurance National Agencies worldwide are promoting international engagement and cooperation on these issues. **IROs can harness this international**

interest towards channeling expertise, funding and alliance with Lao PDR HEIs in order to further consolidate its incipient Quality Assurance framework. Within this domain, ASEAN and the EU have positioned on top of their international agenda promotion and enhancement of Quality Assurance frameworks for convergence with other Higher Education systems worldwide.

- ◆ Post-secondary focal group to issue guidance for universities on how to conduct and use effective tracer studies.
 - **STRATEGY 3.6.** Employability and links with job market still is a serious challenge for the Higher Education system in Lao PDR. **IROs should contribute to this issue by engaging with programmes and international donors that work within this field.**
- ◆ Develop a regulatory framework for mixed-mode (distance and local) education and on-line learning to provide university-level programmes.
 - **STRATEGY 3.7.** While the impact of lockdown measures and academic disruption at national level have been moderately felt in Lao PDR, IROs have been forced to dramatically change all its activities to online interaction. This acquired know-how could help to **extract lessons and experiences that could be escalated to the whole Higher Education system for e-learning actions.**

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