

Strengthening Higher Education in Laos

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Internationalization plays a critical role in building university capacity, especially in developing countries. In the current world of higher education—with competitiveness, branding, and commercialization front and center—international development cooperation is often relegated to a low priority. Status building networks with elite partners are receiving more attention and support than capacity-building initiatives with developing country institutions.

It is time to reemphasize the importance of higher education internationalization as a process of working collaboratively with recently established higher education institutions in developing nations. These kinds of initiatives bring different but mutual benefits, to all partner institutions and reflect the social responsibility and solidarity of more established and experienced universities.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN LAOS

Lao People's Democratic Republic presents an excellent case study where higher education reform is critical to national development, and in turn, international

academic cooperation is fundamental to building and strengthening its higher education system. In Laos, total population of 6.6 million in 2012, the public higher education sector is less than 20 years old and consists of five universities. The National University of Laos, located in the capital Vientiane, is the leading university, and was established in 1996. Three regional universities were founded in the last decade—Champasak (2002), Souphanouvong (2001), and Savannakhet (2009). They are smaller institutions, meeting the needs of their regional population and economies. The University of Health Sciences, founded in 2007, is dedicated to educating health professionals and is located in Vientiane.

The Asian Development Bank has supported the Strengthening Higher Education Project in Laos since 2009. One of the key components is professional development for university staff with teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. This is especially true for the regional universities. As an example, Souphanouvong University, located in the north, enrolls 3,700 students—primarily undergraduates. There are 6 faculties, 19 departments, and 320 faculty members—of whom 3 have PhDs, about 60 have master’s degrees, and the rest have undergraduate degrees. Not surprisingly, professional development, especially degree upgrading is a top priority and complements other areas of development—such as text books, information technology, infrastructure, graduate programs, research capacity, quality assurance, and others.

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR DEGREE UPGRADING OF UNIVERSITY STAFF

In Laos, degree upgrading for the majority of Lao university teachers and researchers relies on a collaboration with foreign universities, primarily through scholarships. Laos cannot produce enough PhDs because it does not have graduate programs in all discipline areas or enough spaces.

The Department of Higher Education has established an ambitious target for faculty development—requiring that 10 percent of university academic staff have a PhD, 60 percent a master’s level credential, and 30 percent an undergraduate degree. The enormity of this task, for example, involves a regional university such as Souphanouvong, in which about 83 percent of the current academic staff have an undergraduate degree, 16 percent a master’s degree, and .01 percent have a PhD.

Achieving this target is contingent on international cooperation with universities who can provide the graduate training and, secondly, foreign governments and multilateral agencies who can provide the financial support. Scholarships for enrollment at foreign partner universities are the preferred modality. Offering graduate programs in Laos by foreign universities is one option, but a critical mass of students is necessary. While this is possible for some subjects—such as business management or teacher training—it is not feasible for more specialized graduate programs in the natural sciences, engineering, and humanities.

Thus, faculty members normally need to leave the country for graduate studies. The implications include many—for example, language requirements for studying abroad and the impact on the teaching load at the home university. In Laos, all foreign scholarships require additional language skills, except perhaps

in neighboring Thailand; but even there many of the new international master's degree and PhD programs are commonly offered in English. Thus, a fundamental requirement for further education is knowledge of another language. To date, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, French, and English are common language requirements, given the source country of scholarships. But, accessing high-level skills in these languages for regional university staff is a challenge. Provision for language instruction is often needed as part of the scholarship.

SHORT-TERM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

It is not surprising that scholarships are seen as the most serious way for university staff to upgrade their teaching and research knowledge and skills and to ultimately improve higher education in Laos. But scholarships are not the only type of needed and beneficial professional development. Short-term and more-focused training courses on site—in regional centers or nearby universities—are equally useful. In Laos, university staff assume teaching, research, and administrative roles. It is common for all senior administrators—such as, rectors, vice-rectors, and heads of finance, personnel, and planning—to have teaching responsibilities. This is also true at the departmental level, as many of the teachers assume administrative tasks. The ultimate aim is to professionalize the administrative staff of the universities and colleges, so that academics can spend more time on teaching and research activities; but this is a long-term proposition. In the meantime, short-term professional development opportunities oriented to teaching and learning methods; curriculum development, research design and

analysis, quality assurance, financial management, human resources development, and information technology are needed.

Laos is only one country—nearby Myanmar is another—which needs to collaborate with foreign universities for capacity building, especially staff training, and development. International partnerships need to bring mutual and multiple benefits, and the international cooperation departments of universities in Laos are committed to developing strategies to ensure benefits for all partners.

International engagement has never been more important as a strategic priority in universities. Yet, can we afford to let the current preoccupation with commercialization, competitiveness, and rankings jeopardize international cooperation for capacity building in countries that are developing and strengthening new higher education institutions and systems? The answer is no. But, this will require a shift in the values that are driving internationalization.