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著者 Author(s)	Ogawa, Keiichi
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Higher Education in Lao People's Democratic Republic: Historical Perspective

OGAWA Keiichi*

1. Introduction

Laotian society and education is deeply rooted in an indigenous cultural heritage, colonialism, socialist revolution and most recently, a movement towards a free market economy and privatization. Over the past two decades, the government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has implemented several important educational reforms. These reforms involve the development of teacher education, introduction of a supporting supervisory authority and responsibility, internal decision making structures, building of programs for officials in education planning, administration and management, curriculum and revised textbooks, and programs consolidating postsecondary institutions. The recognition of education as a priority of the government can be found in policy statements made by the 6th Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party in 1996 and in Five-Year National Plans (1996-2000; 2001-2005) (Asian Development Bank, 2000).

The Government began structural reforms in 1986 with the objective to accelerate the transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. As a part of this effort, the government has instituted various legal and administrative reforms to support the overall development of its economy and education. The vision of the reforms is to elevate the country from its current state of least developed to well-developed by 2020. In order to catch up with other ASEAN countries socially and economically, education is considered to be one of the most important engines for the country to achieve its goals in further development.

Lao PDR is a low-income country with a GDP per capita (PPP) of \$1,900, and a government that is more focused on basic education. Recently, due to

*Professor, Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University.

globalization and the introduction of the knowledge economy, the country has recognized the importance of strengthening its post basic education with a continuous focus on higher education. Thus, it is necessary for the government to ensure the establishment of a well-balanced education system that covers both basic and higher education. However, due to a lack of financial resources in the education sector, the country has relied heavily on foreign assistance and it would be a tremendous challenge to implement a sustainable education development plan.

This paper focuses on the higher education of Lao PDR and covers the following four areas. First of all, it presents the overall historical development of higher education linked with national economic and social policy. Then, it describes the development of the first national university in Lao PDR, the National University of Laos (NUOL), and regionalization of public universities. Third, the paper covers the development of private higher education institutions with a focus on access to higher education from perspectives such as students' economic and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, education finance and management issues are reviewed.

2. Development of Higher Education: Historical Perspectives

During the period of 1917-1939, the entire Indochinese area had a single educational system with central direction from Hanoi, Vietnam. In 1939, the decentralization of the educational system was introduced in Lao PDR. After independence, the operation of the public school system has gradually been transferred to the Lao Ministry of National Education of the Royal Government. Before and during the French colonial rule, the development of formal education in Laos was very limited. The formal education for Lao Loum males centered around the village pagoda with monk-teachers playing a key role in the teaching of Lao Loum formal education. The opportunities for higher education favored the urbanized Lao Loum only. Other tribes such as the Lao Soung and Lao Theung minorities did not have any formal or traditional education. Thus, less than 20 percent of the Lao completed six years of formal schooling and only less than 2 percent finished the full eleven years of education during this period.

There was a critical shortage of qualified and experienced Lao teachers, particularly for the lower and upper secondary schools as well as technical schools.

Higher education in Laos began officially in 1958 with the Royal Institute of Law and Administration (RILA) in Vientiane. In 1964, the National Institute of Pedagogy of Vientiane (NIPV) was founded by the government for the training of primary and lower secondary school teachers. The Pathet Lao government in Huaphan Province upgraded the Normal School of Viengsay to higher education status with the establishment of a section for the training of secondary school teachers in 1974. After the foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Laos (DPRL) in 1975, the NIPV and the Viengsay Normal School were unified into the Higher Institute of Pedagogy of Vientiane (HIPV). The HIPV had two branch campuses located in Luang Prabang and in Savanakheth. This institute consisted of seven faculties, including mathematics and physics, biology and chemistry, geography and history, psychology, educational sciences, and Lao languages. There were also training facilities for high school teachers, who were usually trained for a period of 4 years. In 1975, the Faculty of Medicine of the former Royal School of Medicine in Vientiane was reestablished as the Higher School of Medical Sciences (HSMS) (Can, 1991).

In 1984, the National Polytechnical Institute (NPI) was founded in Vientiane. This institution had four faculties: 1) Faculty of Fundamental Sciences; 2) Faculty of Civil Engineering; 3) Faculty of Mechanical Engineering; and 4) Faculty of Electrical Engineering. The course of study was five years. Some students attended a one-year preparatory course at the institute before entering higher education courses. In 1988, the DPRL government consolidated the faculties and provided NPI with more scientific equipment.

Laos is a socialist country led by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and directed by a Party Congress. The President of Laos is the head of State and is elected by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly. The Prime Minister's Office, the Bank of Lao PDR, the Committee for Planning and Cooperation, and the Nationalities Committee are the main administrative organizations of the Lao PDR. The National Assembly is the legislative body with between 40 and 45 members. The central administration consists of 14 ministries

and ministry-equivalent committees. In June 1990, the National Assembly of Lao officially approved the Constitution (article 19), which explicitly states:

The state pays attention to developing education in combination with the building of the new generation to be good citizens. The objectives of the educational, cultural and scientific activities are to raise the level of knowledge, the patriotic spirit, the spirit of cherishing the People's Democratic Regime, the spirit of maintaining unity and harmony among the people of various ethnic groups; enhance the sense of being masters of the country; and implement the compulsory education system at primary levels. The state authorizes the operation of private schools which function under the curricula of the state. The state together with the people build schools at all levels to turn education into a comprehensive system; and pay attention to developing education in the areas where the ethnic minority people reside (Constitution of Lao PDR, 1991, pp.2).

Before its unification in 1995, Laos operated six higher education institutions with short training terms under the supervision of the related government ministries. They were the Higher Schools of Hydraulic Construction; Electrical and Electronic Engineering; Transport and Communications; Forestry; Finances; and Administration. The students were chosen partly from a pool of technicians with some working experience, and partly from a pool of young high school graduates.

In 1995, the Government of Lao PDR reformed the public and private higher education system with the Prime Minister's Decree on Private Higher Education in 1995 and the Decree of the Higher Education Curriculum (National Standard) in 2001. The Decree also amalgamates ten higher education institutions under the structure of the National University of Laos (NUOL), including the College of Law. The objectives of the reforms were twofold: 1) to meet the social and economic needs of the country by liberalization and privatization of higher education; and 2) to make them capable of exploiting and mobilizing the modernization process. The Educational Law was promulgated in April 2000, and article 3 of the law states, that "All Lao citizens (non discrimination of ethnic group, race, religion, sex and social conditions) have the right to education" (Constitution of

Lao PDR, 1991, pp.1).

The improvement of quality, efficiency, access and equity in higher education takes place against a relatively difficult context of high population growth, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, scattered habitats, economic and financial constraints, and low institutional capacity. Against this context, the government has adopted an education strategy that focuses on the following:

- Defining the role and function of education for the cause of national development;
- Linking education with socio-economic goals and strategic tasks;
- Encouraging the general population to achieve primary education level;
- Upgrading the quality and efficiency of education;
- Raising prestige of teachers and professors in the society;
- Mandating contributions from the entire society towards education; and
- Enhancing the management of administrative committees toward educational objectives (UNESCO, 2006, pp.72).

One year after the World Conference on Education for All was held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the Third National Development Plan on education policy was issued. As a result, the principal orientations of the policy were refined as follows:

- Strengthening the education system as the corner stone for a human resource development strategy focused on poverty alleviation and labor productivity;
- Implementing the principle of compulsory primary education;
- Promoting the operation of private schools; and
- Anticipating the development of education at all levels, with particular attention on ethnic minority areas and disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2006, pp.73).

Diversification within the higher education system is a key challenge to addressing the need to develop a range of economic and social services and skills in the modern economy as envisioned by the Government of Laos. Developing and using a system of higher vocational diploma and bachelor's and master's degree programs is the focus. The Department of Higher, Technical and Vocational Education (HTVED) is responsible for the management and coordination of the

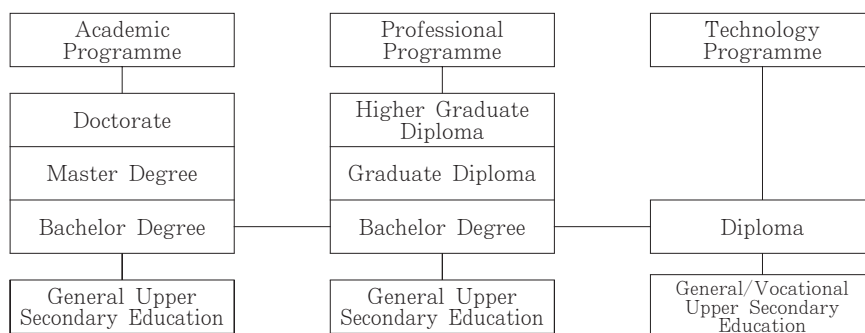
country's post-secondary sector, including overall supervision and monitoring. However, the Department lacks the trained staff to fulfill its roles, which include: determining policy, establishing monitoring standards and approving institutional curriculum. According to UNESCO (2006), the objectives of the administration and management programs for all levels of education in Laos are to: 1) strengthen capacities in planning and management; 2) establish basic tools in education management information systems; and 3) establish school mapping. The objectives of the Vocational, Technical and Higher Education Program are to: 1) rationalize vocational and technical education, and increase by 3.5 times the enrolment in technical and vocational education (up to 19,000 by year 2004); and 2) rationalize higher education and establish a national university through the initial amalgamation of higher education institutions (up to the year 2000) followed by regional colleges (beyond the year 2000) (UNESCO, 2006).

The need for diversification is a key priority in the system of higher education. As a result of this conception, the profiles of the higher vocational diploma, and Bachelor's and Master's programs have been officially redefined and detailed by the Ministry of Education under the decree on 17 July 2001. Areas which have been identified for re-articulation are: organization of teaching and learning, use of a credit system, duration of study, structure of curriculum, morality of the students and evaluation of learning. Graduates of upper secondary school were offered specialized courses in English, architecture, economics and management to study at NUOL. Distance education has been commenced through the cooperation with foreign partners for staff development in educational management and foreign language teaching in French and English. In addition, there is collaboration with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to develop a pilot teacher training centre using Interactive Computerized Testing (ICT). One of the key supporting measures for reform and diversification has been the merger of higher education institutions to form the National University of Laos (NUOL) in 1995. As a result, a number of innovations have taken place, including the introduction of new admission policies, staff development programs, curriculum reform, diversification of courses and the fostering of research and international cooperation.

The aim of the reform program is to increase the number of students between 17 and 25 years of age pursuing higher education to 7 percent in 2005, and 10 percent in 2010. As such, the Ministry of Education expects the number of places in higher education to increase to at least 10,000 per annum by 2010. At present, higher education in Laos comprises the following three public institutions: 1) National University of Laos (NUOL); Souphanouvong University (SU); and Champasack University (CU). Moreover, there are five teacher training colleges and thirty-one private higher institutions.

Figure 1 shows the new programs of study at the higher education level for Laos. There are three-year higher diploma programs for students who have completed upper secondary school and four- to six-year bachelor degree programs depending on the nature of programs for students who have completed upper secondary school in Lao PDR.

Figure 1: Program Levels Available in Higher Education in Lao PDR



Source: UNESCO (2006)

3. Development of the National University of Laos (Dong Dok Campus)

The National Education Center of Laos has conducted short- and long- term teacher training since 1922. In 1942, the teaching school became the Teacher Training School. This school focused on producing quality teachers for primary schools from grade 4 to grade 8. In 1950, this school was moved to Taforand which is now the Educational Research Center. In 1959, this school was moved to Dong Dok area, which is now the location of the main campus of the National University of Laos (NUOL), and it was later renamed the National Education

Center. In 1963, the center was again renamed, this time as the Teacher Training Institute. The higher diploma, which was a three-year program, was introduced in 1964 and the bachelor program was introduced in 1969 at the Teacher Training Institute (Bounmy, 2003).

From 1975 to 1995, three higher education institutions, namely, the Pedagogical Institute, the National Polytechnic and the University of Medical Sciences, which provided university-level programs with four year courses, were established. In 1995, the Government decided to merge all higher education institutions into one university, namely, the National University of Laos (NUOL), with the aim to harmonize and rationalize the higher education system. Additional colleges were then merged into this structure so that by mid-1998, 10 colleges had been merged into the NUOL. The NUOL currently has 13 faculties: School of Foundation Studies, Faculty of Sciences, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Faculty of Letters, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Laws and Political Sciences, Faculty of Forestry, Faculty of Social Sciences, and Environment Development Center (MOE, 2007).

The NUOL has both institutional autonomy and financial autonomy by which it designs its own curriculum/program, selects students, appoints staff, awards qualifications, and directs its own research activities. NUOL has the right to confer diplomas and degrees to its graduates and the right to recognize diplomas from other higher education institutions for admittance to the institution. Due to increased demand for and enrollment in different fields of study in recent years, new faculties have been introduced in NUOL to meet the challenge of the new generation.

The NUOL currently offers undergraduate as well as higher diploma and postgraduate programs as mentioned hereunder:

Undergraduate and higher diploma:

The Bachelor's Degree Program consists of one year of basic sciences and four years of specialized studies except for the Faculty of Medical Sciences Program which comprises 6 years of specialized studies. The Higher Diploma

Program consists of three or four years of studies in the following four faculties: Engineering; Architecture; Forestry; and Agriculture.

Postgraduate programs:

NUOL offers training in Pediatrics and Gynecology at the Faculty of Medical Sciences. It also offers a Master's Degree Program at the Faculty of Engineering through a cooperative program with Hanoi University of Communication and Hanoi Water Resources University. In addition, a Master's Degree Program is offered at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEBM) through a cooperative program with Vietnam University. National University has also been conducting in-service training, distance learning programs in English and French, and other professional disciplines within the staff development program. Additionally, there are various activities offered by the centers housed within NUOL. For instance, the Teacher Development Center (TDC), which is attached to the Faculty of Education, provides services and training for teachers and educational administrators for secondary schools. The Population Studies Center (PSC) is funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and is attached to the Office of the President. Its objectives are to: 1) develop and implement curriculum in population studies at NUOL; and 2) promote and carry out research in the related fields. Table 1 provides a list of the different NUOL faculties and the ministries with which they are associated.

The majority of the programs delivered by NUOL are five-year courses. The first two years are carried out in the School of Foundation Studies (SFS), followed by the next three years in one of the ten faculties with the following exceptions:

- Medicine: 2+5 years;
- Dentistry: 2+4 years;
- Architecture: 2+4.5 years; and
- English: 2+3.5 years.

Courses are based on a credit-based system. The standard five-year program requires 190 credits, while a six-year program requires 265 credits. The credit

Table 1: NUOL Faculties and Delegated Ministry

Name of the Faculty	Name of the School	Name of the Delegated Ministry
School of Foundation Studies	Preparatory School for Overseas Studies	Ministry of Education
Faculty of Sciences	Department of Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Chemistry of University of Pedagogy (IUP)	Ministry of Education
Faculty of Education	Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of IUP	Ministry of Education
Faculty of Social Sciences	Department of Foreign Language, History, Geography and Political Sciences of IUP	Ministry of Education
Faculty of Economics and Management	Newly established	n.a.
Faculty of Engineering and Architecture	National Polytechnic Institute	Ministry of Education
	Higher Technical College of Electronics and Electrics	Ministry of Communication
	School of Communication Vientiane	Transport, Post and Construction
	School of Irrigation Vientiane	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Faculty of Agriculture	Nabong Agriculture College	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Faculty of Forestry	Forestry College	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
Faculty of Medical Sciences	University of Health	Ministry of Health
Faculty of Law and Administration	School of Law and Administration	Ministry of Justice
Faculty of Letters	Newly established from Faculty of Social Sciences, Linguistics and Humanities	n.a.
Faculty of Architecture	Newly established from Faculty of Engineering and Architecture	n.a.

Source: UNESCO (2006)

Note: n.a.=not applicable

value corresponds to the class contact hours, and varies according to the nature of the contact.

Higher education is one of the fastest growing areas in the education system. Currently, NUOL has two programs of study: the new programs in NUOL and the existing programs in the previous faculties and institutions. NUOL's study programs comprise two years of foundation studies followed by three or more years of professional studies in certain faculties. The foundation studies are carried out at the School of Foundation Studies (SFS) with the following objectives:

- Initiating students in the process of academic integration with the overall university system;
- Preparing students for their specialized studies at faculties; and
- Training students selected for overseas studies (UNESCO 2006, pp.79-80).

Moreover, parallel curriculum has been developed in the foundation studies and faculties. A wider variety of programs has been made increasingly available, building on previous provisions. These developments fall into the following categories:

- Three-year higher diploma programs for students who have completed upper secondary school; and
- Four- to six-year bachelor's degree programs depending on the nature of programs for students who have completed upper secondary school (UNESCO 2006, pp.80).

In addition to the above programs, some of the institutions offer a middle-level diploma (technician) consisting of two to three years for students who have completed upper secondary school.

Research is considered as an important university function and was specifically given importance in the decree establishing the National University. However, until recently, research activities have not been visible in the institutions. Private colleges do not currently undertake research. There is incentive for the staff undertaking research activities. It is necessary to seek outside funds, organize institutional exchanges of information and canvass for topics and funds to support university-based research activities. Moreover, few staff members were qualified to conduct research as they did not have a higher degree. Research was meant for individuals going abroad to pursue higher studies. The following objectives are at the heart of the overall research strategy at NUOL: encourage and support all academic staff to carry out research, permit competent staff to deliver consulting services in their field of expertise and establish a Committee for Research Development and Consultancy (CRDC).

As shown in Table 2, the total number of enrollment at the NUOL increased from 9,872 to 22,984 during the period of 1996 and 2005. The increment of

Table 2: Student Enrolment in NUOL (1996/97-2004/05)

Academic Years	Total	Female		Increase	
	Number	Number	%	Number	%
1996-1997	9,872	2,270	22.9		
1997-1998	11,250	2,976	26.4	1,378	13.9
1998-1999	12,896	3,663	28.4	1,646	14.6
1999-2000	14,570	4,345	29.8	1,674	12.9
2000-2001	15,372	4,626	30.1	802	5.5
2001-2002	17,820	5,442	31.1	2,448	15.9
2002-2003	18,366	6,215	33.8	546	3.1
2003-2004	20,230	6,582	32.5	1,864	10.1
2004-2005	22,984	7,396	32.1	2,754	13.6

Source: UNESCO (2006)

enrollment rate fell during 2000-2001 and 2002-2003. However, the number of female enrolment has increased proportionately each year. The total number of graduates during 1996-2004 is 16,294, among whom 63.38% achieved bachelor's degree and the rest achieved a Higher Diploma. The total number of female graduates has increased each year. During 1996-2005 as the number of private colleges/institutions increased, the number of graduates from these institutions also increased. The number of students at the National University during 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 is 15,372 and 22,984, respectively, while in private colleges the number is 4,187 and 14,371, respectively, for the same period. This indicates that the rate of enrollment has increased in private colleges compared to the National University. However, it is clear that most of the upper secondary school leavers cannot be enrolled in higher institutions for further study.

Table 3 provides information on the number of male and female students enrolled by faculty at NUOL. Most of the faculties in NUOL are occupied by large numbers of students whereas colleges under private universities have fewer students. There is a big gap between male and female students in the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture and Faculty of Law in NUOL. In Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, only 10 percent is female, and less than 30 percent of Faculty of Law is female students.

The National University of Laos has established partnerships with 63 foreign universities, institutions and organizations in training and student and staff exchanges, joining research and post graduate programs by cooperating with one university in Australia, one university in Canada, six universities in China, nine

universities in France, two universities in Germany, 10 universities/institutions in Japan, eight universities in the Republic of Korea, two universities in Thailand, three universities/institutions in the USA, and eleven universities in Vietnam (Boupha 2005).

The Lao-Japan Center for Human Resource Cooperation (LJ Center) is funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Its objectives are threefold: 1) to offer Japanese language courses; 2) to offer business courses, and; 3) to promote a good understanding between the Laotian and Japanese people. The Asian Research Center (ARC) is attached to the Office of the President and funded by the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies, Republic of Korea. It aims to promote research among the young staff of NUOL and to promote better understanding among Asian countries. The Lao-Japan Technical Center is attached to the Faculty of Engineering funded by JICA. The objective is to provide training in the maintenance of computers and related devices. The IT Center is attached to the Office of the President which manages all IT mat-

Table 3: Number of Student enrolled by Faculty at NUOL

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
School of Foundation: Female	984	3,175	1,221	1,408	1,702	1,570	863	1,194
School of Foundation: Total	2,839	9,218	3,345	3,622	4,107	3,809	2,156	2,766
Faculty of Language: Female		120	1,286	1,334	1,343	1,570	1,337	1,472
Faculty of Language: Total		296	3,032	3,187	3,051	3,809	3,202	3,429
Faculty of Science: Female	47	1,114	66	91	98	110	272	417
Faculty of Science: Total	143	3,123	235	259	270	259	706	1,051
Economic & Business: Female	89	162	238	445	634	863	1,260	1,445
Economic & Business: Total	161	291	438	1,412	1,537	2,809	2,938	3,263
Law: Female	21	942	198	151	154	216	494	596
Law: Total	133	1,018	942	656	570	600	1,634	2,205
Faculty of Education: Female	9	36		215	470	877	1,468	1,680
Faculty of Education: Total	32	133		579	1,192	2,042	1,278	3,649
Engineering & Architecture: Female	57	66	111	85	81	78	76	127
Engineering & Architecture: Total	608	764	908	882	859	920	846	1,257
Faculty of Medical: Female	255	252	263	304	390	456	594	659
Faculty of Medical: Total	589	542	537	571	689	765	1,037	1,159
Faculty of Agriculture: Female	32	30	21	26	54	54	79	92
Faculty of Agriculture: Total	205	203	84	118	230	233	248	310
Social Science: Female			54	75	96	101	141	349
Social Science: Total			196	219	237	240	312	774
Humanities Science: Female	1,185	1,212						
Humanities Science: Total	2,672	2,952						
Forestry: Female			17	46	40			
Forestry: Total			109	212	137			

Source: MoE (2006)

ters at NUOL. The Center for Environment and Development Studies is attached to the Office of the President. It is established as a center for research and Bachelor's of Environmental Science and Management. The main objective of the center is to educate graduates to deal with the challenge of the sustainable management of Lao PDR's natural resources in the light of increasing development pressures (Boupha, 2005).

4. Regionalization of Public Higher Education

After the NUOL was established in 1995, two more regional universities were established in the South and North regions of the country to ensure equal access to higher education for the people of Laos. First, Champasak University was established in 2002 in the South with four faculties: 1) Agriculture; 2) Economics and Management; 3) Engineering; and 4) Education, with the objective to recruit secondary school graduates from the South. Currently, it has a total enrollment of 1,147 students (445 females — 38.7%). Similarly, Souphanouvong University was established in 2003 in the North with three faculties: 1) Agriculture; 2) Economics and Business Administration; and 3) Education, with the objective to recruit secondary school graduates from the North. It has a total enrollment of 548 students (205 females — 37.4%). Moreover, Souphanouvong University has a Polytechnic School which runs the higher education course on land mapping, with a total enrollment of 120 students (44 females — 36.7%). In addition, Vocational Education Development Center, which is not considered a higher education institution, runs a higher vocational education teacher course with a total enrollment of 47 students (13 females — 27.7%). The Ministry of Education is in charge of coordinating with the Department of Higher, Technical and Vocational Education (Boupha, 2005).

Besides the normal educational program, all public higher education institutions offer an unofficial educational program in order to provide higher education opportunities to secondary school leavers and generate income to cover the operation costs of the institutions. The Institute of Tropical Medicine relevant to the Ministry of Health was established with French cooperation (Francophonie), with the objective to recruit students from French-speaking countries into the

Master's degree program in tropical medicine. The Master's program in Chirurgie was accredited with French cooperation of CCL (Boupha 2005). Some new faculties such as Engineering and Architecture at Souphanouvong University will be established with the support of the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KICA).

According to the Country Report Lao PDR 2005 (Boupha, 2005), the total enrollment of both public and private universities and colleges in Lao PDR is 29,041 students (10,650 females and 36.7% of the total enrollment), of which 5,666 students/2,688 females (47.1%) are in private universities.

In public universities and higher education institutions, there are 125 students/27 females (22.3%) at the Master's degree level, 17,551 students/7,064 females (40.2%) at the Bachelor's degree level and 11,490 students/3,589 females (31.2%) at the higher diploma level. In all faculties at the National University of Laos, there are 11,360 students/6,633 females (58.4%).

Improving the quality of education was greatly emphasized under these policies with a view to progressively raise standards to meet international benchmarks, as well as to increase the relevance of education to family, social and economic life. The Ministry of Education has undertaken all the necessary measures to increase the efficiency of education management in order to improve the quality of and access to education. The Government has also focused on reforming vocational-technical and higher education to improve skills. In order to respond to labor market needs, conceptual and feasibility studies have served as the basis for establishing plans, programs and development projects. The Ministry of Education has introduced five development programs to implement this policy: 1) General Education Program; 2) Non-formal Education Program; 3) Teacher Development Program; 4) Vocational, Technical and Higher Education Program; and 5) Administration and Management Program.

Ethnic Disparities in Access to Education

Laos is characterized as an ethnically and culturally diverse country. Ethnic equality is declared as a national policy for Laos PDR. However, Lao Lung residents are stronger economically. The other two groups, Lao Theung and Lao

Sung, are comparatively weaker both in economic and educational terms. Residents there live in remote areas and have very limited access to education. Table 4 shows the enrollment by ethnicity in national universities. It is very clear that the majority of students who enroll in the National University of Laos are Lao Lung. Lao Theung and Lao Sung have comparatively very little representations. About 93 percent of the NUOL students are Lao Lung, while 5 percent are Lao Sung and 2 percent are Lao Theung. On the other hand, at Souphanouvong University and Champasak University, students who enroll are Lao Theung and Lao Sung. However, the enrollment number is small since these two universities are new.

There is also a gap among the poor and non-poor in terms of opportunities and access to education. Students from the lowest income families are under represented at universities. Students from high income families are more likely to study in faculties such as Engineering and Architecture or Economics and Man-

Table 4: Number of Ethnic students in National Universities

Departments	Number of Ethnic students 2005-2006, NUOL					
	Lao Lung		Lao Theung		Lao Sung	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
<i>National University of Laos (NUOL)</i>						
School of Foundation Studies	2,421	1,123	56	12	232	47
Faculty of Science	840	334	10	5	39	9
Faculty of Education	4,528	706	106	15	349	20
Faculty of Agriculture	861	258	13	2	86	17
Faculty of Medicinal Science	1,172	749	116	30	32	15
Faculty of Literature	3,124	1,417	6	2	54	12
Faculty of Engineering	3,351	1,635	128	24	157	25
Faculty of Economics and Business Management	3,158	1,397	16	7	114	20
Faculty of Architecture	738	91	2	1	50	1
Faculty of Law & Administration	2,137	595	39	13	95	16
Faculty of Forestry	1,316	285	22	3	43	2
Faculty of Social Science	697	339	13	0	62	10
Environment Development Center	264	131	2	1	11	1
Total	24,607	9,060	529	115	1,324	195
<i>Souphanouvong University*</i>						
Faculty of Agriculture			39	13	100	7
Faculty of Architecture			6	1	1	
Faculty of Economics and Business Management			100	n.a	50	n.a
Total			145	14	151	7
<i>Champasak University**</i>						
Total			100	30	11	7

Source: NUOL (2007); *Souphanouvong University, (2007); **Champasak University, (2007)

agement, so jobs in either the government or private sectors are more accessible to them.

However, those from disadvantaged family backgrounds are more likely to study at the faculties of Agriculture and Education. Moreover, there is still a gap in terms of equity to access to higher education between men and women in Laotian society. Furthermore, a gap also occurs among minority and dominant ethnic groups. Ethnic minority students use their native language which is not Lao, even though Lao is officially declared the language for all educational institutes. It is also difficult to recruit a teacher of the same ethnicity as the students to teach due to lack of facilities and infrastructure (Bounmy, 2003). Thus, we can assume that equal opportunity to access to education is still very limited in Laos.

In terms of the efforts of the government of Laos to maintain the quality of education, there has been a recent push to introduce a self-evaluation and external review system to achieve full transparency and accountability. Enrollment increases in higher education have on the whole ignored quality improvements in higher education. To tackle this issue, the Ministry of Education has set up a formal accreditation and quality assurance process. The concept of quality includes many factors including governance/management, teachers, teaching and learning programs, research, financial resources, instructional materials and equipment including optimizing the use of information and communication technologies in the overall institutional environment. The Ministry of Education has undertaken the following measures to enhance the quality of higher education:

- Improving the admission system to higher education by establishing an entry system based on three criteria: (i) equity and access to disadvantaged groups; (ii) academic performance; and (iii) financial need;
- Increasing the number of programs, in line with the Decree on the Profile of Curriculum issued in 2001, to meet the quality and relevance requirements of higher education;
- Increasing the number of employer studies and career guidance services to improve the relevance of programs to meet the requirements of employers, parents, students, the community and the labor market; and
- Improving teacher quality to upgrade the quality of higher education.

Previously, higher education curriculum was designed specially for the needs of the concerned ministries. It is necessary to enable academics to develop routes to support further study and progress from one level to another. It is also of importance to develop the pathways between technical education and higher education and to introduce the flexible entry and exit to and from the system of higher education. In relation to this objective, a credit system has been used in NUOL. At present, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and NUOL are taking action on the question of cross-sectoral curriculum coordination and integration, especially in technology and science-based professional education.

5. Private Higher Education Institutions

According to the country report 2005 (Boupha, 2005), in the academic year 2003/04 out of 22 universities and colleges, 19 are private. The Government released the Prime Minister's Decree on Private Education in 1995 to promote investment in education and provide a regulatory framework within the context of the national education system. Private education has boomed in the last few years as the enrollments have steadily increased from year to year while the demand for higher education has increased sharply. The decree in August 1995 has promoted an investment in education and established a regulatory framework within the national education system. From 1992 to 2000, there were 14 private colleges registered, and by 2005 there were 31 colleges (related to commerce, business, computing, technology and English language studies). The number of students increased from 101 to 15,301, including 3,893 students pursuing bachelor's degrees.

Private education institutions have imported some educational programs especially in English, business administration and ICT. They also began giving diplomas and degrees in August 1995 after the Prime Minister's Decree that authorized the Directors of private institutions to sign diplomas and degrees from their educational programs. The private educational programs were monitored and evaluated by the Department of Private Education for quality assurance.

The Prime Minister's Decree on Private Education defined the legal

framework for the establishment and operation of private schools. It addressed some of the issues and concerns confronting private education by defining the specific means of support and encouragement that private education could receive, including:

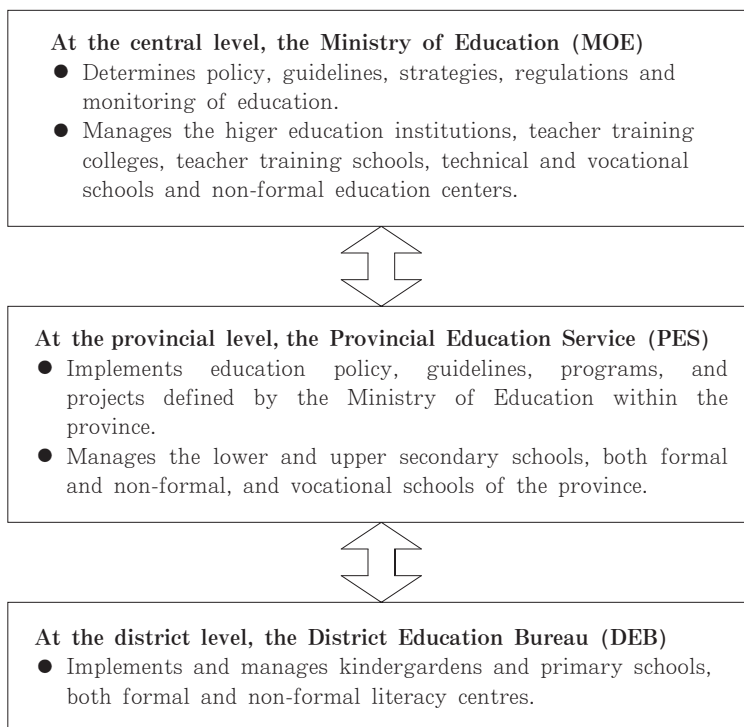
- Teachers in government schools are allowed to work part-time in private schools, under conditions determined by the Ministry of Education;
- The Government permits the authorized person or juristic person to loan or rent the school's assets when possible;
- Private schools are exempt from business tax, income tax, land-use tax and customs duties for the import of necessary instructional materials;
- The Government supports and encourages private schools to have innovative forms of teaching and learning where possible;
- The Ministry of Education will provide in-service training and continuing education for teachers of private schools; and
- The Ministry of Education is allowed to obtain aid from international organizations to grant to private schools (UNESCO, 2006, pp.90)

The number of enrolled students in private universities is shown in Table 5. There was a steady increase in student enrollment in the diploma degree compared to Bachelor's degree. Female students are almost half or one third of the total student population in both programs. The number of students in private universities has increased significantly since 1998. The number was 2,800 in 1998 and it has increased to 5,100 in 2005. Nearly 50 percent of the private university students are female.

Table 5: Enrolment of Student in Private Colleges

Academic Years	Number of institutions	Level		Number	
		Bachelor	Diploma	Total	Female
1996/1997	2		2,509	2,509	1,207
1997/1998	3		2,716	2,716	860
1998/1999	4		2,770	2,770	893
1999/2000	5		3,201	3,201	938
2000/2001	7		4,187	4,187	1,928
2001/2002	8	58	5,333	5,391	2,423
2002/2003	15	127	4,618	4,745	1,968
2003/2004	19	1,246	6,122	7,368	3,427
2004/2005	31	2,639	11,732	14,371	6,557

Source: UNESCO (2006)

Diagram 2: Public Administrative and Management System on Education

Source: Asian Development Bank, 2000

6. Education Management and Finance

Education in Lao PDR consists of three levels of administrative systems. At the top there are 18 provinces, including the Vientiane Prefecture and one special zone; in the middle there are 141 districts; and at the lower level, 11,795 villages. The central administration consists of 14 ministries and ministry-equivalent committees. The public administration and management for the education sector in Laos also consists of three levels (see Diagram 2).

The MOE of Lao PDR is responsible for overall policy decisions, direction and control of the quality of education in both the public and private sectors of Lao PDR. Primary and secondary education comes under the Department of General Education (DGE), while the Department of Higher, Technical and Vocational Education (HTVE) is responsible for post-secondary education. The financing of general education has been primarily the responsibility of the provinces and districts, which have their own revenue base and negotiate their budgets

directly with the Ministry of Finance (MOF). In the case of other ministries that run their own training institutes, the MOE has only to approve the curriculum while other ministries also negotiate their own training budgets with the MOF. Since 1993, the MOE budget has been centralized with two subdivisions; that is, one for the Ministry of Education and the second distributed to the provinces.

The responsibilities of the MOE are policy making, planning and implementation of the policies, giving advice and recommendations regarding education policies and supervising education activities across the country, developing curriculum, editing and publishing textbooks, compiling and distributing teaching materials, training new teachers, providing in-service training, and administering higher education, education finance and human resources management within the education system, either directly or indirectly through subordinate organizations. The MOE also has the authority to institute or abolish educational institutions, the authority to determine the organization and functions of the Provincial Education Service and the district education bureau and the authority to issue regulations, directives and notices as necessary relating to education. Teacher assignment is carried out through a MOE response to requests by the state and county.

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the major policy-making body in the country, plays the key role throughout national policy and planning processes. Generally, other stakeholders at the center, provincial and district levels have little direct input into national education policies and participate in very limited ways in policy dialogue. The LPRP holds a national congress every five years to discuss major national issues and to pass resolutions that establish the broad economic and social policy framework, sectoral objectives, and, sometimes, specific targets for the next five or more years.

Recently there has been a big change in the financial management of NUOL. Though NUOL's budget is small and mostly limited to credit the faculties are permitted to have their financial management unit control their own bank account. As of now, the Government can guarantee a regular salary payment for the staff of NUOL. Since salaries are low, most of the teaching staff find parallel

or additional jobs outside the university. It is difficult for the universities to assume recurrent costs including paying guards and cleaners, maintaining the building and equipment, and buying stationary and consumables. To compensate for the low salary and solve partially the recurrent cost issue, the MOE encourages NUOL to open “special programs.” These programs are held during the evening and the students must pay a significant amount of the fees and tuition. Seventy-five percent of the revenue from these programs is kept within the concerned faculty and can be utilized to assume an important part of the operating costs of that faculty.

There was a very substantial increase in the education budget from 1993/94 to 1994/95 in Laos due to the following reasons: 1) international capital increased three fold; and 2) there was a substantial increase in domestic funds, both in recurrent funds and in domestic capital. The increase in domestic recurrent funds came from a large increase in civil service pay. Since that time, every year there have been increases in the education budgets, at least in nominal terms. In real terms, however, budgets have fluctuated, falling in 1995/96, rising in 1996/97 and then falling again (ADB, 2000).

The education budget for 1996/97 represented about 2.9 percent of GDP and 15.8 percent of the Government budget (Table 6). Over the fiscal years of 1993/94 and 1997/98, the Government budget for education as a proportion of GDP has ranged from 2.2 percent to 3.4 percent. Much of the increase can be attributed to changes in civil service salaries in relation to growth in the economy and to changes in the rate of inflation. However, Lao PDR has a much larger rate of investment spending as a proportion of total education spending than found in other countries and a lower rate of domestic recurrent spending on education. While education spending as a proportion of GDP is in line with other countries, the distribution of spending between recurrent and capital budgets is quite different elsewhere. Though there are large amounts of spending on investments in education, largely funded by foreign sources, so far they seem to have relatively little impact on the educational system for at least two related reasons. First, externally funded education projects tend to use a relatively high proportion of the resources made available for the construction of school buildings and second,

Table 6: Public Expenditures on Education

Public expenditures on education as % of GNP	Distribution of recurrent expenditure (%)		
	Preprimary and primary	Secondary	Tertiary
2.4	42.2	43.5	3.9

Source: Asian Development Bank, 2000

there are often insufficient funds in the recurrent budget to support the investments that are made. About 75 percent of the recurrent budget goes to general education, the schooling that is administered by the provinces, with the largest amount on primary education; 4 percent on pre-school education; 11 percent on the upper levels of education administered by MOE technical and vocational training, teacher training, and higher education; and 9 percent on overall administration (ADB, 2000). Table 6 shows that 3.9 percent of the recurrent expenditure was spent at the tertiary level.

Teacher salaries represent only 40 percent of the recurrent budget for the technical and vocational training, teacher training and higher education. Compared with general education, these schools have many more non-teaching staff and consequently, a much larger budget for this purpose. Another difference is that a major part of the budget for these higher levels of education is student welfare. These monies fund the bursaries for quota students, who make up about 50 percent of the total students. In addition to the bursaries, most schools provide dormitories which are heavily subsidized (only nominal fees are charged), and these expenses appear in the operations budget. Therefore, the total student welfare expenditures tend to be substantial and make up more than 30 percent of the recurrent budget for postsecondary education. While the largest part of the budget is provided for general education, the largest per student expenditures are for teacher training, technical and vocational training and higher education. There are two reasons for the large differences in unit costs: 1) far more resources per student are going into the teaching process at the upper level than is the case for general education; and 2) the system is providing substantial levels of financial support — cash and subsidized housing — for a large part of the upper level students (ADB, 2000).

7. Conclusion

Higher education in Lao PDR has developed significantly in the past decade, especially after the National University of Lao was established in Vientiane, Capital City. In order to better offer public higher education to ethnic minority groups and regionally disadvantaged groups, two more national universities were established in the northern and southern provinces. Private universities have also been established to meet social demand. Recently due, to globalization and the introduction of the knowledge economy, the government has recognized the importance of strengthening its post-basic education with a continuous focus on higher education. Though public expenditure on education is limited, the government has been a fervent supporter of basic education in order to meet the MDGs and EFA targets by 2015. However, the development of post-basic education, including higher education, is considered to be a key factor for the sustainable economic development of the country.

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