

Internationalization of Higher Education in Laos: Perspectives of university staff on rationales, challenges, and strategies for the post-COVID-19

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Abstract. While internationalization has been a strategic driver in transforming higher education in universities across the world, little research has investigated how universities in less-developed countries have implemented the internationalization process to benefit their human and institutional capacity. This article explored the perspectives of university staff on rationales, challenges, and strategies for internationalization through the analysis of survey data collected from 82 university staff (i.e., presidents, deans, directors, academics, and staff) working at four public universities in Laos. The findings showed that resource assurance and academic rationales were the main drivers for internationalization in Lao universities toward strengthening institutional and human capacity and improving the quality of educational provisions. Meanwhile, the universities had attempted to overcome a shortage of capable human resources, financial constraints, and administrative mechanisms to expand internationalization practices. This study also found that universities focused on enhancing information and communication technology (ICT) and foreign language skills of faculty members, expanding partnerships with quality cooperation, and promoting digitalization in the teaching function of the institution as an internationalization strategy for post-COVID-19. These results could bring voices from an under-represented country into the discourse on the internationalization of higher education and have implications for other contexts with similar conditions.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, rationale, challenge, strategy, university staff

Introduction

Internationalization is increasingly gaining significance in higher education systems around the world.

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It is recognized as national and institutional agendas responding to the impacts of globalization and seizing its opportunities through a wide range of methods and approaches depending on local and regional context (de Wit et al., 2017). In Asia, internationalization is seen as the first factor enabling regional and institutional cooperation since the mid-1990s (Sugimura, 2012). In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was established to promote socio-economic cooperation and solidarity among countries in Southeast Asia. The creation of AEC has influenced the development of higher education (HE) in this region, as it has led to more competition, the need for harmonization in HE, and demand for a trained workforce to deal with the new socio-economic situation (Ratanawijitrasin, 2015). Meanwhile, among several catalysts, HE plays a key role in advancing the economic, political, and socio-cultural development agendas of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2015). As a result, governments and universities in the Asian region have adjusted their policies and implemented international strategies to respond to such regional changes. Hotta (2020) notes that some governments and universities have established new agreements for academic exchanges, hired foreign professors and provided English-taught programs to attract international and domestic students, as well as offer transnational education in partnership with western institutions. For many Asian governments and universities, key motivations to accept international students are to improve international prestige, responding to recent population declines, expectations for economic benefits and promoting cross-cultural understanding in the Asian region (Hotta, 2020). Lao People's Democratic Republic—a landlocked country located in Southeast Asia and a member of ASEAN—has also continued improving higher education to keep pace with regional development through international cooperation and networking.

In Lao higher education, internationalization is not yet clearly defined, but widely understood as international cooperation. It is promoted as a strategic tool that allows higher education institutions to broaden their partnerships for reciprocal academic exchanges, research collaborations and capacity building. This is aimed at enhancing educational quality and staying abreast of regional and international development (Sisavath, 2021). However, the concept of internationalization in Lao education dates back to the time when Laos was under colonial rule. The outflow of student mobility and acceptance of foreign experts and educators to teach and assist in the country were regarded as the main aspects of internationalization, particularly after the declaration of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) in 1975. Since then, the scope of international academic cooperation has been progressively broadening and evolving in alignment with the country's strategic direction and foreign policy. In 1997, Laos joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a significant milestone that was closely followed by the National University of Laos (NUOL) joining the ASEAN University Network (AUN).

Laos has committed itself to synchronize with the ASEAN agendas and harmonize its education development with those of ASEAN member countries. A noteworthy transformation in this regard is the transition from the traditional examination system to the credit system in higher education. This shift has been embraced by universities and colleges, which have implemented and commenced the utilization of the credit system since the 2000s (Nuoansavanh, 2010). In response to the AUN's work

plan, NUOL strategically integrated elements such as student and staff exchanges, research collaboration, and information exchange into its strategic plan (NUOL, 2001). This adaptation signifies the readiness of Lao universities to actively engage in the dynamic evolution of regional and international higher education landscapes. Such regional and international engagement enables the universities to improve their international portfolio and seize opportunities to access technical and financial support from external partners and international development organizations/agencies to develop institutional and human capacities. Given limited financial resources and infrastructure, public universities in Laos have tried to adjust their policy and strategies to meet the needs of local contexts and align with trends of educational development in the Southeast Asian region and beyond to access technical and financial support, especially post-COVID-19.

In December 2019, COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China, and it rapidly spread worldwide, eventually causing a pandemic. The virus not only caused economic shocks but also significantly impacted education across the globe (Ounmany, 2021). Educational institutions in many countries, including Laos, were forced to close to control the virus spreading. Students in low- and middle-income countries were hardest hit, partly due to disparities in access to online learning platforms. Around 1.5 billion students stopped learning in physical classrooms in March 2020 (Vegas, 2021). In Laos, around 1.7 million students were affected by the pandemic, owing to school closures, which made the country face a learning crisis (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). For the higher education sector, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, international travel for academic activities was suspended due to border closures, and teaching-learning activities were shifted to online mode. However, distance learning-teaching reached only 30% of higher education students due to the limits of equipment, students' ICT skills, and teachers' capacity to develop teaching materials for online classes (Vongsakith, 2021), which had short- and long-term impacts on student learning outcomes and education quality. In response, the Lao government has sought cooperation and international grants from the public and private sectors to improve and create the environment for distance classes at HEIs and train ICT skills for both teachers and students (Vongsakith, 2021). Doing so implies that the country has relied on foreign assistance, and it would be a tremendous challenge to implement a sustainable education development plan (Ogawa, 2009). This is not surprising that international cooperation and assistance are critical for educational development, including fostering internationalization in higher education, due to the country's economic development status and limitations in human capital.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions of university staff on rationales for adapting internationalization into higher education, challenges facing their implementation, and strategies post-COVID-19 pandemic to foster internationalization efforts and practices. Thematic and content analysis approaches were employed to analyze the collected data from university staff in 2021 when they participated in workshops on international cooperation and networking. Considering Laos as a less-developed country, meanwhile, this research reflected Knight's (2013) comment that while economic advantages are an increasingly prevalent motivator for the internationalization of higher education, there

is a diminished emphasis on international development cooperation and capacity-building initiatives for institutions from developing countries. Findings from this research contribute insights from under-represented developing systems which are hardly heard and overlooked in discourses on internationalization of higher education.

Literature Review

Internationalization is interpreted and implemented in different ways in different countries and by different stakeholders based on priorities, culture, history, politics and resources (Knight, 2004). Considering internationalization can be implemented at national/sector/institutional levels and involves diverse actors, it is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, function or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). Knight’s definition highlights the process of integrating international and intercultural dimensions into all areas that fall within institutional life without specifying the beneficiaries and outcomes of such integration. de Wit et al. (2015) recently refined Knight’s definition as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to the society” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29). This presents internationalization as an agent of change in institutional practices toward enhancing the quality of education provisions, inclusion, and social responsibility of higher education institutions. Given diversity and commonality in the higher-education systems across the world, it is crucial to look beyond the western-dominated lens and explore other perceptions of internationalization (Hill et al., 2019). This process can be interpreted differently by individuals, institutions, or countries depending on their goals and the context in which they enact.

In Southeast Asia, particularly CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam), the internationalization of higher education is perceived as a way to seize opportunities, access resources, and develop the country’s higher education system (Hill et al., 2019). Specifically, in the context of Laos, internationalization is predominantly acknowledged as a form of international cooperation. It is advocated as a strategic instrument that empowers higher education institutions to expand partnerships for mutual academic exchanges, research collaborations, and capacity building. This strategic tool is aimed at enhancing the quality of education and keeping pace with regional and international development (Sisavath, 2021). In Cambodia, internationalization is seen as a modernization process (Yun, 2014). The process leads to improvements in academic standards, up-to-date curricula, and mobility opportunities for staff and students. As such, it contributes to building human capacity and increasing a country’s regional competitiveness. In Vietnam, internationalization is regarded in Vietnamese policy discourse as integration and prioritized in the country’s development and reform of higher education (Hoang et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2014). A notable area in Vietnamese higher education

is the interface between Vietnamese institutions and prestigious institutions from Western countries that offer advanced programs for local students. Collaboration helps develop local human resources to meet demands for socioeconomic development and higher education needs among local students (Hoang et al., 2018). In Laos, foreign higher education institutions, such as FPT University from Vietnam, have recently been granted permission to collaborate with local private institutions. This collaboration aims to jointly provide undergraduate programs to Lao students. Additionally, an overseas branch campus of Soochow University from China has been established in Laos (Ministry of Education and Sports [MOES], 2018). These indicate that internationalization functions as a strategic tool that reinforces the evolution of the local higher-education system and helps the system keep pace with the growing demands for higher education and international dimensions in the local labor market.

Individual institutions each possess their own rationales that shape their approach to internationalization. These rationales, at the institutional level, encompass a variety of aspects including the enhancement of international profile and reputation, the pursuit of quality improvement in accordance with international standards, income generation, student and staff development, formation of networks and strategic alliances, and knowledge production (Knight, 2007). Changes in the operational environment, such as financial crises, coupled with the necessity for global innovation to foster economic competition within the country, serve as catalysts propelling universities towards internationalization (Taylor, 2004). In practice, the rationales guiding internationalization are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some may be predominated by others and changed over time according to the needs, trends, and priorities of individual institutions. In the context of Laos, these rationales for internationalization are important for Lao universities. They serve dual purposes: firstly, they act as benchmarks for operationalization, and secondly, they reflect universities' commitment to internationalization, as outlined in their institutional strategic plan (ISP) (Sisavath, 2021). Lao universities have developed their ISPs according to the Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) of Laos, which also explains reasons for international cooperation. At the institutional level, ISP is regarded as an internationalization plan serving as institutional policies and providing a masterplan for subunits (e.g., faculties, offices) to translate the policy into practice and to report achievements to upper executive levels.

In order to achieve the mission of internationalization, the role of strategic planning cannot be underestimated as it offers a detailed blueprint of the activities, programs, or initiatives that institutions need to undertake. At the institutional level, these strategies consist of both academic programs and organizational strategies (Knight, 2007). The former mainly encompasses academic programs, research and scholarly collaborations, external relations, and extracurricular activities. The latter focus more on governance, operational processes, service provision, and human resource management. In Thailand, for example, public and private universities develop various international programs, using English as a medium of instruction and sometimes in partnership with a foreign university as strategies for illustrating their internationalization in teaching dimensions (Lavankura, 2013). Demands for English

proficiency in the Thai labor market and income generation through tuition fees from particular demographic groups are rationales driving the universities to develop international programs. English-language competence has economic value in negotiating for premium wages and symbolic value in enhancing social status among upper- and middle-class Thais (Lavankura, 2013). In Laos, each university has prioritized a particular area of research field based on the geographical potential and potential partnerships from neighboring countries and beyond to strengthen research capacity and productivity (Sisavath, 2021). In addition, universities in CLMV countries have emphasized improving English-language proficiency for students and staff and professional development for staff (Hill et al., 2019). It is a strategic move for them to open up their national education systems more widely and to develop them to improve graduates' learning outcomes, employability, and access to greater international opportunities.

The pandemic crisis has provided opportunities to re-evaluate our higher education strategies, including partnerships, teaching methods, student pathways, recruitment, incentives, assessment, and goals (Marmolejo & Groccia, 2022). Numerous universities and educators have transitioned to online or hybrid formats, presenting new challenges for faculty members. While this change restricts in-person interactions in the classroom as well as traditional internationalization activities, it also offers new prospects for internationalization in higher education. Among others, internationalization at home is afforded special attention to cope with restrictions on international mobility. In Japan, Japanese universities adopt new approaches, such as the internationalization of curriculum (IoC) in English medium instruction (EMI) to enable students access to international education while complying with restrictions on international mobility. IoC is commonly incorporated in a range of subjects from humanities and social sciences, which are supplemented by content and language integrated learning (CLIL) – type English language classes to respond to the needs and academic interests of both international and domestic students (Hammond & Radjai, 2022). China, as a direct impact of COVID-19, closed its borders since the beginning of the pandemic in order to implement its zero-tolerance strategy to combat COVID-19. All the international students enrolled in Chinese higher education after the pandemic started have had to undertake online learning until now (Cai et al., 2022). Guo (2023) noted that the pandemic accelerated among Chinese universities in their transition in policies to shift their policies from international mobility to internationalization at home (IaH) to enable students to access international education at home. IaH is recognized as the sustainable mode for Chinese higher education in the post-pandemic era due to five supportive conditions, including (a) lots of international scholars conducting research and attending cultural activities in China, (b) lots of international students studying in China, (c) some Chinese universities offering globally recognized international programs, (d) having excellent international teaching materials and utilizing technology, and (e) more high-level international academic conferences held in China (Zhang & Liu, 2017, cited in Guo, 2023). In ASEAN countries, universities have started to organize virtual exchanges, allowing students to experience internationalization without incurring travel expenses (Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN

Region [SHARE], 2022). Altogether, virtual or hybrid learning modes are considered sustainable and successful drivers for implementing internationalization during the pandemic. They could do so in the post-pandemic era in addition to international mobility. It is crucial for universities to address the challenges faced by faculty members, such as foreign language proficiency, intercultural communication skills, and digital competencies, to ensure successful adaptation to the new learning circumstances in the post-pandemic world.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) was adopted to explore the perspectives of university staff regarding internationalization practices at public universities in Laos. A purposive sampling technique was utilized for the selection of participants. Specifically, 82 university stakeholders with diverse roles, positions, and responsibilities at four Lao public universities – National University of Laos (NUOL), Souphanouvong University (SU), Champasack University (CU), and Savannakhet University (SKU) – were invited to participate in the current research (see Table 1). These staff participants are those who work related to international cooperation at the institutional and departmental levels and were assigned to participate in a series of meetings and workshops on international cooperation and networking under the Second Strengthening Higher Education Project (SSHEP) in Laos. Given their roles and experiences, they were considered qualified and suitable participants representing their faculties and universities to provide rich information and nuanced insights into internationalization in higher education. The participants were asked to respond to three main questions as part of their online registration for workshops on international cooperation and networking in June 2021. The questions include (i) What is the key rationale for internationalization at their respective faculty/office? (ii) What are the key challenges facing internationalization practices, and (iii) What aspects are to be emphasized as preparing internationalization strategy for the post-COVID 19?

Table 1. Characteristics of participants by group of stakeholders and position

Group of stakeholders	Position within the institution	n	%
Institutional leader	President, Vice President	3	3.7
Middle manager	Faculty Dean/Vice-Dean, Office Director, Center Director, Head/Deputy Head of Division	54	65.9
Staff	Lecturer, Researcher, Administrative staff	25	30.5
Total		82	100.0

Participants were allowed to answer in their mother tongue (Lao language), which makes them feel comfortable to express their perspective. As shown in Table 1, there is diversity of participants in terms

of position and responsibility helps the reliability of the data. Of the 82 participants, most participants hold a managerial position while having academic responsibilities such as teaching, supervising students, and conducting research. Therefore, their responses on rationales, challenges and needs for internationalizing higher education sustainably and effectively for the post-COVID-19 pandemic are unique in reflecting the reality of research context.

The collected data were prepared for analysis through six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) gaining familiarity with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing a report. The coding process was performed manually. This enables the author to make sense of and analyze the data in more depth. Analysis began with reading entire written texts several times to become familiar with the data and highlighted words, phrases, or statements to generate potential codes/themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this process, unstructured data were gradually transformed into a set of thoughts and ideas that are either directly relevant to or depart from the central research question. Such a coding process enables the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Initial codes were then revisited, reviewed, and collated into meaningful groups to determine or search for themes. Considering reliability and trustworthiness of findings, an iterative process was conducted to improve interpretation of the data, which is a process of revisiting the data and connecting them with the emerging themes to refine key points and understandings (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). When reporting findings, direct quotes from responding texts were used with the following convention: “P” stands for “Participant”, followed by a respondent number (i.e., P1, P2) and position of participant.

Findings and Discussion

Drawing on responses from all participants, regardless of their professional positions within the institution, it was found that there were similarities in their perspectives regarding rationales, challenges, and strategies for internationalization practices. Such findings could be associated with the fact that most participants were involved in both academic and administrative affairs at their universities. Their perspectives might reflect policy to practical dimensions in Lao higher education.

Rationales for internationalization

Irrespective of the group of participants, resource assurance and academic rationales were recognized as two major driving forces for internationalization efforts and practices in Lao higher education to strengthen institutional and human capacity and improve the quality of educational provisions. Institutional leaders perceived international cooperation as a strategic key to open doors to external resources—both technical and financial. Knight (2013) noted that international academic cooperation was significant in strengthening the higher education system in Laos. Due to limited subsidiaries from

the government, Lao universities expanded partnerships and networks to seize opportunities and find multiple sources of funding for human and institutional capacity building (Sisavath, 2021).

Rationales for resource assurance

Resource assurance often refers to financial resources obtained from international donors and development partners through bilateral or multilateral cooperation. As shown in the analysis, cooperation to compete for technical and financial assistance was frequently cited among participants. This indicates that universities in Laos have not only received government subsidiaries but also relied on foreign aid and collaborated with foreign institution partners to develop proposals for funding. These efforts are aimed at improving institutional and human capacity. Also, participants acknowledged the significance of external funding in expediting academic and structural progress.

Notably, many participants pointed out the advantages of collaborating with European partners in higher education, particularly through programs like ERASMUS+. Universities can benefit from projects funded by the EU, which provide training opportunities for students and staff, academic equipment, research and training centers, and opportunities for expanding partnerships. For example, Lao universities partnered with Spanish and Italian universities to develop internationalization strategies at both national and institutional levels and establish the Laos University Association for Internationalization Network (LUAI), as part of the EU-funded Erasmus+ Project “OPEN-ing Laos Higher Education System to Internationalization Strategies” (2020–2023). This evidenced foreign influences in the form of internationalization of higher education in Laos. However, several participants expressed concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of funded projects. Typically lasting between three to four years, these projects receive financial support from the European Union. Yet once the project concludes, universities are left to carry out activities on their own. The financial limitations faced by universities often lead to a reliance on external resources. This requires them to seek partnerships with foreign institutions and international organizations to secure grants or soft loans for funding their activities. Without such support, the productivity of academic and research centers can be hindered. However, this dependence on foreign aid can create a situation where efforts towards internationalization may increase to ensure institutional visibility but sustain reliance on external assistance.

Rationales for strengthening academic improvement and quality

According to data analysis, there were four main aspects of academic rationales being widely perceived to be strengthened through internationalizing higher education, namely: (1) academic capacity, (2) student mobility, (3) qualification upgrading, and (4) joint research. First, more than one-third of participants viewed internationalization as a means to access opportunities and funding for academic

capacity building. A variety of collaborative activities, mainly co-teaching, co-supervising, and developing joint programs could achieve this goal. It was also recognized that collaborating with strategic partners to design teaching-learning activities and co-develop degree program curricula helped universities modernize their teaching function to meet international standards. Second, such academic collaboration further created preconditions to promote inbound and outbound student exchanges and credit transfers from different educational systems. As a part of the internationalization strategy, universities often incorporate student mobility as a vital aspect. Participants recognized this approach aimed to equip students with specialized knowledge and intercultural competency during their degree programs. Student mobility could be done in various forms, including semester exchanges, internships, and academic training programs: “Student mobility forms a part of international cooperation. We send our students to do internship, participate in training, and undertake exchange program for professional education, including cultural exchanges in other countries” (P15, Faculty Dean).

Third, universities aimed to attract technical and financial support from international partners through internationalization to upgrade faculty members’ qualifications and support professional training abroad, especially teaching methodology and hybrid teaching techniques. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for instructors to reconceptualize more innovative and equitable approaches to international education (Hammond & Radjai, 2022). As such, hybrid teaching techniques were necessary for teachers to combine virtual and traditional face-to-face classes. In this regard, international cooperation for professional development is a top priority of international cooperation agenda among Lao universities (Knight, 2013; Sisavath, 2021). It is because universities have been striving to reach an ambitious goal for faculty development, namely a 1:6:3 teacher ratio—where 10% of academic staff hold doctoral degrees, 60% possess master’s degrees, and the remaining 30% have undergraduate degrees, which their commitment to enhancing the quality of education (MOES, 2011). This goal continues to the present since achieving this goal is largely contingent on international cooperation with foreign institutions and development partners to finance university staff’s professional development and degree-seeking mobility abroad.

Fourth, research collaboration was emphasized as part of internationalization in the research function of the institution. Given the limit of facilities, joint research with other universities from overseas helped Lao universities generate research productivity in their research focus. So far, MOES has assigned a specific research domain for each public university. NUOL, in its capacity as a national university, has been designated as comprehensive research institution. SU has been tasked with concentrating on civil engineering and tourism, CU on agriculture, and SKU on logistics and economics (MOES, 2011). This strategic allocation is intended to foster university-industry and regional collaborations, leveraging the unique potential of each institution.

From practical perspectives, staff members, including lecturers, researchers, administrative staff, viewed internationalization as a practical way to enhance academic expertise in specialized field and improve quality. As found in their responses, academics were willing to share and collaborate with

experts in similar professional fields to improve the quality of academic programs and research productivity. Six participants, for instance, stated that engaging in international activities enabled them to improve specialized knowledge and skills, but also strengthen capacity for international relations, particularly improving foreign language skills. As one participant explained:

For us, the rationale for internationalization is to access opportunities to collaborate with specialists from the same academic area. This is a chance to share and receive constructive suggestions from experienced researchers, and also improve communication in English language during discussions. (P69, Lecturer)

Given these findings, it was worth noting that rationales for internationalization practices in Lao universities are not much different compared to a prior study by Sisavath (2021), that is, to strengthen institutional and human capacity to improve the quality of educational services. In addition to this, the current study revealed that resource assurance, especially financial resources, is critical to driving universities' internationalization efforts. In other words, sustainability in educational development at the universities is largely dependent on international cooperation with foreign institutions, donors, and international development partners. It may be because international cooperation to attract technical and financial resources exists in a broad framework of educational sector development at the national and institutional levels.

Challenges in internationalization practices

According to the data analysis, there were three main challenges—shortage of capable human resources, financial constraints, and administrative mechanisms—facing Lao public universities in internationalizing higher education.

First of all, institutional leaders, middle-managers, and staff collectively asserted that the shortage of capable human resources was a major challenge facing universities in implementing internationalization, particularly in the teaching and research functions of the institution. In fact, this challenge has long existed, but it is more critical during and post-pandemic since staff needs to adapt to the digitalization era accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this challenge, first, an unsatisfactory level of foreign language proficiency was widely identified as a critical barrier to preventing academics from actively engaging in international activities. Notably, these days many institutions have taken advantage of the pandemic and its consequences by organizing academic activities in hybrid modes. As a result, academics and staff could not participate in and correspond with their foreign counterparts to carry out collaborative activities such as academic exchanges, research collaboration, and conference participation. Meanwhile, language barriers decrease the competitiveness of staff to access opportunities and scholarships for professional development abroad such as pursuing

degree programs and training. Language proficiency is a critical barrier preventing academics from publishing their research findings in international journals (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2018). Second, early career faculty members still had limited work experience and academic capacity which prevented them from initiating academic exchanges and joint research programs. Some participants added that those faculty members were not fully aware of the importance and benefits derived from internationalization practices. Deans and directors argued that many faculty members had less experience in international cooperation and received little orientation and training on international strategies and direction. Moreover, academics still lacked ICT skills needed to participate in online activities during and post-pandemic and work in the digitalized classrooms. It was evidenced that only 30% of higher education students accessed learning due to insufficient ICT skills of teachers and students (Vongsakith, 2021). This issue needs to be urgently addressed because hybrid teaching is emphasized to create virtually accessible environments for students to access learning anywhere and anytime. Altogether, it is understandable that many staff may not be proactive in seizing chances to get involved in international activities due to limitations in foreign language proficiency and ICT skills. Such competencies are more necessary to take advantage of and survive in the digitalization era after the pandemic: “We have limited financial resources. ... University staff have an insufficient level of foreign language skills to engage or participate in international activities” (P38, International Relation Director)

Furthermore, due to the development status and institutional capability, universities faced financial constraints when it comes to funding internationalization practices. As public universities, they are primarily reliant on subsidies from the central government, but these subsidies are decreasing due to the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, these subsidies are insufficient to cover all action plans that institutions have prepared. The analysis revealed that faculties/departments had limited budgets to organize international activities such as student and academic mobility. Universities still rely on support from foreign partnership institutions and international organizations (e.g., JICA, ADB). For instance, Lao students who participated in student exchange programs abroad were mostly dependent on scholarships from the host institutions and academic consortia (Sisavath, 2019; 2021). It revealed that less-developed countries are dependent on both technical and financial aid from foreign partners, which is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, due to the nature of the top-down management approach, the administrative mechanism did not effectively support internationalization practices. The process of applying for approval for international activities through administrative procedures was often complex and took up a lot of time. This issue sometimes prevented subordinate units or academics from accessing necessary information and carrying out international activities as planned. It is because these universities are public educational institutions operating under the supervision of the MOES. Thus, they are required to obtain approval from the MOES and other relevant governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before implementing programs or collaborating activities.

“Critical challenge in international cooperation is administrative procedures” (P52, Head of International Relations Division)

International academic cooperation at the faculty/department level is dependent on the central level [e.g., institutional leadership, international office] ... most of activities we were provided or assigned from the central level. As a result, we have limited activities regarding international cooperation. (P10, Vice Dean)

Internationalization strategies for post-COVID-19

Regardless of the groups of participants, there were three main components together forming strategies to expand internationalization in Lao higher education post-COVID-19. They consist of strengthening human capacity with ICT and language skills, expanding partnerships with quality cooperation, and promoting digitalization in international cooperation.

Strengthening human capital with ICT and foreign language skills

Having experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities were forced to close and transition to online learning. In response, institutional leaders and middle-managers prioritized the development of ICT skills and foreign language skills among their staff to ensure efficient and sustainable internal operation and internationalization efforts and practices. The middle managers expressed their confidence that those skills would strengthen the academic capacities of both faculty members and students. This would enable them to effectively utilize technology for accessing online resources and taking part in learning opportunities such as virtual exchanges, workshops, and international conferences offered by partnership institutions and beyond. Despite returning to normal circumstances, university staff complete multiple tasks using ICT such as the preparation of online teaching materials, virtual teaching and research meetings. They are required to master online tools to respond to the new digital environment of education provision. Participants believed that participating in online activities and events was a practical way to save operational costs and make international activities more accessible to faculty members and students. In addition, they suggested that university personnel should take initiative to improve English language and intercultural communication skills by actively seeking chances to take part in international activities such as academic mobility and online conferences.

Despite of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to ensure international work to be operated and continued with help of ICT in coordination and communication with partners abroad toward

achieving our policy of mutual benefits. (P42, Deputy Head of Quality Assurance and Academic Service Division)

Improve communication system and the stability of the Internet connection. ... Focus on using online facilities to coordinate, communicate and participate in academic workshops.... That saves costs for organizing meeting/workshop on-site. Importantly, many university staff are able to access, share experiences and exchange good practices from one to another partner (P21, Dean)

Expanding partnerships with quality cooperation

Data analysis revealed that institutional leaders and middle-managers recognized partnership expansion as a crucial part of the post-pandemic internationalization strategy. It is not surprising that international partnerships are crucial for fostering internationalization practices, as they are the main sources of technical and financial assistance. Notably, they prioritized the partnership with quality cooperation, guaranteeing collaborative activities, innovation, and mutual benefits. This is because many of the prior signed memoranda/agreements with HEIs from other countries were merely symbolic of international cooperation without any tangible activities (Sisavath, 2021). In addition to achieving this strategic goal, two action plans were needed to be implemented at the institutional level. First, universities were to prepare a distinct document with detailed and realistic action plans for internationalization practices. This manifested change because the international strategy of Lao universities is usually positioned within the broad framework of the institutional strategic plan (British Council, 2018; Sisavath, 2021). This would be difficult for subordinate divisions/units to translate into practice. Second, institutionalizing the concept and rationales for internationalization was highlighted among participants in order to increase staff engagement. Some participants expressed that the institution was to raise awareness of internationalization strategies, benefits, and implementation procedures among university staff. This could increase faculty members' endeavors and efforts to contribute to and participate in international activities, particularly in teaching and research collaboration. In other words, universities, including faculty members and administrative staff, need to actively seek and collaborate with partner institutions as many are in the process of recovering from the pandemic and resuming various international activities.

Promoting digitalization in internationalization practices

Most participants, regardless of their groups, emphasized that universities needed and promoted digitalization in internationalization in teaching functions of the university. This strategy was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which universities were required to shift from classroom-based teaching to online and hybrid learning. Given such experiences, of the 54 middle-managers, 28% focused on

improving the ICT system, which includes communication system, and Internet connectivity, as well as infrastructure, such as classrooms and meeting halls. Doing so is to ensure that faculty members are able to deliver lessons virtually and participate in international academic activities such as conferences, professional training, and online programs. At present, universities in China, Japan, and ASEAN countries, from which partner institutions of Lao universities are often drawn, have conducted online or hybrid learning modalities and virtual exchanges. This strategy of improving ICT capacities would lead to more collaboration and access to international opportunities among faculty members and students.

With the focus on digitalization in teaching, research and service functions of the university, universities could enrich internal practices and expand internationalization reach. It is important to note that nine faculty deans and directors emphasized the importance of ICT skills of university staff, as this could lead to increasing international academic cooperation through more frequent contacts. By embracing digital tools and technologies, it was believed that universities could better connect with colleagues and partners around the world, advancing the university's mission of global knowledge sharing and collaboration. It is because middle-managers placed importance on collaboration with foreign partners to develop and formulate academic curricula and offer e-learning programs that facilitate credit transfer and recognition of learning outcomes. As such, there is a pressing requirement for supportive policies and regulations to recognize learning outcomes achieved through online or hybrid courses. As one participant said:

University should seek to increase bilateral or multilateral cooperation to develop dual degree and joint degree programs, including co-teaching and joint research with partner universities. In addition, prepare regulations to recognize learning outcomes, certificates of students, and credits earned from online courses offered by Coursera, Edx, and Udemy. (P50, Director of Technical Training Center)

Conclusion

Changes in the operating environment such as geopolitics, financial crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic drive institutions to revise and readapt strategies for practices. This is to ensure their alignment with the evolving trends in regional and international development. This is especially important for internationalization practices that need to fit local realities and higher education trends. With lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, Lao universities have adapted their strategies for internationalization, which are influenced by resource assurance and academic rationales. Internationalization is a strategic tool to increase visibility, expand partnerships, and open doors to external resources. Foreign assistance in the form of internationalization in higher education such as student mobility and scholarships for teachers' professional development and qualification upgrading is necessary to strengthen institutional and human capacity and improve the quality of educational

provisions in Lao universities. In other words, the achievement of development of human resources and the higher education system in Laos is largely contingent on international academic cooperation. In light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lao universities have prioritized digitalization as a part of their internationalization strategy to adapt to the changing circumstances. In order to translate strategies into practices, universities emphasized the improvement of university personnel's English language skills and ICT capacity to support internationalization in the teaching and research functions of the institution. Given these findings, it is worth noting that internationalization of higher education in less-developed countries like Laos is more likely to focus on institutional and human capacity-building than commercialization, such as attracting international students, which is frequently found in most developed countries such as Australia and the U.S. As clearly reflected in its rationales for internationalization, Lao universities are open to the outside world for resource assurance and improvement of education quality. Lao higher education has attempted to develop its system to strengthen the quality of local human resources to meet the demands of national socio-economic development and increase the country's competitiveness in the region and beyond.

The novelty of this study lies in its investigation of perspectives from both policymakers (e.g., institutional leaders, managers) and practitioners (i.e., professors, staff) to reflect the reality of internationalization practices in Lao higher education. In addition, this study makes an insightful contribution to the existing literature, which is dominated by Western perspectives, by focusing on universities in the context of the developing world whose voice has been little heard in the literature on internationalization of higher education. For them, international academic cooperation is important to strengthen their institutional and human capacity building rather than commercialization. Particularly, this study was conducted in Laos, which is claimed by many scholars to be an under-researched context. As a result, there is a scarcity of information on Lao higher education published for the outside world although a wide range of activities related to internationalization has been increasingly implemented in higher education institutions in Laos.

Based on this study, one of the important implications for higher education institutions is to focus on sustainability in internationalization practices. In order to sustain internationalization efforts and ensure campus-wide engagement in practices, universities have to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of internationalization among faculty members. This is because they are the key actors in implementing international activities and ensuring the sustainability of internationalization practices. In Laos, as Laos University Association for Internationalisation (LUAI) Network was already established, from 2024 forward, it is expected that there will be more collaboration and international activities between Lao and other foreign HEIs. Still, there are challenges in the progress of implementation if Lao universities remain reliant on foreign assistance in their international activities.

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