

Teacher employment and deployment in Lao PDR: reasons behind the current challenges

The Laos Australia Development Learning Facility (LADLF) and BEQUAL conducted an evaluative study in 2016 to explore the recruitment and deployment of primary school teachers in Lao PDR. The purpose of the study is to inform strategic and management decisions by the BEQUAL Steering Committee, DFAT and the team implementing BEQUAL. The study analyses root causes of the on-going imbalance in primary teacher supply across the country, particularly in remote and rural schools. The study acknowledges that teacher distribution is an on-going issue in the education sector, and is a priority at the Ministry of Education and Sports, as well as the Government of Laos as whole. The intention was to complement a 2015 study by the Education and Sports Research Centre (ESRC) that quantified teacher distribution in primary and secondary education in Laos and summarised the administrative arrangements for teacher recruitment. The study also builds on the 2013 mid-term review of the Education Sector Development Plan (2011-2015), the National Education Quality Standards, and the 2015 analytical review of teacher allocation in primary schools in Laos.

Key question addressed by the study

The key questions for this evaluative study were:

- › How effective and efficient is the current employment and deployment of primary teachers
- › To what extent is there an effective and accurate formula for calculating needs for primary teachers
- › What are the causes of the current persistent employment/engagement of volunteer teachers, and the incentives for these volunteers.

In order to answer these questions, the study team elicited the perceptions of education officials in 4 provinces and 9 districts as well as teachers and principals from 43 schools about how they manage teacher employment and deployment. Data were compiled and analysed for frequency and variation in practices, particularly those that differed from the 2015 ESRC study.

The focus of this paper was developed in close consultation with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). The study was developed to complement two other studies being undertaken at the same time through the LADLF and being guided by a Steering Committee of senior MoES officials, including the key stakeholders in the Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education, and the Department of Teacher Education. The study was supported in its implementation by the MoES Department of Planning, as well as the ESRC, whose staff participated in the fieldwork for data collection.

Study findings

This study found that institutional practice around teacher employment, allocation, and deployment varies between PESS and DESB. Provinces, districts, and communities have their own contexts that need to be taken into consideration. Phongsaly and Saravan, for example, use rotational deployment to various extents to manage placement of teachers to remote schools. Khammouane and Savannakhet focus instead on deploying teachers appropriately from the start, either to an individual teacher's hometown, or away from it, to avoid future requests for relocation. This and other local diversity should be taken into account during central planning processes.

The study also found that of numerous policy documents produced to guide education delivery and outcomes, the most recent – Guideline (0047/MoES/2014) on the Development of the Annual Plan on Employment and Use of Teachers – has solutions to some of the current problems. However, this study found the guideline is not implemented consistently in practice, partly because of complications tied to the secondary education level, but also because of fragmented administration of teacher recruitment.



The approach to teacher recruitment and allocation in Laos as it is implemented in practice is fragmented:

- > **Vertically** – there is poor integration between functions, responsibilities and practice for teacher recruitment and allocation by the line ministry, PESS, DESB and schools.
- > **Horizontally** – there are many departments in MoES with functions, responsibilities and practice for teacher recruitment and allocation; as well as other ministries, particularly MoF and MoHA.

At the school level, our findings confirmed those of the ESRC Study: that needs for teachers are calculated based on a projection for the following academic year of new pupils (children becoming school age), the number of teachers due to retire, and the requests from teachers to relocate. The needs for teachers are also based generally on the number of physical classrooms in each school. This, according to schools in Khammouane, is to reduce the number of teachers having to teach multi-grade classes.

At DESB level, the practice differs slightly between districts. Most DESB interviewed voiced that Decree 177 does not answer the actual needs for teachers at school level. Following the formula set out in the decree would mean distorting the real situation and would cause a severe lack of teachers. Instead, DESB followed the requests from schools.

At PESS level, the general practice also supports the findings from ESRC Study in that Decree 177 is not being applied, except in Saravan where they had started incorporating Decree 177 and Guideline 0047 as well as directing DESB to do so. An interesting practice to note was that of the PESS in Savannakhet, where, unlike Phongsaly and Khammouane, they used the Decree 177 formula to calculate their needs for teachers. However, when submitting their annual quota request to MoES, PESS used the total needs submitted from DESB and schools.

PESS	Practice used for calculating needs for teachers
Phongsaly	PESS is aware of Decree 177, but has not been applying it in practice.
Khammouane	PESS is aware of Decree 177, but has not been applying it in practice. PESS is aware of Guideline 0047, but has not decided when to disseminate it to DESB.
Savannakhet	PESS is aware of Decree 177 and follows its formula in calculating needs for teachers. However, when submitting annual request for teachers to MoES, it uses the number requested by DESB/schools. PESS had not seen Guideline 0047.
Saravan	PESS incorporates both Decree 177 and Guideline 0047 in calculating needs for teachers. Moreover, PESS developed database formats for DESB and schools to follow.

Overall the study found primary teacher recruitment to be a passive process, responding to applicants' needs for employment rather than the needs for good teachers to meet MoES education quality standards. Applicant screening varies between provinces, with the most thorough in our samples being PESS Khammouane, which included urine testing for drug use in addition to the list stipulated in Guideline 0047.

Consistent with the 2015 ESRC findings, this study found that PESS is the main decision maker on teacher employment, allocation, and deployment, without much input from DESB apart from providing lists of volunteer teachers on a 'waiting list'. The study found that decisions on allocating available quota to individual teachers are generally made based on the length of time the teachers have worked as a volunteer. Those who have volunteered the longest are placed first, after having passed the PESS assessment. Because of the ongoing imbalance between the number of existing volunteer teachers and the quota available, there is always tension around allocation. Recent estimates suggest there are around 10,000 volunteer teachers (all grades), an estimated requirement for 6,500 new teachers to respond to needs and retirements, and an approved quota for 2016 of 1,900 new positions.

Deployment approach differs between districts and provinces though with the same intention of minimising subsequent relocation requests from teachers. A notable practice was found in Phongsaly district where teachers work on a 5-year rotational basis, except those who are near retirement or women with children (who are given priority to choose to stay in one place/home base longer than 5 years). The idea behind this, as



voiced by schools from Phongsaly, is so that the hardship of teaching in remote schools is shared. This is also made possible by having accommodation facilities for teachers available within school vicinity, usually provided by the villages. Another example from Toomlarn district also uses rotation but it was not as systematic due to the high rate of relocation that appeared to be a feature of the district. School teachers interviewed reported that they have been working on a rotational basis since they started, sometimes as frequently as every year. The rotation is mainly to fill needs in schools where there is a severe shortage of teachers. A contrasting example was in Savannakhet province, where teachers prefer to be deployed anywhere away from their home villages. Discussion with PESS and DESB revealed that many ethnic groups within Savannakhet have a tradition of preferring to gain personal or career advancement outside their birthplace. While this may help to alleviate problems relating to relocation, it poses a challenge for language barriers between teachers and pupils of different ethnic groups.

PESS	DESB	Deployment Approach
Phongsaly	Phongsaly	Teachers are relocated on a 5-year rotational basis.
	Mai	Teachers are deployed to their home village/town where possible to avoid possible relocation.
Khammouane	Nhommalath	Teachers are deployed to their home village/town where possible to avoid possible relocation.
	Nakai	
Savannakhet	Xonbouly	Teachers are deployed to schools in other villages than their home towns.
	Phine	
	Outhoumphone	
Saravan	Lao Ngam	Teachers are deployed to their home village/town where possible to avoid possible relocation.
	Toomlarn	Similar to Phongsaly, but on a more frequent basis, due mainly to high rate of relocation.

The number of volunteer teachers in each province is quite dynamic. The reason behind this variation is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is worthwhile noting the trends. At local level, PESS and DESB are forced to 'hire' teachers because workloads at school levels can be a burden on a number of teachers, especially those with multi-grade classes. While schools are sympathetic to teachers who work as volunteers without pay, not having them would simply mean a number of children could not complete primary school. At the individual level, teachers accept a volunteer position thinking it would only be for a couple of years before they are appointed to a permanent (quota) civil service position.

For example, in the academic year 2011-2012 volunteer teachers in Phongsaly, Savannakhet, and Saravan decreased, while those in Khammouane increased. Then in 2012-2013, the number in Savannakhet and Saravan dropped, while that in Phongsaly and Khammouane rose.

Academic Year	Primary Volunteer Teachers Nation Wide	Phongsaly	Khammouane	Savannakhet	Saravan
2010-2011	2,215	58	140	206	147
2011-2012	1,993	14	164	155	121
2012-2013	1,873	45	186	145	186
2013-2014	1,743	14	82	249	246
2014-2015	1,706	49	153	253	250

*Source: Annual School Census and LaoEduInfo Database 2015



School	Number of Classrooms/Pupils					Total Pupils	Standard No. of Teachers	Existing Teachers	No. of Volunteer Teachers
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5				
Nongsano	1/7	1/10	1/18	1/0	0	35	3	1	0
Satid Sangkou	1/12	1/14	1/12	1/12	0	50	3	1	0
Watkang	1/16	1/11	1/13	1/12	1/8	60	5	4	0
Maknao Nyai	1/18	1/14	1/22	0*/36	0*/19	109	3	2	0
Paonyai	1/38	2/36	1/36	1/34	1/24	168	6	6	1
Narek	2/64	2/57	2/46	2/58	2/52	227	11	12	0
Sepon	2/70	2/55	2/55	4/123	2/63	366	13	6	3

* 0 classroom where there are pupils means multi-grade teaching offered in another classroom

Teacher salary is generally disbursed from the national treasury through provincial treasury and into PESS, except for the provinces categorised as economically self-sufficient. Savannakhet and Khammouane are two such provinces where salaries are drawn from the provincial revenue and so disbursed directly at provincial level. Savannakhet, however, regarded as the most industrialised province in the country, had been paying its (primary school) teachers late for as long as study respondents could remember. In Phongsaly where salary payment arrives from the national treasury, not only do teachers receive their salary on time, the provincial governor also contributed a budget line to support volunteer teachers in the form of 'bonuses' paid out at the end of each academic year.

Social security is also relevant to a discussion about salaries. From each payment 8% of teacher salary is automatically deducted for social security and healthcare coverage. This is required under the Social Security Law 2751/SSO, dated 24 July 2015, although the current contributions are regulated to be 6% from the employer and 5.5 from the employee. A number of study respondents perceive that they just 'lose' the 8% of their salary – even though they are entitled to a pension at retirement that is in part paid for by their social security contributions made whilst working. This logic is not communicated to teachers and so their total remuneration is poorly understood.

Key conclusions

The employment and deployment of primary teachers in Laos is inconsistent and poorly linked to education quality standards. The quota system of employment has a direct impact on the ability of DESB and PESS to manage human resources for quality primary education outcomes. This is coupled with uncertainty around disbursement of salary compensation for staff because of different financial channels for funding salaries. Inconsistent understanding of the total remuneration package, in particular what social security deductions are used for and how allowances are calculated and paid create uncertainty for teachers. Given these reasons, it is understandable that DESB and PESS, as implementing agencies, are unable to do much because the management of financial and human resources to meet policy objectives are mostly out of their control.

Key conclusions from the study suggest opportunities for MoES to work with PESS and DESB to:

- › agree approaches to implementation of Guideline (0047/MoES/2014) on the Development of the Annual Plan on Employment and Use of Teachers that respond to local contextual needs whilst ensuring a consistent education quality standard across Laos
- › simplify the administrative processes for teacher recruitment and allocation to ensure more efficient use of the primary education salary budget – the largest primary education expense to the government
- › take into account the financial context facing Government of Lao PDR, to ensure that sector development plans do not impose unrealistic expectations on provincial and district agencies that implement plans in practice.

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