

EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION BETWEEN VIETNAM AND LAOS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MEKONG SUBREGION'S DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract - This research attempts to explain the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos from the viewpoint of theories of international relations. The scope of this research is the field of education of Vietnam and Laos from 2011 to 2020. By combining two research methods, including qualitative and historical-logical method, the article clarifies obtained outcomes in two main aspects of the cooperation, namely education, training of personnel and development of education infrastructure, and shows limitations of the cooperation at the same time. Thereby, the article proposes some suitable policies for Vietnam, with a view to improving the efficiency of the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos, in the context of Vietnam's international cooperation for the development of the Mekong Subregion.

Keywords: Cooperation, education, Laos, Vietnam and policies.

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INTRODUCTION

The international cooperation for the development of the Mekong Subregion started since 1957, when the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East of the United Nations established the Mekong River Commission of which Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam are member states. Since the Paris Peace Agreements regarding Cambodia was signed in 1991, the cooperation among countries of the Mekong Subregion has been actually fostered, become one of the new development cores of the Asia and got great attention from many international organizations, especially the Asia Development Bank (ADB). In 1992, thanks to the support from the ADB, the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS Program) was introduced and participated by Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Yunnan Province (China). The first summit (GMS-1) held in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) adopted general principles for economic cooperation of the subregion, developed and implemented the vision of a prosperous, harmonious and united region, characterized by high economic growth rate, social progress and sustainable environmental development.

GMS's cooperation benefits not only Vietnam and Laos, but also regional countries, brings common interests in many sectors, such as security, politics, economy, culture, society, and

enhances the standing of each country in the region and in the world as well. Vietnam and Laos are two neighboring countries, that have maintained the traditional solidarity, friendship and long-standing special partnership with each other. The educational cooperation between Vietnam and Laos also has lasted for more than 60 years. The cooperation in education and training has been considered by the Party and State of the two nations as an important mission and the strategic cooperation at all times, and has represented the special relationship between Vietnam and Laos. Training well qualified human resource for Laos is regarded by Vietnam as a permanently strategic mission, that not only facilitates the development of Laos, but also contributes to the better cooperation between Vietnam and Laos.

We believe that the choice of the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in the context of international cooperation for the Mekong Subregion's development depends on two variables, including national interests and similar identity. We also discuss outcomes obtained by the two countries throughout the educational cooperation, outstanding limitations and prospects for the future cooperation.

This article aims to make positive contributions to researches on bilateral cooperation relations in education between Vietnam and Laos, and provide supplements to researches on international relations that only focused on economy and politics so far. We also give recommendations to the Vietnam on policies, based on available resources, history of the relations and prospects for future cooperation between the two nations.

1. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The qualitative method is used for explaining the nature of the cooperation among nations from the viewpoint of theories of international relations.

The end of the Cold War facilitated the formulation of some new types of international relations, while relations among nations become more and more independent from impacts and paradigms of the polarity thinking. Besides available models, nations have endlessly sought new methods and applied them flexibly for fostering the cooperation with each other.

Cooperation occurs when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination (Keohane, 1984). Based on such definition, the cooperation must rely on the legal binding of international relations. Theories of international relations regarding the cooperation include the realism, institutionalism, constructivism, functionalism, and theories of opening the black box of politics.

The first theory is realism.

It is widely said that the realism emphasizes the explanation of international conflicts. But the realism is also a tool used for explanation of international cooperation. According to the realism, national security drives the cooperation among nations. In other words, the risk of security threats requires countries to identify their partners and adversaries, thereby, establishing the relationship of conflict and cooperation with specific objects (Morgenthau & Thompson, 1985). The realism does not exclude the possibility of cooperation among nations. Such cooperation aims to assure security and balance power, that are connotations of the cooperation among nations. However, the cooperation among nations is not permanent because of high possibility of conversion from partners to adversaries and vice versa.

The second theory is liberalism

The liberalism emphasizes the roles of individuals and organizations as factors in international relations beside states. While the realism focuses on selfish and evil aspect of personal characteristics and considers international relations as a zero-sum game, in which, nations always compete against each other or cooperate with each other in short term, the liberalism puts great emphasis on advances of people and believes that nations can cooperate with each other, instead of competition against each other, for mutual interests, especially through international institutions.

The third theory is institutionalism.

Institutionalists believe that great powers play an important role in developing international organizations and mechanisms (collectively known as international institutions) with laws, principles and codes of conduct governing behaviors of their members, including their founders, thereby, contributing to the reduction of uncertainty in international relations. The institutionalism is more positive than the realism as a result. The institutionalism shows greater capacities for the cooperation among nations, and regards international institutions as another subject in international relations existing beside states as well. However, the institutionalism cannot explain why the cooperation is established. This means that the institutionalism cannot find out the independent variable for explaining the root causes of decisions on cooperation among nations.

The fourth theory is functionalism.

Like the institutionalism, the functionalism believes that technical issues related to scientific and technological development require nations to cooperate with each other, beyond ideological boundaries and political differences, because a nation cannot solve all issues alone, but it must reach an agreement on technical regulations with all of the other countries. This school is significantly supported by David Mitrany. He thought that international organizations showed their cooperation demand based on requirements for the technical consistency amid dramatic and worldwide development of the scientific and technological revolution (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2002). Consequently, supporters of the functionalism and institutionalists share the same opinion that international organizations have played more and more decisive roles in international affairs and are gradually becoming new subjects in international relations.

However, the functionalism is a theory of technocracy, only focusing on technical and technological aspects of relations among nations, while international relations are basically political ones. Agreements on standards and regulations are only for more favorable cooperation among countries, but cannot explain why nations cooperate with each other.

The fifth theory is constructivism.

According to this theory, the same identity makes the cooperation among nations easier. Nations are subjects with social actions. Depending on specific historical and social background and by interacting with each other, nations develop ideas about each other, specific concepts of their own and other nations (also known as identity), and develop relations with each other based on such concepts (Nguyen & Hoang, 2006). Due to the emphasis on historical and social factors, supporters of the constructivism consider that identity represents a process of active development, in which, nations can actively seek, choose their own identity and are not limited by an only identity. This does not mean that nations only consider their identity as the criterion for developing their cooperation (or struggle) relations. The process of identity selection is also associated with factors of interests, i.e., the identity that does not suit interests of nations is hardly chosen.

The constructivism does not deny the fundamental reasoning of the realism, but only seeks to add automatic reasoning of the realism by specific historical, social and cultural background, thereby establishing the causal relationship, in which, identity and interests appear to be two main independent variables.

The sixth theory is opening the black box of politics.

These theories have the approach of opening of the black box of nations with different political regimes, power structures, ideologies, including cultural and social aspects. This flow of theories gives different explanations of the nature of international relations (Dinh, 2013).

In detail, according to the democratic peace theory, the nature of international cooperation relies on characteristics of political regimes of each nation. Nations with political regimes often do not declare war against each other, thus, they closely cooperate with each other. These nations pursue peace policies because democracy is closely associated with values of liberalism. They share the same values of democracy and values of liberalism with each other, and anti-war goal is one of the most significant criterion. Nations with democratic institutions must comply with a policy-making process, involved by many domestic parties and classes representing various interests, with public information. Consequently, decisions on war declaration in these nations are not simple as

those in nations with other political institutions, and peace solutions are highly recommended in these countries as a result.

This theory has two theoretical and practical limitations. Firstly, democratic countries' declaration of no war against each other does not mean that such countries promote peace. Secondly, democratic countries declared war against each other and against other countries in fact.

The theory of practical politics is applied to developing nations. According to this theory, the survival of a regime (not the survival of a nation) is the concern of rulers. Based on this reasoning, the theory of practical politics considers that while developed nations establish and maintain relations based on their interests (national security), in developing nations, national interests seem to be generalized to interests of the authorities. In fact, rulers of developing nations worry about their political survival. Due to poor economic and national defense potential, leaders of these nations often tend to consider the threats to their ruling position to be more important than the threats to security and territorial integrity of their nations. As a result, these nations will pursue bandwagoning policies. By making an alliance with great powers, leaders of small nations are entitled to clear benefits, such as reducing or terminating domestic subversion activities, obtaining or seeking foreign aid, getting political recognition or support for weakening the opposition of domestic opposition parties, receiving economic and military aid from major powers with which such small nations are making alliance (Dinh, 2013).

The above theories can be all used for explaining the choice of cooperation among nations from various aspects. However, for the relationship between Vietnam and Laos, theories of liberalism and constructivism are regarded as the most suitable analysis tools, because they show similarity of interests and identity that mainly drive the establishment of the special relationship between the two nations.

Vietnam and Laos are not only two neighboring countries, but their friendship has been also established and maintained for a very long time. The mutual support between Vietnam and Laos on multilateral forums has contributed to the improvement of international standing of the two nations, while making great contribution to the promotion of peace, stability and development of ASEAN. The relationship between the two nations regarding politics, foreign affairs, national defense and security has been recently highlighted and fostered, and become the solid foundation for the development and stability of each nation. The cooperation in economy, culture, education, sciences, techniques and health has been practically and efficiently boosted, for mutual benefits and growth of the two nations.

The historical-logical method is used for honestly illustrating the establishment and development of the relationship between Vietnam and Laos in actual chronological order. This method puts movements of the relationship between Vietnam and Laos in the interrelationship with related factors, performs an overall research of events, phenomena, removes random and non-basic factors for finding out nature and rules of movements and development of the educational relationship between Vietnam and Laos.

The cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in the Mekong Subregion development programs have made significant contribution to the socioeconomic development of the two countries and regional countries.

The cooperation in education and training is important, strategic and for permanent benefits, and symbolizes the successful cooperation among the comprehensive cooperation relations between the two nations. The educational cooperation between Vietnam and Laos from 1975 to 1985 showed the mutual support for meeting urgent requirements of the age of post-war restructuring. The Ministry of Education of the two nations signed cooperation documents on an annual basis, and Meetings of the Minister of Education of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were alternately held in Hanoi and Vientiane. A series of schools and classrooms, such as high schools, vocational schools of pedagogy, Vientiane Pedagogical University, were built in Laos thanks to the support from Vietnam. Overseas Lao students, mainly including university students, interns and postgraduate students, studied at 36 universities, colleges and professional secondary schools in Vietnam. Besides, Vietnam still kept training a large number of high school students for Laos. During this period, a very large

number of Lao students were sent to Vietnam for studying economics, politics, sociology, military and security at schools, including high schools, professional secondary schools and universities, accounting for about 50% of total Laotians sent to foreign countries.

Between 1986 and 1992, Vietnam trained 537 bachelors and 252 postgraduate students of professional secondary schools for Laos, and strengthened postgraduate training (master's degree and doctorate degree) for Laos, with the view of providing high-quality personnel for major sectors, including economic, scientific and technical sectors. At the same time, Lao authorities requested Vietnam to send Vietnamese experts to Laos for providing support to the development of training curricula, training, coaching teachers, instructing students to write graduation theses, etc. Since 1992, the Government of Vietnam and the Government of Laos signed the Agreement on training of Lao officers in Vietnam, and this Agreement was annually amended and supplemented in conformity with new situations and missions. Since 1997, the two nations have rapidly combined provision of long-term and full-time training courses with provision of more short-term re-coaching and re-training courses for officers in management fields, and combined the assignment of Vietnamese training experts to Laos with the expansion of in-service training mode for Lao students in Vietnam. From 1996 to 2000, Vietnam received 2,184 Lao officers and students. The Government of Laos also increased the number of undergraduate scholarships for Vietnamese officers and students studying in Laos. Besides, National University of Laos also received tens of Vietnamese students participating self-financed undergraduate courses on an annual basis (The Central Propaganda and Training Commission, 2017).

In the first years of the 21st century, Vietnam and Laos paid more attention to the cooperation in training and development of human resource, Between 2001 and 2007, the two countries agreed to spend 49.05% of the aid (VND 289.4 billion) training and developing Lao human resource by offering scholarships to Lao officers and students studying in Vietnam and investing in training institutions in Laos. The two countries focused on and gave priority to training and coaching of political and managerial officers of the Party and State of Laos, ranging from 130 officers in 2001 to 225 officers in 2005, and thousands of Lao officers and students graduated from universities and colleges in five years (2001 - 2005) (The Central Propaganda and Training Commission, 2017). Laos obtained high-quality human resource specialized in economics, culture, sciences, techniques, management, etc. as a result.

The cooperation in education and training at local level was also expanded and fostered. As at the end of 2006, there were 1,046 Lao students studying in 12 provinces and cities of Vietnam, including 383 officers and students participating training courses funded by the local budget (The Central Propaganda and Training Commission, 2017). The local authorities of Vietnam also provided support to the construction of many training institutions in Laos. In detail, Quang Binh built Khammouane High School, Hanoi built Vocational School of Animal Husbandry Techniques in Vientiane, Ho Chi Minh City built Sikhottabong High School in Vientiane while offering 100 undergraduate scholarships to two of its sister cities, including Vientiane and Champasak, etc.

Based on "Strategic agreement on cooperation in economy, culture, education, sciences and techniques between Vietnam and Laos for the period 2011 - 2020" signed in Hanoi on April 09th, 2011, the two nations reviewed, supplemented, amended agreements, cooperatively developed new mechanisms and policies in conformity with the laws and actual situation of each nation, showing the special relationship between the two nations and international practices, promoting economic cooperation, international and regional integration of each nation, etc. The Government of Vietnam and the Government of Laos encouraged ministries, departments, organizations, local authorities and enterprises of the two nations to cooperate with and provide support to each other in their fields of strength. Vietnam kept providing the best support to the best of its ability, to ministries, departments and local authorities of Laos.

The scheme for improvement of quality and efficiency of the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in education and development of human resource for the period 2011 - 2020 signed by the government of the two parties in 2011, proposed strategic solutions and specific missions for significantly promoting quality and efficiency of human resource training for Laos (the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, 2011). The article focuses on clarification of cooperation contents, achievements and limitations in implementation of the scheme during the period 2011 - 2020, thereby assesses prospects for cooperation and gives solutions for boosting the cooperation in the near future.

1. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vietnam and Laos have implemented many bilateral cooperation programs and called for the involvement of authorities beyond the subregion as supporting and leading entities. In nature, human resource development projects at the subregion-level were transnational, but were implemented on the specific characteristics of each country. Two countries supported and adopted “GMS Phnom Penh Plan for Development Management”. At meetings of GMS Working Group on Human Resource Development of ADB, the two countries proposed their opinions for development of human resource development plans for cross-border trade and economic development by experience sharing and mutual learning.

Vietnam and Laos were involved in “The U.S. Agency for International Development Connecting the Mekong through Education and Training” (USAID COMET) with a view to building the workforce in five countries of the Lower Mekong Basin; cooperating with countries of the subregion in formulating projects, coaching, holding study tours, building teaching programs for human resource development, organizing international workshops, performing scientific researches; cooperating with Thailand in building a group of nine provinces sharing the roads running through National Highway 8 and National Highway 12 of Vietnam, assisting teachers, students of universities and schools of the three countries in studying languages, exchanging culture and together cooperating for future development. Vietnam established the Scholarship Fund for Students of CLMV Countries (comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam), with an aim of offering scholars, receiving officers and students of the other countries for studying in the host countries, and providing support to the construction of boarding schools for ethnic minority students in Sekong Province (Laos) and Ratanakiri (Cambodia). This is one of the first key projects to be implemented by CLMV countries thanks to great outcome of the cooperation mechanism of CLMV Countries.

The active and enthusiastic involvement, coordination and cooperation between Vietnam and Laos has significantly contributed to the reinforcement of the relations of neighboring friendship between the two countries and countries of the subregion, creating a favorable international environment for the socioeconomic development of the two countries, gradually improving the roles, standing and promoting advantages of the two countries in the Mekong Subregion.

The cooperation in education and training between Vietnam and Laos has been extended to many levels, including training at vocational schools, colleges, undergraduate and postgraduate training, Vietnamese training, and to many modes, including short-term and long-term training.

At present, most of traditional and reputable training institutions in Vietnam provide training to Lao students. The mechanism for training cooperation between the two parties has become more and more diverse, covering training at the central and local level, coordination between departments, training institutions and local authorities, training funded by third countries, governmental training and training provided by social and political organizations and non-governmental organizations.

The promotion of education and training cooperation between the two nations has been evidenced by two main aspects, namely cooperation in training and coaching of human resource, including training of well qualified human resource, improvement of the fluency in Vietnamese and Lao for students and officers of the two nations; and cooperation in construction of education infrastructure.

Training of well qualified human resource

Vietnam has extended and improved the training of high-quality human resource for Laos in quantity and quality, by offering various training methods and modes, for meeting reform requirements of Laos. Study results of overseas Lao students covered by the Agreement have become better. There were 4,709, 5,234, 6,493, 7,782 overseas Lao students and 9,295 Lao officers

and students studying in Vietnam in the school year of 2010 - 2011, 2011 - 2012, 2012 - 2013, 2013 - 2014 and 2014 - 2015, respectively.

The Agreement on bilateral cooperation between the Government of the two countries stated that during the period 2016 - 2020, the Government of Vietnam offered about 1,000 scholarships to Lao officers and students participating undergraduate, postgraduate training courses and short-term coaching courses on an annual basis in Vietnam (including officers and students trained for national defense and security purposes and 35 overseas Vietnamese people in Laos). In contrast, the Government of Laos offered 60 scholarships to Vietnamese officers and students participating undergraduate, postgraduate training courses and short-term coaching courses in Laos.

In the period 2011 -2020, Vietnam provided training to almost 30,000 overseas Lao students covered by the Agreement and beyond the Agreement, in various fields and at various levels, including almost 5,000 overseas Lao students covered by the Agreement, over 10,000 overseas Lao students participating training courses funded by Vietnam's sister cities, and 15,000 overseas Lao students participating self-financed training sources and others (The Vietnam News Agency, 2022).

Besides long-term training courses, during 2011 - 2020 period, the education industry of Vietnam provided training and coaching to 1,196 Lao officers, teachers, students via 44 coaching programs/courses mainly organized in Vietnam with training period ranging between 2 and 9 months. Coaching courses focused on methods for teaching Vietnamese for Lao teachers in charge of teaching Vietnamese, coaching for enhancing qualification regarding teaching methods of Lao mathematics and physics teachers; in-depth coaching for Lao kindergarten teachers; coaching for enhancing qualification in Vietnamese and interpretation of officers of Lao ministries and departments; study of Vietnamese culture; coaching courses for press and communications managers.

Trainees of special coaching courses were teachers and students of the Vietnamese faculties, who obtained knowledge of information technology, method for making questions and exercises, developing questions banks for examinations, assessing study results during teaching progress. Besides, teachers got to know new and modern contents in the Vietnamese education system, and obtained in-depth knowledge of Vietnamese culture and history of the relations between Vietnam and Laos. Thereby, the coaching courses helped trainees to gain better understanding of Vietnamese country, people and roles, meaning of the great friendship, special solidarity and comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Laos, and between Laos and Vietnam.

Besides annual short-term coaching courses, Vietnam implemented two projects for improving capacity of Lao education managers by holding 10 coaching programs for 370 trainees (The Vietnam News Agency, 2021) .

Training and coaching for Lao leaders and managers

Vietnam has always given special priority to provision of education and training support to Laos, and training and coaching to leaders and managers of any levels and qualification, local officers of Lao provinces sharing border with Vietnam, and officers working for cooperation programs and projects between the two countries.

The Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics - the theoretical and political training and coaching institution of the Communist Party of Vietnam, has provided training and coaching to thousands of officers of the Party and State of Laos, including leaders, managers at medium and high level, and officers in charge of sciences and political theory, for many years.

From 2011 to 2020, personnel sent by the State and Government of Laos to Vietnam for training were mainly political officers. Although overseas Lao students studying politics only accounted for 8.3% of those studying economics and engineering, after graduating and returning to Laos, they promoted knowledge and skills obtained in Vietnam and became key leaders of many local authorities, important industries and sectors, and made great contribution to the building and development of Laos.

The scheme for improvement of quality and efficiency of the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in education and development of human resource for the period 2011 - 2020 mainly focused on training for high-quality human resource with the average annual growth rate in the number of

trainees approximating 10%. Scholarships were given to officers who participated in undergraduate, postgraduate courses and short-term coaching courses, and were politicians, military officers, policemen, leaders of Laos involved in mining and geology, agroforestry, pedagogy, foreign affairs, foreign trade, economy, and leaders at grassroot level or higher. According to the scheme, Vietnamese experts were continuously sent to Laos for exchanging experience, helping Laos to develop its human resource development strategy, and change its formal education system from 11 years to 12 years.

Training Vietnamese for Lao students

Training Vietnamese for Lao students has been significantly fostered by many specific activities, such as sending Vietnamese teachers to Laos for teaching Vietnamese, providing support to the development of the Vietnamese faculties, preparing training curricula and textbooks of Vietnamese for Lao students of grade 1 to grade 12, piloting bilingual teaching in Vietnamese and Lao at Nguyen Du bilingual school in Vientiane.

From 2011 to 2020, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam sent 156 teachers to Laos for teaching Vietnamese and annually maintained about 30 Vietnamese teachers in Laos on average. Before coming to Laos, these teachers participated coaching courses regarding appropriate methods for teaching Lao students Vietnamese, and while working in Laos, they actively joined social activities and closely complied with internal regulations and rules of Lao schools. During this period, great attention was paid to the improvement of skills of Vietnamese for overseas Lao students by provision of Vietnamese training to such students 3 to 6 months prior their arrival to Vietnam. Thanks to the receipt of basic Vietnamese training in Laos, when participating training courses in Vietnam, overseas Lao students rapidly caught up with training curricula, made considerable progress, and made important contribution to improvement of efficiency of specialist training for overseas Lao students in Vietnam.

Training Lao for Vietnamese students and officers

During the period 2011 - 2020, Laos provided training to 395 overseas Vietnamese students, including 44 postgraduate students, 289 undergraduate students and 62 interns of Lao. This cooperation outcome contributed to development of a team of Vietnamese experts in Laos, thereby making the comprehensive cooperation relations between the two countries more intensive and extensive.

In order to facilitate teaching of Lao in Vietnam and teaching of Vietnamese in Laos, the two nations compiled, edited and completed the Vietnamese-Lao and Lao-Vietnamese bilingual dictionary. This was the first bilingual dictionary to be compiled in accordance with dictionary principles, and was considered by linguists to be highly pedagogic, scientific and practical, therefore best address issues of parts of speech, homonyms and polysemes.

Cooperation in building of education infrastructure

Investment in building of schools aimed to strengthen facilities for enhancing training capacity of Lao educational institutions. Repair and construction projects focused on investments in friendship schools, boarding schools for ethnic minority students and Vietnamese faculties. These are reputable training institutions for overseas Vietnamese students or Lao residents who want to learn Vietnamese and come to Vietnam for learning and research.

The Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam was the employer of 07 projects of school construction and finishing funded by the Government of Vietnam during the period 2011 - 2020.

Table 1. Schools in Laos funded by Vietnam from 2011 to 2020

No	Name of construction works	Year of commencement
1	Pongkham High School, Luang Prabang	2012
2	Boarding School for Ethnic Minority Students of Xiangkhouang Province	2013
3	Vietnamese Faculty, National University of Laos	2013
4	Vietnamese Faculty, Champasak University and Souphanouvong University	2018
5	Stage 2 of Laos-Vietnam Friendship High School, Vientiane	2018
6	Repair of dormitory for foreign students, National University of Laos	2018
7	Construction of Laos-Vietnam Friendship High School of Savannakhet Province	2019

Vietnam and Laos also agreed to make a list of priorities for investment and repair of dormitories of Vietnamese schools where Lao students studied, repair and upgrading of Lao high schools that were funded by Vietnam, significantly downgraded, damaged, with old and obsolete learning equipment and tools. Besides, Vietnam funded teaching equipment for schools of overseas Vietnamese in Laos at an amount of almost VND 41 billion.

Apart from obtained outcomes, the cooperation in education and training between Vietnam and Laos still had some limitations. In detail, the direction and implementation of some contents of cooperation agreements, and training quality failed to meet requirements of the two nations; cooperation programs and contents were extremely theoretical, impractical and unenforceable; facilities and infrastructure for bilateral educational cooperation had some limitations while forms of cooperation for diversification of resources had low efficiency and failed to make use of third-party resources, etc. These are significant issues requiring new solutions for strengthening the cooperative relationship in the near future.

Prospects for the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos

While the international and regional situation is extremely variable, and Vietnam and Laos are facing new challenges and opportunities during more intensive and extensive international integration of the two countries, the relations between Vietnam and Laos in general and bilateral educational cooperation in particular, require the modification and adaptation for mutual benefits of the two nations. Aiming to multilateralize and diversify international relations, Vietnam and Laos has established relations with other partners, but Vietnam has been always treasuring its comprehensive relations with Laos, especially in education.

On December 6th, 2020, in Hanoi, Vietnam and Laos signed three documents on their cooperation in education and training, including the Agreement between the Government of Vietnam and the Government of Laos on the Scheme for improvement of quality and efficiency of the cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in education and development of human resource for the period 2021 - 2030; the Agreement on the plan for implementing the scheme of teaching products of the historical works of the special relations between Vietnam and Laos, Laos and

Vietnam at schools of Vietnam and Laos, and the Plan for cooperation in 2021 between the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam and the Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos.

On January 11th, 2023, the Government of Vietnam and the Government of Laos exchanged the Protocol and signed documents on educational cooperation. The Protocol on training cooperation between the Government of the two nations takes effect for five years, and concretizes activities of educational cooperation between the two countries, including selection, training and management of overseas students. On this occasion, the Government of the two countries signed the Agreement on digital partnership. This was the first Agreement on digital partnership to be signed between Vietnam and other countries. The signing of the Agreement on digital partnership between the two Governments has affirmed the highest priorities of the two countries given to expansion of the cooperation in digital services and technologies, digital transformation, contributing to further improvement of the comprehensive cooperation relations between Vietnam and Laos. Right after the Signing ceremony, the Government of Vietnam gave the Government of Laos two software systems, including the “Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)” system for education. MOOCs currently has 18 curricula in three main topics, including digital transformation, specialist knowledge and common skills. Of which, digital transformation training courses are suitable for trainees who are managers of units and enterprises; specialist training courses cover in-depth knowledge in various fields, namely economy, education, agriculture, health, etc.; common skill training courses are specially designed for the whole of Laotians. MOOCs are developed with an aim of popularizing digital skills that play the key roles for officers, public servants, public employees and the whole people to get involved in and accelerate the digital transformation in Laos.

Recommendations to Vietnam on policies

Firstly, Vietnam needs to identify clear priorities and focuses of the comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in education, in its policies on cooperation with Laos. In the new context of higher and higher demand for educational cooperation for training of high-quality human resource for the development goals of the two nations, with limitations of capacity and resources of each nation, it is essential to inherit the spirit of comprehensive cooperation of the traditionally special relations between Vietnam and Laos, while the bilateral cooperation must identify clear priorities and focuses, for the best performance and interests of the two nations. Due to limited resources, the two nations will not be able to best implement any projects in any fields, Vietnam and Laos need to give priority to projects and fields for reinforcing their strategic relationship. Especially, in the context of fiercer and fiercer competition in educational cooperation between other countries and Laos, it is very important to choose priorities and focuses in the educational cooperation between Vietnam and Laos.

Secondly, Vietnam needs to issue many policies for attracting Lao students to Vietnam for study, by increasing value of scholarships for making overseas Lao students afford to pay living and studying expenses, offering special benefits to excellent overseas Lao students, and ordering training missions for educational institutions. Moreover, Vietnam needs to request Laos to issue policies for attracting Vietnamese students to Laos for study by increasing value of scholarships awarded to Vietnamese students studying in Laos, loosening criteria for study in Laos and giving priority for students in provinces sharing border with Laos in choosing Vietnamese students for study in Laos.

Thirdly, expansion of training modes needs to get special attention in the context of globalization and the dramatic development of sciences and technologies. It is necessary to develop public and open online training courses that are publicly and officially provided via portals of the education sector of the two nations in three languages, including English, Vietnamese and Lao, and accessible to more overseas students of the two countries sooner. It is also important to strengthen the cultural exchange for overseas students of each nation to obtain certain knowledge of custom, language, culture, socioeconomic conditions of the host country before studying abroad in such host country.

During expansion of training modes, it is vital to highlight the training cooperation among localities, training institutions and expand training modes based on demands of enterprises.

Vietnam should combine training with re-training, pay more attention to vocational training, provide undergraduate and postgraduate training based on socioeconomic development demand of Laos, and focus on training in sectors and fields that are strengths of Vietnam.

Fourthly, Vietnam needs to introduce policies for strengthening the strict management of admission and training of overseas Lao students, focusing on three topics, namely admission, Vietnamese training and specialist training. At the same time, Vietnam needs to inspect more and more educational institutions where overseas Lao students study, for identifying and dealing with violations in admission, training and management of overseas Lao students studying in Vietnam. It is required to strengthen Vietnamese training for overseas Lao students; enable overseas Lao students to work with indigenous students in modules involved in teamworking; assign homeroom teachers to regularly monitor, instruct and help overseas Lao students to choose subjects, answer their questions and give them suitable learning roadmaps; organize separate classes for overseas Lao students; organize periodic dialogues between training institutions and overseas Lao students for promptly discussing and answering questions for improvement of serving and training quality.

Fifthly, Vietnam needs to expand programs in cooperation with Laos in digital technologies, digital transformation and digital infrastructure for boosting the development of the education sector. Besides giving software systems, these programs need to set the goal of assisting Laos in digital innovation, digital research and development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the actual educational cooperation between Vietnam and Laos from 2011 to 2020 and its achievements and shortcomings, the two nations can draw a lesson that it is essential to always know how to adapt to new contexts. The two nations well understand the importance of the comprehensive cooperation. However, the bilateral cooperation in education must have clear priorities and focuses.

The educational cooperation relations between Vietnam and Laos are not only bilateral but have been also extended multilaterally. In the context of GMS cooperation, Vietnam and Laos have been efficiently cooperating with and providing support to each other. By the cooperation, the active and responsible involvement by Vietnam and Laos have made important contribution to the socioeconomic development of each country. Thereby, the economic potential of the two countries has been endlessly boosted and their diplomatic relations have been extended, resulting in the great improvement in their standing, and affirming their independence and autonomy in the guidelines and policies for development and international integration. Thanks to the close and responsible cooperation in GMS, Vietnam and Laos contributed to the spirit of cooperation and adhesion among GMS's countries in particular and the ASEAN Community (AC) in general, and contributed to the development of a peaceful, stable and prosperous environment in the region and in the world at the same time.

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