

## **ABSTRACT**

This research investigated the scholarship program offered by the Government of Australia to assist students from Laos to gain advanced skills through study in Australia. The research focused on (1) the strengths, benefits and challenges of the Australian Scholarships Program (ASP) from the perspectives of the scholarship recipients and the employers, (2) the labour mobility trends of alumni, and (3) the policy structures supporting the ASP and whether there is a need for further policy development. Empirical data were derived from an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

A total of 72 scholarship recipient participants took part in the online survey using SurveyGizmo. In addition four public employers, four AusAID staff, and 17 scholarship recipients were interviewed. Three out of 17 alumni participants were scholarship recipients who moved from public organisations to work in private/NGOs after finishing study in Australia. Data from the interviews were supplemented by an analysis of the online survey and Lao and Australian government policy documents to gather rich data on the strengths, benefits and challenges of the ASP, the labour mobility trends, and the policy structures supporting the ASP.

Findings indicated that the strengths and benefits of the ASP were generally highly positive and included improved English language competency, greater promotion opportunities, the acquisition of skills and knowledge for Lao national and human resource development, financial benefits, an effective pre-departure program, good

cooperation between the two countries, retention of scholarship completers by public employers, and social and personal development of alumni.

Findings also revealed some challenges that require further attention. These included inadequate English language skills on the part of some participants, resistance to knowledge transfer into Lao public sector workplaces, the loss of some staff from public organisations and a greater propensity for international migration by recipients in the open category. The data also pointed to a range of academic, social and personal challenges, occasional poor planning in selecting levels and fields of studies and some inadequacies in the selection process of the ASP.

Findings relating to labour mobility revealed that career transition occurred in low, medium and high-level positions in public and private/NGOs. In addition, labour mobility occurred from public to private sector employment, to self-employment, and to further study. Labour mobility also occurred between private/NGOs and unemployment, and between students and self-employment. No evidence was found of labour mobility from private/NGOs to public organisations. Findings overall reported that the majority of scholarship recipients from both public and private/NGOs were promoted to hold higher or more senior positions after returning from study in Australia under the ASP.

In terms of policy structure, findings reported that there was a need for further policy development by Lao public employers, AusAID, and joint development by both Lao and Australian governments.