



Spotlight on student engagement

The Australian Government is supporting the Government of Lao PDR to undertake significant primary education reforms through its flagship Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR program (BEQUAL), including the roll-out of a new primary curriculum. Phase 1 of BEQUAL (2015-22) supported the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) to roll out the new primary curriculum in schools. BEQUAL support included teaching and learning materials, orientation training on the new curriculum, and education support grants. Phase 2 (2022-26) is focused on inclusive teaching practices, student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

To understand progress and to make necessary adjustments, the Australian Government commissioned an independent evaluation. Led by the Australian Council for Educational Research, a multi-year study investigated how BEQUAL supported improved teaching quality and student learning. Here we take a closer look at student engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

The multi-year study found positive changes in student attitudes towards Lao language learning with the introduction of the new curriculum in Lao PDR. Participants reported improved levels of student participation, interest, engagement, and wellbeing, and attributed this to the teachers' implementation of the new curriculum.

'I have observed that students are more interested and pay more attention than before.'
- National interviewee

Data on student attitudes and dispositions towards learning was captured over 3 cycles of data collection via questionnaires, case study interviews and classroom observations of Lao language lessons from 2019 to 2022.

Improvements in student interaction and engagement are important to teaching and learning. Student learning is about more than academic outcomes. Engagement, which includes participating in activities, collaborating with peers and seeking challenges, has consistently been associated with positive outcomes for students, including achievement, academic success and wellbeing.



Promising positive changes to student attitudes towards learning indicates that the new curriculum is making a real difference. Going forward, it is critical for teachers and students to be supported to translate these initial gains into better learning.



Case study participants made these connections between student enjoyment of lessons and the new curriculum:

- More fun and interesting learning environment
- More activities that students like
- Greater variety of resources.

'It [the new curriculum] makes it more exciting for the students. More eager.'
- National interviewee



Case study participants linked improved levels of student participation, interest, engagement, and wellbeing to:

- Student-centred and active learning pedagogies
- Connections to cultural heritage, local context and environment
- Activities that facilitate student involvement and interaction.

'...classrooms with students actively asking questions rather than just copying notes from the board. [There's a] reduction in passive learning.'
- National interviewee



Data suggested an awareness of inclusive education and associated strategies has contributed to greater student participation and wellbeing for girls and boys, low achieving students and non-Lao speakers.

'As teachers become more familiar with these methods, these benefit all children. Not just those from non-Lao speaking backgrounds, but those with disability.'
- National interviewee

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

With high absenteeism and dropout, and the need to improve learning outcomes in Lao PDR, the student engagement results are promising. The study data suggested that the new curriculum supported more students to enjoy Lao language lessons and engage in school. The next step is to build upon these successes to support progressive improvements in learning outcomes.

A key element is supporting teachers along their own learning pathways. This includes using evidence to target their teaching to the needs of learners. Teachers need to have the knowledge, skills and tools to be able to do this, and the MoES' continuous professional development approach is targeting resources to teacher training and inclusive classroom practices. Improving student engagement and learning requires a collaborative and targeted approach involving education systems, schools, parents and community. BEQUAL is playing its part, together with a range of programs and partners led by MoES and the Government of Lao PDR.

Visit [DFAT's website](#) to read the full report, Evaluation of Australia's Investment in Teacher Development in Lao PDR. This report forms part of a study series commissioned by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to investigate teaching and learning development initiatives in 3 countries: Lao PDR, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu.

