

IMPLEMENTATION OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

COUNTRY STUDIES OF CAMBODIA, LAO PDR,
THAILAND AND VIETNAM



BY

DVV INTERNATIONAL
REGIONAL OFFICE SOUTHEAST ASIA

AND

FACULTY OF EDUCATION, ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF PHNOM PENH (RUPP)

WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM THE



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

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Education for Everyone. Worldwide.
Lifelong.



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CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

CHRISTOPH JOST

DVV INTERNATIONAL

Chapter II BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

By Christoph Jost

II. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the United Nation's Agenda 2030 postulates in its mission statement to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Almost a decade after releasing SDG 4, having passed the midpoint of Agenda 2030's lifespan, it can be noted that lifelong learning (LLL) has gained momentum in many countries around the globe. Policies, strategies, laws, decrees and other frameworks have been adopted in the meantime. Stakeholder groups and platforms at national, regional and international levels have been established. Hence, there is notable progress regarding country and region-specific mechanisms for policy dialogue, coordination, exchange and planning.

The progress on the policy level (and beyond) is a good opportunity for cross-country sharing and learning, which is essential for gaining a better understanding on how to effectively implement lifelong learning, transitioning from policy to institutionalisation, capacity building and concrete learning practice. Since lifelong learning by nature requires a multi-stakeholder dialogue and intra-ministerial coordination, new challenges emerge regarding cross-sectoral awareness raising, the creation of sector, activity and training plans as well as joint reporting.

DVV International's Regional Office in Southeast Asia conducted and published a first compilation of country studies on "The Role of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Thailand" in 2019.¹ The present study builds on the former research exercise, including the proven set-up of research partners (see Chapter II.4 below), but widens its scope to include the field of lifelong learning and its implementation, especially considering the role of adult learning and education and non-formal education, respectively.

II.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Against the background outlined above, the present cross-country study on lifelong learning implementation has the following objectives:

- To assess current strategic developments in lifelong learning in four countries of Southeast Asia, with special focus on policies and other framework documents developed in recent years as well as new and emerging cross-sectoral governance structures
- To identify challenges and share best practices regarding the effective implementation of lifelong learning by informing about key stakeholders involved, institutional arrangements as well as major initiatives and programs that reach out to learners at local levels
- To inform about awareness raising and capacity building measures to promote lifelong learning and support a learning society throughout the four countries, taking into account the potential non-formal education approach and structures

¹The full study report can be found here: https://www.dvv-international.la/fileadmin/files/south-and-southeast-asia/documents/Final_Version_ALE_within_LLL_Southeast_Asia.pdf

- To put the current status of lifelong learning implementation in the study's four target countries into perspective with global trends (see Chapter III)
- To compare the current situation in the four target countries (see Chapter V)
- To provide overall policy recommendations and outline effective strategies for future implementation of lifelong learning (see Chapter VI)

II.2 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study begins with an overview of global developments in lifelong learning to provide a conceptual foundation for the following country cases studies from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam (Chapter IV). All case studies initially provide details on the respective methodology applied as well as relevant country-specific information (e.g., demographics, geography, socio-economic situation). Following that, each country case study informs about the evolution, policies and framework conditions of lifelong learning before they shed light on practical implementation by key stakeholders, with special attention to best practices, successful programs, and initiatives.

The study continues with an in-depth comparison of the four country case studies before providing policy recommendations to promote lifelong learning in the future. In addition, the study is complemented by supplementary chapters on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Lifelong Learning Hub linking endeavours in Asia and Europe, and an article on lifelong learning measurement and platforms in Europe.

II.3 RESEARCH TEAM AND PARTNERS

The study was coordinated by DVV International's Regional Office in Southeast Asia, based in Vientiane, Lao PDR with valuable support from its longstanding strategic partner, the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning (SEAMEO CELLL), based in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam.

The four country case studies were elaborated by research teams from the following well-known universities and institutions, which were already involved in the study on the role of adult learning and education, as mentioned above:

- Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand
- Faculty of Education, National University of Laos
- Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia
- SEAMEO Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning, Vietnam

The chapter on global developments was written by an international expert and long-standing former staff member of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), while the comparative analysis and the policy recommendations were authored by the former Head of Education from UNESCO's Regional Office in Bangkok who also supported the quality assurance of the four country case studies.

The valuable complementary chapters were elaborated by the Chair and the Southeast Asia Coordinator of the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning and international experts supporting DVV International's Regional Office in Laos and Country Office in Cambodia.

II.5 TERMINOLOGIES AND KEY TERMS

The research undertaken in this study is mostly based on the definitions and concepts outlined in UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE),² if not indicated otherwise in the table below. RALE points out that learning is a lifelong endeavour that can occur in formal, non-formal and informal settings. The ultimate goal is to ensure that adults can fully participate in social and work-related life. By taking stock of ALE's and lifelong learning's situation in various different contexts, the organisations participating in this study would like to further draw attention to this debate.

Key terms

For the matter of length, conciseness and originality, the key terms, their sources and definitions are illustrated in the manner of excerpts in the table below. The first column illustrates the key terms whose definitions and sources are displayed in the second column or footnotes respectively.

Key terms	Definitions
Education	Peters (1966), in one of his more accessible works, identified three criteria for education: (i) that 'education' implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it (ii) that 'education' must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert (iii) that 'education' at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack willingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner. Organised and sustained instruction designed to communicate a combination of knowledge, skills and understanding valuable for all the activities of life.
General education	General education shall be the education that allows the learners to progress their knowledge of morality and good characteristics by enhancing their personal, intellectual and physical capacity by assuring their use of knowledge and fundamental skills. General education is the fundamental education for learners to continue their studies and receive other training.
Formal education	Processes of an education, which is systematic and proper in structure and hierarchy. Formal education is provided by educational institutions with appropriate educational licenses or educational accreditation in accordance with the legal criteria and procedures stipulated in this law. Formal education is provided by the education and training system set up or sponsored by the state for those expressed purposes (Groombridge 1983, p. 6).
Non-formal education	Educational activities, which are systematically prepared and conducted outside of the framework of formal education programs to offer a number of selected studies. Non-formal education covers a wide range of education programs such as literacy, life and professional skills and basic education for learners who do not

² <http://uil.unesco.org/adult-education/unesco-recommendation>

Key terms	Definitions
	attend schools delivering formal education. Non-formal education consists of continuous and equivalent studies that are integrated into formal education or lifelong education. Learners in non-formal education have the right to request to be assessed and to take tests for assessing the equivalent levels of their education by education authorities. Non-formal education, which encompasses all organised educational or training activities outside of the formal education system, may offer a cheaper and more accessible means for delivering needed learning. Non-formal education, while not constituting a parallel system, covers: ‘[A]ny organised, systematic, educational activity, carried on outside the framework of the formal system, to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups in the population, adults as well as children. Thus, defined non-formal education includes, for example, agricultural extension and farmer training programmes, adult literacy programmes, occupational skill training given outside the formal system, youth clubs with substantial educational purposes, and various community programmes of instruction in health, nutrition, family planning, cooperatives, and the like’ (Coombs and Ahmed 1974, p. 8). An official education system, which contributes to achieving Education for All and gives people access to lifelong education and helps build a learning society with equity, justice and social development.
Informal education	Informal education may be seen to cover all forms of learning not included in formal and non-formal education. Thus, it refers to: ‘The life-long process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganised, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning – including that of even a highly ‘schooled’ person’ (Coombs and Ahmed 1974, p. 8).
Lifelong education	The development of coherent strategies to provide education and training opportunities for all individuals during their entire lives (Jallade and Mora 2001, p. 362). Lifelong education is a set of organisational and procedural guidelines for educational practice. Its goal is lifelong learning – learning carried out throughout life. It is important to define this term of ‘learning’ which is not spontaneous, day-to-day learning. The kind of lifelong learning that is the object of lifelong education (...) has the following four definitive characteristics: 1. It is intentional – learners are aware that they are learning.

Key terms	Definitions
	2. It has specific goals and is not aimed at vague generalisations such as ‘developing the mind’. 3. These goals are the reason why the learning is undertaken (i.e., it is not motivated simply by factors like boredom). 4. The learner intends to retain and use what has been learnt for a considerable period of time (Knapper and Cropley 2000, pp. 11–12).
Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning is ‘[r]ooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men) in all life-wide contexts (family, school, community, workplace and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands. Education systems which promote lifelong learning adopt a holistic and sector-wide approach involving all sub-sectors and levels to ensure the provision of learning opportunities for all individuals’.
E-learning	E-learning is an umbrella term that refers to the use of any digital device or media (multi-media) for teaching and learning, especially for delivery or accessing of content. Thus, e-learning can take place without any reference to a network or connectivity. The digital device used by the learner to access materials need not be connected to a digital network, such as a local area network or the Internet (or even to a cell phone network if a tablet is used as a terminal or access device). ³
Microlearning	Microlearning refers to small units of learning that can be completed in a short time. These “bitesize” chunks of learning can be aggregated into larger lessons/modules or programs of learning. The term also refers to the process of using small chunks of multi-modal resources for just-in-time learning in the workplace or in professional development programs. ⁴
Adult	The idea of an ‘adult’ is not, therefore, directly connected to age, but is related to what generally happens as we grow older. That is, we achieve physical maturity, become capable of providing for ourselves, move away (at least in most western societies) from our parents, have children of our own, and exercise a much greater role in the making of our own choices. This then affects not just how we see ourselves, but how others see us as well. In other words, we may see the difference between being and not being an adult as chiefly being about status and self-image. Adulthood may thus be considered as a state of being that both accords rights to individuals and simultaneously confers duties or responsibilities upon them. We might then define adulthood as: ‘an ethical status resting on the presumption of various moral and personal qualities’ (Paterson 1979, p. 31). Having said that, however, we also need to recognise what a heterogeneous group of people adults are. It is this amorphous group which forms the customer base or audience for adult education and training.

³ <https://oasis.col.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/2d6d0e13-a452-4392-9821-2456a2a2ed2e/content>

⁴ Ibid.

Key terms	Definitions
Adult learning and education	Adult learning and education is a core component of lifelong learning. It comprises all forms of education and learning that aim at ensuring that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work. It denotes the entire body of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, whereby those are regarded as adults who are recognised as adults by the society in which they live in and in which they develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working, both in their own interests and those of their communities, organisations and societies. Adult learning and education involve sustained activities and processes of acquiring, recognising, exchanging, and adapting capabilities. Given that the boundaries of youth and adulthood are shifting in most cultures, in this text the term ‘adult’ denotes all those who engage in adult learning and education, even if they have not reached the legal age of maturity.
	According to UNESCO (2016), ‘the 2015 Recommendation takes a comprehensive and systematic approach to ALE, defining three key domains of learning and skills: literacy and basic skills; continuing education and vocational skills; as well as liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills. It also describes five transversal areas of action: policy; governance; financing; participation, inclusion and equity; and quality’ (p. 3).

CHAPTER III

GLOBAL TRENDS IN LIFELONG LEARNING

UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING (UIL)

Chapter III - GLOBAL TRENDS IN LIFELONG LEARNING

By UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

III.1 INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is fast becoming a strategic imperative for rethinking education and development in the 21st century. The world today is defined by rapid transformation: digitalisation continues to reshape labour markets and communication, climate disruption challenges the sustainability of development models, demographic change introduces new social pressures, and global inequality undermines social cohesion. Within this context, education systems are being called upon to play a more dynamic and expansive role - one that supports not only knowledge acquisition but resilience, adaptability and inclusive participation across the life course (UNESCO, 2021; UIL, 2023).

Historically, lifelong learning was primarily associated with adult or non-formal education. It was often seen as a second-chance opportunity for those who had been excluded from mainstream schooling (UNESCO, 2015). However, in the contemporary global landscape, this understanding has evolved significantly. Lifelong learning is now regarded as a holistic, system-wide approach that transcends age, sector and setting. It connects learning across the life course - from early childhood to older adulthood - and integrates multiple modes of delivery, including formal, non-formal and informal learning (UIL, 2022). More importantly, it extends beyond the boundaries of the education sector, intersecting with health, labour, social protection, cultural policy and environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 2020).

Adopting lifelong learning as an organising principle transforms how education systems are structured, governed and financed. It implies a fundamental shift from education as a finite phase of life to learning as a continuous, inclusive and participatory process. This shift has deep implications not only for curriculum and pedagogy, but for legislation, institutional design and stakeholder coordination in enabling learning opportunities throughout life (UNESCO, 2015).

This chapter provides a global perspective on lifelong learning to serve as a conceptual and policy framework for the regional case studies that follow, particularly those from Southeast Asia. It draws on UNESCO's longstanding vision of lifelong learning as a human right and a foundation for sustainable development. It also highlights the relevance of lifelong learning to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), examines current global trends reshaping lifelong learning, and outlines guiding principles for national policy development. In doing so, it aims to position lifelong learning as a foundational paradigm for inclusive, adaptive and equitable societies.

III.2 UNESCO'S LIFELONG LEARNING FRAMEWORK

UNESCO's vision of lifelong learning has evolved over several decades into a comprehensive and integrated policy framework. Lifelong learning is understood as a process that enables individuals, communities and societies to acquire, update and apply knowledge, skills, attitudes and values throughout their lives. It supports not only economic productivity, but also personal growth, cultural identity, civic responsibility and environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2023). The framework is organised around four essential dimensions conveying that lifelong learning must include all age groups, span all types and levels of education, take place in all settings and serve all purposes (UIL, 2022).

- **All age groups:** Lifelong learning must serve individuals at every stage of life. Learning begins in early childhood and continues into old age. At each stage, learners have different needs, ranging from foundational literacy and digital skills to vocational retraining and education for active ageing. A life-course approach recognises this evolving demand and ensures appropriate learning support across all phases of life (UNESCO, 2015).
- **All types and levels of education:** Lifelong learning bridges formal, non-formal and informal learning. It encompasses early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), higher education and adult education. Systems must allow individuals to transition flexibly between learning modes and build competencies over time. This requires frameworks that support the recognition, validation and accreditation of diverse learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2023).
- **All settings:** Learning occurs not only in schools and universities, but also in libraries, community centres, homes, workplaces, faith-based organisations and online platforms. Policies must ensure that these diverse learning environments are accessible, inclusive and well resourced. As digitalisation accelerates, equitable access to devices, connectivity and digital literacy support becomes essential (UNESCO, 2020).
- **All purposes:** Lifelong learning must address the full range of human aspirations. It supports employability, entrepreneurship and innovation, but also personal fulfilment, cultural participation, civic engagement, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Education systems that reflect this diversity of purpose are more likely to equip individuals and communities with the tools to navigate complexity and contribute meaningfully to society (UNESCO, 2021).

Turning this vision into practice requires lifelong learning to be embedded into national legal frameworks, sectoral strategies and institutional governance frameworks. UNESCO advocates for system-wide policies supported by inter-ministerial coordination, sustainable financing, robust data systems and mechanisms for quality assurance and stakeholder participation (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2023).

One prominent example is Malaysia, which has institutionalised lifelong learning as a national priority through its **Blueprint on the Enculturation of Lifelong Learning 2011–2020**. The blueprint introduced a whole-of-government approach that linked LLL to national development, digital transformation and labour market strategies. It also established coordination structures and indicators for monitoring progress, illustrating how comprehensive frameworks can drive sustainable implementation (UIL, 2023a).

UNESCO also highlights the critical role of civil society organisations, grassroots networks and community actors in building inclusive lifelong learning systems. These local initiatives are often the first to reach marginalised groups, innovate pedagogical approaches and create learning environments that reflect cultural values and local needs. National strategies should empower such actors through funding, legal recognition and participation in planning and decision-making processes (UIL, 2022).

III.3 LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies education as both a fundamental human right and a transformative force for achieving broader development objectives. While SDG 4 specifically calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2015), the concept of lifelong learning is deeply interconnected with nearly every other SDG. It underpins progress in areas such as health, gender equality, decent work, environmental sustainability and peace—positioning learning as an enabling condition for sustainable, inclusive and resilient societies (UNESCO, 2020; UIL, 2022).

To illustrate, here are some of the ways lifelong learning contributes to specific SDGs:

- **SDG 3 – Good health and well-being:** Lifelong learning enhances public health through health literacy and community-based education. Programmes that promote understanding of nutrition, mental health, hygiene and chronic disease prevention empower people to make informed decisions and engage proactively with health services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, agile learning systems were crucial in disseminating health information and building public trust (Ireland Department of Education, 2020; UIL, 2023).
- **SDG 5 – Gender equality:** Lifelong learning supports gender empowerment by creating flexible, inclusive pathways for women and girls who have experienced educational disadvantage. Through community learning centres, vocational training, digital literacy programmes and leadership development, lifelong learning reduces structural inequalities and promotes women’s full participation in economic, civic and cultural life (UNESCO, 2016; UIL, 2022).
- **SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth:** As economies undergo rapid transformation, lifelong learning equips individuals with the competencies required for upskilling, reskilling and entrepreneurship. It supports transitions between sectors, helps bridge the informal-formal divide and ensures that no group is permanently excluded from the labour market. Recognition of prior learning and alternative credentials further support workforce adaptability (UNESCO, 2021; UIL, 2023).
- **SDG 13 – Climate action:** Lifelong learning contributes to climate resilience through environmental education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). It fosters ecological awareness, critical thinking and local engagement. Community learning centres, media campaigns and intergenerational knowledge-sharing initiatives all play important roles in shaping environmentally responsible behaviour and mobilising grassroots action (UNESCO, 2020).
- **SDG 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions:** Lifelong learning reinforces democratic governance by promoting civic education, critical thinking and intercultural understanding. Programmes that encourage inclusive participation, dialogue and cooperation help to build social cohesion, reduce polarisation and prevent conflict (UNESCO, 2021).

Countries that have aligned their lifelong learning strategies with the SDGs offer promising models of integrated development. For instance, in **Vietnam**, an extensive national network of community learning centres (CLCs) connects provincial, district and commune-level activities, promoting inclusive lifelong learning and supporting grassroots initiatives to build a learning society. As another example, **Colombia** leverages lifelong learning as part of its peacebuilding efforts. Learning cities and neighbourhood hubs offer training, civic engagement opportunities and psychosocial support, particularly in post-conflict regions. These initiatives promote social integration and democratic renewal at the local level (UIL, 2022).

These examples affirm that lifelong learning is not simply a goal within education policy - it is a strategic framework for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. By embedding learning opportunities across life stages and sectors, countries can build the adaptive capacities needed to navigate complex challenges and realise the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda.

III. 4 GLOBAL TRENDS SHAPING LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning systems are being shaped by a set of converging global trends that reflect deeper structural shifts in economies, societies and technologies. While these trends vary by context, they share common implications for how learning is accessed, delivered and governed. This section identifies six such trends, each presenting both challenges and opportunities for reimagining education through a lifelong learning lens (UNESCO, 2021; UIL, 2023).

Digital transformation

Digitalisation has reshaped the learning landscape. Online platforms, mobile applications, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and digital credentialing systems have made learning more flexible, scalable and accessible. Yet persistent digital divides threaten to entrench inequalities. Many learners lack access to internet connectivity, devices or the digital literacy required to participate fully in digital education ecosystems (OECD, 2021; UIL, 2022).

Example: Rwanda's Digital Ambassadors Programme

To address digital exclusion, Rwanda launched a national initiative that trains youth as "Digital Ambassadors" to deliver digital skills training in rural communities. This programme not only builds capacity in digital literacy but also promotes entrepreneurship and civic participation through technology (Rwanda Ministry of ICT and Innovation, 2021).

Changing world of work

Technological change, globalisation and the rise of platform economies are reshaping the nature of work. Jobs are becoming more fluid, skills requirements are shifting rapidly, and informal or precarious employment is increasingly common. Traditional models of education-to-employment are no longer sufficient. Lifelong learning must support multiple transitions, enable upskilling and reskilling, and offer recognition of prior learning for those already in the workforce (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2023).

Example: South Africa's National Skills Development Plan (NSDP 2030)

The NSDP 2030 aligns skills development with labour market needs through workplace learning, community-based training and inclusive policies that target disadvantaged groups. It also supports the recognition of skills acquired outside formal education, helping learners navigate diverse and dynamic employment pathways (South Africa DHET, 2019).

Demographic change and migration

Population ageing, youth bulges and large-scale migration are transforming education needs globally. In some regions, ageing societies require re-skilling for older adults and policies to promote active ageing. In others, expanding youth populations necessitate scalable education and employment opportunities. Migration - whether internal, transnational or forced - creates demands for culturally responsive learning systems that can support integration and inclusion (UNESCO, 2021).

Example: Portugal's Qualifica Programme

Portugal's national Qualifica Programme provides recognition, validation and certification of prior learning for adults. Delivered through a network of Qualifica Centres, it enables individuals to obtain formal qualifications based on prior work and life experience. This system supports social inclusion, labour market integration and lifelong learning, particularly for low-skilled adults and early school leavers (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023).

Climate change and sustainability

The climate emergency calls for transformative learning that builds environmental awareness, resilience and action. Education systems must embed environmental themes across curricula and reach learners across age groups and settings. Lifelong learning enables citizens to understand, adapt to and mitigate environmental challenges while strengthening sustainability at local and global levels (UNESCO, 2020).

Example: Espoo, Finland's learning city model

Espoo has mainstreamed sustainability education through partnerships with schools, libraries and community organisations. Activities such as urban gardening, waste reduction campaigns and citizen science projects involve learners of all ages and strengthen the city's commitment to climate action (City of Espoo, 2023).

Health and well-being

Public health crises, mental health concerns and changing patterns of disease highlight the importance of health education throughout life. Health literacy is essential for informed decision-making, preventative behaviours and access to care. Lifelong learning systems must link health promotion with community empowerment and social resilience (UIL, 2023).

Example: Ireland's adult learning and health promotion programmes

Ireland integrates health into community education through workshops on chronic illness, nutrition, mental health and navigating healthcare systems. Delivered in non-formal settings, these initiatives empower individuals while reducing pressure on health services (Ireland Department of Education, 2020).

Citizenship and social cohesion

Rising inequality, polarisation and cultural fragmentation challenge democratic institutions and social trust. Lifelong learning offers tools to promote civic engagement, critical thinking and intercultural understanding. Learning spaces, especially at the community level, can foster dialogue and collective responsibility (UNESCO, 2021).

Example: Philippines' Alternative Learning System (ALS)

The Philippines' ALS programme delivers basic education and functional literacy to out-of-school youth and adults through flexible, community-based learning sessions. The system includes mechanisms for accreditation and equivalency, allowing learners to transition into the formal education system or gain recognised certifications. ALS strengthens educational inclusion and supports second-chance learning (DepEd Philippines, 2019; UIL, 2023b).

III.5 MULTI-LEVEL PROMOTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The successful implementation of lifelong learning depends not only on national policy direction but also on how well different levels of governance interact and collaborate. A multi-level approach spanning national ministries, local authorities, educational institutions and community actors is essential to ensure both strategic alignment and context-sensitive implementation. While national governments are responsible for establishing enabling legal frameworks, financing mechanisms and quality assurance systems, it is often at the local level that learning is most effectively designed, implemented and adapted to community needs (UNESCO, 2021; UIL, 2023).

Local actors play a particularly vital role in translating lifelong learning policies into practice. Municipal governments, civil society organisations and local learning centres are uniquely positioned to understand the challenges faced by diverse groups - whether youth, older adults, migrants, informal workers or people with disabilities - and to offer tailored, inclusive and flexible learning opportunities. UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities illustrates how cities and towns can act as laboratories for innovation, drawing on cross-sectoral collaboration and citizen participation to embed lifelong learning in the fabric of daily life (UIL, 2021).

- **Example: Medellín, Colombia:** Once known for urban violence, Medellín has undergone a transformation driven by inclusive development and educational investment. The city has repurposed public libraries, digital hubs and community schools as learning centres for all age groups. Lifelong learning is linked to urban renewal, peacebuilding and digital inclusion, demonstrating how city-level leadership can catalyse system-wide change (City of Medellín, 2022).
- **Example: Shanghai, the People's Republic of China:** Shanghai has developed a coordinated network of neighbourhood learning centres, digital learning platforms and senior education initiatives. Its lifelong learning strategy is integrated with economic development and social cohesion policies. Partnerships with universities and private sector actors help extend learning beyond traditional institutions and into workplaces, homes and communities (Shanghai SMEC, 2021).
- **Example: Aswan, Egypt:** Aswan's lifelong learning strategy draws on local culture, heritage and tourism. Through partnerships with schools, museums and youth centres, it connects learning to environmental stewardship, heritage preservation and entrepreneurship. The city's approach reflects how place-based education can foster both individual development and community resilience (UIL, 2021).

These examples reinforce the importance of bottom-up approaches that are informed by local knowledge, social networks and lived experience. When national and local actors collaborate effectively, lifelong learning can become not only a policy goal but a living reality embedded in everyday life. The challenge for policymakers is to institutionalise these linkages – through decentralised governance, capacity development and resource allocation - so that innovation and equity go hand in hand.

III.6 GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY DEVELOPMENT

As this chapter has demonstrated, lifelong learning is a foundation for reimagining the role of education in building inclusive, adaptable and resilient societies. Translating this vision into practice requires deliberate, coordinated and sustained policy action. The following guiding principles offer a framework for countries seeking to strengthen or establish lifelong learning systems that are equitable, integrated and future-ready (UNESCO, 2015; UIL, 2023):

- **Make lifelong learning a legal and policy imperative:** Lifelong learning should be enshrined in national education laws, development strategies and sector-wide frameworks. It must be treated not as an optional add-on, but as a central organising principle for system transformation. Countries such as the Republic of Korea, Vietnam and Malaysia have shown how constitutional and legislative backing can sustain long-term reform (UNESCO, 2021; Government of Malaysia, 2011).
- **Develop multi-sectoral strategies:** Because learning needs intersect with employment, health, environment, digital transformation and civic participation, policy development should involve multiple ministries and stakeholders. National lifelong learning councils or inter-ministerial committees can foster coherence, coordination and accountability across sectors (UIL, 2023).
- **Ensure flexible and inclusive learning pathways:** Systems must accommodate learners of all backgrounds and life stages, with options for formal, non-formal and informal learning. Mechanisms such as the recognition, validation and accreditation of learning outcomes (RVA), micro-credentials, modular courses and open digital platforms can help individuals accumulate learning across time and space (UNESCO, 2020; OECD, 2021).
- **Invest in learning infrastructure and local capacity:** Libraries, digital learning centres, community hubs and outreach services are vital for making learning accessible, especially in rural and underserved areas. Investment must go hand-in-hand with professional development for educators, administrators and community facilitators (UIL, 2022).
- **Empower cities and communities:** Local governments should be equipped with resources and autonomy to lead lifelong learning initiatives tailored to their communities. Support for community-led innovation ensures responsiveness and sustainability and builds learning cultures from the ground up (UIL, 2021).
- **Promote equity and inclusion:** Policies must actively address barriers faced by marginalised groups, such as women, older adults, people with disabilities, migrants and Indigenous populations. This includes both targeted programmes and systemic reforms that reduce structural inequities in access and outcomes (UNESCO, 2016; UIL, 2023).
- **Cultivate a learning culture:** Public awareness campaigns, celebration of learning achievements and integration of lifelong learning into media and cultural life can shift mindsets and encourage lifelong learning as a societal norm. Cultural narratives and incentives matter just as much as policies and programmes in shaping learning behaviour (UNESCO, 2021).

As Southeast Asian countries navigate demographic, technological, environmental and social change, lifelong learning offers a unifying and forward-looking policy approach. It enables individuals to adapt, participate and thrive, and empowers communities to co-create inclusive and sustainable futures. The imperative is clear: to embed lifelong learning not only into education systems, but into the social contract itself.

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CHAPTER IV

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

CHAPTER IVa

OVERALL CONCEPT AND METHODOLOGY

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Chapter IVa - OVERALL CONCEPT AND METHODOLOGY

By Christoph Jost

IVa.1 RATIONALE

The present country studies are the main output of a one-year project that started in July 2024, and which included three encounters with researchers from the National University of Laos, the Royal University Phnom Penh, SEAMEO Center for Lifelong Learning, and Chulalongkorn University Bangkok. These meetings served to discuss the concept of the study, present preliminary results at an international Lifelong Learning Conference organised by DVV International's Regional Office Southeast Asia, and assure the quality of all country case studies and discuss the comparative analysis and policy recommendation with an external consultant.

As already mentioned in the background chapter (Chapter II), lifelong learning (LLL) has gained momentum in many countries around the globe. This also holds true for the countries of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, where – to a different extent – policies, strategies, laws, decrees and other frameworks have either already been adopted, or are currently being processed. Cross-sectoral stakeholder groups such as lifelong learning committees are being formed and action plans developed. Emerging institutional structures comprise, for example, lifelong learning departments at national or government-sponsored lifelong learning centres at the community level. These developments underpin the political intent to further promote and implement lifelong learning in practice.

Discussing the study's conceptual framework at the initial research workshop in July 2024 showed that – albeit the remarkable progress mentioned before – most LLL-related developments are still limited to the policy level while concrete capacity building and learning activities are often undertaken or promoted by the sub-sector of non-formal education (NFE). In most countries, there are not yet specific budgets and limited awareness or understanding of the cross-sectoral concept of lifelong learning. Support for lifelong learning structures and activities are mostly channeled and implemented under the auspices of non-formal education development departments.

IVa.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To duly consider the above realities, it was discussed at which stage the conceptual framework for the country studies needed to be narrowed down from the broader lifelong learning to the more specific non-formal education perspective. Eventually, it was agreed that each case study – following a country overview – will have the following main chapters:

- The first chapter will deal with the evolution of lifelong learning taking into account framework conditions (laws, decrees, policies, etc.), governance structures (committees, etc.) and – as far as existent – lifelong learning institutions as well as strategies to further promote lifelong learning in the country, and key stakeholders focussing on LLL.

- The second chapter will analyse the implementation of lifelong learning “on the ground”, informing about key stakeholders (government agencies, education institutions, development partners), major programs and best practices. This chapter will focus on the non-formal education system because there is hardly any concrete implementation of lifelong learning by other (sub-) sectors yet.

In a nutshell, country case studies will focus on lifelong learning with special attention to NFE/ALE regarding concrete implementation (local institutions, capacity building programs, activities, best practices, etc.). This approach is reflected in the conceptual framework illustrated in the figure below.

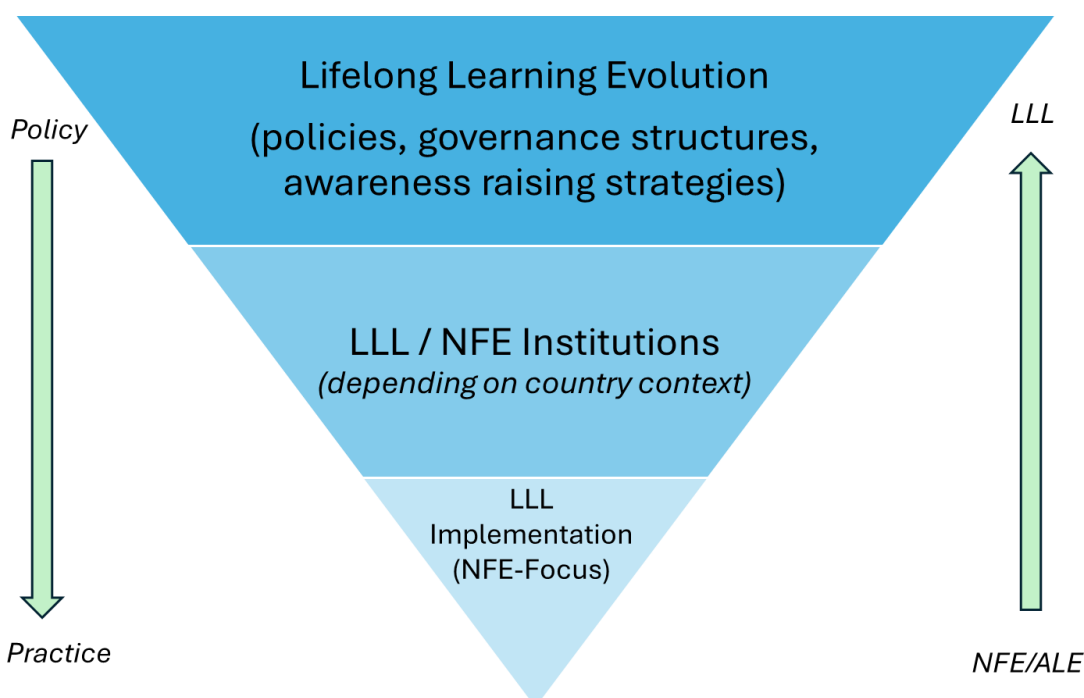


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for analysing the implementation of lifelong learning

The conceptual framework does not only consider a narrower focus when more practical lifelong learning implementation is concerned. It also includes the hypothesis that the evolution of lifelong learning is often influenced by key stakeholders from the non-formal education sector and respective government departments or development partners active in that field. The case studies will shed light on the situation in the four countries concerned and verify this hypothesis.

IVa.3 MARRAKECH FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Besides the conceptual framework outlined above, the country case studies also refer to and align with key elements of the United Nation’s Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA) adopted in 2022 by 142 member states.¹ The MFA is considered as an instrument that provides a roadmap for adult learning and education within a lifelong learning perspective and within vital areas of action. The MFA, inter alia, encourages:

¹ See: <https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/marrakech-framework-action>

- To establish frameworks and governance arrangements including multi-sectoral platforms and appropriate ways to translate the vision of a right to lifelong learning – with adult learning and education at its core – into reality.
- To redesign systems for ALE and to establish mechanisms and regulations for allocating financial and human resources to support structures at the national and at the local level, the latter being considered as a strategic dimension for planning, designing and implementing learning programs.
- To address the quality of learning and the key role of teachers and educators, including volunteers and strategies to upskill and further professionalise them.
- To recognise the importance of conducting research and evaluation to guide policies and practice to further promote inclusion, quality and relevance.
- To continuously exchange knowledge and good practices between governments and non-governmental institutions, academia, civil society and member states, to foster peer learning and contribute to institutional capacity development, with the objective of improving ALE and promoting lifelong learning.

The country case studies analyse, with respect to each country's specific context, to what extent frameworks and governance arrangements have emerged, which institutional changes have taken place or are currently planned, and what kind of programs and best practices exist, improving the quality of teaching and learning. The study itself constitutes a piece of cross-country research and evaluation to further guide policymaking through recommendations in the final chapter. Finally, the study aims to promote international cooperation through exchanging knowledge and good practices between governments and other stakeholders active in the spheres of lifelong learning and non-formal education.

IVa.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The country case studies sought to address the following research questions:

- Which LLL policies and other frameworks have emerged since the release of the Agenda 2030? Which governance structures and cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms are in place? How effective are these and how can these be improved in the future?
- Which mechanisms and strategies are applied to translate lifelong learning into practice, and to document progress? Which institutional and capacity building programs related to LLL and NFE/ALE exist? Which good practices (from various sectors) should be shared with a wider audience?
- How is lifelong learning promoted and communicated to other ministries, key stakeholders and the public? Which role do non-formal and adult education play when it comes to the promotion of lifelong learning?

IVa.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

The country case studies had to navigate two major limitations:

- They were elaborated within a short time frame and with limited financial resources. The overall study follows academic standards but is not necessarily meant to undergo a thorough peer review. It rather aims to shed light on the implementation of lifelong learning, from policy to practice – to promote regional and international exchange, policy dialogue and inspire stakeholders to learn from each other.
- Currently, there is hardly any aggregated data on lifelong learning because appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems do not yet exist.² It is also very challenging to collect data from the scattered sub-sector of non-formal education and adult learning and education. Thus, presented data of learning centres, teachers, learners, etc. focus mostly on the public NFE sector, taking into account – as far as available – additional information from national and international development partners.

IVa.6 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

All country case studies applied the same overall structure and methodological framework to allow for comparison and analysis. Nevertheless, the researchers maintained a degree of flexibility for their specific methodologies on account of country contexts, available data, secondary sources and interview partners.

The study design is based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. All research teams elaborated their country case studies based on a desk review of available documents (e.g., government policies, regulations, studies, handbooks), a review and assessment of ongoing and past major NFE/LLL programs and initiatives, and qualitative interviews with selected key informants (e.g., government officials, development partners, UNESCO offices) as well as other available, secondary data.

The country case studies used convenience and purposive sampling techniques. Data used is mostly derived from thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. The studies followed ethical considerations, i.e., a set of principles that guided research designs and practices, including voluntary participation, informed consent, whenever requested anonymity, confidentiality, a do-not harm approach, and proper results communication.

Details on each country case study's specific methodology are outlined at the beginning of each case study.

² See also the complementary chapter that, inter alia, deals with the intent to establish lifelong learning indicators in Europe.

CHAPTER IV b

COUNTRY CASE STUDY CAMBODIA

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Chapter IV b – COUNTRY CASE STUDY CAMBODIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In contrast to UNESCO's more expansive definition of Adult Learning and Education (ALE), which includes all forms of learning (formal, non-formal, informal), ALE in Cambodia is underrepresented in practice and policy. The 2020 Cambodia case study on adult learning and education also revealed participant confusion in differentiating between Non-Formal Education (NFE), Lifelong Learning (LLL), and ALE. According to the study, ALE is what it takes to showcase lifelong learning in Cambodia (p. 35), creating learning communities and bolstering democratic societies, which the Marrakech Framework for Action reinforced (UNESCO, 2022).

Building on the previous Cambodia case study on adult learning and education (2020), and reflecting on the actions taken by concerned stakeholders to date, this present country study on the implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia has the following purposes:

1. To assess the implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia
2. To identify challenges and share best practices
3. To put the current status into perspective with global and regional trends

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The objectives of the present study, research questions, and sources of data are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Connection among purposes of the study with supporting objectives, and sources of data

Purposes of the Present Study	Objectives of the Present Study	Research Questions	Sources of Data
1. To assess the implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia	1.1. Understand the context of LLL implementation in Cambodia	1. What do you think about LLL implementation in Cambodia in general?	Policy review, interviews with key stakeholders (Secretary of State et al. of National Committee for Lifelong Learning, Department of NFE, development partners, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), etc.)
	1.2. Identify key stakeholders of LLL implementation in Cambodia	2. Who do you think are the key stakeholders in LLL implementation in Cambodia?	Policy review, interviews with key stakeholders
	1.3. Evaluate the existing infrastructure of LLL implementation in Cambodia	3. How do you rate the existing infrastructure of LLL implementation in Cambodia? Poor – Okay – Good – Very Good	Policies, action plans, and budgets (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) and other ministries)
	1.4. Examine the level of inclusivity of LLL implementation in Cambodia	4. In your opinion, how inclusive is LLL implementation in Cambodia?	Policies, action plans, and budgets (MoEYS and other ministries)

Purposes of the Present Study	Objectives of the Present Study	Research Questions	Sources of Data
	1.5. Monitor and measure outcomes of existing LLL implementation in Cambodia	5. How are the outcomes of existing LLL implementation in Cambodia measured?	MoEYS's Education Congress Report (2024)
	1.6. Promote sustainable development of LLL implementation in Cambodia	6. In your opinion, how can LLL implementation in Cambodia be promoted in a sustainable development manner?	Policy review, interviews with key stakeholders
	1.7. Examine the level of technology integrated in LLL implementation in Cambodia and how this can be leveraged	7. In your opinion, what is the rate of technology integration in the LLL implementation in Cambodia? Poor – Okay – Good – Very Good?	Policy review, interviews with key stakeholders
2. To identify challenges and share best practices	2.1. Identify challenges in LLL implementation in Cambodia	8. In your opinion, what are the key challenges in LLL implementation in Cambodia?	Policy review, interviews with key stakeholders
	2.2. Identify best practices in LLL implementation in Cambodia	9. What do you consider as best practices of LLL implementation in Cambodia?	Policies, action plans, and budgets (MoEYS and other ministries)
3. To put the current status into perspective with global and regional trends	3.1. Compare Cambodian practices with regional trends	10. How do Cambodia LLL practices compare with those in the region?	Literature review, policy review, interviews with key stakeholders
	3.2. Compare Cambodian practices with global trends	11. How do Cambodia LLL practices compare with those in the global context?	Literature review, policy review, interviews with key stakeholders

1.3. METHODOLOGY

To respond to the purposes and objectives of this study, a qualitative research design in the form of a case study was employed to examine numerous forms of data from a wide range of sources to generate in-depth information. With the research objectives identified (see section 1.2), the sources of data were determined by the researchers using the purposive sampling technique, from which the snowball technique was used to identify the respective next informant. Key informants, who were purposively selected to provide insights responding to the research objectives and agreed to be interviewed for this study, represent the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), as well as the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Lifelong Learning Centres, and development partners from various projects in the field. In total, 17 key informants participated in this study, coming from various backgrounds and institutions (see further details in Appendix 1).

For ethical considerations, the authors requested permission to interview the participants and to use their information provided in this study. The purposes of the study were made clear to them, and they were given the options to sign a consent form or to agree verbally. All participants chose to provide verbal consent, on the condition that their full names were not to be revealed in the study.

This study used semi-structured interviews as its main tool for data collection. Iconaru (2012, p. 64) stated that ‘the semi-structured interview is used for gathering qualitative information in specific situations from small samples. The semi-structured interview allows the moderator to interfere in the respondent’s speech in order to direct him or her to the desired topics’.

Figure 1 below visualises the conceptual framework behind the present study. It demonstrates that this study was developed by reviewing the 2020 country study on ALE; actions taken since then; and the current status of lifelong learning in Cambodia.

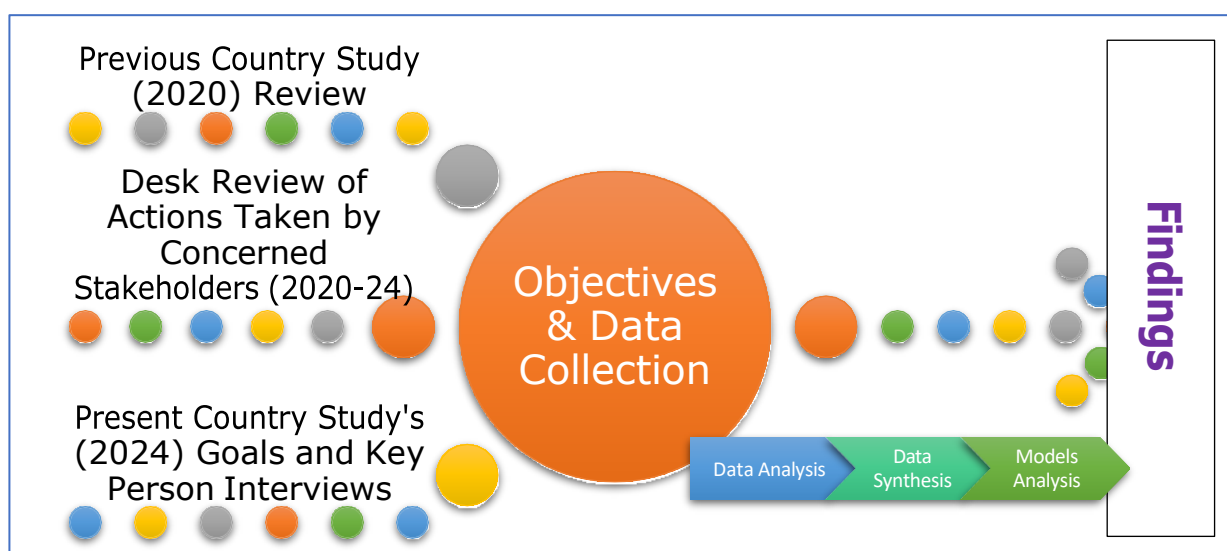


Figure 1. Research conceptual framework

II. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Cambodia is a small country located in Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand to the west and northwest, Laos to the north, Vietnam to the east and southeast, and the Gulf of Thailand to the south (Heuveline, 1998). The country’s area covers approximately 181,035 square kilometres, with the low-lying central plain of the Mekong River and Tonle Sap Lake as its defining features. The Dangrek mountain ranges surround this fertile basin, and the tropical climate supports rice farming and other agricultural activities, making agriculture a cornerstone of the economy. As of 2025, Cambodia has a population of about 16.5 million people, with the majority being ethnic Khmer, who constitute over 90 per cent of the population. Other ethnic groups include Vietnamese, Chinese, and various indigenous minorities. Buddhism is the predominant religion, profoundly influencing the country's culture and way of life. The population is relatively young, with a large percentage below 30 years, reflecting the demographic impacts of the Khmer Rouge era (Zimmer & Kim, 2001).

Cambodia is classified as a lower-middle-income country as its economy has largely been driven by agriculture, garment manufacturing, tourism, and, more recently, construction and real estate. Poverty rates have significantly decreased in recent decades. Yet, income inequality remains a concern, particularly between urban and rural areas. Challenges also persist in education, healthcare access, and infrastructure, although governmental and international efforts have led to improvements (Rana & Ardichvili, 2014).

Cambodia has various education-relevant national development frameworks in place, such as the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024-2028, the Cambodia Skills Development Roadmap (2023-2035), the National Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy 2017-2025, and the

Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025. These frameworks aim to foster learners' hard and soft skills to better prepare them for the job market. Cambodia has enacted a National Policy on Lifelong Learning in recognition of the need for ongoing education in a world that is changing permanently. In order to promote personal growth and active engagement in society, this policy seeks to give all individuals the chance to gain information, skills, and attitudes throughout their lives.

III. LIFELONG LEARNING EVOLUTION

3.1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge destroyed most of the foundation of modern education, including books, buildings, and various educational resources (Beck & Scholar, 2011, p. 82). In this period, 90 per cent of Cambodia's teachers were killed (Ross, 1987).

During the 1980s, Cambodia suffered international isolation from the West, receiving aid and assistance only from Vietnam, the Soviet Union, the socialist bloc, and some non-aligned countries (Supote, 1996, p. 1). Nevertheless, within the span of 12 months following the end of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the United Nations stated that '[e]nthusiastic community interest combined with the determination of national and provincial authorities has resulted in the reopening of over 5,000 primary schools, with more than 60% of eligible children back in the classroom along with 21,000 teachers' (ICORC/UNICEF Joint Mission, December 1980, in Duggan 1996, p. 366). Duggan added that 'teachers from the pre-1975-1979 period were located and recruited. They provided crash training to new recruits. They were farmers, artisans, and menial workers who could find some status in assuming the role of teacher' (1996, p. 367). UNESCO (1991) explained that:

'Over the past decade of educational reform, individuals from urban and rural areas were recruited as teachers and given brief training sessions lasting three weeks, one month, or six weeks. By the academic year 1982/83, approximately 32,000 teachers supported the education system despite having significantly varied levels of expertise. Their subject knowledge spanned from primary school to university level, highlighting the broad spectrum of competencies among them.'

(p. 47, in Duggan, 1996, p. 367)

'By late 1980, school enrollment had increased to 1.3 million children, supported by 30,000 teachers. These numbers grew to 1.5 million students and 37,000 teachers the following year. This significant expansion was largely facilitated by the reopening of the École Normale Supérieure and the École de Pédagogies in the capital, which trained 3,000 teachers, as well as the establishment of 20 provincial training centers that collectively prepared 12,000 teachers between 1979 and 1981.'

(Kiernan, 1982, p. 179, in Duggan, 1996, p. 367).

Programs that could be viewed as lifelong learning implementation commenced in Cambodia in the form of an adult literacy program in the 1980s. According to UNESCO (1994, p.35), non-formal education was the responsibility of the Department of Adult Education, providing two main components—literacy and complementary education.

1. **Literacy education:** It was estimated in 1980 that nearly one million adult Cambodians could not read or write. Two major national literacy campaigns were conducted. Approximately 567,000 people participated in the 1980 to 1983 campaign, and 450,000 in the 1984 to 1987 campaign (Orn, 2022). Literacy classes were held for six hours per week, and after 180 hours of instruction, the adult students were expected to be able to read, write, and make simple arithmetic calculations equivalent to grade one of primary school. In 1988, the government announced a national literacy rate of 93 per cent for youth and adults aged 13 to 45 years (McCaffery et al., 2007). The figures, however, were based on attendance in the program, not the actual ability to read or write. Most experts believe that a minimum of four years of primary schooling is required to prevent relapse into

illiteracy. In 1992, the Ministry of Education estimated that 220,000 adults could not read or write, and it is believed that the actual literacy rate is well below 93 per cent (Thigpen, 2016). Accurate data does not exist. A third national literacy campaign was planned for 1993 to 1995 but was significantly underfunded.

2. **Complementary education:** The second component of non-formal education, complementary education, was divided into three types of programs: regular, semi-regular, and irregular programs. Regular programs were offered free of charge to government employees in provincial schools. Semi-regular classes were held during working hours for state employees. Irregular complementary education was conducted part-time and via evening classes. Adult students had to pay fees for these classes, and there were only few of them. At the program's height in 1985/86, approximately 310,000 students were enrolled in complementary education, but the number of graduates was small (Benveniste et al., 2008). In 1992/93, there were 14,851 adult students: 1,037 at the primary level, 4,356 at the lower secondary level, and 9,458 at the upper secondary level. MoEYS staff stated that, at current enrolment and dropout rates, compulsory education for all will be impossible to attain without strengthening complementary education, especially at the primary level (Tan, 2007).

The general focus of education and health policies since 1979 has been on quantity rather than quality (UNESCO, 1994, p. 2). Mass campaigns, backed by financial and technical assistance from countries in the socialist bloc, had considerable quantitative success. Around 900,000 children were able to go back to school when the doors reopened in 1979, and school enrolments increased throughout the following decade. Literacy campaigns reached more than one million illiterate adults, though a lack of follow-up support and training reduced their effectiveness. Basic education was also provided to Cambodian refugees and orphans in Thai border camps through the United Nations' agencies for refugees (UNHCR) and Border Relief (UNBRO), with high enrolment rates driven by free food incentives and community support. NGOs also played a key role in supporting education in the camps and within Cambodia. Cambodia restored its education system in the 1980s, though teaching quality remained uneven.

Cambodia shows that literacy action is most effective under two conditions. Firstly, as demonstrated by the community and temple learning centres, which have played a major role in literacy, education on morals, and skills training for over a thousand years, the support of the communities is crucial. Secondly, the largest national campaign was conducted during the 1980s when a socialist government ran the country. The campaign, based on voluntary spirits rather than financial incentives, achieved impressive results despite ongoing conflict in some parts of the country. As the country has entered the market economy, it has become more difficult to initiate such a voluntary campaign again. The only low-cost option left are the community and temple learning centres (Supote, 1996, p. 13).

Following the 1991 to 1993 United Nations peace process, the government prioritised qualitative reforms across all education levels, supported by UNESCO's training programs for senior education officials since 1993 (Supote, 1996, p. 6). This period saw formal schooling and literacy campaigns being primarily used to generate a set number of literate individuals (Em et al., 2022). The effort to provide adult literacy continued as the main responsibility of the Department of Adult Education before it was renamed to the Department of Non-Formal Education in 1993 (UNESCO, 1994). In an education policy statement, H.E. Ung Huot, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport (1996, p. iv), stressed that,

‘Those who have had no chance to go to school or who left school too early should receive attention through the non-formal system. Up till now, the successive ministries of education have concentrated on mass literacy campaigns and complementary education. This was certainly an appropriate strategy over the previous decade. Now that peace has come, new perspectives for social, economic, and human development are opening up. They should serve as a guide for the renovation and expansion of functional literacy and non-formal skills training with the aim of improving the living conditions of the populations, particularly youth, women, and rural dwellers. Massive expansion probably cannot be envisaged in the near future. Linking non-formal education with integrated development operations is perhaps the most effective method for its development.’ (H.E. Ung Huot, Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, 1996, p. iv)

Lifelong learning can also be inferred from the 1993 Cambodian Constitution statement that defines the ‘people’s right to quality education at all levels’ and the role of the state in the establishment of ‘a comprehensive and universal educational system throughout the country’. The ‘principles of educational freedom and educational equality, so that all citizens have equal opportunity to earn a living’, shall be guaranteed in the educational system. Primary and secondary school education is to be provided free of charge, and nine years of education have become compulsory for all citizens. Private schooling is allowed, and Buddhist educational institutions are promoted, but ‘the State shall control public and private schools at all levels’ (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11). Programs that can be viewed as an implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia in the 1990s were also reflected in the ministry’s technical education and vocational training program. In the same education policy statement as mentioned above, the Minister refers to the roles of technical education and vocational training. The need for qualified workers is constrained by Cambodia’s small contemporary economy, particularly in the industrial sector. Enhancing technical training facilities and vocational schools is crucial for maintaining global competitiveness, but growth should align with labour market demand. Instead of focusing on expensive formal education, mobile teams, customised modules, and creative short training courses are needed to increase labour productivity, particularly in rural regions. In order to strengthen rural communities and build informal skills, private initiatives and interministerial collaboration are essential (H.E. Ung Huot (MOYES), 1996, p. iv). The Minister acknowledged that:

‘Reorienting the technical and vocational training system is a difficult task, and I need the advice of workers, employers, investors, and national agencies in charge of development. This explains why I consider "strategic" the creation of a National Training Board, which could suggest orientations, solutions, and possible funding opportunities’ (1996, pp. iv-v).

3.2. NON-FORMAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN THE 1990S

In the 1990s, many activities related to lifelong learning implementation were conducted through the priorities of the Department of Non-Formal Education (UNESCO, 1994, pp. 35-41). The table below summarises those activities.

Table 2. Non-formal education activities of the 1990s

No.	Program Number	Program
1	Program 2.1.	Preparation and implementation of a strategy for improving non-formal education
2	Priority action 2.1.1.	Survey of existing non-formal education activities and compare with the requirements of the community
3	Priority action 2.1.2.	Preparation of a Five-Year Plan for the Development of Non-Formal Education (one year)
4	Priority action 2.1.3.	Translation of the Asia and Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL) and other NFE training materials into Khmer for literacy and training of Personnel
5	Priority action 2.1.4.	Development of literacy vocational curriculum and materials for improved living conditions (two years)
6	Priority action 2.1.5.	Review of the new primary education curriculum and adaptation for continuing education (two years)
7	Priority action 2.1.6.	Development of vocational training programs for income generation, entrepreneurial skills and training of personnel
8	Priority action 2.1.7.	Improvement and expansion of women's literacy program (two years)
9	Priority action 2.1.8.	Vocational training for orphans, homeless children, and people living with disabilities (two years)
10	Priority action 2.1.9.	Establishment of Non-Formal Education Centres at provincial and community levels (five years)
11	Priority action 2.1.10.	Training of demobilised soldiers, police officers, and civil servants (three years)
12	Other activities	Review of the new secondary education curriculum and adaptation for continuing education
		Development of alternative continuing education delivery systems: 1. In-school non-formal education for youth and adults 2. Distance learning using mass media 3. Self-learning materials

(Source: Education Congress 2012-2023)

These priorities were formulated by MoEYS for the Department of Non-Formal and Inclusive Education (formerly the Department of Non-Formal Education) to be implemented by concrete activities. All relevant stakeholders complied with those activities to enhance lifelong learning education in Cambodia.

3.3. EVOLUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

The present study's interview data shows that adult education in Cambodia has evolved since the 1980s, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

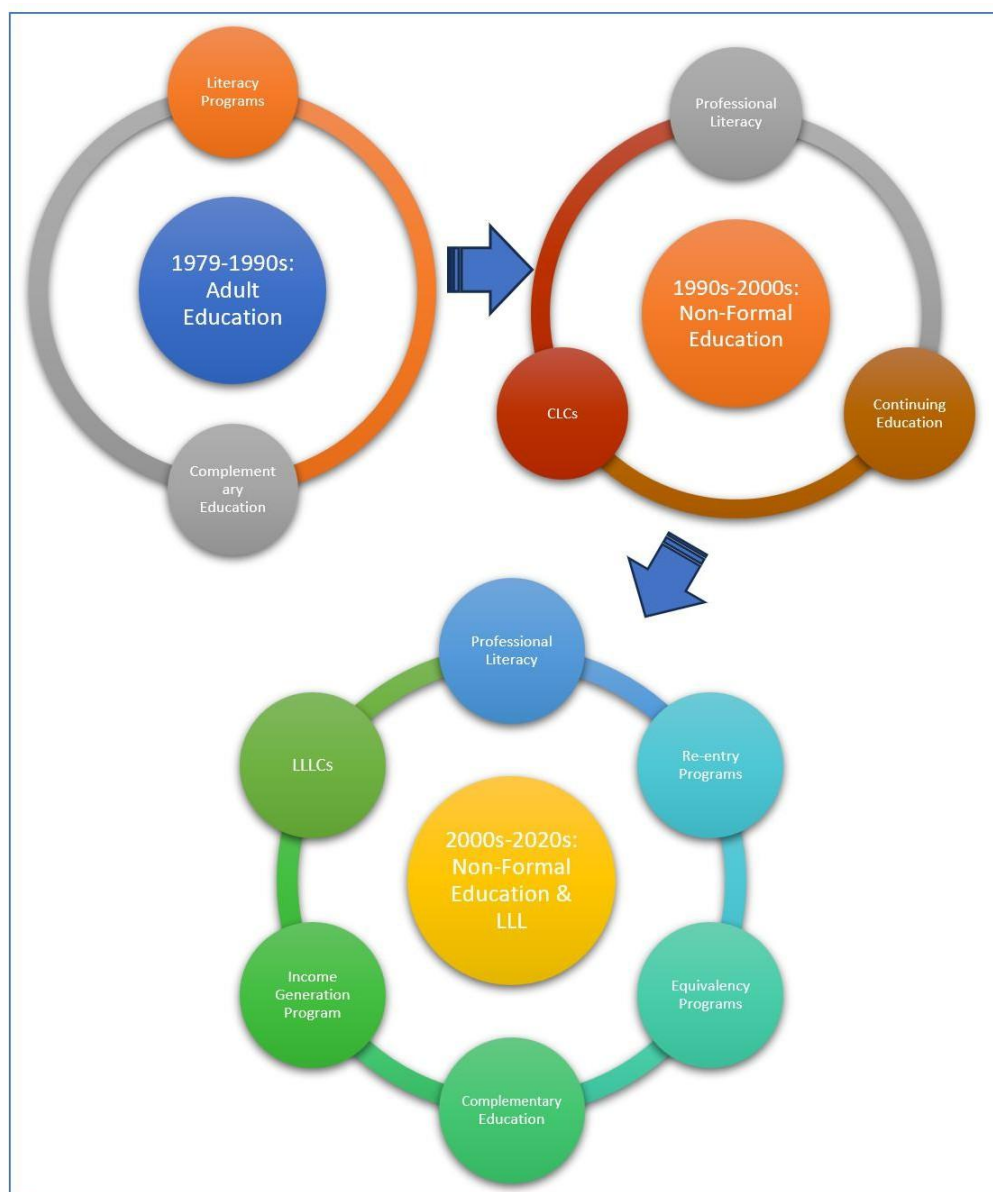


Figure 2. The Evolution of Adult Education in Cambodia since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime
(Source: Authors' illustration based on interview data)

3.4. LIFELONG LEARNING POLICIES AND FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

3.4.1. ACTIONS TAKEN BY CONCERNED STAKEHOLDERS SINCE THE PREVIOUS COUNTRY STUDY

Since the 2020 study, stakeholders in the field of lifelong learning have been committed to its further improvement. A total of 28 ministries have been working together to promote lifelong learning in support of the National Policy on Lifelong Learning. At MoEYS level, specific strategies were developed and included in the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023. These strategies focus on (1) developing and improving non-formal education programs; (2) promoting adult literacy programs; (3) transforming Community Learning Centres (CLC) into Lifelong Learning Centres (LLLC); and (4) encouraging private sector and NGO support for non-formal education programs within the framework of lifelong learning. The MoEYS has been actively reinforcing the implementation of the Education Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2019a), which includes the following non-formal

education sub-sectors: (1) increasing the number of literates and the enrolment in non-formal education programs for children, youth, out-of-school learners and adults to receive full non-formal education services within the framework of lifelong learning of building knowledge, and practical skills; (2) strengthening the management system, based on the results of non-formal education programs, to be fully operational; and (3) enhancing the capacity of non-formal education officials at all levels (The Phnom Penh Post, 2022). Moreover, MoEYS has made strategic efforts to achieve agreement on an action plan by all 28 ministries and members of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in Cambodia (NCLLL, 2024, online). This action plan is needed and essential in addressing the main challenges identified in Cambodia's National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019): high dropout rates, poor quality of education, and limited productivity (Mottl, 2023).

3.4.2 LAWS AND DECREES ON LIFELONG LEARNING

CONSTITUTION (1993) ON LIFELONG LEARNING

After decades of warfare, the 1993 adoption of the Cambodian Constitution was a major turning point in the nation's contemporary history. A new era of government was formed in Cambodia with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 and the holding of democratic elections by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993. The 1993 Constitution established a liberal multi-party democracy and restored the constitutional monarchy (Royal Government of Cambodia, 1993). With the King acting as the Head of State for life and symbolising the nation's unity, the Constitution proclaims Cambodia to be an independent, sovereign, peaceful, and neutral country. To maintain checks and balances within the government, the Constitution explicitly outlines the division of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial departments. All citizens are guaranteed essential freedoms and rights, including the freedom of speech, religion, movement, and peaceful assembly. Incorporating international human rights treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, further solidified Cambodia's dedication to protecting human rights (OHCHR, n.d.). Additionally, the Constitution creates the rule of law, guaranteeing that everyone is treated equally before the law and stipulating that the Constitution is the ultimate law of the nation.

Citizens of Cambodia have become more conscious of their rights and obligations in the new democratic society, in large parts due to constitutional education. Civic education initiatives have been supported by foreign partners, civil society organisations, and schools in an effort to increase knowledge of the Constitution and the democratic process (UNESCO, 2005). The goal of this educational program was to ensure that the principles outlined in the 1993 Constitution are honoured and preserved while also creating a knowledgeable populace that can take an active role in Cambodia's political and civic life (Hughes, 2003; Slocomb, 2003).

EDUCATION LAW (2007) ON LIFELONG LEARNING

The legal foundation for the advancement and management of education in the Kingdom of Cambodia is provided by the Cambodian Education Law, which was enacted on the 8th of December 2007. The core of this legislation is to guarantee every citizen's right to a high-quality education, emphasising lifelong learning, fairness, and inclusivity. It declares that education is a national development priority and a vital component of sustainable development, democracy, peace, and human resources (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007). General education, TVET, higher education, and non-formal education are all included in the formal education system, which is outlined in the

law. The roles and responsibilities of MoEYS, educational institutions, instructors, students, parents, and local communities are all outlined in the Law. It encourages communities and the business sector to fund education and supports the decentralisation of educational management. It also emphasises the significance of professional ethics, teacher credentials, and the development of curricula, tests, and accreditation standards. Cambodia's attempts to enhance educational quality, access, and governance in accordance with national objectives and international commitments like Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are significantly shaped by the 2007 Education Law.

OPERATIONS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE AND SECRETARIAT GENERAL FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

The creation of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in 2020 and the Secretariat General for Lifelong Learning in 2021 marked the institutionalisation of lifetime learning promotion in Cambodia. The Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport chairs the National Committee, which was established in accordance with Sub-Decree No. 220 ANKr.BK and consists of members from several ministries and interested parties. Its main responsibility is to oversee, coordinate, and give strategic direction to the nation's implementation of lifelong learning initiatives. The Committee further is tasked to incorporate lifelong learning into national development plans, encourage cross-sectoral cooperation, and guarantee alignment with international frameworks such as the SDGs and UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2020).

According to Sub-Decree No. 50 ANKr.BK, the Secretariat General for Lifelong Learning was created in 2021 under MoEYS to assist the Committee's functions. As the Committee's technical and administrative branch, it oversees liaising with line ministries, creating action plans, and prepares awareness campaigns to promote lifelong learning. Additionally, The Secretariat General is essential to study, collect data, and create a program that supports fair and inclusive access to educational opportunities for all age groups, particularly underserved populations. The Committee and Secretariat work together to strengthen the government's commitment to education as an ongoing, inclusive process and to further Cambodia's lifelong learning goals (MoEYS, 2021).

3.4.3 POLICIES AND PLANS IN LIFELONG LEARNING

NATIONAL POLICY ON LIFELONG LEARNING (2019)

MoEYS introduced the National Policy on Lifelong Learning (NPLL) in 2019 as a comprehensive framework to direct the development of lifelong learning for all Cambodians. In keeping with Cambodia's commitment to the SDGs, and especially SDG 4, and the Education 2030 Agenda, this Policy seeks to provide inclusive, egalitarian, and high-quality education as well as to encourage opportunities for learning throughout life. According to the NPLL, lifelong learning is a process that takes place both inside and outside of the official educational system from early childhood to adulthood, with a focus on employability, skill development, and flexibility in learning (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2019).

The five strategic priorities outlined in the Policy are: developing institutional frameworks and governance for lifelong learning; expanding the use of technology to improve access to learning; strengthening the provision of quality learning opportunities through formal, non-formal, and informal channels; encouraging a culture of lifelong learning; and ensuring efficient financing and

partnerships. It also emphasises how critical it is to reach underrepresented and vulnerable populations, such as women, members of ethnic minorities, people living with disabilities, and residents of rural regions. By acknowledging education as a right and obligation of all people, and by promoting cooperation between public and corporate sectors as well as civil society groups, the NPLL offers Cambodia a road map for building a more knowledge-based and inclusive society.

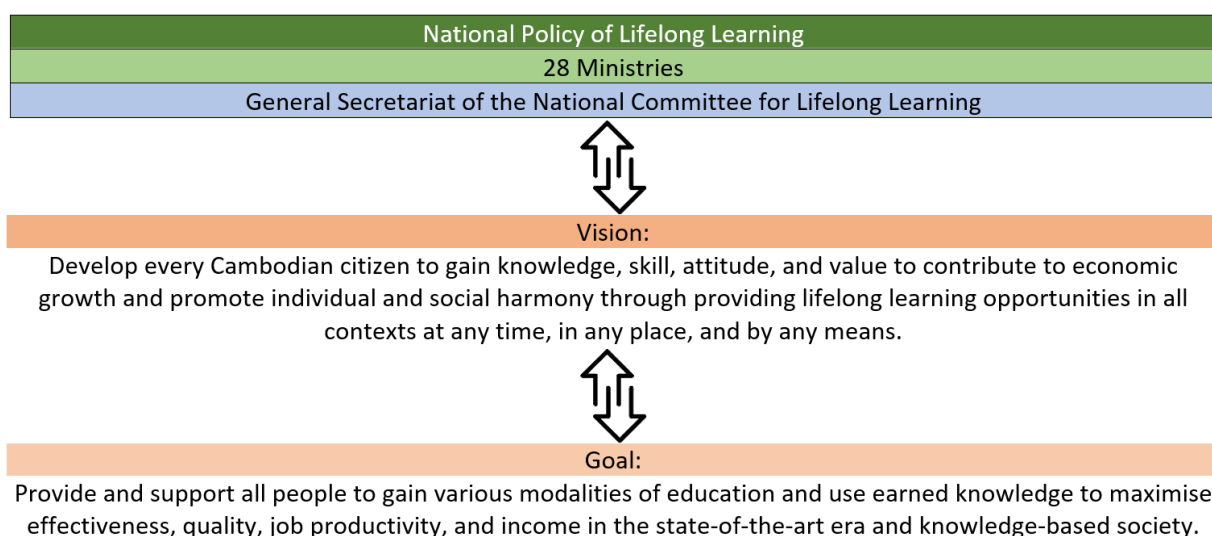
EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN (2024-2028)

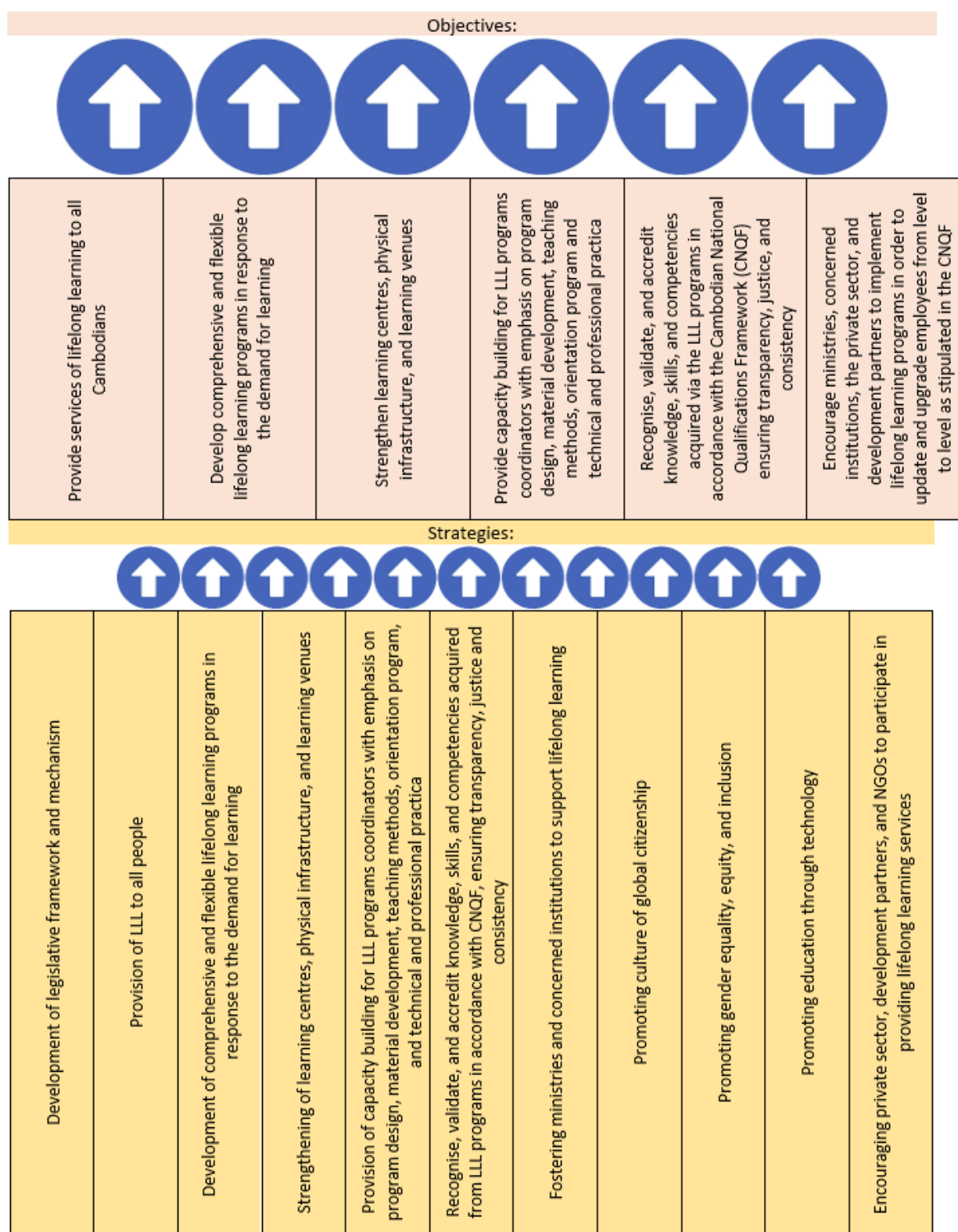
Cambodia's national plan for developing the education sector in line with the Pentagon Strategy of the Royal Government is the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028. The ESP was created by MoEYS with the goal of expanding possibilities for lifelong learning while guaranteeing inclusive, egalitarian, and high-quality education. Eight major targets are highlighted in this strategic plan, such as improving school administration and leadership, improving curricula to improve students' knowledge, morals, and conduct, and promoting school health through food safety and nutrition initiatives. Additionally, the ESP strongly emphasises the incorporation of digital technology into teaching and learning processes and promotes the active involvement of families and communities in school matters.

The ESP fosters the development of sports and physical education, supports the creation of centres of excellence in higher education, and fortifies the general capability and control of the educational system. The ESP's dedication to inclusion is a fundamental component that aims to guarantee students from disadvantaged and vulnerable areas are not left behind. With comprehensive sub-programs, strategic frameworks, and performance indicators to track advancement and pledge accountability, it employs a results-based management strategy (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport [MoEYS], 2024).

CAMBODIA'S INTER-MINISTRIES MODEL

In 2019, the Royal Government of Cambodia conceived the National Policy on Lifelong Learning to maximise human resource development and support the country to progress to an upper-middle-income status by 2030 and a high-income status by 2050 in a sustainable manner (UNESCO, 2023). The National Policy on Lifelong Learning aims to provide and support all citizens to access various types of education and to utilise the knowledge they gain to improve their job prospects and quality of life. The figure below summarises the Policy.





*Figure 3. Cambodia's National Policy on Lifelong Learning and its supporting strategies
(Source: Authors' illustration based on interview data)*

MOEYS' TIERED MODEL OF LIFELONG LEARNING

The National Policy on Lifelong Learning will be implemented via an inter-ministerial adoption of the “learning cities” model. The model below summarises this approach.



Figure 4. MoEYS' approach to sustainable lifelong learning in Cambodia

(Source: Personal Communication, Dr. Dy Sam Sideth, Secretary-General of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and Deputy Director-General for Education, MoEYS, Nov 5th, 2024)

3.4.5 ACTION PLANS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

In the ESP (2024-2028), lifelong learning is embedded in Priority Program 3: Promoting 21st Century Skills for Youth as a sub-program on non-formal education and lifelong learning:

‘NFE and Lifelong Learning: Children, youth, and adults, including those who did not complete formal education, have increased opportunities to improve on their education level and benefit from lifelong learning programs to improve the quality of their life’ (p. 47).

Out of the above policies, the National Policy on Lifelong Learning is the most relevant policy for lifelong learning. Therefore, this study puts a particular focus on this Policy and provides information on its goal, objectives, and strategies. The LLL Policy foresees the development of a national action plan on lifelong learning to operationalise the strategies of the policy. The main areas of this plan are:

- Establishment of an implementation mechanism, such as a national committee for lifelong learning and its general secretariat
- Establishment of legislative frameworks for this committee
- Financial support
- Human resource development in management, planning and coordination of lifelong learning as well as in curriculum development in formal, non-formal and informal education

The plan also foresees the development of a system for follow-up, monitoring, and evaluation, which includes the setting of targets and indicators for the strategies to enable reporting on progress.

IV LIFELONG LEARNING IN PRACTICE

4.1. KEY STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

At the development partners' level, many key players have been active in supporting lifelong learning in Cambodia. The major development partners include UNESCO and DVV International. Besides these two key development partners, several local and international NGOs have contributed to promoting lifelong learning in Cambodia: Non-Timber Forest Products, NGO Education Partnership, STEP IT Academy Cambodia, Asian Hope Cambodia, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Aide et Action (AEA), Disabled Youth Children Foundation for Education (DYCFE), DNTC, Khmer Development of Freedom Organization (KDFO), Disability Action Council (DAC), Hagar, Women's Development Association (WDA), Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), Komar Pikar Foundation (KPF), Rural Aid Organization (RAO), Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE), Agir pour les Femmes en Situation Precaire (AFESIP), Friends/Mitsamlanh, and Integral Cooperation Cambodia (ICC).

According to Anne Lemaistre (2018), UNESCO's Head of Office and Representative for the UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh, UNESCO in Cambodia focuses on the following country strategy (2019-2023, p. 2): 'UNESCO's support includes advancing the quality of education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities, ensuring the preservation and sustainable management of Cambodia's archaeological and urban heritage, promoting creativity and living culture, integrating culture within the development, promoting access to information, and advocating for science, technology and innovation to increase the sustainability and inclusivity of Cambodia's economic growth'. Among others, UNESCO addresses four broad areas: education, culture, communication and information, and natural science. With regards to lifelong learning, UNESCO has been addressing the issues of gender equity, youth empowerment, and SDG 4 implementation support via three interventions: 'First, sector-wide education policy, planning, and coordination. Second, teacher training and teacher reform enhance the capacity of teachers and improve the quality of education. Third, promoting lifelong learning, including improving literacy rates throughout the country with a focus on factory workers, out-of-school youth, and adults' (UNESCO, 2021, p. 11).

Similarly, DVV International Cambodia focuses on three spheres of activity:

(1) Supporting projects that make the potential of ALE visible. In order to achieve long-term success in this area, an attempt has been made in cooperation with DVV International's partner organisations, to improve the legislative and financial framework conditions for ALE by engaging in lobbying and providing advisory services to governments. In parallel, the organisation strengthens its civil society partners regarding their organisational development and professionalisation.

(2) DVV International, as a professional organisation, makes its expertise available. On the one hand, it is nourished by the more than one hundred years of experience of the German Volkshochschulen (adult education centres), and on the other hand, by the work of partner networks at the national, regional and global levels. Practice-oriented studies and publications, as well as specialised events, are carried out jointly. Another central building block is the development of curricula and guidelines for organisational and policy advisory services as well as the training and further education of adult educators.

(3) Ultimately, DVV International participates with its network partners in global lobbying to improve the framework conditions for ALE. Especially for many partners from the global south, goals formulated by international organisations and large donors are important factors for shaping national policies.

Table 3. Relevant stakeholders' activities for implementing LLL

Years	Activities	Stakeholders	Output by LLLCs
2020	Capacity building on start-up businesses	MoEYS	Provided training programs to high school students on start-up businesses
	Capacity building on computer skills and computer lab instalment	DVV International (DVVI) Cambodia	Provided training program on computer skills to adult learners
2021	Disseminating the 4th Global Report on ALE (GRALE) and launching ALE Cambodian National Day	DVVI Cambodia and Faculty of Education (FoED), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Introduced the results of the 4th GRALE to LLLC staff and students
	Convening a roundtable discussion on Curriculum globALE	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Disseminated Curriculum globALE to LLLCs' staff and adult learners
	Piloting Curriculum globALE	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Implemented and contextualised Curriculum globALE in LLLCs by carrying out income generation and life skills programs
	Adopting Curriculum globALE	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	
	Administration and computer skills training program for LLLC Management Committee members	Cambodia Charitable Trust (CCT)	Produced guidelines for administration and computer skills
	Capacity building training program on foreign languages	MoEYS	Provided training programs in English and Chinese to adult learners
2022	Capacity building training program on LLLC leadership and management	DVVI Cambodia	Strengthened LLLCs' leadership and management
	Managing NFE approaches via online medium	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Conducted training program on managing NFE approaches to LLLCs' trainers
	Round table discussion on Curriculum globALE, Digital Module	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Disseminated the Curriculum globALE, Digital Module to LLLC's trainers, staff and adult learners
	Piloting Curriculum globALE, Modules 4 and 5 (Methods of ALE, Planning, Organisation & Evaluation in ALE)	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Implemented training program on Curriculum globALE's Modules 4 and 5 for LLLCs' trainers
2023	Capacity building on Curriculum globALE implementation: Module 3, Communication and Group Dynamics in ALE	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Implemented training program on Curriculum globALE's Module 3 for LLLCs' trainers, staff and adult learners

Years	Activities	Stakeholders	Output by LLLCs
	Online coaching and following up: NFE approaches for women	FoED, RUPP, MoEYS, and DVVI Cambodia	Implemented training program on delivering online coaching regarding NFE approaches for women to LLLCs' trainers, staff and adult learners
	Introduced and implemented the Sustainability Strategy of Lifelong Learning Centres	DVVI, FoEd, RUPP, and MoEYS	Introduced and implemented the Strategy to LLLCs' trainers, staff and other stakeholders
	Training program on income generation	DVVI Cambodia	Produced agricultural skills books for LLLCs
	Introduced a training program to strengthen women's participation in LLLCs	DVVI Cambodia, FoEd, RUPP, and MoEYS	Conducted training program with women LLLCs' trainers, staff and adult learners
2024	ALE training based on Curriculum globALE	FoED, RUPP, DVVI Cambodia, and MoEYS	Implemented a training program on ALE curriculum development for LLLCs' trainers
	Short course on life skills	FoED, RUPP, DVVI Cambodia, and MoEYS	Implemented a training program on life skills for LLLCs' trainers, staff, and adult learners
	Short course on facilitation skills	FoED, RUPP, DVVI Cambodia, and MoEYS	Implemented a training program on facilitation skills for LLLCs' trainers, staff, and adult learners

4.2. COUNTRY INITIATIVES/PROGRAMS

The ESP (2024-2028) stipulates that CLCs will continue to be transformed into LLLCs that will provide a diversity of learning options, including non-formal education programs, life skills and income-generating programs. An assessment framework and manual on the management and operation of the LLLCs will be developed. The Education Congress 2024 made recommendations for 15 key policy measures, supporting the reform of school models, with one of these measures concerning LLLCs. In order for a CLC to function well and to transition into an LLLC, several factors are required, including:

1. Supplementing the public-school curriculum: In line with the actual needs of youth and students, CLCs should offer foreign language training programs, information technology, skills training and short courses, and successfully attract students.
2. Linking training programs with real needs in the community: CLCs should conduct market needs studies, agricultural skills training, and creative and innovative program development, such as short courses in pedagogy, metal crafts, video production, and skills training.
3. Involving and cooperating with multiple stakeholders: CLCs should establish an active and highly conscious management committee with the participation of youth volunteers, and support from the Department of Non-Formal Education and partner organisations such as DVV International. The capacity of the committee should be developed regarding both soft and hard skills.
4. Ensuring sustainability: CLCs should have various sources of income, including the provision of public funding, the creation of income-generating activities, and mobilisation of resources from various sources. They should provide incentives for staff to reduce staff turnover (ESP p. 41).

4.3. HIGHER EDUCATION

The Faculty of Education at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) has a Lifelong Learning Department as a key academic unit. Its primary role is to institutionalise lifelong learning as a major field of study, addressing the diverse educational and training needs across workplaces and communities in Cambodia. The department aims to:

- (1) Develop human capital by maximising human potential across all segments of society for economic growth
- (2) Offer academic programs by providing both undergraduate and graduate-level programs focusing on lifelong learning
- (3) Conduct research and offer training related to lifelong education, adult learning, and non-formal education, adapting international curricula (like Curriculum globALE) to the Cambodian context
- (4) Support policy implementation by contributing to the implementation of Cambodia's National Policy on Lifelong Learning, often working in collaboration with MoEYS and development partners
- (5) Promote lifelong learning by actively working to inspire and guide Cambodian youth and the wider population to understand and engage in continuous learning, emphasising its importance for national development goals

DVV International Cambodia is also a funding partner of the Faculty of Education, supporting the implementation of various activities to build capacity for local LLCs in Cambodia. At the higher education level at least 18 activities have been implemented to address pertinent challenges since 2020. The table below illustrates these activities and outputs.

Table 4. LLL implementation activities by the Faculty of Education, RUPP

Year	Activities	Output
2020	2020 baseline survey on the limitations of NFE in Cambodia	Short inception report, published as a book by FoE, RUPP
2021	Translation of the Curriculum globALE to Khmer	Book published by Warlich Mediengruppe
	Disseminating the 4th GRALE and launching ALE Cambodian National Day	Survey report translated to Khmer; awareness raising campaign among students and educators
	Convening a roundtable discussion on Curriculum globALE	Videos documenting the importance of Curriculum globALE and how to implement it in the Cambodian context
	Piloting Curriculum globALE	18 trainers from three CLCs trained on delivering Curriculum globALE
	Adopting Curriculum globALE	Ten CLCs and Ten Youth Centres trained in and adopted Curriculum globALE
2022	Development of ALE concept for ethnic minorities: Indigenous women's empowerment via life skills and welfare in Ratanakiri	25 indigenous representatives and seven trainers from NTFP delivered training on life skills and welfare in Ratanakiri
	Managing NFE approaches via online medium	30 potential managers from the Departments of Non-Formal Education and Youth Center and FoEd trained
	Round table discussion on Curriculum globALE, Digital Module	One video on Curriculum globALE, Digital Module for policy makers and implementers on ALE matters
	Piloting Curriculum globALE, Modules 4 and 5 (Methods of ALE, Planning, Organisation & Evaluation in ALE)	21 LLC committee members trained

2023	Capacity building on Curriculum globALE implementation: Module 3, Communication and Group Dynamics in ALE	35 trainers and LLLCs committee members trained
	Online coaching and following up: NFE approaches for women	20 potential managers from the Departments of Non-Formal Education and Youth Center and FoEd trained
	Introduced and implemented the Sustainability Strategy of Lifelong Learning Centres	Developed concept notes on the Strategy for Ten LLLCs
	Introduced a training program to strengthen women's participation in LLLCs	Ten male LLLC directors and 20 female LLLC trainers trained
2024	ALE training based on Curriculum globALE	40 trainers from ten LLLCs are in training (Phase 1 to finish by the end of 2024)
	Short course on life skills	40 trainers from ten LLLCs are in training (Phase 1 to finish by the end of 2024)
	Short course on facilitation skills	40 trainers from ten LLLCs are in training (Phase 1 to finish by the end of 2024)
	"Promoting of Adult Education in Asia / Country Project Laos", supported by BMZ (German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development) (project number 2023 2604 9/DVV0004)	Country study report to be published in 2025; conference organised by DVV International on 21 st and 22 nd of November 2024 in Vientiane

In addition,

'The 1st National Forum on Lifelong Learning aims to bring together stakeholders (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, NGOs, and Universities) from across sectors to establish a shared vision and integrated approach to developing Cambodia's lifelong learning ecosystem. This will expand digitally enabled opportunities that prepare Cambodians with the complex mix of technical, digital, and human skills to succeed today and tomorrow' ([website of the National Forum](#)).

Using a hybrid model (online and on-site), the forum discussed the following topics: (1) Roles of lifelong learning in supporting economic growth; (2) expanding access to digital learning platforms and resources; (3) partnerships between stakeholders; (4) skills anticipation and development; (5) validation of non-formal and informal learning; (6) guidance and support services; (7) building sustainable economics: The role of Lifelong Learning in TVET; and (8) leveraging TVET for continuous skill development as an approach to promote lifelong learning.

The expected outcomes of the forum includes the development of recommendations and five-year goals for digital-enabled lifelong learning in Cambodia, which may include specific outcomes such as: (1) Develop national lifelong learning strategy and governance frameworks; (2) increase adult participation in training programs; (3) establish multi-stakeholder partnerships for skills anticipation and development; (4) enhance access to online learning platforms and resources; (5) validate and recognise non-formal and informal learning; and (6) provide career guidance and learning support services. Actions are being taken to materialise these agreed results.

4.4. BEST PRACTICES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

In this section, the LLLC model is presented as a best practice example for lifelong learning implementation. Data used stems from the present study's literature review and interviews.

At LLLCs, lifelong learning implementation should begin with needs assessments involving trainees and concerned stakeholders before developing any lifelong learning training programs. LLLC trainers can enhance their capacity through technical and financial support from DVV International in Cambodia and the Faculty of Education at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Once the trainers have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills, they can proceed with program implementation with trainees and community members.

The LLLC Operational Committee plays a key role in the successful implementation of pilot projects aimed at transforming CLCs and Youth Centres (YC) into an *enduring source of water that never runs dry*, i.e., sustainable sources of knowledge and resources, for the community. The Committee further is responsible for building the LLLC's capacity, expertise, and attitudes as a driving force of the sustainable operation of LLLCs.

DVV International and FoED have collaborated to enhance the skills and capacity of stakeholders involved with LLLCs. In-person and digital training courses on ALE and the Curriculum globALE were provided to LLLC members and relevant government officials from the Non-Formal Education Office and the Youth Office at target district and provincial levels. The training courses focused on working in groups, participatory and collaborative working, flexible and adaptive working, and encouragement to ensure that trainees could translate their newly gained knowledge into practice at their workplaces. Lastly, the training provided lessons learned on motivating community members to get involved in LLLC development activities.

After completing the training program, trainees returned to their tasks at LLLCs but continued to stay connected via bi-weekly meetings. These meetings served to monitor LLLC work progress and challenges, and to collaboratively evaluate and solve issues, ultimately ensuring the continued progress of the program. It is crucial that LLLCs conduct regular monitoring and evaluation, as well as coach the trainees to ensure they can apply what they have learned to improve their respective LLLCs' status. Furthermore, all trainers and trainees have been asked to document their best practices for LLL implementation and promotion. They can then share these practices with other trainers, trainees, and relevant stakeholders to inspire greater participation and involvement, as well as advocate for government support to sustain and scale up the programs.

Lifelong learning culture promotion should be leveraged through community events, exhibitions, and competitions to recognise and reward learners' achievements, as well as embed learning opportunities in daily community life. Ultimately, all lifelong learning activities at LLLCs should align with national policies and goals, particularly the National Policy on Lifelong Learning. Without government support and recognition, the implementation of lifelong learning at the community level will not be sustainable.

This model of implementing lifelong learning at LLLCs is summarised in the figure below.

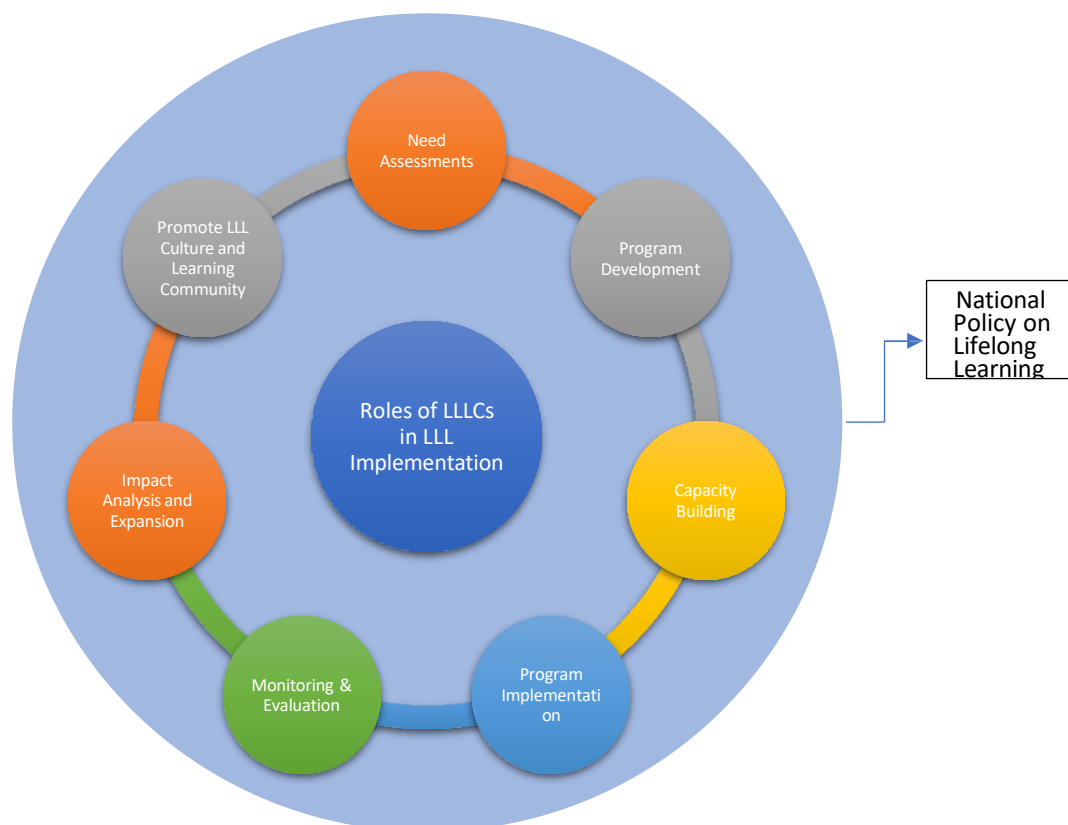


Figure 5. Model of implementing lifelong learning at LLLCs
(Personal communications, Mr. Neak Piseth and Associate Prof. Mam Socheath, LLLC Master Trainers, 12th of December, 2024)

V. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING LIFELONG LEARNING IN CAMBODIA

5.1. VISION AND UNDERSTANDING OF LIFELONG LEARNING

ALE, NFE, and lifelong learning are all connected but separate ideas that support human growth outside the formal educational system in Cambodia. According to UNESCO (2016), lifelong learning includes all educational endeavours made during one's lifetime with the goal of enhancing one's knowledge, abilities, and competencies in social, civic, personal, or professional contexts. A subset of lifelong learning, NFE describes structured learning experiences outside the formal system that targets certain populations, such as adults, youth, and school dropouts, frequently using adaptable and community-based methods (MoEYS, 2022). Another component of lifelong learning is ALE, which focuses on the educational requirements of adults. It includes literacy, vocational skills, and citizenship education, and it is frequently carried out through programs at CLCs.

CLCs in Cambodia act as hubs for the intersection of ALE and NFE. For example, in rural regions, CLCs provide computer or English language courses (NFE) for adolescents, adult literacy classes, and sewing and agricultural training (ALE), all of which foster a culture of lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2021). The government's efforts to empower communities and create equitable learning opportunities, particularly in underprivileged areas, are reflected in these projects.

5.2. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS OF LIFELONG LEARNING (LAWS, DECREES), AND POLICIES

Despite the approval of many legislative frameworks and policies, like the National Policy on Lifelong Learning 2019, which shows Cambodia's strong political commitment to support lifelong learning, there are still some obstacles in the way of successfully putting these efforts into practice. Limited personnel and financial resources are two of the main obstacles. Particularly in rural regions, a large number of CLCs, which are key to lifelong learning, lack adequate finances, qualified facilitators, and relevant educational resources (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, there is insufficient coordination between local authorities, NGOs, and government institutions, which results in dispersed efforts and program duplication. It is challenging to evaluate the impact and efficacy of lifelong learning activities due to the lack of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems (MoEYS, 2022).

Furthermore, adult learners frequently encounter socioeconomic obstacles, including poverty, time limits brought on by employment and family obligations, and restricted transportation. Public knowledge and appreciation of the importance of lifelong learning remains low. Despite the existence of supporting legislation, these issues make it difficult for people to participate in learning opportunities. In order to make lifelong learning a reality for all Cambodians, it is imperative that these implementation gaps be addressed.

5.3. FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS AND ARTICULATION BETWEEN FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND INFORMAL LEARNING; EQUIVALENCY, RVA, CREDIT TRANSFER

Particularly at the basic school level, Cambodia has made considerable strides in integrating formal and non-formal education to provide flexible learning pathways. By providing students with the opportunity to achieve primary and lower secondary level equivalency through CLCs, the Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP), which is jointly implemented by MoEYS, UNESCO, and UNICEF, acts as a link between non-formal and formal education (MoEYS, 2022). At the upper secondary level, where dropout rates are greatest at over 30 per cent, currently no equivalency program is accessible, which represents a serious deficiency in the educational system (UNESCO, 2021). The lack of defined routes for re-entry into higher levels of formal education, low public knowledge of the equivalency system, and inadequate stakeholder cooperation are other difficulties. Additionally, many students find it challenging to navigate alternative learning routes, especially in rural and underprivileged areas, due to a lack of clear articulation and integration between formal and non-formal institutions, as well as inadequate guidance and counselling services.

There is currently no completely developed or institutionalised system in Cambodia for Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation (RVA) that acknowledges and verifies learning obtained through informal or non-formal ways at all levels and in all sectors. The lack of a thorough RVA procedure that is methodically connected to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) restricts learners' chances of having their past education, particularly work-based or acquired through experience learning, officially acknowledged and credited (UIL, 2022). Furthermore, lifelong learning programs presently lack or are only in very early phases of piloting mechanisms for obtaining credits or credit transfers, such as credit banks or micro-credentialing systems. Without these platforms, students find it difficult to accrue learning outcomes toward accredited credentials or to transfer knowledge and skills between learning modes. The mobility, motivation, and reintegration potential of learners, particularly adults looking to change occupations or to return to school, are restricted in the absence of these frameworks.

5.4. NATIONAL LIFELONG LEARNING ACTION PLANS AND STRATEGIES

The legislation of Cambodia's proposed National Lifelong Learning Action Plan is still restricted and dispersed because of a number of enduring obstacles. Budget constraint is a significant issue; lifelong learning programs and CLCs frequently receive inadequate funding and are highly dependent on external donors, which has an impact on scalability and sustainability (UNESCO, 2021). Effective implementation at the local and national levels is further impeded by capacity shortages within implementing institutions, including a lack of qualified educators and facilitators, poor interministerial coordination, and a lack of technical competency (MoEYS, 2022). The National Committee for Lifelong Learning lacks a comprehensive and operational action plan. While the Committee is mandated to monitor and direct national lifelong learning initiatives, its governance structure and strategic direction remain under development. This limits its capacity to effectively organise stakeholders, track progress, and promote coordinated implementation.

The lack of knowledge and comprehension of lifelong learning at institutional and community levels is another obstacle that influences local commitment to implementation as well as program demand. Furthermore, because there is no unified monitoring mechanism, fragmentation among stakeholders, including NGOs, government organisations, and development partners, causes overlapping efforts and inefficiencies. Because of this, only a few key elements of the draft National Lifelong Learning Action Plan—like basic education equivalency programs—are being put into practice, largely ignoring other crucial areas like RVA, the development of digital skills, and vocational pathways.

5.5. GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND DISTRICT/LOCAL LEVELS

For the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in Cambodia to successfully carry out its role of directing and coordinating lifelong learning policies and activities across sectors, it needs to be reorganised. Although the Committee was created to supervise the implementation of the 2019 National Policy on Lifelong Learning, it lacks the institutional capacity, defined roles and duties, action plan framework, and operational structure required to promote systemic change. Recent evaluations indicate that in order to guarantee more representation from pertinent ministries, development partners, civil society, and the private sector, the Committee's makeup and coordination procedures must be updated (MoEYS, 2022). The Committee finds it difficult to mobilise resources, exercise strategic leadership, and include lifelong learning in national development planning without this reorganisation. Additionally, the National Committee for Lifelong Learning's Action Plan is being developed to promote a cohesive and inclusive lifelong learning system in Cambodia.

5.6. KEY STAKEHOLDERS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND COORDINATION MECHANISMS

A major obstacle in Cambodia is the lack of a central mechanism to efficiently monitor, assess, and harmonise the various lifelong learning programs being implemented by numerous ministries, agencies, and development partners. Inefficient use of resources, gaps in service delivery, and overlapping activities are the outcomes of this fragmentation (MoEYS, 2022). It is challenging to evaluate the overall impact of lifelong learning policies or to make sure that programs are inclusive, egalitarian, and responsive to the needs of learners in the absence of a centralised framework to monitor progress and match activities with national goals. Current, ongoing data collection and evidence-based policy making, which are critical for the ongoing enhancement of lifelong learning programs, are constrained by the absence of a monitoring and evaluation framework. Therefore, creating a centralised mechanism and enhancing coordination are essential first stages in creating a more cohesive and successful lifelong learning system in Cambodia.

5.7. ACCESS AND EQUITY OF PROGRAMS

Although Cambodia has a number of lifelong learning programs in place, including literacy courses, vocational training, and equivalency education, there is still a disconnect between the programs' current offerings and the nation's socioeconomic development objectives as well as the changing requirements of learners. Instead of emphasising emerging competencies like digital literacy, green skills, entrepreneurship, and labour market-relevant training, many of the programs provided by CLCs still concentrate on fundamental skills (MoEYS, 2022).

This restricts their capacity to fully support Cambodia's goals of reducing poverty, promoting inclusive growth, and developing human capital. Lifelong learning opportunities exist, but they are not dispersed fairly, and there are notable differences between urban and rural areas in terms of inclusivity and accessibility. Ethnic minorities, people living with disabilities, and low-income individuals are examples of marginalised groups who frequently encounter obstacles to access, such as a lack of programs in their local language or location, transportation issues, and learning opportunity costs. Furthermore, due to household and caregiving obligations, gender disparities in participation still exist, particularly among adult women in rural communities (UNESCO, 2021).

There has been little and inconsistent success in converting CLCs into LLLCs (Neak & Charungkaittikul, 2022). Although some development partner-supported pilot projects have modernised CLCs to serve as more dynamic, multipurpose lifelong learning hubs, the majority of CLCs continue to operate with inadequate capacity, antiquated curricula, and limited infrastructure (Bun, Ueangchokchai, & Nopas, 2025; Neak, 2020). A well-defined national plan, more funding, skilled facilitators, and closer ties to formal education and the labour market are all necessary for the transition process (MoEYS, 2019; MoEYS, 2024). CLCs in Cambodia will find it difficult to function as powerful catalysts for lifelong learning unless these structural changes are made.

5.8. TEACHING-LEARNING: CURRICULUM, TEACHING-LEARNING METHODS, TEACHING-LEARNING MATERIALS, QUALITY ASSURANCE

A lot of programs continue to use conventional, one-size-fits-all curricula that emphasise reading and numeracy above all else, with little modification to local contexts or the quickly shifting demands of the job market (MoEYS, 2022). Programs need to be more relevant, engaging, and responsive, especially for adult learners and young people who have dropped out of school. This requires the use of contemporary, adaptable, and learner-centred techniques, including competency-based learning, blended learning, and modular training. Moreover, there is no thorough national structure in place in Cambodia for quality assurance that would allow for the systematic monitoring and assessment of lifelong learning and NFE program quality. Although internal monitoring systems are included in certain NGOs' and development partners' programs, these initiatives are not standardised or coordinated at the national level. Consequently, few systems exist to evaluate learning results or guarantee ongoing progress, and delivery and quality vary greatly among CLCs (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, particularly in rural regions, there is a lack of appropriate and suitable teaching and learning resources. Many CLCs use antiquated texts, few digital resources, and subpar instructional aids. The dearth of resources available in ethnic minority languages or inclusive formats for people with impairments further marginalises vulnerable populations. In addition to funding the professional development of facilitators who can successfully apply cutting-edge teaching techniques, there is an urgent need to provide updated, inclusive, and context-relevant resources to guarantee quality and equity (UNESCO, 2021).

5.9. CAPACITY

The institutional capacity to oversee lifelong learning initiatives remains constrained in Cambodia, particularly at the subnational and local levels. Insufficient staffing, budgetary constraints, and a lack of technical expertise limit the actual implementation capacity of the policies and structures that MoEYS has put in place to support lifelong learning, such as the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and various initiatives through the Department of Non-Formal Education (MoEYS, 2022). For instance, many CLCs are supported by local volunteers or part-time employees who frequently lack official training in adult learning approaches or education management. Many facilitators have limited access to continuing professional development and lack professional credentials in lifelong learning or adult education. There may be differences in the quality of instruction and learner outcomes since, for example, the facilitators of basic literacy or vocational training programs in CLCs are frequently members of the local community and might not have access to pedagogical assistance or up-to-date training materials (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, the absence of a formal certification or accreditation structure for lifelong learning facilitators jeopardises the industry's professional reputation and career advancement. This has an impact on the programs' scalability, sustainability, and quality.

In conclusion, Cambodia must engage in developing a skilled lifelong learning workforce in order to increase institutional capacity. This includes creating clear professional standards, delivering in-service training, and providing incentives to competent educators so they can work in informal and community-based settings. For lifelong learning programs to be efficiently run, adequately funded, and in line with national development objectives, cooperation between national institutions, local governments, and non-governmental organisations must be strengthened.

5.10. BUDGET AND FINANCING

The funding allotted for lifelong learning programs in Cambodia is still insufficient to address the various demands of all learners nationwide. By enacting the National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019), MoEYS has shown political intent, but significant funding for lifelong learning, especially for community-based projects and non-formal education, has been few and uneven (MoEYS, 2022). The accessibility, calibre, and durability of lifelong learning programs are all strongly impacted by this financial limitation, particularly in impoverished and rural communities where access to educational alternatives is already restricted. CLCs, which are important lifelong learning delivery platforms, provide a tangible example. The majority of CLCs have very little money and frequently rely on donations from external funders or payments from the local government, neither of which is necessarily sufficient nor guaranteed. Because of this, many CLCs find it difficult to maintain their infrastructure, recruit skilled facilitators, or provide a variety of current programs. Some centres are devoid of even the most basic supplies, such as computers, furniture, and textbooks, as well as tools for digital learning or skill development (UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, there is not much funding allocated specifically for the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in charge of organising and standardising the implementation of lifelong learning among ministries and stakeholders. This significantly restricts its capability to carry out crucial tasks, including stakeholder coordination, monitoring and evaluation, capacity building, and national mapping of lifelong learning projects. Increased and ongoing public investment in lifelong learning is desperately needed to mitigate these issues, and this investment must be backed by a national finance plan that allocates funds for both implementation and coordination. To secure long-term effects and generate more resources, this should be supplemented by closer collaboration with development partners, the private sector, and NGOs.

5.11. DATA AND MONITORING

MoEYS oversees the Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS), a fundamental tool for tracking non-formal education activities, including literacy programs, equivalency education, and some vocational training. While the NFE-MIS provides some information on lifelong learning programs and learners in Cambodia, it is not yet fully functional or comprehensive enough to capture the entire scope of lifelong learning initiatives offered across various sectors and providers (MoEYS, 2022). Currently, the NFE-MIS gathers data on learner enrolment, attendance, gender, age, and completion rates for literacy and basic education equivalency programs primarily run by CLCs. For instance, it monitors involvement in non-formal learning programs financed by the MoEYS, such as BEEP.

Furthermore, the NFE-MIS' applicability for policy planning, resource allocation, and program assessment is limited since it lacks thorough data on adult learning, lifelong learning outcomes, occupational skill development, and informal learning pathways. Furthermore, it might be challenging to evaluate equity and inclusion since data disaggregation by disability status, ethnic group, job status, or learning modality is frequently absent. The NFE-MIS must be upgraded and expanded to create a fully integrated LLL-MIS that gathers standardised data from all stakeholders in order to improve lifelong learning monitoring and evaluation in Cambodia. To guarantee that reliable, anonymous, and actionable data is accessible for evidence-based decision-making and progress monitoring toward national education and development objectives, this would necessitate increasing institutional capacity, enhancing interministerial coordination, and creating explicit data-sharing protocols.

To effectively track lifelong learning, a comprehensive lifelong learning database management system should be established. This system is essential for recording learners' activities, outcomes, and recognition, and it requires a collaborative effort from public and academic institutions, private sector entities, development partners, NGOs, and other pertinent stakeholders. The National Committee for Lifelong Learning is well-positioned to spearhead and lead this critical initiative.

5.12. CHALLENGES TO NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Many of the issues outlined in the proposed National Lifelong Learning Action Plan are ongoing and intrinsically linked to Cambodia's non-formal education growth and implementation. A primary challenge is the absence of a robust and cohesive structure for organising non-formal education programs across various sectors. While numerous ministries and development partners manage NFE initiatives, there is no clear overarching plan or system to coordinate their objectives, identify beneficiaries, or ensure consistency in results and quality. This fragmentation leads to inefficient resource utilisation, fragmented service delivery, and duplication of effort.

The inadequate professional development of NFE facilitators and teachers is another significant issue. Since the national training framework for non-formal education is frequently not met by the existing training offered, teachers lack the pedagogical abilities needed to provide flexible, learner-centred, and competency-based instruction. Additionally, many facilitators do not have access to regular in-service training, and there are no clear career advancement or professional certification paths, which has an impact on teaching quality and motivation.

Moreover, non-formal education data management systems continue to be immature. Data from all learning centres and programs, especially those operated by NGOs or at the community level, is not fully captured by the NFE-MIS that is now in place. The system's capacity to offer real-time, disaggregated, and localised data for policy and program planning is limited because it is not yet operational at the Krong (city), District, and Khan (commune) levels. Additionally, the absence of data

makes it more difficult to assess learning results and gauge how NFE initiatives affect community development.

The lack of suitable learning resources contributes to the continued low quality of non-formal education. Textbooks on basic vocational skills and instructional guides created especially for revenue-generating endeavours that are pertinent to regional economic demands are in scarce supply. It is challenging for students to gain professional skills that support employment or entrepreneurship without context-specific, hands-on materials, particularly in underserved and rural communities. The lack of community and local government support for non-formal education and lifelong learning programs is another obstacle. Many communities are not actively involved in the conception, execution, or monitoring of CLCs, even though they are supposed to be locally led. This diminishes the overall integration of lifelong learning into community development initiatives and decreases the ownership and sustainability of CLC operations.

Furthermore, a key objective of Cambodia's lifelong learning strategy—the transformation of CLCs into LLLCs—has not been widely realised. There are some successful examples. However, many CLCs continue to operate with limited program options, outdated curricula, and inadequate infrastructure. The absence of diverse educational resources and capacity training hinders CLC/LLLC management committees from evolving these Centres into inclusive, multipurpose learning hubs that promote literacy, skills development, and community empowerment. Crucially, a consistent framework for gathering information on community-level skill needs is lacking. Consequently, learners face challenges in securing decent employment or improving their living standards because training programs do not align with the actual demands of the local labour market. Currently, there is a scarcity of community-level labour market assessments and insufficient capacity building for CLC personnel, both essential for developing a localised, demand-driven training system.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1. POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The present study suggests for the following model to be adopted by the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in Cambodia and developed into phases, each with clear outcome indicators, until all currently scattered lifelong learning activities can be harmonised and credited in a central certified system for talents/skills acknowledgment and expansion.

6.2. STRATEGIES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

- **Vision and understanding of lifelong learning:**
Enhance public awareness and institutional understanding of lifelong learning as an inclusive, continuous process that extends beyond literacy to encompass vocational, digital, and civic skills, while fostering a shared national vision that positions lifelong learning as a catalyst for sustainable development, inclusive growth, and human capital advancement.
- **Legal frameworks of lifelong learning (laws, decrees), and policies:**
Ensure the full implementation and widespread dissemination of the National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019) across all levels of government, while developing supporting legal instruments, such as sub-decrees or guidelines, to operationalise lifelong learning policies and clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and mandates of institutions.

- Flexible pathways and articulation between formal and non-formal education and informal learning; equivalency, RVA, credit transfers:**
 Enhance the BEEP to encompass upper secondary education, aiming to reduce high dropout rates. Institutionalise an RVA system to formally acknowledge skills and competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning, integrating it with the NQF. Establish credit accumulation and transfer mechanisms, such as micro-credentials or a national credit bank, to facilitate seamless transitions across learning systems.
- National lifelong learning action plans and strategies:**
 Finalise, endorse, and implement the draft National Lifelong Learning Action Plan, incorporating clear targets, timelines, and monitoring frameworks, while ensuring its inclusivity by addressing digital skills, vocational training, civic education, and entrepreneurship, especially for rural and disadvantaged communities.
- Governance and institutional mechanisms at national, regional and district/local levels:**
 Restructure and strengthen the National Committee for Lifelong Learning to provide it with clear mandates, adequate resources, and authority for coordinating and monitoring efforts nationwide, while establishing functional lifelong learning committees or focal points at provincial, district, and commune levels to promote localised implementation, ownership, and accountability.
- Key stakeholders, partnerships and coordination mechanism:**
 Establish an inter-ministerial coordination platform and partnership framework that engages NGOs, development partners, the private sector, and civil society, while conducting regular stakeholder dialogues and joint planning sessions to harmonise efforts, minimise fragmentation, and align with national priorities.
- Access to and equity of programs:**
 Expand outreach efforts to marginalised groups, including rural populations, women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and out-of-school youth, by offering transportation stipends, flexible scheduling, and community-based delivery models to overcome participation barriers, while ensuring that learning materials and instruction are inclusive, available in local languages, and provided in accessible formats.
- Teaching-learning: Curricula, teaching-learning methods, teaching-learning materials, quality assurance:**
 Revise and broaden the non-formal education curricula to integrate 21st century skills, entrepreneurship, life skills, and climate resilience, while encouraging learner-centred, modular teaching methods tailored to adult learning styles. Establish quality assurance mechanisms and standards for non-formal and lifelong learning programs, and develop practical, context-specific teaching and learning materials, including manuals focused on vocational and income-generating skills.
- Capacity building:**
 Offer regular, structured training and professional development for lifelong learning facilitators and CLC staff, ensuring alignment with national frameworks, while strengthening the capacity of management committees at CLCs and LLLCs to effectively plan, implement, and evaluate programs.

- **Budget and financing:**

Increase the national budget allocation for lifelong learning and non-formal education at all levels, dedicating specific funding to the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and the transformation of CLCs into fully functional LLLCs, while promoting blended financing models through partnerships with the private sector and international development partners.

- **Data and monitoring:**

Enhance and enlarge the NFE-MIS to encompass all lifelong learning programs across ministries and partners, ensuring its implementation at district and commune levels with disaggregated data on learners, learning outcomes, and skills demand, while integrating lifelong learning monitoring into national education and development planning systems to support evidence-based decision-making. Establish a comprehensive lifelong learning database management system. This system, led by the National Committee for Lifelong Learning, will be crucial for tracking learner activities, outcomes, and recognition through collaborative efforts with public and academic institutions, private sectors, development partners, and NGOs.

6.3. CURRENT STUDY'S SUGGESTED MODEL

By synthesising various models, this study proposes a comprehensive integrated model for the implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia.

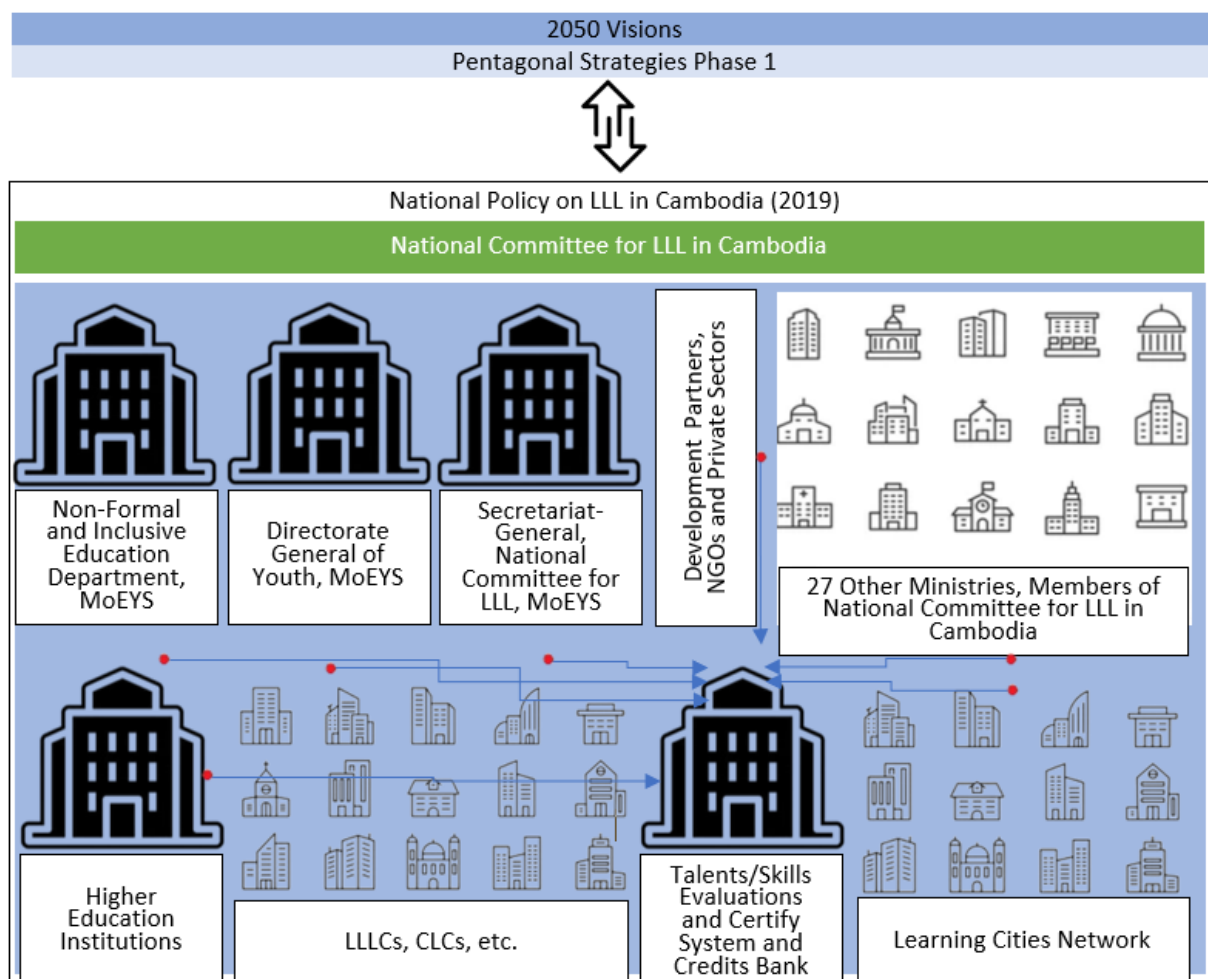


Figure 6. Comprehensive integrated model for the implementation of lifelong learning in Cambodia

The model illustrates various kinds of lifelong learning implementation in Cambodia by different bodies and agencies. With the National Policy on Lifelong Learning and the National Committee for Lifelong Learning already established, albeit they are in the process of being revised, the next step should be the establishment of a national certifying system of acknowledging, giving, and keeping credits to the existing skills and talents headed by the National Committee for Lifelong Learning while working together with these recognised skilled individuals or institutions to provide training and internships opportunities to apprentices so that the skills and network of skilled individuals can be expanded. Funding from different sources should be channelled to address the needs and priorities of the nation, which is facilitated by a fully competent and committed National Committee for LLL in Cambodia.

6.4. FINAL THOUGHTS

Finally, it is worth reminding that the findings and suggestions put forward in this study need to be disseminated among all stakeholders and improved according to their suggestions to ensure the study's validity, and for it to be used to its fullest potential. As of the submission of the country case study, the findings and suggestions are merely based on the insights from the authors and the data collected and analysed. With more time and funding, the dissemination and consultation should be done as soon as possible.

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VIII. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Information of key informants

No.	Name	Position	Interview Date	Means of Data Collection
1	HE. NSS	Secretary of State (Non-formal Education and Lifelong Learning, MoEYS	31 Oct 2024	Personal Interview
2	Prof. CHY	Rector, RUPP	26 Nov 2024	Special Lecture to LLCs Trainers
3	HE. Dr. DSS	Secretary-General of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and Deputy Director-General for Education, MoEYS	3 Nov 2024	Personal Interview
4	Mr. PMK	Deputy Director General for Education, General Directorate for Education, MoEYS	12 Nov 2024	Personal Interview
5	Ms. PVN	Country Director, DVV International Cambodia	31 Oct 2024	Personal Interview
6	Mr. KSR	Senior Education Specialist and Technical Advisor to General Education Improvement Project (GEIP), MoEYS	5 Nov 2024	Personal Interview
7	Mr. PT	Director of Srae Khnong CLC, Kampot Province, Cambodia	26 Nov 2024	Presentation to LLCs Trainers
8	Prof. YWB	Lifelong Learning Expert, Seoul National University, Republic of Korea and Lifelong Learning Project for Cambodia and Korea	28 Oct 2024 12.00-1.00 PM	Personal Interview
9	Mr. KTV	Director, Cambodia-Korea Cooperation Center, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia	28 Oct 2024 1:00-2:00 PM	Personal Interview
10	Associate Professor MSC	Vice Dean, Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh	28 Oct 2024 2:00-3:00 PM	Personal Interview
11	CT LLC	Management Team of Chheu Tom LLC, Pursat Province, Cambodia	15 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
12	PR LLC	Management Team of Prek Roka LLC, Kandal Province, Cambodia	16 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
13	KL LLC	Management Team of Krang Leav LLC, Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia	22 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
14	KC LLC and Youth Center	Management Team of Kampong Cham LLC and Youth Center, Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia	23 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
15	TK LLC	Management Team of Takeo LLC, Takeo Province, Cambodia	29 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
16	SV LLC	Management Team of Svay Rieng LLC, Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia	30 Oct 2024 2.00-4.00 PM	Focus group discussion
17	Mr. TSN	Director of Youth Program Development Department, MoEYS	8 Nov 2024 12.30-1.30	Personal Interview

Appendix 2: The definition of LLL in Cambodia and its understanding

(Key terms explained in the glossary of the Cambodian National Policy on Lifelong Learning, 2019)

In the Cambodian National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019), several key terms related to lifelong learning have been defined. This section highlights the key terms explained in the glossary from the original source in the English version (pp. 12-13).

No.	Key Terms	Definitions
1	Soft skill	is referred to as the attitude to working on something in a creative, innovative, and psychological manner, including communication, leadership, negotiation, motivation, time management, emotional management, and so on.
2	Hard skill	is referred to as vocational or technical skills such as carving, pottery, crafting, weaving, and repairing engines, computers, and phones, etc., gained from training and education in different modalities: formal, nonformal, and informal systems.
3	Attitude	is referred to as behaviour, character, and affection learners need in any situation in order to think critically or solve problems in an appropriate and equal manner.
4	Learning Society	is referred to as a society whose citizens have enough knowledge and skills.
5	National Qualifications Framework	is referred to as a legal instrument for development and categorises qualifications based on criteria of learning, which is achieved by level and is generally specified in the qualification description in each level.
6	In Breath of Learning	is referred to as deeply understanding lifelong learning in various and in-depth modalities of education and training.
7	Bridging Program	is a core program established to provide knowledge or return to formal, 13 non-formal, and informal education, as well as technical and vocational training, so that learners return to school for a new skill to upgrade knowledge, generate income, and create an appropriate job in the future.
8	Gender Equality	is referred to as a state of equal opportunities between males and females and equality of access to education and training of all forms.

Appendix 3: Key Terms Used by UNESCO Related to Lifelong Learning

No	Key Terms	Definitions
1.	Lifelong Learning	is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men) in all life-wide contexts (family, school, the community, the workplace, and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal), which, together, meet a wide range of learning needs and demands (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023).
2.	Non-Formal Education	Learning is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning but that contain an important learning element (UNESCO, 2009).
3.	Informal Education and Training	Learning results from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. Informal learning is part of non-formal learning. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can, to a certain degree, be understood as accidental learning (UNESCO, 1984).

No	Key Terms	Definitions
4.	Adult Learning and Education	is a core component of lifelong learning. It comprises all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work (UNESCO, 2015).
5.	Community Learning Centers	is a local place of learning outside the formal education system. Located in both villages and urban areas, it is usually set up and managed by local people in order to provide various learning opportunities for community development and improvement of the quality of life (UNESCO Bangkok, 2003).
6.	Four Pillars of Education	is in the form of a report, comprised of Learning to Know, learning to do, Learning to Live and Learning to Be (Jacques Delors, 2001)
7.	Basic Education	Education that precedes the earliest entry point into TVET (lower-secondary, upper-secondary, or post-secondary). Thus, basic education can encompass preschool, primary education, and, depending on the entry point into TVET, none, some, or all of secondary education (UNESCO, 2023)
8.	Continuing Education	All forms and types of education are pursued by those who have left formal education at any point and who entered employment and/or assumed adult responsibilities (UNESCO, 1984).
9.	Inclusive Education	The process of strengthening the capacity of the education system is to reach out to all learners (UNESCO, 2017).
10	21st Century Education	is one that responds to the economic, technological, and societal shifts that are happening at an ever-increasing pace. It's an education that sets children up to succeed in a world where more than half of the jobs they'll have over their careers don't even exist yet. In short, it's an education that provides students with the skills and competencies they need to thrive in the 21st century (Jerald, 2009).
11	Learning cities	UNESCO defines a learning city as a city that effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; revitalizes learning in families and communities; facilitates learning for and in the workplace; extends the use of modern learning technologies; enhances quality and excellence in learning; and fosters a culture of learning throughout life (Longworth, 2006).

CHAPTER IV c

COUNTRY CASE STUDY LAO PDR

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Chapter IV c – COUNTRY CASE STUDY LAO PDR

By Dr. Souksakhone Sengsouliya and Dr. Vanmany Vannasy

I COUNTRY OVERVIEW

1.1 GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

1.1.1 Geography

Laos, or the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), is a landlocked country located in the northeast-central mainland of Southeast Asia. Its capital city is Vientiane, pronounced “*Viengchan*”. The total land area of Laos is 236,800 square kilometres. The country shares borders with five nations: China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar to the northwest (Dommen et al., 2024).

1.1.2 Demographics

As of 2024, the country's population is estimated at 7,769,819, with a density of 34 people per square kilometre, approximately 87 people per square mile. Around 38 per cent of the population resides in urban areas (Worldometer, 2024). The population is growing at an annual rate of approximately 1.34 per cent. In terms of age distribution, the median age is 24.6 years. A breakdown by age group shows that 11 per cent of the population is below 5 years old, 20 per cent is aged 5 to 14 years, 19 per cent falls within the 15 to 24-year age range, 45 per cent are between 25 to 64 years, and 4.4 per cent are aged 65 years and above. The sex ratio is approximately 101 males to every 100 females (Danso, 2024). Laos is known for its diverse ethnic groups and languages. The population is officially categorised into three groups based on linguistic families and geographical locations: Lao Loum, referring to lowland Lao; Lao Theung, representing Lao people of the mountain slopes; and Lao Soung, referring to Lao people of the mountain tops. The official language is Lao, and the majority of the population practices Buddhism (Dommen et al., 2024).

1.1.3 Socio-economic situation

Since gaining independence in 1975, Laos has pursued economic transformation. Notably, the country experienced an average annual economic growth rate of approximately 7 per cent between 2000 to 2019 (World Bank, 2021). Presently, however, according to the World Bank's report “The Lao PDR Economic Monitor”, economic growth in Laos remains below pre-pandemic levels due to macroeconomic instability. The report highlights a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 3.7 per cent in 2023, driven by sectors such as tourism, transport, logistics, and mining (World Bank, 2024). The country's economy remains primarily agricultural and continues to rely heavily on foreign aid and investment, a trend that began in the late 20th century (Dommen et al., 2024). Laos is classified as a low-income country, with a GDP per capita of USD 2,659 in 2023 (Trading Economics, 2024). To respond effectively to the rapid changes in the global landscape, the government of Laos must urgently enhance its human capital to better align with the demands of regional labour markets. Particular emphasis is needed on improving competencies in technical and vocational skills (Laos Post, 2025), especially in areas where the country faces significant skills shortages, such as information and communication technology, agriculture, and logistics (World Bank, 2022).

Recognising the importance of education in building human resource capacity, Laos has prioritised educational development. Between 2018 and 2023, the government allocated approximately 12 to 14 per cent of its annual expenditure to the education and sports sector. However, the allocation declined to around 11 per cent in 2023, a decrease compared to 2021 and 2022 levels

(MoES, 2024). According to the mid-term assessment report for the 2021 to 2025 Educational and Sports Development Plan (MoES, 2024), the enrolment rate for primary education improved significantly, reaching approximately 98.25 per cent in the 2023/2024 academic year, compared to 97.70 per cent in 2022/2023. However, the primary school dropout rate increased slightly, from 4.1 per cent in 2020/2021 to 4.7 per cent in 2023/2024. At the lower secondary level, enrolment declined from 80.4 per cent in 2020/2021 to 73.6 per cent in 2023/2024, while the dropout rate rose from 11.2 per cent in 2022/2023 to 12.4 per cent in 2023/2024. A similar downward trend could be observed at the upper secondary level, where enrolment fell significantly from 54.8 per cent in 2019/2020 to 41 per cent in 2023/2024.

1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This country study employs a qualitative research method, which is commonly used in sociological inquiries to understand specific phenomena (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Dawson, 2002). The authors adopted a social constructivist and interpretivist perspective to analyse qualitative data, utilising a combination of document reviews and interviews (Owen, 2014).

Sampling, sample, and procedures

In this study, several documents were selected for review, including newsletters, reports, policy legislation, local presentations, meeting minutes, academic papers, and other text materials obtained from relevant personnel, units, local government offices, and international partners. The authors employed a purposive sampling technique to ensure the inclusion of the most relevant documents by framing their meanings and assessing their contributions (Bowen, 2009). Practically, the selected documents were evaluated against pre-developed inclusion criteria:

1. Whether the documents addressed the implementation of lifelong learning in Laos
2. Whether they highlighted the challenges, barriers, and contributors to lifelong learning practices in Laos
3. Whether they reported on collaborative projects and the roles of stakeholders (both international and local partners) in implementing the concept in Laos
4. Whether they offered policy recommendations and best practices for enhancing lifelong learning in regional and global contexts (e.g., materials from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning).

The four key criteria proposed by Flick (2018, as cited in Morgan, 2022), authenticity, creditability, representativeness, and meaning were also applied during the document selection and exclusion process.

The authors continued reviewing documents until the dataset was deemed sufficiently comprehensive to address the research questions (Morgan, 2022).

Interview data was used to supplement the findings from the document analysis before reporting the results. For this paper, ten key informants (four women) were purposively selected for interviews. To ensure a broad range of perspectives, the interviewees were drawn from diverse organisations, including the Non-Formal Education Department, the National University of Laos, Teacher Training Colleges, Lao Youth Union, Lao Women's Union, the Institute for Administrator Development, the Non-Formal Education Center, and representatives of Community Learning Centres (CLC). A semi-structured interview format served as the primary data collection tool, combining open-

ended and closed-ended questions. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview questions and probes underwent content validation through expert review. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Data analysis and interpretation

In this study, the inductive category formation was adopted. Using this procedure, the authors carefully analysed the textual materials, allowing the data itself to guide the identification of emerging patterns and themes (Delve et al., 2023). This inductive approach offers researchers flexibility, as it does not require predefined categories and enables a deeper understanding of the studied topics (Delve et al., 2023). For the interview data, responses to the interviewer's questions and probes were transcribed verbatim before analysis (Schreier, 2014). The analysis was conducted using QCAmap, a software tool developed by Mayring (2014) to facilitate qualitative content analysis. All data processing and analysis were carried out in Lao, while the English version of this paper was prepared specifically for publication purposes.

II LIFELONG LEARNING EVOLUTION

2.1 THE EVOLUTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE COUNTRY

The emergence of the concept of lifelong learning in Lao PDR can be traced back to the pre-independence period, prior to 1975, although it was not explicitly referred to by that term at the time. Its key idea was reflected in educational slogans and proverbs commonly used in schools, such as *"Learn, Learn, and Learn"* and *"Learning is Loving the Nation"*.

During the concept's initial phase in the 1960s, the primary focus was on adult literacy. A basic literacy program targeting illiterate populations was first introduced in 1967. This program was designed for government officials and villagers aged 15 to 45 years, aiming to equip them with basic reading and writing skills as well as foundational cultural knowledge. It was initially piloted in two provinces: Huaphan and Xiengkhuang¹.

Following the country's independence in 1975, the Lao government made significant efforts to expand educational opportunities for all citizens. Under the Prime Minister's Order, No. 08/PM, dated 14 January 1976, the education sector was tasked with systematically providing basic education and cultural knowledge to target groups aged 15 to 45 years. As a result of these efforts, Huaphan Province became the first to be declared free of illiteracy in 1979. By the end of December 1984, a total of 755,768 individuals were officially declared literate, as announced by then-President Souphanouvong.

By the 1990s, the idea of lifelong learning gained more recognition as the Lao government adopted lifelong learning approaches through non-formal education. These initiatives focused on two main objectives: 1) welcoming students who had dropped out of or failed in their previous education, and 2) upgrading adults' skills and competencies for work (Yorozu, 2017). During this time, the concept of non-formal education became integral to the implementation of the national strategy for human resource development. For instance, the Ministry of Education's 1995 to 1996 educational action plan emphasised non-formal education as a crucial tool for eradicating illiteracy, promoting vocational training, and developing skills among target populations (Souvanvixay, 2002).

¹ See speech by Dr. Phankham Vipphanh, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Sports, at the Graduation Ceremony of the Primary Education Equivalency Program on August 28, 2015 (DVV, 2015).

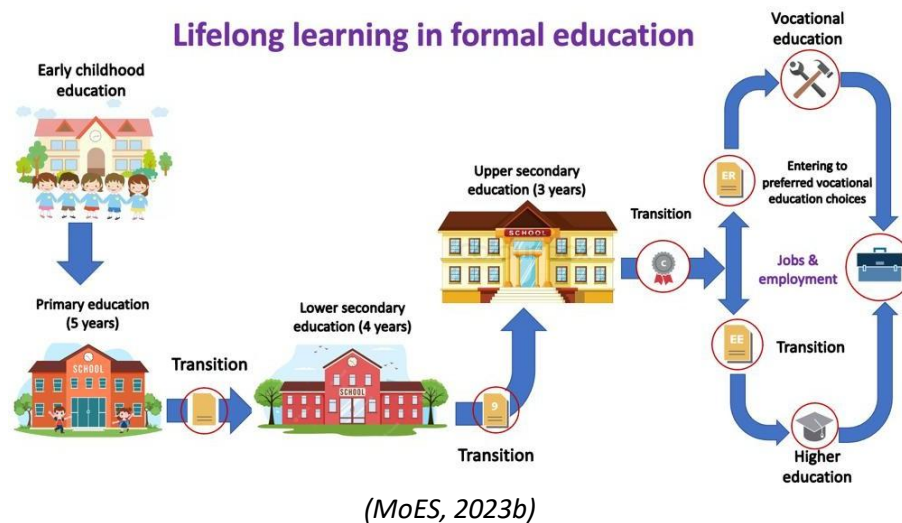
The early 2000s saw slow progress in the development of lifelong learning in Laos due to limited commitment and collaboration from internal stakeholders. This stagnation was likely caused by a lack of understanding and awareness of the concept. Furthermore, at that time, no comprehensive policy framework for lifelong learning existed (Yorozu, 2017). The regional context also played a role in shaping the adoption of lifelong learning initiatives, as the concept was relatively new to Southeast Asia, having been introduced by UNESCO only recently. Like its neighbouring countries, Laos demonstrated greater commitment to the lifelong learning agenda after the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) officially approved the establishment of the SEAMEO Regional Center for Lifelong Learning in 2012 (Hinzen & Knoll, 2014). Additionally, UNESCO's 2013 Workshop on National Policy Frameworks for Lifelong Learning in ASEAN countries, held in Hanoi, Vietnam, further contributed to the regional momentum (Hinzen & Knoll, 2014).

Significant progress in lifelong learning in Laos began in 2009 when the Lao government welcomed support from the German Adult Education Association, DVV International. After establishing its regional office in Vientiane, DVV International partnered with various stakeholders, including the Department of Non-Formal Education, the Non-Formal Education Development Centre, the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos, the Lao Youth Union, and the Lao Women's Union. DVV International's goal was to create sustainable structures for lifelong learning and adult education (ECCIL, 2024). To address the need for a policy framework to disseminate and institutionalise lifelong learning practices, DVV International and the Ministry of Education and Sports organised a series of initiatives. The first meeting, held in 2012, introduced the lifelong learning agenda and raised awareness of its importance among ministry staff and related units (Yorozu, 2017). A second meeting, held in 2013, provided a platform for discussions on structuring a comprehensive national policy on lifelong learning (Yorozu, 2017). Additional support from DVV International included inviting experts on lifelong learning and adult education to collaborate with local institutions, such as the Non-Formal Education Department, the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos, and the Non-Formal Education Development Centre.

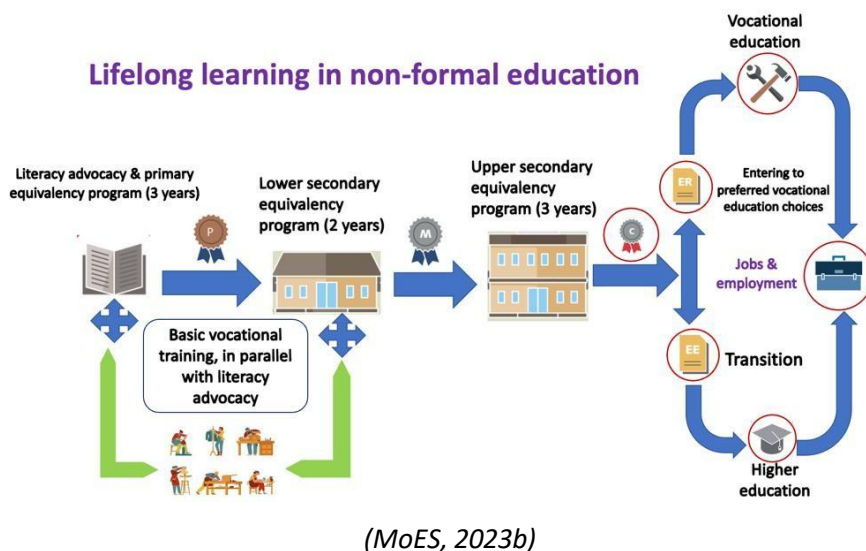
2.2 LIFELONG LEARNING POLICIES AND FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

Vision and structure of lifelong learning in Lao PDR

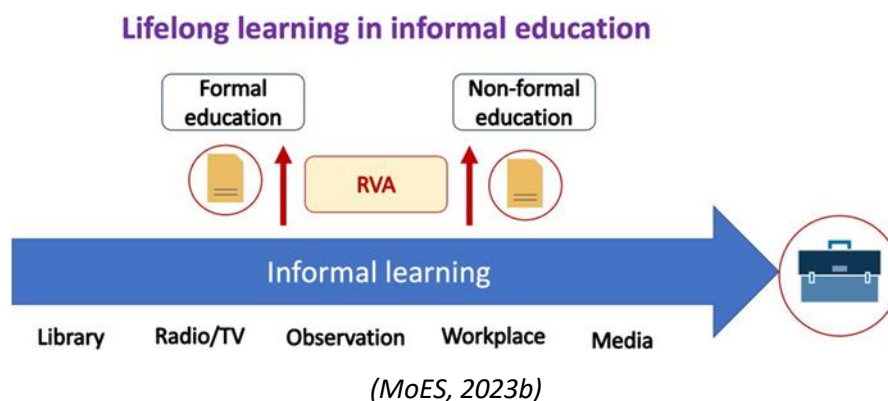
The Lao government recognises investment in education as a critical mechanism for human resource development by implementing lifelong learning. It aims to promote access to educational opportunities, knowledge and skills development for all Lao citizens, including those living overseas and incarcerated individuals. This approach is outlined in detail in the Decree on Lifelong Learning (MoES, 2020) which was adopted by the government in 2020. In the context of Laos, lifelong learning encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning modalities (MoES, 2020). The implementation of these modalities within the Lao context is illustrated in the following figures.



The figure above illustrates the pattern of lifelong learning in formal education, based on the national qualifications framework. According to this framework, students are encouraged to complete 12 years of education before deciding whether to pursue vocational education or higher education prior to entering the labour market.



Aligned with the national qualifications framework, the lifelong learning model in non-formal education aims to promote literacy among target groups, particularly adult learners, and to facilitate their pursuit of self-development based on their individual preferences.



Regarding the pattern of lifelong learning in informal education, there appears to be no specific regulation or explicit framework for recognising learning outcomes achieved through informal learning modalities. The final figure above suggests a potential pathway for linking informal learning outcomes to formal and non-formal learning patterns. However, this remains a significant challenge in practice. Before looking more closely at recent developments in the field of lifelong learning, the methodological approach of this country study will be outlined.

According to official documents (Lao Law on Education, the Lifelong Learning Decree), lifelong learning is education combining formal, non-formal, and informal learning, enabling men and boys as well as women and girls to receive learning throughout their lives and to develop an intellectual society responding to developmental needs. In contrast, many people hold the understanding that lifelong learning equals non-formal education, and that lifelong learning promotion should be the responsibility of the Non-Formal Education Department.

Legal frameworks: Laws and decrees, norms and standards

The promotion of lifelong learning across various ministries in Laos, prior to the approval of the national Decree on Lifelong Learning, was initiated through individual annual plans and strategies. For example, each ministry's human resources division or department focused on enhancing professional development among staff, guided by the Lao Law on Human Resources (No. 74/NA, dated 18 December 2015). Specifically, Article 4 of this law outlines state policies on human resource development (National Assembly, 2015b). Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Sports, alongside educational institutions, aligned their efforts with the national education law and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which emphasises promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, as launched by the United Nations in 2015 (UN, 2015). Lifelong learning is also referenced in various articles of the Lao Law on Education (Articles 5, 6, 17, 19, 24, & 28). For instance, Article 6 (Revised) emphasises that all Lao citizens, irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, physical ability, or economic status, have the right to access quality education and equal opportunities for lifelong learning in accordance with the law and relevant principles. Article 19 (revised) specifies that non-formal education is structurally similar to formal education, with reliance on curricula and grading. However, the two systems differ in teaching methods, timing, and formats, allowing flexibility based on learners' competencies and readiness. Non-formal education also integrates basic vocational training and includes both non-formal and informal learning modalities (National Assembly, 2015a).

Following an extensive and complex process, the Prime Minister's Decree on Lifelong Learning was officially approved in March 2020 (MoES, 2020). The approval represents a significant collaborative effort between the Lao government and DVV International. It designates the Ministry of Education and Sports as the primary coordinating body, responsible for working with ministries, organisations, and other sectors to ensure effective and efficient implementation (MoES, 2020). The Decree serves as a foundational reference for the Ministry of Education and Sports, its stakeholders, and other organisations across the country in their efforts to promote lifelong learning. Its objectives introduce principles, regulations, and measures for managing, monitoring and promoting lifelong learning. The focus is to ensure that all learning modalities, formal, non-formal, and informal, are recognised, valued equally, and accredited. The ultimate goal is to enable all Lao citizens to access educational opportunities and engage in knowledge and skills development (MoES, 2020). Key principles of lifelong learning in Laos (Article 5, MoES, 2020) include: 1) Lifelong learning shall adhere to the country's political directives, laws, socioeconomic development framework, and strategies for human resource capacity; 2) Lifelong learning shall incorporate systems for assessment, recognition,

validation, and accreditation of learning outcomes across all modalities, formal, non-formal, and informal; 3) Lifelong learning shall be continuous, flexible, and integrated with various learning approaches, tailored to the contexts in which learning occurs; 4) Lifelong learning shall align with the national qualifications framework and link to regional and international systems; 5) The promotion of lifelong learning shall involve shared participation and commitment from ministries, organisations, local authorities, and other related stakeholders; and 6) Implementation shall adhere to agreements and treaties with Laos' international partners. The Decree determines regulations for lifelong learning in three main areas:

- Teaching/learning in lifelong learning (including in formal and non-formal education and informal learning)
- Assessment, recognition, certification, equivalence and transfer
- Quality assurance of lifelong learning

Since the approval of the Lifelong Learning Decree, additional legislation, regulations, and agreements have been established to translate policy into practice. Lifelong learning is prominently featured in the Ninth Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) as a governmental priority (MoPI, 2021). This plan aims to enhance quality education at all levels and provide equitable access to education for all, aligning with regional and international standards while preparing the country for Industry 4.0. Specific measures include enhancing lifelong learning by focusing on basic literacy, upgrading educational levels for people aged 15 to 40 years, and offering basic vocational training for school dropouts and unemployed adults. Furthermore, the plan emphasises collaboration with entrepreneurs to develop policies and incentives for hiring individuals who complete general education and vocational training programs, as well as ensuring fair and acceptable wages for these workers (MoPI, 2021). Additionally, the labour and social welfare sector recently introduced the Decree of the Organisation and Operation of the National Committee for Persons with Disabilities, established in 2022, as part of its inclusive approach to lifelong learning (MoES, 2023a).

Policies, plans and strategies

Lifelong learning is embedded in the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2021-2025), which supports the social and economic priorities of the 9th National Social-Economic Development Plan, for example, under *Intermediate Outcome 1.3: Increased intake and progression rates at all levels leading to increasing graduation rates*.

Two of the policy actions refer to lifelong learning:

- A National Committee for Lifelong Learning will be established at national and sub-national levels to create stronger linkages between formal and non-formal education. Terms of Reference for this Committee will be developed and approved.
- The Lifelong Learning Decree will be implemented covering early childhood education, primary to tertiary education, non-formal education and informal learning. Quality standards will be developed to recognise all forms of learning to be accredited by issuing certificates together with a review of existing accreditation systems in order to acknowledge the learnings gained from various sources, including informal learning experiences of learners, based on international and regional qualifications frameworks (p. 17).

Further, under the Non-Formal Education Sub-Sector Plan, there are a number of key policy objectives and strategies which either refer directly to lifelong learning or to non-formal education and literacy. They are key for the implementation of the Decree:

- Expansion of equivalent secondary education must be more affordable and realistic but benefits of access to lower secondary education will not occur until graduates of primary equivalency programs have much improved literacy and numeracy skills.
- Increase the literacy rate and continue to provide upper secondary equivalent programs until 2030 for the target group of non-formal education.
- Promote access to universal, equal, quality education and lifelong learning for all (p. 106).

In the education sector, other significant policy documents include the Human Resource Development Strategy, and the Minister's Agreement on Sharing Human Resources between the Non-Formal Education and the General Education Departments, issued in 2021. The latter legislation encourages collaboration between the two departments, enabling the exchange of knowledge and expertise. For instance, teachers from general education may contribute to basic literacy programs organised by the non-formal education sector (MoES, 2021). Similarly, the Minister's Advice on Collaboration and Sharing Human Resources between Non-Formal Education and Vocational Education Departments, released in 2022, underscores cooperation between these entities (MoES, 2022). Specifically, the Advice facilitates the transfer of learners who complete literacy programs in non-formal education to vocational education. The vocational education sector evaluates these learners to determine appropriate program levels (e.g., C1, C2) and issues corresponding certificates. Finally, the Prime Minister's Agreement on the National Committee for Lifelong Learning (2024) is a key policy decision towards the implementation of lifelong learning.

One of the three pillars of the Decree regards teaching and learning in lifelong learning. This is based on the national education system which is quality-assured and compliant with curricula; the standards of equivalency of education; and the regulations for the transfer of learning outcomes. It can take one of three forms: teaching-learning in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings. Non-formal education is provided using flexible teaching methods, forms, time and places based on the learners' context and readiness and is delivered in different Non-Formal Education Centres (NFEC) and CLCs, through mobile and distance learning. Informal learning is any learning that learners undertake voluntarily and out of interest, and includes for example career-based self-directed learning, interest-based self-directed learning, and work-based learning, or learning related to life events.

The Decree stipulates that lifelong learning shall have curricula, textbooks and materials to be used for teaching-learning in compliance with the Law on Education. Lifelong learning institutions are educational institutions as identified by the Law on Education. Teachers of lifelong learning are individuals who perform the task of teaching and transferring knowledge to learners at public and private lifelong learning institutions. However, informal learning typically does not have dedicated curricula, textbooks and materials; it is not limited to taking place in education institutions, and typically does not have teachers, but may be facilitated by instructors.

Flexible pathways and articulation between formal, non-formal, and informal learning

As outlined in Article 2 of the Prime Minister's Decree on Lifelong Learning, lifelong learning in Laos encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal modes of education (MoES, 2020). The inclusion of these diverse learning forms aims to create flexible learning pathways that are accessible to all learners. According to the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning, all education providers, educators, and teachers are expected to adhere to the principles of lifelong learning, to ensure that

instructional methods align with learners' individual learning styles and needs. Teaching and learning practices should therefore be flexible, continuous, and responsive to diverse learning approaches (MoES, 2025). One of the core principles also emphasises the establishment of a system for equivalency and Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation (RVA), which serves as a critical mechanism for integrating and articulating the three modes of learning.

Equivalency and Recognition, Validation and Accreditation

The RVA system provides essential guidelines and a framework for the recognition and certification of prior learning acquired outside traditional educational settings. This system plays a vital role in promoting the implementation of flexible learning pathways and in systematically integrating various forms of learning.

Assessment, recognition, certification, equivalence and transfer

Chapter 3 of the Prime Minister's Lifelong Learning Decree specifically addresses these aspects, particularly in Articles 16 through 19. These articles define the process of assessment, recognition, and certification and transfer of learning outcomes and stipulates that these practices shall follow the regulations determined by the Ministry of Education and Sports in collaboration with relevant ministries and agencies. For instance, Article 19 describes the process of establishing equivalence and transfer of learning outcomes, assigning equal value to learning outcomes to all forms of learning irrespective of where the learning outcomes were acquired; and enabling the transfer of learning outcomes between formal, non-formal and informal learning in compliance with the Law on Education. This provides a strong legal framework for equivalency and RVA.

Equivalency

In terms of educational equivalency, the Lao non-formal education sector currently offers equivalency programs at the primary and lower secondary levels. The Education and Sports Development Plan (ESSDP) aims to strengthen and enhance the quality of primary-level equivalency programs, while also expanding access to and improving the delivery of lower secondary equivalency programs. Vocational education and non-formal education collaborate towards this goal, and non-formal education has agreements with the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. They can implement the equivalent program up to C1 level (low level diploma for TVET). Regulations for the recognition of non-formal education diplomas exist, but in reality, it is difficult for non-formal education graduates to enter the labour market, and their diplomas do not give them a straightforward entry point to formal education. They are required to go through a long process of verifying their documentation.

Neither an RVA framework, nor a system for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) have been set up, but there are ongoing discussions and plans to develop these. A team needs to be established to drive the development. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) emphasises the significance of educational equivalency in recognising and validating individuals' prior learning outcomes, with the overarching goal of promoting societal equity and advancing lifelong learning for all. However, the practice of awarding credits or facilitating credit transfers for lifelong learning programs remains limited. In most cases, credit transfers occur only between basic education within the non-formal education system and vocational education or professional training programs.

Quality assurance

The Lifelong Learning Decree also refers to quality assurance of lifelong learning. All educational institutions that provide lifelong learning must develop internal quality assurance systems to monitor and inspect teaching-learning, ensuring that all learning outcomes acquired through all forms of lifelong learning are of equal quality and comply with the standards of the national qualifications framework. Quality assurance is to be coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Sports. According to the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030, quality assurance can only be implemented within the formal and non-formal educations systems and must be based on the Lao National Qualifications Framework (MoES, 2025).

National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning

To accelerate progress, the government has recently developed the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030. This urgent task aligns with the SDGs and the Ninth National Socio-Economic Development Plan to promote lifelong learning for all (MoES, 2025). The document involves multiple sectors, including the Lao Trade Union, Lao Youth Union, Lao Women's Union, as well as the Lao Front for National Development. The Plan outlines four primary directions for implementation:

1. To operationalise the Prime Minister's Decree on Lifelong Learning into practices by integrating lifelong learning into the mandates of all sectors, and applying the mechanisms established by the National Committee for Lifelong Learning
2. To disseminate information and raise awareness and understanding of lifelong learning among government staff, students, youth, and the general public
3. To develop new and revise existing policies and legislation that promote and ensure equitable access to lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens
4. To enhance coordination mechanisms and intersectoral collaboration to support the effective implementation of lifelong learning

Furthermore, the Action Plan proposes six strategic schemes, supported by eleven key tasks, to advance the implementation of lifelong learning across the country. The key tasks serve as practical guidelines for implementation and are subject to ongoing assessment and monitoring.

Scheme 1: To promote and expand lifelong learning opportunities nationwide

Scheme 2: To develop learning models, curricula, teaching-learning materials, and quality assurance mechanisms for lifelong learning modalities

Scheme 3: To strengthen management systems and build the capacity of institutions, educators, and human resources involved in lifelong learning

Scheme 4: To improve infrastructure to support societal readiness for lifelong learning

Scheme 5: To foster coordination, collaboration, and shared responsibility at national, regional, and international levels to promote lifelong learning

Scheme 6: To enhance access to lifelong learning through digital platforms

Governance

Most recently, the Lao government issued an Agreement on the National Committee for Lifelong Learning (No. 47/PM, dated 14 March 2024), thereby establishing the Committee. It is chaired by the Minister of Education and Sports and is primarily initiated by the Department of Non-Formal Education with representation from all ministries, the Party Central Committee, the National Assembly, the Prime Minister's Office, the Bank of the Lao PDR, the National Institute for Politics and Administration, the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences, mass organisations (e.g., the Lao Women's Union, Lao Trade Union, Lao Youth Union), provincial governors, and the National Chamber

of Trade and Industry. The representatives serve as the Committee's members and are responsible for fostering and coordinating lifelong learning practices across ministries (Prime Minister, 2024). The Committee's duties are as follows:

- Promote, monitor, and evaluate lifelong learning initiatives nationwide
- Lead and collaborate with ministries, ministry-equivalent units, mass organisations, local authorities, and regional and international partners
- Analyse, revise, and periodically update legislation, strategies, and the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning
- Compile reports, share lessons learned, and evaluate the implementation of lifelong learning initiatives periodically

The National Committee for Lifelong Learning is supported by a secretariat, which comprises the Department of Non-Formal Education and representatives from all academic departments within the Ministry of Education and Sports. The secretariat is primarily responsible for coordinating and facilitating the involvement of relevant ministries in the implementation of lifelong learning initiatives. Key responsibilities include the development of the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning and the translation of this plan into specific schemes and projects. Meanwhile, the ministerial stakeholders represented on the Committee are tasked with implementing lifelong learning within their respective mandates by integrating or aligning lifelong learning principles with their internal policies, strategies, and activities (MoES, 2025).

Budgeting and financing lifelong learning

There is no dedicated budget for lifelong learning within the state budget, and no funding has been made available beyond existing educational or human resource development projects. Instead, lifelong learning is supported through the allocation of existing sectoral budgets, ensuring that its implementation is integrated into all relevant activities and contributes to the country's broader socio-economic development (MoES, 2025).

Funding for lifelong learning promotion is derived from both domestic resources and external grants. The Ministry of Planning and Investment, in coordination with the Ministry of Finance, is responsible for allocating domestic funding across sectors and to local governments to support the implementation of lifelong learning initiatives. All sectors at both central and local levels are required to allocate a portion of their budgets to lifelong learning-related activities. Moreover, the promotion of lifelong learning is supported through partnerships and collaboration with neighbouring countries, non-governmental organisations, financial institutes, civil society organisations, as well as national and international individuals and groups. These actors provide technical and financial assistance to advance lifelong learning in Laos (MoES, 2025).

Data and monitoring

The National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030 clearly emphasises the importance of data dissemination and systematic monitoring. Data on the progress of lifelong learning implementation across the country is to be collected, monitored, and reported by the secretariat of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning. In addition, committee members at all levels are responsible for contributing to the development of monitoring systems, evaluating the implementation of lifelong learning and disseminating relevant information and guidance on system

use. Moreover, committee members are tasked with organising quarterly meetings and an annual cross-sectoral meeting on lifelong learning. They are also required to prepare and submit periodic progress reports to the government to ensure transparency, coordination, and continuous improvement of lifelong learning implementation (MoES, 2025).

III LIFELONG LEARNING IN PRACTICE

3.1 COUNTRY INITIATIVES/PROGRAMS

The promotion of lifelong learning in Laos can be summarised across four key aspects: skills development and adult education; dissemination and integration; facilities and infrastructure improvement; and partnerships.

▪ ***Non-formal education, skills development, adult education and LLL initiatives from other sectors:***

Lifelong learning is actively promoted in Laos through skills development and adult education initiatives. The Lao government, through the Non-Formal Education Department, provides opportunities for youth and adults who have previously dropped out of formal education to access second-chance education and vocational training, delivered via non-formal education modalities and CLCs. In 2023, 36,121 individuals, including 18,526 women and girls, participated in training programs. Additionally, female target populations were introduced to soft skills and income-generating skills (MoES, 2023a).

The Non-Formal Education Department has recently updated non-formal learning programs, particularly equivalency programs at primary and secondary levels, to better respond to learners' needs. A notable initiative includes the establishment of online learning resources and platforms, such as the development of the "ED App," which facilitates informal and non-formal learning (MoES, 2023a).

The labour and social welfare sector also plays a critical role by offering job-related skills training to diverse groups, such as employed individuals seeking job changes, unemployed individuals, and those preparing for their first jobs. These efforts align with the national skills standards, covering 37 professions. In 2021 and 2022, a total of 35,761 people, including 16,636 women and girls, received vocational training through these initiatives. Additionally, the sector conducted 15 professional training sessions for committee members responsible for child protection and support at the village and district levels, with a total of 627 participants. According to a national survey conducted in 2022, approximately 47.1 per cent of the adult population, equivalent to 5.3 million people, were active participants in the labour force (MoES, 2023a).

In higher education, lifelong learning has been incorporated into university programs through various training initiatives, including courses on pedagogy, soft skills, etc. For example, final-year students in the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos, engage in weekend soft skills training sessions designed to enrich their knowledge of community engagement before their teaching practicums in local communities (FED NUoL, 2023).

Interviews also revealed that youth organisations have integrated lifelong learning concepts into their vocational and technical training by empowering target populations with soft skills modules on topics such as teamwork, conflict management, communication, and time management. To support these efforts, youth organisations have developed trainer teams for soft skills in every province across the country.

- ***Dissemination and integration:***

The Ministry of Education and Sports has actively committed to disseminating the perspectives of lifelong learning and the content of the National Decree on Lifelong Learning among stakeholders, organisations, and local partner practitioners (MoES, 2023a). Concurrently, the Ministry works to integrate the concept into its management and policy practices. For example, in 2021, the Ministry nominated staff to participate in a capacity building workshop titled “Strengthening education systems from a lifelong learning perspective”, organised by UNESCO’s Institute for Lifelong Learning and Shanghai Open University. The workshop aimed to enhance the capacity of Lao policy makers to design and implement lifelong learning policies (UIL, 2021).

In the university context, the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos, with support from DVV International, has tested lifelong learning content as part of its curriculum. The team (including the authors of this paper) shared their experiences with partner institutions, resulting in lifelong learning being officially approved by the Ministry of Education and Sports as a subject in 2023. This subject is now included as both an elective and a compulsory course across all three levels of teacher education curricula (kindergarten, primary, and secondary teacher training) in teacher training institutions nationwide (MoES, 2023b).

- ***Facilities and infrastructure improvement:***

According to the Non-Formal Education Department’s annual report for 2023 (MoES, 2023b), 156 NFECs across the country have undergone infrastructure renovations and improvements to their learning facilities. These improvements include enhancements to physical learning spaces, as well as the provision of updated materials and resources to better support teaching and learning activities. In addition to these upgrades, the government has increased the administrative budget for these Centres, ensuring they are well-prepared to provide effective educational services to communities.

- ***Partnership and networking:***

In the context of lifelong learning, partnership and networking refers to fostering a shared mission among local and regional communities. Efforts have been made in Laos to engage various ministries in taking responsibility for promoting lifelong learning. Following the release of the Agreement on the National Committee for Lifelong Learning in 2024 (Prime Minister, 2024), internal stakeholders and ministries have become more aware of their roles in translating the concept of lifelong learning into practical applications within their respective workplaces and contexts. For instance, ministries are now required to submit annual reports detailing their lifelong learning practices and initiatives (Prime Minister, 2024). During meetings on drafting a national implementation plan for lifelong learning, organised by the Non-Formal Education Department, representatives from various ministries and partners were invited to discuss and provide input on future action plans. Collaborative efforts have also been strengthened through agreements and guidelines on the sharing of expertise and teaching staff. Notably, partnerships have been formed between the non-formal education and technical/vocational education sectors (MoES, 2022) and between non-formal education and general education sectors (MoES, 2021).

MoES has prioritised building international networks to learn from best practices in lifelong learning in neighbouring countries. For instance, in 2024, the Faculty of Education (NUoL) conducted a study visit to Chulalongkorn University in Thailand to observe LLL teaching and learning practices. Both institutions are currently negotiating a memorandum of discussion (MoD), with the signing expected to be finalised by the end of 2024. Most recently, Lao educators and staff participated, both on-site and virtually, in the 3rd International Conference on Equitable Education: Reimagining Education, Co-Creating Lifelong Learning for Youth and Adults, held in Thailand (EEF, 2024).

3.2 BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

3.2.1 BEST PRACTICES

In Laos, initiatives to promote lifelong learning are implemented at the micro, meso, and macro levels, engaging both active practitioners and policy planners. These initiatives involve contributions from non-formal and formal education stakeholders. Some key best practices in promoting lifelong learning in the country are summarised below.

a) Integrating lifelong learning into the formal education curriculum

The basic concept of lifelong learning was first introduced to higher education students in 2017 through its integration into a course titled “Environment and Daily Technology” at the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos (FED NUoL, 2017). The university played an active role in piloting and integrating this concept into the teacher education curriculum. This process included sharing the model with its partner teacher training institutions and disseminating instructional approaches to lifelong learning. Over several years, the university has built a robust network for promoting lifelong learning in teacher education. As part of this collaboration, lifelong learning teams were established within each partner institution. These teams are responsible for promoting the foundational concepts of lifelong learning and integrating them into both teaching methodologies and institutional work cultures. Additionally, they are committed to sharing their practices and outcomes during annual year-end reflection meetings. The rationale for expanding lifelong learning through teacher training institutions is to maximise impact on communities. Teacher training students come from diverse regional backgrounds, and they can return to their hometowns upon graduation and introduce lifelong learning concepts to schools and local communities (FED NUoL, 2022).

After six years of effort, the integration of lifelong learning into the teacher education curriculum achieved a major milestone in 2023, when the Teacher Training Department of the Ministry of Education and Sports officially approved lifelong learning as a standalone compulsory subject for kindergarten, primary, and secondary teacher education curricula. This subject introduces pre-service teachers to the key concepts of lifelong learning and equips them with the essential skills and competencies required of lifelong learners. The subject is now taught across all teacher training institutions in Laos, preparing students at both higher diploma and bachelor’s degree levels to promote lifelong learning. Additionally, lifelong learning has been adopted as an elective course at the master’s degree level in the Faculty of Education at the National University of Laos and Souphanouvong University. This course offers students the opportunity to explore the principles and practices of lifelong learning as part of their graduate studies. Its content is also incorporated into courses at the Northern Agriculture and Forestry College (FED NUoL, 2022). Currently, lifelong learning initiatives are included in institutional strategic plans, with best practices and challenges discussed at annual year-end meetings. This dynamic approach has shifted traditional perspectives in Laos, where lifelong learning was previously associated only with non-formal education and seen as the sole responsibility of specific units. This model exemplifies an effective practice for disseminating lifelong learning across broader society through formal education.

b) Capacity building on lifelong learning

This component focuses on the government’s efforts to develop specialists in lifelong learning. Beyond integrating the concept into curricula, the government, with support from DVV International, has implemented short-term and long-term capacity building programs. For example, two government officials were sent to Germany as part of their PhD studies (MoES, 2019a; MoES, 2019b). These individuals are expected to play pivotal roles in advancing lifelong learning in Laos upon their return. They are anticipated to contribute to establishing a Lifelong Learning Centre in Laos in the future. Such

a Centre is envisioned to act as a focal point for collaboration with national and regional practitioners in international conferences, workshops, training sessions, study visits, and academic exchanges. These initiatives reflect the government's commitment to developing expertise and fostering a sustainable system for lifelong learning in the country.

c) Recognising lifelong learning as a national agenda

For Laos, translating the concept of lifelong learning into practices requires a combined bottom-up and top-down approach. Elevating lifelong learning to the status of a national agenda is an effective way to ensure accountability and encourage the involvement of all partners and ministries. In the Lao PDR, lifelong learning has been referenced in several government documents, including the education law, the Decree on Lifelong Learning, and the establishment of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning. These documents not only demonstrate the government's active commitment and acknowledgement of lifelong learning but also serve as key references for practitioners when implementing in their respective contexts. Recognising lifelong learning as a national mission unites stakeholders. Organisations require policy support, implementation guidelines, and governmental recognition to carry out their roles effectively. In Laos, active contributions from various partners and ministries are essential, as development tasks are interconnected and require mutual support.

3.2.2 CHALLENGES

Despite notable actions to implement lifelong learning, the Lao government faces several challenges that require careful consideration and strategic intervention. These challenges are categorised and presented in the following.

a) Policy implementation

One of the primary challenges remains the effective translation of policies into actionable practices. Although the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030 has been successfully developed, its implementation may require additional support mechanisms, including technical expertise, strategic planning, and clearly defined operational strategies. Developing a decree is a complex process but its implementation is even more challenging, requiring both political acknowledgement and active participation from all relevant sectors (Heilmann, 2021). According to the 2023 annual report of the Non-Formal Education Department (MoES, 2023b), although the Decree on Lifelong Learning was approved in 2020 and the National Committee for Lifelong Learning was established subsequently, implementation progress has been limited due to an unsystematic mechanism. Additionally, the Committee has yet to develop or discuss shared missions for implementing lifelong learning (MoES, 2023a). This issue may stem from the Committee's recent formation and the heavy internal workloads of its members, which have hindered policy-level meetings.

Existing educational development policies primarily support formal and non-formal education, while informal education approaches are underemphasised (MoES, 2023a). Furthermore, geographic implementation of the policies is uneven, with significant progress observed in urban areas but limited action in small towns and rural regions. According to the Non-Formal Education Department, the lack of monitoring and evaluation tools complicates the follow-up process. Additionally, there is poor coordination between educational providers and businesses, resulting in skill mismatches that hinder new graduates' integration into the labour market (MoES, 2023a).

b) Perception and understanding in society

Another significant challenge is the limited societal understanding of lifelong learning. Many stakeholders perceive lifelong learning as synonymous with adult education and see it as the sole responsibility of the Non-Formal Education Department. This perception is rooted in the belief that lifelong learning is primarily for populations who missed educational opportunities in the past or those who dropped out of school. During the present study's interviews, a key informant from the Non-Formal Education Department working at the policy level, stated that limited understanding among stakeholders complicates efforts to foster active collaboration and participation in implementing lifelong learning: *'One of the challenges I see is that the understanding of lifelong learning by other partners is quite limited; even though there is a decree on this work, others are still confused with how to implement it, this concern requires us (the Ministry) to think about a solution...'*

Conceptually, promoting lifelong learning should be a shared mission, integrated into the regular responsibilities of various sectors and stakeholders. However, according to the 2023 annual report by the Non-Formal Education Department, lifelong learning is often perceived as a responsibility exclusive to the education and sports sector (MoES, 2023b). This perception undermines its broader relevance and reduces lifelong learning to a theoretical perspective, offering optional educational services. Such attitudes contribute to the uneven implementation of lifelong learning initiatives across Lao society. Moreover, traditional belief persists among parents that formal education is the only pathway to quality education and successful careers. This leads to negative attitudes towards non-formal and technical education. For example, a representative from a mass organisation highlighted that parents often discourage their children from pursuing technical education, even when free programs are available: *'Even though we provide a free program on welding, parents are unlikely to support their children to study in this field.'*

c) Implementation mechanism and coordination

This factor refers to arrangements such as establishing a taskforce, defining implementation mechanisms, and ensuring systematic coordination. There is a pressing need to establish taskforces, such as dedicated lifelong learning committees within each ministry, to act on behalf of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and strengthen implementation mechanisms. Without such designated bodies, the effective management, coordination, and execution of lifelong learning initiatives are unlikely to be fully realised.

d) Lacking linkages between formal and non-formal education, and informal learning as well as an RVA system

In Laos, one of the significant challenges is the lack of clear mechanisms to link different learning systems and to ensure RVA of learning outcomes across these systems. Learners from informal education often face difficulties in continuing their studies within non-formal or formal education settings due to the absence of an RVA system for prior learning outcomes (Heilmann, 2021). Another challenge concerns the quality assurance of education. Among the three modalities, only the formal education system is covered by the National Qualifications Framework. In contrast, the non-formal and informal education systems lack clear and standardised quality benchmarks.

e) Lack of capacity and human resources

This challenge pertains to the availability of competent professionals and teams to promote lifelong learning. In Laos, trainers and technical staff working in NFECs and CLCs often come from diverse educational backgrounds, most of which are rooted in formal education. Lacking expertise in the specific features of non-formal and informal education, these professionals tend to rely on methods and approaches designed for formal education. Consequently, the capacity of human

resources in non-formal education is often insufficient, which presents obstacles in delivering effective educational services to target populations. Discussions with the Acting Head of the Department of Non-Formal Education revealed that in-service trainers at many CLCs and NFECs have not undergone full professional development programs. Only a few centres, primarily those with direct donor support, provide capacity building opportunities for their staff.

Interview data indicates that the readiness of human resources is limited. Many staff members have educational backgrounds in fields unrelated to adult education, which hinders their understanding of effective methods for delivering educational activities. This issue is reflected in the following statement from a key informant: *'I would say that one of the challenges I have observed is that many of the staff members at our centre graduated in different majors, which are non-educational specialisations. As a result, they face barriers in understanding methods of providing educational services.'* Moreover, several Non-Formal and Community Learning Centres face a persistent shortage of staff. For some, the lack of trainers necessitates hiring external personnel, which adds financial strain. This challenge impacts adult learners as they often face higher fees. A key informant explained: *'At our centre, we encounter a shortage of trainers, so we need to hire external trainers, which results in trainees paying higher course fees.'*

f) Budget and financing

The limited available budget is a significant challenge for Laos in promoting lifelong learning. Collaborative projects focusing on non-formal and informal education are scarce (MoES, 2023a). Furthermore, annual fiscal reports reveal that the allocated budget for the non-formal education sector is consistently limited, with most government investments directed toward formal education. Therefore, the implementation of lifelong learning activities is heavily reliant on donor support. Many initiatives are only possible with external financial assistance from collaborative projects, as highlighted by the following quotes: *'Our vocational training programs have been running continuously since 2019 because we have a sponsor who takes care of our funding'*; and: *'We have plans, courses, and know who our target groups are, but our activities are stuck due to a lack of financial support'*.

The lack of financial resources continues to pose a major obstacle for numerous NFECs and CLCs in fulfilling their missions. According to the Non-Formal Education Department, this challenge may also stem from unclear strategies for implementing lifelong learning among practitioners (MoES, 2023b).

g) Limited access to lifelong learning

Currently, high dropout rates across various levels of education, combined with limited transition pathways of basic education graduates to vocational or professional training programs, pose a significant challenge. Moreover, access to education remains inequitable, particularly for ethnic minority groups residing in remote areas, where participation in lower and upper secondary education is notably low. These issues represent substantial barriers to the effective promotion of lifelong learning in Laos (MoES, 2025).

h) Learning approaches, content, and materials for lifelong learning

According to the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030, one of the key challenges in advancing lifelong learning in Laos is the limited availability and diversity of learning approaches. Opportunities for professional training and skills development are insufficient and often misaligned with the needs of socio-economic development. Additionally, there is a lack of robust support mechanisms and accessible resources for learners. The development and improvement of educational materials, such as textbooks and other learning resources, remain inadequate to meet the diverse and evolving learning needs of the population (MoES, 2025).

IV RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen the implementation of lifelong learning and ensure the translation of existing policies into action and address identified challenges, attention must be given to the following considerations:

- ***Ensuring policy implementation***

The National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030 represents a promising framework for translating lifelong learning policies into practice. The plan outlines clear objectives, strategic directions, expected outcomes, implementation schemes, and priority focus areas, accompanied by specific indicators. Notably, it also introduces mechanisms for effective implementation. However, to ensure the successful and comprehensive execution of lifelong learning across sectors and among all relevant stakeholders, it is essential that the National Committee for Lifelong Learning operates actively and fulfils its designated responsibilities. This includes, for instance, the development and enforcement of a robust system for monitoring, evaluation, and continuous reflection.

- ***Ensuring a deep understanding of lifelong learning among stakeholders***

Following the release of the Decree on Lifelong Learning in 2020, many stakeholders, including senior government officials and professionals, remain to be introduced to the Decree's content. Without widespread dissemination, key actors may lack a clear understanding of lifelong learning, fail to integrate the concept into their work, and miss opportunities to contribute to the shared commitment of promoting lifelong learning. To address this, the Ministry of Education and Sports, as the lead agency, must prioritise disseminating the Decree on Lifelong Learning to wider audiences. Two immediate actions are:

1) Organising meetings to disseminate the Decree of Lifelong Learning to provincial governors. Engaging provincial governors is critical, as they are closely connected to local communities and possess valuable insights into local contexts. By empowering governors with an understanding of lifelong learning, they can champion its implementation within their realms of responsibility and help introduce the concept to local units and target populations. As emphasised by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, local governments play a pivotal role in translating policy into action by addressing the learning needs of their communities (UIL, 2022).

2) Hosting the first policy dialogue on lifelong learning. This platform could facilitate discussions among policy makers from various ministries and units. Attendees could collaboratively determine strategies to integrate lifelong learning into their institutions and organisations. The dialogue can also provide opportunities for stakeholders to share experiences, best practices, and challenges in promoting lifelong learning. Ultimately, fostering a shared understanding among all ministries will ensure the acknowledgement and integration of lifelong learning into their policies and regular activities. These actions are vital for cultivating a workplace culture of lifelong learning, which can support ministries in adapting to a rapidly changing world. By embedding lifelong learning into human resource development strategies, ministries can enhance individual and team learning at all organisational levels.

▪ ***Establishing key mechanisms and coordination***

While lifelong learning is recognised as a national agenda in Laos, supported by foundational documents such as the Decree on Lifelong Learning and the establishment of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning, additional mechanisms are required to ensure active participation and a shared mission across ministries. It is recommended that each ministry establish a dedicated committee for lifelong learning. Given the cross-cutting and broad nature of lifelong learning, these committees could serve as working teams to facilitate their respective ministries' contributions to lifelong learning initiatives. Key responsibilities of these committees would include:

- Coordinating with affiliated offices, departments, and local authorities on lifelong learning-related tasks
- Organising meetings, preparing reports, and sharing notifications as part of follow-up and monitoring efforts
- Providing administrative support to the National Committee for Lifelong Learning

Moreover, these committees should engage in regular communication and information exchange with one another on behalf of their respective ministries. This collaborative structure would ensure the functionality and effectiveness of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning. Without such mechanisms, the National Committee may struggle to fulfill its mission, particularly in preparing a framework for monitoring and evaluation. As noted by the UNESCO Institution for Lifelong Learning (2022), effective monitoring and evaluation is crucial for supporting the implementation of lifelong learning policies.

▪ ***Linking formal education and non-formal education systems***

Promoting lifelong learning requires active coordination and collaboration among different education and training systems, including formal, non-formal and informal modalities. Such joint commitment facilitates diverse learning pathways, allowing target learners greater access to their preferred learning options. Theoretically, a lifelong learning system encompasses all stages of education and employs various learning modalities (OECD, 2001). Ideally, all forms of learning should be recognised as equally important, avoiding the exclusive acknowledgement of formal education as the sole legitimate learning pathway. To enhance the provision of multiple and flexible learning pathways, it is essential to link different education systems. This would grant learners autonomy to acquire skills and knowledge, especially by enabling smooth transitions from one system to another (ILO, 2019). Well-defined collaboration among systems not only reflects an understanding of their roles in promoting lifelong learning but also serves as a starting point for academic exchanges and the sharing of experiences. One best practice example in Laos involves a governmental agreement to share human resources between non-formal, general, and vocational education. For example, teachers from general or vocational education programs contribute to literacy equivalency programs and basic vocational training organised by non-formal education providers. Linking these systems can foster supportive policies for developing flexible learning environments, updating programs, and ensuring their alignment with labour market needs at both local and national levels (OECD, 2019). Additionally, creating these linkages sets the stage for discussions on transfer requirements to enhance learning pathways and prepare for the establishment of an RVA system.

▪ ***Establishing an RVA system***

The present study highlights that the recognition of prior learning outcomes is a critical challenge in Laos. Learners from informal education often face barriers when transitioning to the non-formal education system or transferring their learning outcomes to formal education. To address this issue, the Lao government should prioritise establishing an RVA system to recognise individuals' prior knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through various forms of learning. Such a system would

enable effective implementation of lifelong learning by providing clear pathways for transition and validation of prior experiences. UIL emphasises that an RVA system is a cornerstone for realising lifelong learning, as it boosts learners' motivation and self-esteem, enabling them to make informed decisions about further studies (UIL, 2024). Additionally, an RVA system can engage target groups in the informal economy, connecting them to flexible learning and training systems.

- ***Ensuring access to, multiple learning approaches, content, and materials for lifelong learning***

The establishment of a Centre for Lifelong Learning represents a strategic initiative to potentially expand access to and participation in lifelong learning through a wide range of activities. These may include research, inter-agency coordination, prior learning assessment, certification, skills training, and on-the-job training. Such a Centre could serve as a hub for integrating formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities, thereby responding more effectively to the diverse needs of learners across all age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Fostering collaboration with national, regional and international partners and stakeholders would be essential to ensure that the Centre is inclusive, responsive, and aligned with global standards and best practices in lifelong learning. The proposed Centre for Lifelong Learning would serve as a key mechanism for operationalising the government's Decree on Lifelong Learning, while simultaneously strengthening the provision of academic services in the fields of adult and non-formal education. Furthermore, it could play a vital consultative role in the review and revision of curricula and other training programs, ensuring their relevance, responsiveness and alignment with both national development priorities and the evolving needs of learners.

- ***Seeking capacity building opportunities and funding***

Establishing partnerships and networks is a strategic approach to enhancing capacity building and securing funding for lifelong learning initiatives. Domestic and international partnerships are critical to support implementation, enable stakeholders to share best practices, exchange expertise, and foster mutual learning. For instance, the deployment of experts across institutions or partner organisations serves as a valuable mechanism for capacity development. Such collaborative efforts not only strengthen institutional capabilities but also promote innovation and sustainability in the delivery of lifelong learning programs. Partnerships should actively engage local government bodies and grassroots units, including CLCs, district and provincial educational personnel, and schoolteachers. A collaborative approach facilitates the rapid dissemination of lifelong learning initiatives and expands access opportunities for target populations.

The government should also consider collaboration with private organisations which could contribute critical resources such as financial support, human capital, and community access capabilities. As previously noted, the successful promotion of lifelong learning depends heavily on sustainable funding mechanisms. Reliance solely on state budget allocation is insufficient. Therefore, mobilising external financial support, through grants, donations, and international development assistance, is crucial to ensuring the long-term viability and effectiveness of initiatives. These resources are essential for increasing investment in education, particularly for marginalised and underserved populations. As emphasised by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning: 'Making (lifelong learning) a reality for all is a collective effort that requires a participatory approach, representing the interests of all groups of society' (UIL, 2022, p. 126). In this regard, it is crucial for the government to maintain close contact and build networks with regional and international partners, including non-governmental organisations.

4.2 CONCLUSION

This qualitative research, focusing on the case study of Laos, reveals that the country has made notable progress in implementing lifelong learning due to strong political will and the presence of robust policies. Best practices in promoting lifelong learning in Laos include:

- 1) Recognising lifelong learning as a national agenda, with determined participation from all internal stakeholders
- 2) Integrating the concept into teacher education programs and disseminating it to wider audiences through formal institutions, such as teacher training institutions
- 3) Strengthening capacity building initiatives for government officials, particularly educators, institutional teams, and teachers

However, challenges remain, including issues related to policy implementation, societal perceptions and understanding of lifelong learning, structural limitations, a lack of competent human resources, and inadequate budgetary support.

To further realise lifelong learning in Laos, the Ministry of Education and Sports as the primary stakeholder, must prioritise translating existing policies into actionable strategies, ensuring coherence and alignment between policy and practice. Additionally, developing clear mechanisms for implementation as well as monitoring, evaluation and learning from past experiences will be essential. Promoting lifelong learning cannot rely on a single approach. It is necessary to analyse the relevant contexts and engage individuals and units across affiliated sectors in the implementation process. Moreover, successful promotion of lifelong learning is unattainable without robust partnerships and networks with regional and international development partners.

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CHAPTER IV d

COUNTRY CASE STUDY THAILAND

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Chapter IV d – COUNTRY CASE STUDY THAILAND

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I. COUNTRY OVERVIEW

1.1 METHODOLOGY OF PRESENT COUNTRY STUDY

The information used in this case study of Thailand was collected via various methodologies: document analysis, interviews with several experts in the field, and focus group discussions. The experts' names and interview questions can be found in Appendices D and F.

1.2 GEOGRAPHY

The area of Thailand consists of 513,000 square kilometres. The country generally has good soil and a monsoon climate. Thailand's suitability for wet-rice agriculture attracted settlers prior to and during the nation's early history (Ishii, 1978). Thailand borders Myanmar (Burma) to the west, Laos to the north and northeast, Cambodia to the east and south of Isan (the northeast), and Malaysia to the very south. Much of the northeastern border is formed by the Mekong River. Most boundaries are the result of treaties imposed on Siam and its neighbours by the United Kingdom and France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Thailand is the fourth largest country of Southeast Asia with a current population of 66.05 million people, with considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. Topography and water drainage divide Thailand into four natural regions. The southern region consists chiefly of a long peninsula called the Isthmus of Kra, which it shares with Myanmar to the west. There is a long coastline on the Andaman Sea (Indian Ocean) and one on the Gulf of Thailand. Thailand has 1,430 islands, contributing to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. Trade routes across the peninsula contributed to the early development of this region. The terrain is mainly rolling and mountainous. Natural resources include forest products, metals, rubber, oil, and natural gas. The country has a humid tropical climate. Monsoons are an important weather factor. In the summer, warm humid air arrives from the southwest with much rainfall. From November through January, cool dry air arrives from the north and northeast.

Thailand is fortunate to have extensive fertile land, which has been and continues to be used to produce rice, other crops, and fruit trees. Large annual exports of rice have given Thailand the name "rice bowl of Asia" (Ishii 1978). Each year Thailand is the world's number one rice exporter or at least among the top three. Thailand is one of the world's lowest importers of food.

A large agricultural population has been a source of cheap labour for urban manufacturing and other Thai industries. Thousands of Thai workers are employed abroad as guest workers in the Middle East and elsewhere. Their remittances contribute significantly to the Thai economy and balance of payments. In earlier centuries, this large resource of manpower made the state the dominant military power in Southeast Asia. Fish are a basic part of the diet of agricultural villagers, and fish and shrimp exports are globally significant. Forests have in the past been a prominent natural resource for villagers. For the central government, historically, forests provided valuable exports chiefly to China and included elephant tusks, spices, gems, precious metals, and other items. During the decades since

World War II, forest lands have provided a major place for thousands of farm families to carve out a livelihood. In 1993, when forests constituted less than 25 per cent of the kingdom's total land, a ban on logging was imposed.

1.3 DEMOGRAPHICS

Thailand has conducted national censuses at 10-year intervals for the past ten decades. The nation's annual population growth rate has significantly declined over time. Between 2000 and 2010, the growth rate was 0.6 per cent, a stark contrast to the 3.5 per cent recorded in the 1960s before the implementation of family planning. The period between 2010 and 2020 showed a continued trend of low population growth, with figures indicating a further decrease, highlighting an aging society. Data on population growth rates are available from the National Statistical Office of Thailand.

Regional variations in population growth are significant. Bangkok and its adjacent provinces exhibit rapid growth, as do Phuket (a major tourist destination), Rayong (a key industrial hub with proximity to Gulf of Thailand energy resources, as documented by the Eastern Economic Corridor Office), and Chon Buri (including the Pattaya/Jomtien resort area). Conversely, regions like the northeast have experienced slower growth and out-migration, contributing to regional disparities. The northern and southern regions also exhibit varied growth patterns, with some provinces experiencing growth due to tourism and others due to industry, while many rural areas in all regions are seeing population decline.

In 2023, Thailand's population was 66.05 million, with a median age of 41 years. The average life expectancy at birth was 74.9 years for men and 81.1 years for women. Bangkok had the highest population at 5.47 million, followed by Nakhon Ratchasima at 2.63 million. Updated population data is available from the Department of Provincial Administration.

The total labour force in August 2024 was 40.39 million. This demographic situation has significant implications:

- **Aging society:** The declining growth rate and rising median age indicate an aging population, which places increased pressure on social security systems, healthcare, and long-term care services.
- **Labour force changes:** A shrinking working-age population may lead to labour shortages, necessitating increased productivity and skills development. Lifelong learning becomes crucial for upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce.
- **Educational requirements:** The changing demographic landscape requires educational systems to adapt, focusing on adult education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities. There is a need for programs that cater to the needs of older adults, enabling them to remain active and engaged.
- **Regional disparities:** The uneven population growth across regions highlights the need for targeted development policies and educational initiatives to address regional disparities and promote inclusive growth.
- **Increased need for digital literacy:** With an aging population, and the need for a more adaptable workforce, digital literacy is becoming an essential skill for all age ranges.
- **Increased need for elder care:** The increasing number of elderly people will require more trained care givers.

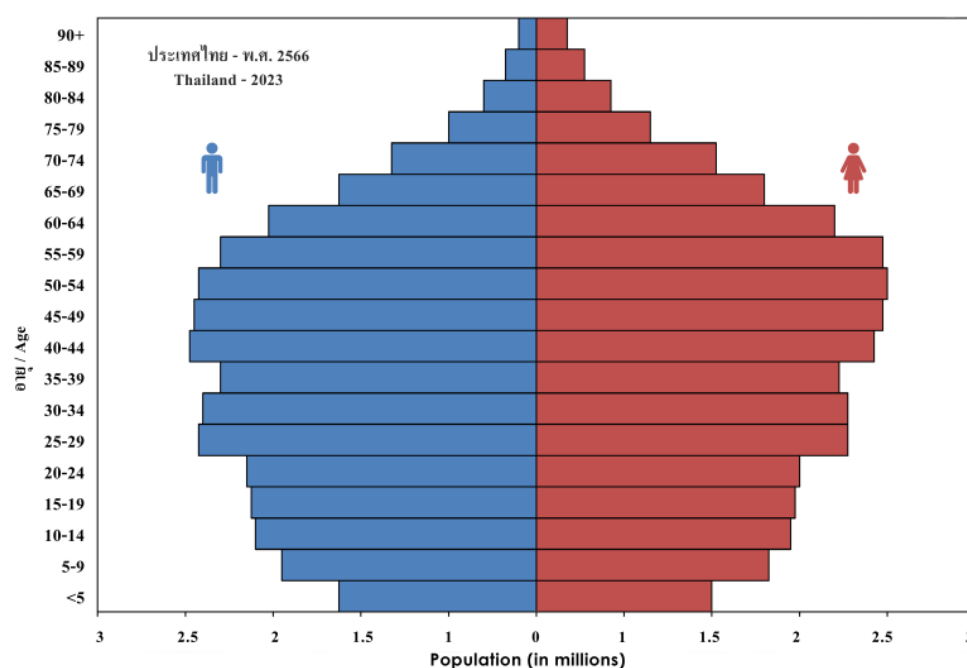
Lifelong learning is essential for addressing these challenges, enabling individuals to adapt to changing labour markets, maintain their health and well-being, and contribute to society throughout their lives.

Table 1. Population statistics table of Thailand

Total population of Thailand	66.05 million (2023)
Median age	41 years (2023 est.)
Population growth rate	0.2% (2023 est.)
Birth rate	10 births/1,000 population (2023 est.)
Death rate	7.9 deaths/1,000 population (2023 est.)
Life expectancy at birth (2023 est.)	
Male	74.9 years
Female	81.1 years
Main urban areas by population (2023)	
Bangkok (capital)	5.47 million
Nakhon Ratchasima	2.63 million
Total labour force (Aug 2024)	40.39 million
Unemployment rate	1.1%

The Bureau of Registration Administration, Department of Provincial Administration (2024)

Figure 2. Population pyramid of Thailand (age structure)



The Bureau of Registration Administration, Department of Provincial Administration (2024)

Thailand exhibits considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. While the national and official language is Thai, derived from the Siamese dialect of the Tai language family, numerous other ethnic groups and languages exist within the country. The Tai language family itself encompasses a broad

range of related languages spoken not only in Thailand but also across the wider region, including Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia, southern China, and Assam, India.

Historically, the Siamese dialect gained prominence, particularly in central Thailand, and became the language of government administration. The introduction of compulsory education in the early 20th century further solidified the position of Siamese, now known as Thai, as the national language. However, it is important to recognise that alongside Thai, various ethnic minorities maintain their distinct languages and cultural traditions, contributing to the rich tapestry of Thai society.

1.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Thailand's economy is currently recovering from the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2024, the economy experienced growth, supported by sustained private consumption, a resurgence in tourism, and increased goods exports. Updated growth figures from the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) for 2024 indicate a growth rate of approximately 2.5 per cent. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in Thailand was approximately USD 8,000.

NESDC presents key social indicators and significant trends in their 2024 reports:

1. **Employment:** The unemployment rate has slightly increased to 1.07 per cent in 2024, primarily due to a continuous decline in agricultural employment. However, non-agricultural sectors have expanded across all areas. Source: NESDC.
2. **Household debt:** Household debt growth has slowed in 2024, but household debt servicing capacity has declined. Key issues include debt restructuring for credit card borrowers and the proliferation of informal loans. Source: NESDC.
3. **Public safety and security:** Public safety and security experienced a downturn in the second quarter of 2023, with concerns including violations of children's rights and risks from public construction projects. Source: NESDC.
4. **Health:** In 2024, monitored diseases increased by 72.1 per cent, driven by seasonal illnesses. The Thai healthcare system provides universal health coverage through a public system, ensuring access to essential medical services for all citizens. While some private healthcare exists, the public system is the primary provider. Source: Ministry of Public Health.

Education sector:

Thailand's education system includes public and private institutions, providing education from early childhood to higher education. The government prioritises education, with a focus on improving quality and access. There are still challenges in rural areas, and regarding the quality of some public schools. Lifelong learning is being promoted to address the evolving needs of the workforce and society.

II. LIFELONG LEARNING EVOLUTION

From the structured interviews with different experts in the field, it results that adult education was officially introduced in Thailand in 1940 when the Adult Education Division in the Department of General Education of the Ministry of Education was established. Work on adult education and lifelong learning has been active since; however, there has been development along the contextual changes of Thai society. DVV International (2020) and Charungkaittikul (2021) indicate that there are six periods of lifelong learning development in Thailand.

2.1 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1.1 PROMOTION OF ADULT EDUCATION (1939 TO 1959)

The first era of adult education in Thailand took place after the country changed its education law in 1932. According to the 1937 census, 47 per cent of the total population (14.5 million) was illiterate. Attempting to enhance people's literacy and understanding of democracy, the government established the Adult Education Division to educate people, to teach them how to read and write, and to perform their duties as Thai citizens. Adult education targeted illiterate people above the compulsory education age of 15 years. The government provided systematic adult education management, with curricula, personnel, teaching-learning materials, etc. Further, the government launched literacy campaigns for adults with the idea of nation building in mind. Besides imparting literacy, these campaigns taught adults about their roles as citizens under the democratic administration and promoted national culture, according to the Announcement of the Prime Minister Office (No. 9: the Announcement of Adult Education Policy B.E. 2483 and Literacy Promotion Decree).

2.1.2 DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (1960 TO 1976)

During the 1960s and 1970s, adult education was widened based on UNESCO's concepts and community development. Post World War II in 1945, Thailand suffered from poverty. At that time, UNESCO promoted an education program called "Fundamental Education", to eradicate illiteracy as a cause for inequity and therefore a threat to peace. Around the world, there was a shared understanding that education can transform lives, but not everyone has equal access to it. UNESCO's role in setting global education standards was about building opportunities for individuals and communities. Based on UNESCO's concept, Thailand implemented a one-year curriculum for adults to become literate. Completing this curriculum was considered equivalent to fulfilling the requirements of the basic education curriculum, and graduates were able to pursue their studies at secondary level. The emphasis laid on promoting literacy and improving employability; encouraging people to conduct themselves as good democratic citizens; and enhancing people's standard of living

2.1.3 NON-FORMAL EDUCATION (1977 TO 1989)

From the late 1970s onwards, the golden age for adult education began, focusing on general education and vocational training to develop manpower as outlined in the National Economic and Social Development Plans, Volumes 1 to 7. The target were people outside the formal education system from 15 years of age to become literate and to think for themselves according to the *Khit-Pen* (thinking-ability) philosophy. This concept was initiated by Dr. Kovit Vorapipat and was then first applied in an integrated adult education project. The concept encourages people to analyse situations, identify problems, and seek solutions, and has since been applied in various educational and social development programs in Thailand. Knowledge was provided both via the general and the vocational education systems, in accordance with learners' needs and demands.

During this time, adult education focused on basic and continuous general education with content relating to people's lives in rural contexts, aiming to give them the ability to pursue their education beyond the basic level. Vocational curricula were developed to serve the country's economic growth. Towards the end of this era, there was a major change in the system: the Adult Education Division was transferred to the Department of Non-Formal Education. Hence, adult education became more structured in its set up – regarding content, management style, and targeting learners – and linked to non-formal education (NFE).

2.1.4 EXPANSION OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION SERVICES (1990 TO 2000)

Based on the previous systematic changes, adult education became important to promote lifelong learning and sustainable development. The National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999) led to the country's first education reform period from 1999 to 2008, and to the second education reform period from 2009 to 2018. From the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plans onwards, the Promotion of Non-formal and Informal Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008), the National Strategies B.E. 2561 to 2580 (2018 to 2037), and the Master Plans Volumes 11 and 12 have led to significant legislative changes in adult education. Adult education is a form of non-formal education that provides basic education for learners aged above the compulsory education age (15 years and older). This type of education aims to enable people to pursue their careers, become self-reliant, and encourage lifelong learning. Adult education in Thailand primarily focuses on the *Khit-Pen* (thinking-ability) philosophy, the prevailing lifelong learning concepts, learner-centred learning, self-directed learning, and the concept of education for all or mass education. For working-age adults (15 to 59 years), learning is geared toward preparing for higher education and developing skills for career opportunities. For adults aged 40 to 59, learning also focuses on preparing them to become active and engaged senior citizens. Learning management emphasises partnership networks.

2.1.5 LIFELONG EDUCATION (2001 TO 2015)

The transformation of non-formal education into lifelong education has its roots in the education reform aligned with the National Education Act of 1999 and coincided with the 21st-century learning trend that emphasises lifelong education as a cornerstone of learning. Lifelong education shifts the focus from content or knowledge delivery to providing opportunities for continuous learning throughout life, incorporating principles of education for sustainable development (as outlined in the UNESCO Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action). Lifelong education is characterised by the integration of formal, non-formal, and informal education. Furthermore, the Thai government's decentralisation action plan led to the transfer of village reading centres to local administrative organisations, and the Promotion of Non-Formal and Informal Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008) was enacted.

The Department of Non-Formal Education expanded non-formal education services based on the lifelong education concept, developing a vocational education management model more aligned with the needs of learners, communities, and markets. Examples include vocational certificate programs and sub-district vocational education centres. The Department developed learning models and processes emphasising scientific skills and methods, as well as a distance education management model, and created community learning networks to foster continuous lifelong learning. It also developed self-learning models using diverse types of media, established regional science centres, and implemented an education level equivalency system. By assessing learners' prior knowledge and experience, the Department supports the operation of Royal Initiative Projects, promotes wisdom-based learning, encourages democratic practices, facilitates community needs planning, promotes and supports development research, establishes NFE professional standards, develops a model for measuring outcomes and transferring knowledge and experience, accelerates the decentralisation of NFE administration, and develops systems for budget planning and results-based budgeting. During this period, the Department of NFE had a clearly defined role and mission in supporting lifelong education activities and adjusted the structure of its agencies and educational institutions to facilitate these activities, including district NFE service centres and provincial science centres for education.

2.1.6 PROMOTION OF LIFELONG LEARNING (2016 TO PRESENT)

Since 2015, the development of education in Thai society, including lifelong learning, has been significantly influenced by global development trends and educational concepts, such as the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN, 2015) with its Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on education, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Promoting lifelong learning encompasses education management and the organisation of learning activities for all ages, including primary, secondary, higher, non-formal, and informal education. Lifelong learning enables individuals to perform professions effectively, possess sufficient knowledge and capability to navigate life, and manage ongoing changes (Office of the Education Council, 2017). This concept aligns with the principles of the Promotion of Non-Formal and Informal Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008), which emphasises managing lifelong learning for all, and enabling participation from all societal sectors. Education management is to be conducted across formal, non-formal, and informal education systems, either as a single integrated system or a combination of these three. The educational structure in Thailand is being adapted to facilitate lifelong learning, evidenced by the expansion of educational pathways. The National Learning Encouragement Act, B.E. 2566 (2023), a central piece of legislation for strengthening lifelong learning, stipulates provisions concerning lifelong learning for personal development, economic growth, and social cohesion. To ensure the implementation of this Act, the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE) was elevated to the Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE). This Department is vested with the responsibility to organise, promote, and facilitate learning in three key areas: 1. lifelong learning, 2. learning for self-development, and 3. learning for qualification levels (Draft Article 6, Senate Go. Th., 2023).

Central to the National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023) is the government's obligation to provide education catering to diverse needs and to extend learning opportunities to those without formal education or residing in remote or disadvantaged locales. This necessitates collaboration between governmental bodies, local administrative entities, and private sector stakeholders in education administration. To fulfil lifelong learning aspirations, the enhancement of learning management mechanisms and structural components becomes paramount. The goal is to cultivate holistic individuals in body, mind, emotions, society, and intellect. These individuals are envisioned as morally upright, disciplined, cognisant of their rights and responsibilities, and deeply conscious of the significance of the nation, religion, monarchy, and democratic governance with the King as the head of state. This legislation emphasises instilling a sense of obligation towards oneself, family, community, society, and the nation (Charungkaittikul, 2023).

2.2 LIFELONG LEARNING POLICIES AND FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS (STILL IN EFFECT)

With the enactment of the National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023), the focus has shifted towards accelerating the development of foundational education to foster a learning-oriented society. This shift is driven by a transition from the Promotion of Non-Formal and Informal Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008). DOLE (formerly ONIE) is developing a content framework for a new foundational curriculum, aligning with the Department's objectives. The government emphasises the importance of enhancing the nation's education system to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed for a dynamic world. DOLE is tasked with improving educational opportunities for those outside the formal education system, applying non-formal education management principles.

The content framework for the foundational curriculum, established under the National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023), includes eight subject groups: Thai language, foreign languages

(English), mathematics, science, digital technology, career skills, health and arts, social studies, history, and civic responsibilities. This initiative involves developing a credit transfer evaluation manual, in collaboration with the Institute for the Promotion of Science and Technology Education (IPST) and relevant officials, based upon an equivalency framework and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The curriculum's design focuses on practical application, quality of life improvement, current events, and societal changes. Life skills are integrated to ensure alignment with lifelong learning, self-development, educational qualifications, and alternative learning modalities.

DOLE's educational management aims to benefit the public, supporting its evolution and promoting high-quality learning experiences. The Department establishes learning centres nationwide, catering to diverse needs, including certifications and educational qualifications from early childhood to tertiary education. The "Credit Bank" system facilitates credit transfers across institutions. Vocational skills training is emphasised to enhance employability and income generation. Life skills development is prioritised to improve public well-being, aligning with lifelong learning principles and utilising diverse learning sources. The Department recognises the importance of "teachers throughout the system", including formal, non-formal, and community educators, fostering collaboration at regional and national levels, with international cooperation.

The National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023) prioritises the development of learning, not solely the curriculum. Article 5 of the Act outlines the promotion and support of learning programs, learning media, learning processes, and other activities related to learning encouragement. This Act is the central legislation, and DOLE is the central entity for strengthening lifelong learning in Thailand.

DOLE is responsible for establishing sub-district learning centres, with a focus on accessibility, particularly in remote, border, disaster-prone, or challenging areas (Ministry of Education, 2023). District-level Learning Promotion Centres serve as educational institutions, coordinating and supporting community learning networks. They manage sub-district and local learning centres, facilitate learning promotion, and coordinate learning processes within their networks. The structure of DOLE is organised to ensure comprehensive support for lifelong learning at both national and local levels. Each of DOLE's divisions contributes to this mission as follows:

Central administration

- **Administrative system development group:** Enhances and streamlines operational systems to meet evolving educational needs
- **Internal audit group:** Ensures accountability, transparency, and efficiency in all departmental activities
- **Legal and regulatory group:** Offers legal support and develops policies to promote lifelong learning
- **Secretariat office:** Coordinates departmental operations and communications effectively
- **Finance administration division:** Allocates and manages funding for lifelong learning initiatives and community projects
- **Human resource division:** Focuses on building skilled personnel who can implement lifelong learning programs

Learning innovation and strategy

- **Learning innovation development division:** Creates and integrates innovative approaches to learning, including new technologies and methods
- **Strategy and planning division:** Develops long-term educational plans and aligns them with national priorities
- **Digital technology and information Centre:** Leverages digital tools and platforms to make education accessible to all

Local outreach

- **Provincial Lifelong Learning Encouragement Offices and Community Learning Centres (CLC):** Provide on-the-ground support, bringing education and skills development directly to communities

This structure is strategically designed to foster lifelong learning by addressing innovation, accessibility, and localised support, ensuring that individuals in Thailand can continually learn and develop throughout their lives.

DOLE's core mandate encompasses promoting: 1. lifelong learning, focusing on continuous learning throughout life; 2. learning for self-development, emphasising personal growth and skill enhancement; and 3. learning for qualification levels, providing pathways for formal certification. Learning for qualification levels is a significant duty of DOLE, as it provides clear pathways for individuals to gain formal recognition for their knowledge and skills. While the other two pillars are also important, the infrastructure and systems surrounding qualification levels are more established. However, DOLE is actively working to enhance the implementation of all three pillars.

Learning management units are required to engage with communities, collaborating with local experts, networks, and institutions to promote learning and transfer local knowledge (Nobnop et al., 2021). DOLE facilitates diverse learning opportunities and accreditation through formal and informal channels, including online systems, multimedia, and community resources like television, radio, museums, and libraries. This allows learners to accumulate credits and attain qualifications.

Effective lifelong learning promotion requires collaboration across all sectors. It is essential to consider the impact of digital technology, economic and social progress, demographic changes, and 21st-century skill requirements. DOLE aims to ensure educational management, opportunities, quality, and effectiveness meet national needs. Planning involves addressing educational challenges and considering global trends, focusing on concepts, visions, objectives, strategies, and the roles of relevant organisations.

To support these initiatives, DOLE may utilise traditional state funding and explore alternative models like public-private partnerships. Examples include leasing educational television channels, outsourcing science centre management, and partnering with higher education institutions for vocational training centres and library activities. These strategies aim to enhance resource utilisation and expand learning opportunities.

2.3 LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

Lifelong learning governance and stakeholders:

The governance of lifelong learning in Thailand has evolved significantly, reflecting broader educational and bureaucratic reforms. The Ministry of Education plays a central role, with

responsibility for national-level management, administration, and coordination of adult and lifelong education.

Historically, DNFE held these responsibilities from 1997 to 2003. Subsequently, the Office of the Non-Formal Education Commission (ONFEC) took over from 2003 to 2008. In 2008, ONFEC was restructured and renamed to ONIE, in alignment with the Non-Formal and Informal Education Promotion Act.

Most recently, in 2023, the National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 led to the creation of DOLE, replacing ONIE. DOLE is now the primary national body responsible for providing, promoting, and supporting lifelong learning, focusing on professional growth, community development, and educational access for underserved populations.

Key stakeholders in the Thai lifelong learning sector include:

- **The Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE):** The central government agency responsible for lifelong learning
- **Local administrative entities:** Play a vital role in implementing lifelong learning initiatives at the community level
- **Educational institutions:** Including formal schools, universities, and vocational training centres
- **Private sector:** Contributes through partnerships, training programs, and resource provision
- **Community networks and organisations:** Deliver and support local learning initiatives
- **Local experts and wisdom holders:** Transfer valuable knowledge and skills to learners

Effective lifelong learning governance requires collaboration among these stakeholders, ensuring that learning opportunities are accessible, relevant, and aligned with individual and societal needs.

2.4 STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE COUNTRY

Lifelong learning in Thailand is now viewed holistically, encompassing all forms of learning — formal, non-formal, and informal — throughout an individual's lifespan. Delivered through diverse providers and facilities, lifelong learning aims to meet a wide range of learning needs and demands. It focuses on developing knowledge, skills, and mindset, enhancing employability, personal development, active citizenship, and social inclusion.

While adult learning and education have long been present in the Thai educational system, the emphasis has shifted towards a comprehensive lifelong learning approach. This shift aims to provide opportunities for individuals of all ages to enhance their personal and community capacities.

The quality of lifelong learning depends on several factors, including:

- Effective administration and management by organisations
- Collaboration on programs and activities addressing identified needs
- Engaging learning content and innovative delivery methods
- Active participation of learners, organisations, and communities
- Robust follow-up and evaluation systems to assess learner achievement
- Adaptation to technological advancements and evolving policies

Ultimately, learning is a shared responsibility between individuals and organisations. In a lifelong learning society, dynamic learning activities are continuously fostered, where a supportive learning environment strengthens lifelong learning and vice versa (Charungkaittikul, 2023a, 2023b).

III. LIFELONG LEARNING IN PRACTICE

3.1 KEY STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

The primary stakeholders involved in lifelong learning in Thailand include various government agencies, educational institutions, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO). As mentioned in Chapter 2.2, DOLE under the Ministry of Education is the central agency responsible for overseeing lifelong learning initiatives. Other key Departments include the Department of Learning Promotion, the Department of Community Development, the Department of Agricultural Promotion, and the Department of Health. In addition, the private sector, including associations, banks, and state-owned enterprises such as the Electricity Authority and Water Supply, as well as higher education institutions like universities, play an important role in supporting lifelong learning initiatives.

With collaboration, those agencies, institutions, departments, and organisations effectively work together to provide quality and accessible education to all groups across the country. The stakeholders take on both shared and distinct roles within the scope of their responsibilities. For instance, when working on policy development, numerous stakeholders contribute diverse perspectives that have the potential to improve Thai education. Conversely, in the implementation of instructional activities or programs, these stakeholders are capable of independently managing the programs. The specific roles of the stakeholders will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

3.1.1 GOVERNMENT SECTOR AND ORGANISATIONS

In Thailand, many government sections and private organisations are involved with managing and supporting lifelong learning for any target groups. The table below presents examples of organisations that hold distinctive roles. More details can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2. Stakeholders in the government sector

Nr	Name	Role / Function
1.1	Ministry of Education (MoE)	The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing a comprehensive education system that supports lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens, ensuring equitable access to education at various stages of life (e.g., Adult Education Programs, Community Learning Centres). Under the MoE, the Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE) is mainly responsible for developing programs and promoting the management (see details under 2.2).
1.2	Ministry of Digital Economy and Society	The Ministry of Digital Economy and Society plays an important role in developing technical innovations for fostering lifelong learning.
1.3	Ministry of Labour	The Ministry of Labour organises lifelong learning programs to improve labour skills and competencies of the employees according to labour market demands.

Nr.	Role	Role / Function
1.4	Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation	The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation oversees public universities in Thailand. Additionally, it supports and develops the online learning platform, ThaiMOOC (Massive Open Online Course), in collaboration with over 100 universities. This platform provides opportunities for individuals to upskill, reskill, and acquire new competencies.
1.5	The Equitable Education Fund (EEF)	EEF has launched the community-based learning innovation and career development project, aimed at providing educational opportunities for marginalised and underprivileged youth and informal workers aged 15 and above. In cooperation with over 100 partners, they address the specific needs for vocational skills (more information under 3.2.2).
1.6	The National Science Museum (NSM)	The NSM, through its network of science centres and museums across the country, fosters life skills and scientific literacy by offering interactive exhibitions, workshops, and educational activities that are accessible to the public.
1.7	TK Park (Thailand Knowledge Park)	As a national public library and learning hub, TK Park offers a range of educational programs and resources to promote a culture of continuous learning, with a focus on empowering individuals to acquire new skills and knowledge, for example through digital platforms.
1.8	Public universities	Public universities have established lifelong learning programs aiming at enhancing the skills of their students and the general public. They offer a wide range of courses, online and offline, covering life skills, professional skills, and continuing education topics (for details, see Appendix B).
1.9	Local Administrative Organisations (LAO)	Local Administrative Organisations play a crucial role in promoting community-based lifelong learning and offering educational programs tailored to local needs. By building learning centres, they focus on marginalised and elderly populations in rural areas.

3.1.2 PRIVATE SECTOR: PROFIT AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS

In Thailand, the private sector also performs a vital role in implementing lifelong learning through various strategies and programs aimed at enhancing individual skills and competencies. Organisations focus on providing flexible and accessible educational opportunities, such as short courses, workshops, and vocational training tailored to market demands. They collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure that their offerings align with current job requirements, facilitating the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce. Additionally, many private institutions leverage technology to deliver online learning platforms, making education more accessible to diverse populations. This approach not only empowers individuals but also contributes to overall economic development by fostering a skilled and adaptable workforce.

Table 3. Stakeholders in the private sector

Nr	Name	Role / Function
2.1	Skill Development Institute (SDI)	SDI focuses on providing skill development and vocational training to enhance the employability of individuals across various sectors. It offers a range of courses, including technical skills, business management, and personal development. SDI collaborates with industries to ensure that training aligns with job market needs.
2.2	Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC)	TCC is a leading business organisation that supports economic growth in Thailand. It promotes lifelong learning through various programs for business professionals. These include workshops, seminars, and certification courses covering several topics aimed at enhancing the competencies of business leaders and entrepreneurs, such as entrepreneurship, marketing strategies, and leadership skills.
2.3	Bangkok International Digital Innovation Centre (BIDIC)	BIDIC focuses on digital transformation and innovation in education. It provides training and resources for individuals and organisations looking to enhance their digital skills. The courses and workshops that it offers cover various areas such as data analytics, digital marketing, and software development, promoting skills essential for the digital economy.
2.4	Education for Development Foundation (EDF)	EDF is a non-profit organisation that promotes education and training for marginalised communities in Thailand. The programs focus on vocational training, life skills, and entrepreneurship for youth and adults, helping them gain the necessary skills for sustainable livelihoods.
2.5	Saturday School Foundation	The Saturday School Foundation is a non-profit organisation dedicated to creating educational opportunities for everyone in Thai society. The foundation believes in transforming education by inspiring children to pursue their dreams and contribute positively to their communities. The foundation's projects include work on self-awareness, citizenship, language and digital literacy (see Appendix C for details).
2.6	Young Happy	Young Happy is a Thai initiative that promotes lifelong learning for senior citizens, aiming to enhance their self-development and quality of life. The program offers a variety of activities tailored to the elderly, such as digital literacy workshops, creative arts classes, and health seminars.
2.7	Banks	Thai banks also play a vital role in promoting lifelong learning in Thailand by providing educational resources and programs that empower individuals to enhance their financial literacy and overall quality of life.

3.2 COUNTRY INITIATIVES/PROGRAMS

3.2.1 INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS UNDER THE LEARNING ENCOURAGEMENT ACT B.E. 2566 (2023)

According to the Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023), DOLE has run many programs covering lifelong learning, self-development, and learning for tiered qualifications. Dole's 2025 Action Plan outlines several key projects to promote inclusive, sustainable, and innovative lifelong learning across Thailand (see also Appendix G). The following examples illustrate each area:

Table 4. Examples for programs run by DOLE

Nr	Name	Role / Function
1	Digital literacy program	This program mainly focuses on helping learners of all ages, particularly older adults, develop essential skills for navigating the digital world.
2	DOLE Variety	This television program, developed by DOLE, is disseminated through Education Television Station (ETV) and YouTube. It primarily shows local wisdom and highlights successful initiatives implemented by Learning Encouragement Centres in the community.
3	Empowering the elderly, fostering connections with the younger generation	This initiative provides a framework for promoting intergenerational lifelong learning between older adults and younger individuals, bridging age differences to foster mutual understanding and collaborative learning. Its ultimate objective is to enhance the overall quality of life and ensure equitable and appropriate learning opportunities for all.
4	Scholarship program for disadvantaged children in the Northern Highland Office (9 provinces)	This program aims to provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged children in the northern highland regions, ensuring access to basic education for those outside the formal education system.
5	Educational support for out-of-school youth	The project aims to improve access to basic education for individuals who are not currently enrolled in the formal education system, offering support for completion of their basic education and providing subsidies for textbooks.
6	Support for non-formal education	This initiative focuses on enhancing educational access from kindergarten through basic education, providing non-formal education students with resources such as textbooks, facilities, media, and services. These resources enable students to follow personalised learning plans.
7	Inclusive education for people living with disabilities	The project supports people living with disabilities by providing tailored educational resources, including facilities, media, and services, as specified in the relevant ministerial regulations. Students living with disabilities can follow individualised study plans to ensure they receive an inclusive education.

Nr	Name	Role / Function
8	Royal project extension and vocational training	This initiative uses non-formal and informal education processes to drive learning activities in rural areas across seven districts in three provinces (Chiang Mai, Tak, and others). It offers vocational skills training in areas such as electrical work, electronics, network maintenance, and agriculture, fostering capacities for increased income and local resilience.
9	Community Vocational Centre project	This project promotes vocational education and skills development to improve livelihoods and income in local communities. It offers training programs in various professions, with a focus on enhancing needed skills and economic self-reliance.
10	Sub-district learning programs	To reduce educational inequality, learning programs are organised at the sub-district level, providing local communities with opportunities for skill development and self-reliance. This includes the printing of educational materials and support for local education offices.
11	Non-formal education network support	This project enhances the availability of internet services for non-formal and informal education, enabling educational institutions to offer online learning opportunities to students at their convenience.
12	Non-formal education on public television	The project aims to reduce educational inequalities by developing educational television programs and online tutoring to complement formal and non-formal education. It includes a variety of support materials available on the etvthai.tv online platform.
13	English and language learning projects on ASEAN countries	This project produces educational content to enhance English language skills and awareness of ASEAN languages and contexts. It includes educational radio and television programs, as well as materials to support people living with disabilities, such as sign language resources for better understanding of the ASEAN context.

3.2.2 INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS SUPPORTED BY THE EQUITABLE EDUCATION FUND

The Equitable Education Fund (EEF) plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning by supporting programs aiming to reduce educational disparities and providing continuous learning opportunities for marginalised groups, particularly in underserved areas, through community-based, flexible, and mobile learning initiatives. These approaches aim to provide equitable access to education for all individuals, regardless of location or socioeconomic status. For example, CLCs provide educational programs tailored to the specific needs of each locality, promoting skills such as literacy, digital literacy, and vocational training. In areas where infrastructure is limited, the EEF has pioneered mobile learning programs to bring education directly to learners. For instance, the Mobile Classroom Initiative uses mobile units equipped with educational materials and technologies to deliver lessons in remote communities, ensuring that individuals without access to traditional schools can continue their education. Further, the Open Education for All program, which provides access to both formal and non-formal education through flexible schedules and personalised learning pathways, allows individuals to pursue education at their own pace and according to their needs.

3.2.3 INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS BY CLCs

CLCs serve as an institution that facilitates and supports the organisation of learning activities, the transmission of local wisdom, and the exchange of experiences among community members. Its aim is to enhance the capacity of community residents to stay informed and adaptive in a globalised society while preserving their traditional way of life and local knowledge. The operational principle of CLCs is to act as a mediator in knowledge management, by the people and for the people. Therefore, CLCs are distributed across various areas in Thailand. Each Centre implements operational approaches tailored to suit community members of all age groups in their respective areas, addressing specific challenges. The programs are often related to community economics, livelihoods, or the enhancement of professional skills (Community Development Department, 2023; Jantakot, 2015).

3.2.4 INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITIES

The higher education system and universities in Thailand aim to produce quality graduates and support lifelong learning for individuals of all ages. This initiative seeks to enhance the quality of the labour market and prepare individuals for higher education. To achieve this, many universities have restructured their internal operations to extend educational support to external individuals. For example, they have introduced a credit bank system, enabling the public to accumulate credits from elective courses that can be transferred in the future. Additionally, universities have reformed learning systems to ensure greater accessibility and affordability, shifted their perspective on preparing students from local communities to global communities, and transitioned from a closed to an open-access model of education.

3.2.5 INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMS OF THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR

The Ministry of Labour organises lifelong learning programs aimed at improving workforce skills and competencies to align with international standards. These programs focus on enhancing employees' knowledge, technical abilities, and work attitudes to ensure they meet the demands of the labour market. For skill development, a minimum training duration of six hours is required, while individuals undergoing career transitions are provided with at least 18 hours of training. These efforts are designed to equip participants with the necessary skills to excel in their respective fields.

To maintain relevance and effectiveness, the training programs are tailored to address business needs and industry demands. All sessions are conducted by qualified instructors, ensuring the delivery of high-quality education. In addition to technical skills, these programs emphasise fostering a positive work attitude and adaptability, which are essential for succeeding in a rapidly changing economic environment.

3.3 BEST PRACTICES

In Thailand, various organisations are making significant strides in promoting lifelong learning through innovative programs and community engagement. This case study highlights exemplary initiatives from different agencies, including CLCs in Tak Province, the Community Empowerment Program for the Elderly in Rangsit Municipality, the Chiang Dao Learning City, and the Zero Dropout Program by EEF. Each of these practices implements distinct activities, projects, and strategies for contributing to a culture of continuous education and empowerment across the country.

3.3.1 CLCs IN TAK PROVINCE

In the highlands of Tak Province, Thailand, many ethnic minority groups, particularly the Karen people, face challenges with Thai literacy, with approximately 3 per cent of individuals over 15 years illiterate in Thai. To address this issue, UNESCO, in collaboration with the Office of NFE and the Tak Provincial NFE Office, has launched an initiative aimed at improving basic Thai literacy among disadvantaged adults and young learners. The initiative targets 3,000 individuals across 125 CLCs in five remote districts of Tak. To enhance their learning experience, it employs engaging methods such as movies and karaoke songs. Village visits are conducted by motorbike, during which NFE teachers utilise multimedia resources to teach Thai through these creative formats.

A key component of the project involved training 26 NFE teachers and equipping them with multimedia kits, including laptops, projectors, DVD players, speakers, and microphones. This training empowers teachers to effectively deliver Thai language lessons, fostering a more interactive and engaging learning environment. As a result of this initiative, 4,613 learners, including women and girls, have improved their Thai speaking and listening skills. Participants have gained confidence in communicating in Thai, leading to a better understanding of news and increased access to information. The initiative's success has also garnered coverage from major Thai media outlets, highlighting its impact on community development and literacy. Overall, the CLCs initiative in Tak Province exemplifies a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning that leverages innovative teaching methods to address literacy challenges in marginalised communities.

3.3.2 COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM FOR THE ELDERLY, RANGSIT MUNICIPALITY

The phenomenon of population aging is becoming a significant global concern. Thailand, like many countries, faces a rapidly growing elderly population, which presents challenges for health care management and services. The increase in elderly individuals, particularly those with chronic illnesses, underscores the need for a well-structured health care system that can support their needs effectively. In response, Rangsit Municipality has implemented a Community Empowerment Program specifically designed for the elderly. This program aims to address the challenges associated with an aging population by providing a comprehensive and accessible service system for elderly residents.

Key aspects of the program:

- 1) Holistic health care: The program focuses on integrating various health care services to offer a complete support system for elderly individuals. This includes regular medical check-ups, chronic disease management, and mental health support.
- 2) Accessibility and convenience: To ensure that elderly individuals have easy access to the services they need, the program offers mobile health units and community clinics. These facilities are strategically located to minimise travel and provide on-site care.
- 3) Empowerment and engagement: The program also emphasises the importance of social engagement and empowerment. It includes initiatives such as community activities, educational workshops, and support groups that help elderly residents stay active and connected.
- 4) Training and support: Health care professionals and caregivers receive specialised training to better understand and manage the needs of elderly patients. This ensures that the quality of care provided is both effective and compassionate.
- 5) Family and community involvement: Recognising the role of family and community in elderly care, the program encourages family members to participate in care planning and support activities. Community volunteers are also involved in providing additional assistance and companionship.

The Community Empowerment Program has made significant strides in improving the quality of life for elderly residents in Rangsit Municipality. Participants have reported better management of chronic illnesses, enhanced overall well-being, and increased social interaction. The program has also been instrumental in raising awareness about the needs of the elderly and fostering a supportive community environment. Overall, the initiative represents a proactive approach to addressing the challenges of an aging population and ensuring that elderly individuals receive the care and support they deserve.

3.3.3 CHIANG DAO LEARNING CITY

Learning cities in Thailand represent a community-oriented approach that efficiently mobilises resources across various sectors to support lifelong learning for all residents. This initiative leverages innovation and technology to enhance the quality of education and to foster a culture of continuous learning throughout life. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has established the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) to assist local governments in devising effective strategies for the development of these learning cities. The learning city initiative seeks to mitigate challenges, such as unequal and limited access to quality education, by implementing local strategies that adopt a holistic approach, addressing the needs of diverse demographics and age groups. By providing comprehensive and accessible educational opportunities, Learning Cities aim to promote social mobility and work toward the eradication of intergenerational poverty. UNESCO identifies six key attributes that facilitate the transformation into a learning city:

- 1) Promoting learning from basic to higher education
- 2) Fostering learning within families and communities
- 3) Facilitating effective workplace learning
- 4) Encouraging the use of technology in modern learning
- 5) Promoting quality and excellence in education
- 6) Nurturing a strong culture of lifelong learning

These attributes reflect Thailand's commitment to creating inclusive learning environments that encourage education and personal development for all citizens, thereby reinforcing the importance of lifelong learning as a fundamental pillar of social progress (UNESCO, 2016). Several Thai cities have been recognised as members of the GNLC, reflecting their commitment to lifelong learning and community development. Notable members include Chiang Rai (2019), Chiang Mai (2019), Phuket (2019), Chachoengsao (2020), Sukhothai (2020), Phayao (2020), Hat Yai (2022) as well as Bangkok, Khon Kaen, and Yala, which were recently accredited in 2024. These cities have implemented various initiatives to enhance education and promote lifelong learning at the local level. For example, Chiang Mai established a Lifelong Learning Centre, offering programs in digital literacy and sustainable development, while Phuket launched the Phuket Learning Festival, an annual event that brings together educators, learners, and local communities to promote education for all ages. Hat Yai has focused on creating mobile learning units to reach underserved areas, ensuring that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible even to remote communities. These efforts demonstrate Thailand's growing commitment to integrating education into the fabric of local community development, fostering inclusive learning opportunities for people of all ages. Each city's unique approach reflects its local context, making them vibrant centres of learning and innovation.

Chiang Dao, also recognised as a learning city in Thailand, has implemented several best practices to promote lifelong learning within the community. As part of its initiatives, Chiang Dao emphasises accessible, inclusive education for all age groups through both formal and non-formal learning programs, tailored to local needs and resources. Different partners from all sectors participate, e.g., Makhampom Art Space (NGO), Chiang Dao Learning Encouragement Centre at district level (government), local schools, communities, and local enterprises (private sector). Each partner has created Learning Stations or Learning Centres which are open to all community members. At these, community members can participate in flexible learning opportunities that cater to different learning styles and schedules. These opportunities include weekend classes, evening programs, and community-based learning activities that align with local economic and social activities. Learning credits earned can be collected and transferred to the Chiang Dao Learning Encouragement Centre at district level, and local schools' credit banks. The city's commitment to lifelong learning reflects a holistic vision of education as a tool for sustainable community development

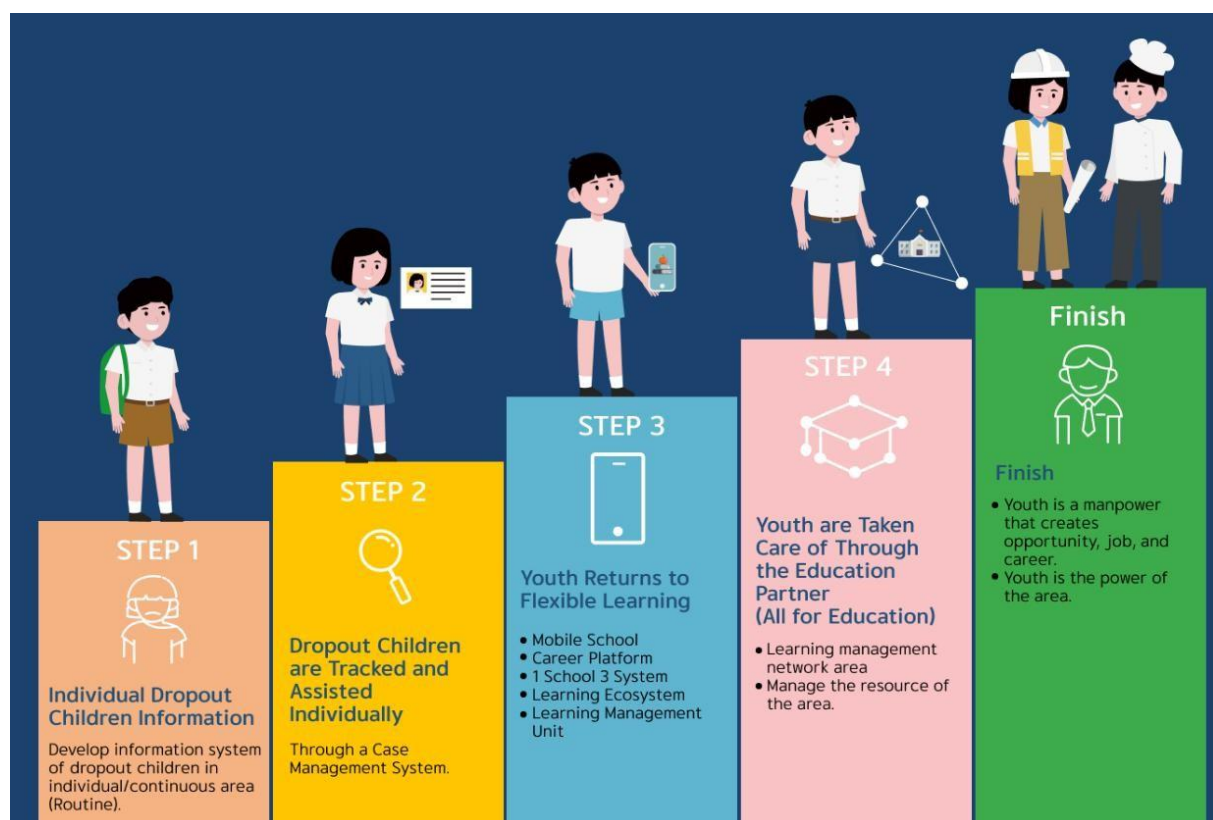
3.3.4 THE ZERO DROPOUT PROGRAM BY EEF

One of the key initiatives of the EEF is the Zero Dropout Program, which focuses on ensuring that all individuals, particularly those who have left the formal education system, are given opportunities to return to learning. The program is structured around five progressive steps that aim to address the root causes of dropout and reintegrate youth into the education system.

- 1) The first step involves the continuous collection and development of a detailed database about out-of-school children, allowing for targeted interventions at the individual and community levels.
- 2) The second step ensures that at-risk children receive personalised support through a collaborative network of multi-disciplinary professionals, including educators, social workers, and community leaders.
- 3) Step 3 focuses on reintegrating dropouts into flexible learning environments, using innovative educational models such as mobile schools, career platforms, and learning ecosystems. These models offer an alternative to traditional schooling by providing education through mobile units and online platforms, adapting to the needs of out-of-school youth.

- 4) Step 4 establishes a robust educational partnership network to provide additional resources and support, involving local learning networks and resource mobilisation within communities.
- 5) The final step emphasises the role of educated youth as key contributors to national economic and social development, ensuring that they become active and productive members of society.

Figure 3: Steps of the Zero Dropout Program



From Thailand Zero Dropout, by Equitable Education Fund (2024)

(<https://en.eef.or.th/por-portfolio-items/thailand-zero-dropout/>). In the public domain.

Through this program, the EEF aims not only to address the immediate needs of out-of-school youth but also to create a sustainable and inclusive education system that supports lifelong learning for all, with a focus on reducing educational inequality and fostering a knowledge-based society.

In conclusion, various organisations are making significant strides in promoting lifelong learning through innovative programs and community engagement. These case studies highlight key initiatives, including CLCs in Tak Province, which provide local access to education and vocational training; the Community Empowerment Program for the Elderly in Rangsit Municipality, aimed at enhancing the skills and well-being of older adults; Chiang Dao, designated as a Learning City, integrating continuous learning into its community development efforts; and EEF's Zero Dropout Program supporting youth to reintegrate into the education system. These organisations implement diverse activities, projects, and strategies, from awareness campaigns to community-based initiatives and the development of local learning infrastructures, all of which contribute to building a culture of lifelong learning and empowerment across Thailand.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1 REFLECTIONS

Lifelong learning in Thailand represents a significant commitment of the Thai government to fostering continuous education and personal development for all citizens. Anchored in the Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023), alongside numerous other initiatives by various organisations, these efforts underscore Thailand's intention to emphasise the importance of integrating formal, non-formal, and informal education. This integration aims to enhance the quality of life and equip individuals to adapt to rapid societal and environmental changes.

Central to Thailand's lifelong learning strategy is its dedication to developing initiatives and programs that ensure education is both accessible and suitable for diverse populations. Local learning hubs, such as CLCs and Learning Encouragement Centres, play a pivotal role in this endeavour. These centres offer an array of educational opportunities, including vocational training and literacy campaigns, specifically targeting marginalised groups such as rural communities and out-of-school youth. By addressing educational disparities, these programs empower individuals with practical skills necessary for employment and entrepreneurship, thereby fostering social equity and economic development.

Beyond community-based efforts, Thailand has actively embraced digital technology as a critical component of its lifelong learning practices. Recognising the transformative potential of these tools, the Thai government, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders, has launched e-learning platforms that facilitate remote learning. This digital transition has proven particularly valuable for individuals residing in remote areas, as well as members of the workforce with limited time to study or limited financial resources to pursue education in urban centres. Such innovations exemplify Thailand's commitment to leveraging technology to overcome geographic and economic barriers, ensuring that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible to all.

The above discussion clearly demonstrates that a robust foundation for lifelong learning has been established through various initiatives and programs. Nevertheless, sustained efforts are essential to further develop a more inclusive and accessible learning ecosystem. Lifelong learning continues to underscore its transformative potential, both in personal and professional domains. By fostering a culture of continuous learning, individuals and society can build resilience and remain innovative amidst an ever-evolving global landscape. Looking ahead, enhancing collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, and private sector stakeholders will be pivotal in reinforcing and expanding lifelong learning practices in Thailand.

4.2 GAPS AND CHALLENGES

While Thailand has made significant strides in promoting lifelong learning through various policies and initiatives, there are still considerable gaps and challenges that hinder its full implementation and accessibility. Addressing these issues is essential to ensuring that all individuals, regardless of socio-economic background, geographic location, or professional status, can benefit from continuous learning opportunities.

The first challenge is economic disparity. Many individuals, particularly those from lower-income groups, face financial constraints that limit their ability to participate in lifelong learning programs. While some government-funded initiatives exist, the cost of educational materials, digital devices, and internet access can still be prohibitive for marginalised populations. This financial barrier creates an uneven playing field where only those with sufficient resources can take full advantage of lifelong

learning opportunities. Moreover, the digital divide also poses a significant obstacle to the success of lifelong learning in Thailand. Despite efforts to expand digital infrastructure, internet accessibility remains inconsistent, particularly in rural and remote areas. Many educational and vocational training programs rely on online platforms such as ThaiMOOC, but individuals without stable internet connections or adequate technological literacy are unable to participate effectively. This digital gap exacerbates existing educational inequalities and limits the reach of lifelong learning initiatives.

The second challenge is a lack of awareness and motivation among some demographic groups that challenges the effectiveness of lifelong learning programs. In some cases, individuals do not fully recognise the benefits of continuous learning beyond traditional education. Cultural attitudes that prioritise formal degrees over skill-based learning contribute to this issue, discouraging individuals from engaging in non-formal or informal educational opportunities. Additionally, older adults may feel excluded from digital learning initiatives, as they often require additional support in acquiring technological skills.

Next, policy fragmentation and insufficient coordination between various stakeholders also hinder the development of a robust lifelong learning ecosystem in Thailand. Although multiple government agencies, private institutions, and non-profit organisations are involved in lifelong learning initiatives, there is a lack of integration and alignment across programs. This results in discontinuities, inefficiencies, duplication of efforts, and gaps in service delivery. A more cohesive and strategic policy framework is needed to ensure that lifelong learning efforts are aligned with national development goals and effectively implemented at all levels.

Finally, employer engagement in lifelong learning remains limited, particularly in industries where continuous skill development is crucial. Many businesses are hesitant to invest in employee training due to concerns over cost and workforce turnover. As a result, employees often lack opportunities for professional growth and skill enhancement. Greater incentives, such as tax benefits or subsidies for corporate training programs, could encourage businesses to prioritise lifelong learning for their workforce.

To address these challenges, Thailand must adopt a multi-faceted approach that includes targeted investment in digital infrastructure, financial support for disadvantaged learners, and public awareness campaigns to promote the value of lifelong learning. Additionally, stronger collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, and private sector stakeholders is essential to create a more integrated and effective lifelong learning system. By overcoming these barriers, Thailand can build a more inclusive and resilient learning society that fosters continuous growth and development for all citizens.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

5.1 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a national vision for lifelong learning to create a lifelong learning society where everyone has access to opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge, and potential throughout their lives, with a comprehensive and modern support system to accommodate changes in the economy and society. The following actions should be taken:

1.1 Development of lifelong learning infrastructure

1. Establish lifelong learning promotion centres in every province, at the provincial, district, sub-district, and community levels, working in collaboration with universities, local administrative organisations, and the business sector.

2. Develop artificial intelligence (AI) technology to analyse learning trends and recommend courses tailored to individuals.

1.2 Financial incentives and learning opportunity support

1. Establish a National Lifelong Learning Ecosystem Development Fund to develop and promote learning resources, learning media development, learning workshops, and the development of new career skills, including per capita budgets to support learners and learning managers in choosing to participate in learning activities according to their interests.
2. Establish learning credit accounts for citizens to accumulate free learning credits in government-supported courses and to allow for the transfer of learning across all learning formats.
3. Develop a lifelong learning coupon or a state welfare card for education. An Education Credit ID can increase the access to educational services, as the state can directly allocate government subsidies to everyone, especially vulnerable groups, allowing them to use the coupon or credit to choose to learn and train anywhere, including using it to collect learning credit information to apply for jobs and continue studying in the future. In addition, all sectors of society should be supported to participate in investing (monetarily and non-monetarily) to support the management of various educational paths that meet the needs of students. This may include tax incentives for social enterprises, private sector Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, and vocational training and employment establishments at community, local and national levels.
4. Provide tax deductions for organisations that encourage employees to learn new skills.

1.3 Development of curricula and skills that meet future needs

1. Modernise curricula to include topics such as digital skills, AI, and entrepreneurship
2. Support micro-credentials or short-term certificates to enhance specific skills
3. Integrate learning with work by collaborating with private companies in training and internships

1.4 Creating a culture and incentives for learning

1. Campaign to promote the importance of lifelong learning in Thai society through media and activities
2. Promote the development of learning cities and co-learning spaces in local communities to foster intergenerational learning
3. Develop lifelong learning promoters who have the knowledge and ability to be mentors or speakers in the community

2. Promote understanding of lifelong learning through a comprehensive strategy encompassing communication, education system reform, learning opportunity support, and collaboration to build a sustainable learning society. The following actions should be taken:

2.1 Communication and awareness raising: Conduct public relations campaigns on lifelong learning through mass media, online media, and community activities; incorporate content on the importance of lifelong learning into basic and higher education curricula; and support the development of open learning resources to provide free access to such resources for the public.

2.2 Education and training system reform: Develop easily accessible learning platforms that support personalised learning; encourage educational institutions to offer short courses and adult education programs that can be pursued alongside work; and develop mechanisms to credit non-formal and informal learning for transfer into the formal education system.

2.3 Support for learning opportunities for all: Establish a National Lifelong Learning Ecosystem Development Fund to support learning budgets for self-development, especially for vulnerable groups; promote the "Learn Anywhere, Anytime" project through learning promotion centres at the district, sub-district, and community levels, public libraries, and learning resource networks; and support organisations and companies to develop lifelong learning training and skills development systems for employees.

2.4 Collaboration and infrastructure development: Promote private sector involvement in curriculum development and educational resource support; and integrate digital technology and artificial intelligence to develop modern and responsive learning systems.

3. Reform laws and policy measures to ensure that the education system and labour market can support the concept of lifelong learning in a systematic and sustainable manner. The following actions should be taken:

3.1 Legal reform to support lifelong learning: Revise the law promoting lifelong learning to establish a policy framework requiring all government and private agencies to support learning opportunities for people of all ages; amend education laws to accommodate flexible learning, such as learning through digital platforms, learning through learning centres, and learning from work experience; and amend labour laws to include measures to support employees who wish to develop their skills, such as the right to paid leave for skills development and tax incentives for organisations that promote employee learning.

3.2 Promoting legal literacy on the right to lifelong learning: Disseminate knowledge on educational rights and lifelong learning through various offline and online media, digital platforms, and through awareness raising activities.

4. Develop a lifelong learning standards framework with the following features:

4.1 Equitable and equal access to learning opportunities: Support open education systems and alternative education and reduce disparities in access to education through digital technology

4.2 Integration of learning across all age groups: Promote learning from early childhood to old age and support workplace learning and community learning

4.3 Development of skills that meet labour market demands: Update curricula and learning content to align with economic and technological trends, and promote the development of digital and soft skills

4.4 Government support and multi-sector collaboration: Create a government support system through appropriate policies and budgets, and foster collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society

5. Establish policies for creating a fair, inclusive, and efficient lifelong learning system with the following key tools:

5.1 Promote flexible learning pathways: Develop open education policies to allow individuals to access education through multiple pathways, such as formal, non-formal, and informal education; develop micro-credentials and modular learning systems that allow learners to accumulate credits from short courses and transfer them towards qualifications; and support learning through digital technology and online platforms that can be customised to individual needs.

5.2 Transfer and accreditation of educational qualifications: Establish a National Qualifications Transfer Centre to assess and accredit educational qualifications both domestically and internationally; develop a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that aligns with international standards; and support the recognition of competencies in the labour sector, especially among workers who did not complete formal education.

5.3 Recognition of prior learning: Design a system for assessing competencies from real-world experience to enable learners to obtain certifications or professional qualifications without having to repeat entire courses; support the development of flexible curricula and assessment criteria that cover knowledge, skills, and abilities gained from work and learning outside the classroom; and establish a collaboration mechanism between the government and private sector to develop and utilise recognition of prior learning effectively.

The implementation of these three aspects requires the establishment of supporting laws and regulations to provide clarity and enable the effective implementation of flexible learning pathways (Flexible Pathways), the transfer and accreditation of educational qualifications (Equivalency & RVA), and RPL. It also requires the development of financial mechanisms, such as lifelong learning grants or lifelong learning coupons, to help people of all groups access learning opportunities; the creation of collaborative networks between government agencies, educational institutions, professional qualification institutions, and the industrial sector to align flexible learning systems with labour market needs; and the development of a central data platform to record and verify individuals' qualifications, competencies, and learning outcomes for ease of transfer.

6. Define strategic and action plans for lifelong learning that enable everyone to access lifelong learning opportunities to develop their potential and the country sustainably. Action plans should be developed in the following areas:

6.1 Creating educational infrastructure for lifelong learning: Action plans include developing digital learning centres in every province, supporting access to the internet and digital technology equipment for education, and creating a national lifelong learning data warehouse.

6.2 Promoting flexible and responsive learning systems for all ages: Action plans include expanding micro-credentials and recognition of skills from experience, developing open online courses (MOOCs) and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered learning platforms, and revising laws and regulations to facilitate lifelong learning, such as via cross-institutional credit transfer.

6.3 Integrating formal, non-formal, and informal education: Action plans include promoting the 3- system school model as a base for community learning, developing non-formal education curricula that are linked to industry and local needs, and integrating curricula between educational institutions, universities, and businesses.

6.4 Developing essential 21st-century skills and preparing for future careers: Action plans include supporting the development of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), AI, Big Data, Green Economy, and Soft Skills, designing skills development programs for all levels of the workforce, and creating a database of future occupations to help people plan their learning.

6.5 Supporting collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society to drive lifelong learning: Action plans include supporting workplace skills development programs, promoting learning communities using temples, churches, mosques, schools, and learning centres, and supporting private sector investment in education through tax measures.

7. Develop a unified governance and cooperation mechanism to promote inclusive, equitable, and sustainable lifelong learning. The following actions should be taken:

7.1 Establishing a lifelong learning governance mechanism: Establish a National Lifelong Learning Council (NLLC) under the supervision of the Prime Minister to set strategic policies, develop a Lifelong Learning Promotion Act to provide a clear regulatory framework, and create a National Lifelong Learning Master Plan that is linked to the National Economic and Social Development Plan.

7.2 Developing coordination and collaboration mechanisms: Establish a National Coordination Centre for Lifelong Learning (NCCLL) to connect relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, and the Ministry of Interior; promote public-private partnerships in developing training curricula and workforce skills; and empower local administrative organisations (LAO) to play a significant role in supporting lifelong learning promotion agencies at the local and community levels, such as district, sub-district, and community learning centres.

8. Define financial policies to promote lifelong learning (Financing for Lifelong Learning) to ensure equitable and sustainable access to learning opportunities at the individual, community, and organisational levels. The following actions should be taken:

8.1 Establishing a National Lifelong Learning Ecosystem Development Fund or a Lifelong Learning Fund to provide financial support to individuals of all ages, potentially using funding sources from the government budget, such as allocations from central and local government tax revenues, social security funds, alcohol and tobacco taxes, and from the private sector, such as tax incentives for companies that invest in employee training or public-private partnerships.

8.2 Developing a learning credit card or learning coupon system for individual citizens, which can be used as credit for short courses or new skills training, potentially as a conditional grant system, such as support for courses that enhance workforce potential, interest-free or low-interest loans to enable individuals to invest in their own learning, and a grant system for vulnerable groups to provide learning support to low-income groups, informal workers, the elderly, and people with disabilities to enable them to develop various skills.

8.3 Creating tax incentives for organisations that invest in employees, such as additional tax deductions for training expenses, and for individuals who enrol in government-certified courses, EdTech companies, and education providers that develop digital learning platforms.

9. Develop a monitoring and evaluation system as a key mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of lifelong learning promotion policies. The following actions should be taken:

9.1 Developing a transparent monitoring, evaluation, and supervision system: Define national lifelong learning indicators that align with international standards defined by, for example, UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and develop a Lifelong Learning Monitoring System (LLMS) to track the achievements of lifelong learning promotion policies.

9.2 Creating a Lifelong Learning Watch network to promote the participation of civil society and other independent organisations in monitoring lifelong learning outcomes, with an independent monitoring and evaluation committee to ensure policy transparency. Establish a system for public participation through opinion surveys on lifelong learning promotion in various projects, and develop a network of academics and research institutions to conduct international comparative studies.

9.3 Developing a long-term policy evaluation system to track the long-term impact of lifelong learning by studying the outcomes of participants in Upskill/Reskill programs and the lifelong learning skills of learners over a period of five to ten years, and tracking learners' career paths to measure economic and social impacts.

The promotion of lifelong learning in Thailand is not just a necessity but a strategic move to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge required to thrive in an ever-changing world. The implementation of the comprehensive policy recommendations outlined above will lay the foundation for a transformative education system that serves the needs of all learners across the country. By establishing a **national vision for lifelong learning**, promoting **inclusive and flexible learning pathways**, and reforming **laws and policies**, Thailand can build a resilient education system capable of adapting to new economic, social, and technological challenges. The development of a **lifelong learning standards framework** and the introduction of **financial policies** will ensure that opportunities are available to everyone, regardless of background or economic status.

Furthermore, the establishment of a **unified governance mechanism** and a **monitoring and evaluation system** will provide the necessary structures to ensure the sustainable and equitable implementation of lifelong learning initiatives. With these policies in place, Thailand will create a dynamic and inclusive lifelong learning ecosystem where individuals of all ages can continuously develop their potential. This will not only enhance the skills of the workforce but will also contribute to long-term **economic growth**, **social equity**, and **sustainable development**. Lifelong learning will be a key pillar in driving national progress and fostering a society that is well-prepared for future challenges.

5.2 STRATEGIES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

5.2.1 Policy and operational aspects of various agencies on lifelong learning in Thailand

- **Government legislation and policies:** The Thai government must establish clear and comprehensive legislation and policies to operationalise the lifelong learning concept. The **Ministry of Education** should collaborate with stakeholders, those with practical and theoretical expertise in lifelong learning, to develop and implement specific guidelines for action. This ensures that lifelong learning is effectively integrated into the education system at all levels.

- **Framework development:** Collaboration between the government and relevant agencies is essential for developing a **lifelong learning framework**. This framework should accommodate **formal, non-formal, and informal learning** pathways, ensuring flexibility and inclusivity across various education systems.
- **Responsible agencies:** Designate agencies at local, regional, and national levels to be responsible for promoting and managing lifelong learning. These agencies should be tasked with coordinating learning initiatives and encouraging **public participation** in education management, ensuring that lifelong learning becomes a national priority.
- **Capacity building:** To ensure the effective promotion of lifelong learning, it is crucial to build the capacity of personnel involved in education. This includes fostering a deep understanding of the **philosophy** and **concepts** of lifelong learning, along with developing the skills necessary for planning and implementing projects that meet the needs of local communities in a rapidly changing society.
- **Implementation support:** It is essential to provide consistent **support** for the implementation of lifelong learning laws and policies across all levels. Support should range from local initiatives to international partnerships, ensuring a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning.

5.2.2 Public awareness and accessibility

- **Diverse communication methods:** To ensure broad public understanding and engagement with lifelong learning, various **communication methods** and media should be employed. Agencies should use accessible, user-friendly channels to continually build awareness and invite the public to participate in learning activities.
- **Collaboration:** Promote **cooperation** among various sectors, including **government** bodies, **private organisations, foundations, local groups**, and the **public**. By fostering collaboration, Thailand can create a mutually beneficial environment for both formal and informal lifelong learning management.

5.2.3 Continuous monitoring and evaluation

- **Evaluation processes:** Lifelong learning activities should undergo continuous **monitoring** and **evaluation** to ensure they meet the needs of the target groups. Regular assessments allow for the identification of areas of improvement and the refinement of learning activities to better serve learners.
- **Inclusive access:** Efforts to ensure **inclusive access** to lifelong learning must include diverse methods to reach all target groups—especially **disadvantaged populations**. Activities should be designed to account for the specific needs, challenges, and contexts of different communities.

5.2.4 Credit bank system

- **Knowledge and experience transfer:** The development of a **credit bank system** will facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experience. By enabling learners to accumulate **learning credits** from various experiences, this system can link informal learning to the formal education system, and recognise professional standards across sectors.

5.2.5 Learning resources

- **Development and promotion:** Sufficient **learning resources** are essential to meet the increasing demand for lifelong learning. Local authorities should be encouraged to establish **learning centres** and leverage **Information and Communications Technology (ICT)** to support educational initiatives.
- **Digital Platforms:** In line with global trends, **digital platforms** should be promoted as integral parts of lifelong learning. These platforms should offer accessible short courses with certificates, and state infrastructure, such as **free Wi-Fi** and **tax incentives**, should be leveraged to make learning materials more affordable and accessible.

5.2.6 Teachers and practitioners

- **Expertise and enthusiasm:** It is important to encourage **experts** in various fields to share their knowledge and contribute to the education of others. Programs to **develop learning facilitators**—with the right expertise and enthusiasm for guiding lifelong learners—should be a key focus.
- **Policy improvement:** Policies governing **teacher education** and professional development should be aligned with the **needs** of lifelong learners at all levels. Teachers and facilitators should be trained to meet the diverse educational demands that lifelong learning encompasses.

5.2.7 Vulnerable groups

- **Scholarships and projects:** To ensure equal opportunities for all, special **scholarships** and **projects** should be developed for vulnerable groups, particularly youth and marginalised populations. These initiatives will empower them to engage in lifelong learning and skill development.
- **Specialised training:** Teachers and facilitators working with vulnerable groups or learners with **special needs** should receive specialised training to address these specific challenges effectively. This will ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background or abilities, can benefit from lifelong learning opportunities.

5.2.8 Curriculum and learning content

- **Skill development:** The development of curricula should focus on equipping learners with essential **skills**, including **basic literacy**, critical thinking, **communication**, **technology use**, and **vocational training**. This broad approach ensures that learners of all ages can gain valuable skills applicable to their personal and professional lives.
- **Gap analysis:** Collaboration with the **private sector** is necessary to identify and address **skills gaps** in the labour market. Online learning opportunities should be developed to fill these gaps, ensuring that lifelong learners can acquire the specific skills needed in the evolving job market.
- **Art-based learning:** In addition to traditional academic learning, **art-based** learning should be promoted as a means of enhancing creativity, problem-solving, and community engagement. Initiatives like **community art projects** and **free community art learning spaces** can help foster a more holistic educational experience.

5.2.9 Public awareness

- **Lifelong learning culture:** To embed the concept of lifelong learning in Thai society, it is crucial to create a **culture of lifelong learning**. National campaigns, **community outreach**, and organizational initiatives can raise awareness and promote the value of both formal and **non-formal learning**. Recognizing informal learning experiences will also help foster a broader acceptance of lifelong learning as a societal norm.

The strategies detailed above, drawn from expert recommendations, provide practical and actionable steps for bringing the policy recommendations (see section 5.1) to life. By focusing on **legislation**, **capacity building**, **collaboration**, and **inclusive access**, Thailand can create a sustainable and equitable lifelong learning ecosystem. With continued **monitoring and evaluation**, the success of these initiatives will be measured, ensuring that the educational needs of all populations are met, especially those of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. As Thailand embarks on this journey toward becoming a lifelong learning society, it is essential for all sectors—government, education, business, and civil society—to collaborate and invest in the necessary infrastructure, resources, and frameworks. Only through this combined effort can Thailand ensure that lifelong learning is accessible to all, driving both personal development and national prosperity.

5.3 FINAL THOUGHTS

Lifelong learning is an ongoing commitment to personal and societal growth. By addressing barriers to access, leveraging technology, and fostering partnerships, we can create a robust framework for lifelong learning in Thailand. Policies and strategies are only the start — cultivating a culture that values continuous education and self-improvement is equally crucial. Implementing these initiatives can empower individuals to adapt, thrive, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. It is all about making learning a natural, integrated part of life at every stage. Charungkaittikul (2023) pointed out that learning is a shared responsibility between individuals and organisations. In a lifelong learning society, dynamic learning activities are ongoing, where fostering a learning environment can bolster lifelong learning and vice versa. Community learning centres function as venues for such lifelong learning endeavours. In Thailand, these centres have evolved from village reading centres to comprehensive learning resource hubs, fostering learning atmospheres to meet learners' needs and improve their lives. They are currently transitioning to Sub-District Learning Centres or learning enhancement centres, a challenge that empowers local administration to drive lifelong learning. This integration aligns sub-district development plans with community learning centre operations, enhancing local participation, self-management, and educational service efficiency for elevated quality.

The exciting feature of the National Learning Encouragement Act, B.E. 2566 (2023) is that the Department of Learning Encouragement of the Ministry of Education will be the primary host in organising education for the underprivileged. Direct education will no longer depend solely on the government because local areas or the private sector will be linked to an education management network that supports the needs of each area. Hopefully, this will create cooperation in promoting learning between government agencies, local authorities, the private sector, civil society, and the public at all levels of education management to reduce inequality in education. It is an opportunity for all groups of people to access learning resources for self-development more widely and comprehensively. The success of implementing the Learning Enhancement Act B.E. 2566 (2023) hinges on several key factors: comprehensive and inclusive content, collaborative development across sectors, practical application, and effective public awareness campaigns. The Act's achievement is

contingent on clear comprehension and execution, encompassing individuals at all levels where CLCs could serve as local institutions for lifelong learning, performing important functions to improve access to education. Finally, to fully understand the impact of lifelong learning, empirical data is required, especially on the role of CLCs as hubs for individual learning and community development. Effective implementation of CLCs requires a stronger national commitment to linking policy and funding, as well as international collaboration and cross-national comparative research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: GUIDELINES FOR DEPARTMENT OF LEARNING ENCOURAGEMENT

1. Guidelines for Promoting and Supporting Lifelong Learning: In promoting and supporting lifelong learning, the Department shall operate with the following guidelines: (1) Encourage individuals to seek knowledge in subjects of interest and develop learning competencies by utilizing current information technology systems at any time for continuous and accessible learning. This should be self-driven and up to date, allowing access to several learning resources without undue financial burden. (2) Establish and develop learning resources to ensure that individuals can learn throughout their lives conveniently, without any restrictions or conditions that hinder learning or discourage lifelong learning. (3) Organize or promote the establishment of community networks or collaborative efforts within families and communities to cultivate a culture of reading and learning. Create initiatives that encourage reading and learning within communities. (4) Encourage and support local experts and community network members to participate in learning management and the dissemination of local wisdom, thereby fostering lifelong learning.

2. Guidelines for Learning Management for Self-Development (Draft Article 9) aim to develop potential, skills, and specialized expertise according to one's aptitude. This includes pursuing a profession, advancing in a career, enhancing the quality of life for oneself, family, community, or society, or the benefit of one's own knowledge enrichment. This learning can be certified appropriately. In organizing this type of learning, there should be a guidance system for learning and vocational development to enable learners to have the opportunity to be informed in advance or plan to align with their own aptitude. In promoting and supporting self-development through learning, the Department should operate while considering the following guidelines: (1) Employ any methods to stimulate individuals of all ages and professions to learn or train in subjects of interest or aptitude to develop their potential, skills, and specialized expertise. This applies to career development, vocational improvement, leading a fulfilling life, or collectively developing their own communities. (2) Promote, support, assist, or collaborate with the community networks in implementing activities according to (1).

3. Guidelines for Promoting and Supporting Learning for Attainment of Educational Qualification: Learning for Educational Qualification aims to provide learning opportunities to individuals who are of school age but have not received formal education, or those who are of school age but are not enrolled in schools, or those who reside in remote or disadvantaged areas, or those who do not have access to other educational institutions. Implementing such learning must be conducted to achieve the objectives and goals specified in the National Education Act, considering adjusting the age and duration as stipulated by the National Education Act to align with the learner's needs and providing reasonable guidance as permitted. Guidelines for Promoting and Supporting Learning for Educational Qualification: (1) Provide learning opportunities for target groups that have not received basic education, for any reason, to obtain basic educational qualifications or vocational education. (2) Learning methods and curriculum development or improvement must align with global development and learners' needs to allow learners to learn according to their aptitude. The Department and educational institutions should collaboratively develop and determine the methods and curriculum. (3) Evaluation for educational qualification should use diverse methods suitable for learners' differences and not solely rely on academic testing. In cases where children are compelled by law to receive compulsory education to obtain educational qualifications at a learning center

specified in this Royal Decree, the parents or guardians have fulfilled their legal obligation under the compulsory education law. However, in providing learning for these children, the Department must design a learning process, curriculum, and duration that aligns with the learners' needs. The Department and educational institutions must collaboratively design the curriculum and learning process to make them appropriate and effective.

APPENDIX B: KEY STAKEHOLDERS FROM GOVERNMENT SECTORS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

1. *Ministry of Education (MoE)*

The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing a comprehensive education system that supports lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens, ensuring equitable access to education at various stages of life. Examples of Activities: Adult Education Programs: The MoE implements programs that provide adults with opportunities to gain basic education and vocational skills, enabling them to enhance their employability. Community Learning Centres: These centres offer various courses and workshops tailored to local community needs, focusing on skill development and personal enrichment.

The main organisation under MoE that is responsible for lifelong learning development is the Department of Learning Encouragement. The Department of Learning Encouragement has the following mission (Department of Learning Encouragement, 2024):

- 1) Organise, promote and support lifelong learning. Learning for self-development and learning for qualifications according to the level of quality, comprehensively, equitably, and fairly without discrimination in order to develop learning skills and raise people's education levels to equip them with the capacity to be ready for a rapidly changing world.
- 2) Develop and produce curricula and learning programs, media and learning innovations, including organising the learning process, and measuring and evaluating learning outcomes with quality and standards in line with the learning management model, circumstances, and for the development of the country.
- 3) Promote the use of digital technology and modern innovations in organising and promoting learning so that people can learn anywhere and anytime.
- 4) Build and coordinate proactive cooperation with network partners and communities to participate in learning management. Provides facilities and learning resources so that learners can access all forms of learning, anywhere and anytime.
- 5) Develop a modern internal management system based on the principles of good governance and enhance the potential of all types of personnel at all levels to be able to promote learning and guide learning effectively as well as enabling them to create educational innovations. To increase operational efficiency and promote quality learning.

The Department of Learning Encouragement's mission indicates 12 operational foci (Department of Learning Encouragement, 2024):

- 1) Promote and support the co-creation of a society of lifelong learning. Develop a process to encourage people to acquire the habit of loving learning, being aware of the value and importance of learning, being interested in and pursuing knowledge regularly. Establish a social process that encourages individuals, groups of individuals, and communities to learn and develop continuously.
- 2) Promote learning management to strengthen security. Creating an accurate understanding of democratic governance. Foster learning that cultivates morality and ethics, builds discipline, public spirit, ideology, and adherences to the nation's main institutions, including learning about national and local history.
- 3) Develop and improve the curriculum learning programs, learning materials, and methods of organising the learning process with quality and standards in line with the country's circumstances and the changing world.

- 4) Provide a guidance system for learners, e.g., coaching, so that learners can discover their own learning path and life goals, and so they can adjust throughout the study period.
- 5) Develop a system for comparing or transferring academic results, skills, knowledge, experience and competencies to have standards linked to all forms of education and learning.
- 6) Develop a credit bank system that can link education and learning at all levels and types. Create cohesion and provide choices for learners at all levels for the sake of certification, and qualifications for further occupation or profession.
- 7) Develop a digital learning platform that supports the national learning platform of the Ministry of Education, including applications or digital media with comprehensive quality, and for various forms of learning channels, both online on-site and on-air for learning anytime, anywhere.
- 8) Organise, promote, and support STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to be more comprehensive. Focus on students to learn from active learning both in educational institutions and various learning resources.
- 9) Develop readiness to promote learning management, such as building the readiness of technology and communication of the learning management unit to cover the area of public service, as well as supporting cooperation in creating measures. Encourage the private sector to invest in education and learning.
- 10) Develop an operational model to promote reading for the public. Develop learning resources with an atmosphere and environment that is conducive to reading and develop the potential of image learning to occur widely and comprehensively.
- 11) Provide vocational training to strengthen new skills, upskill or reskill for the people as a tool to help people reduce household expenses and create supplementary jobs for their families.
- 12) Solve the problem of debt for teachers and educational personnel, and plan and build financial discipline for personnel by integrating working with relevant agencies.

2. *The Ministry of Digital Economy and Society*

This ministry highlights the success of its ICT. Thus, it plays an important role to lead Thailand into the 4.0 era by leveraging digital technology and innovation which enhance communication technologies to ensure equitable access to education for marginalised children. These efforts align with the mission of providing “Digital Lifelong Learning Solutions for all” and fostering an inclusive educational environment where every individual can thrive in the digital age. This results in another role of the ministry which is supporting projects related to lifelong learning.

3. *The Ministry of Labour*

The Ministry of Labour’s Department of Labour Skills Development focuses on enhancing labour productivity and meeting modern labour market needs. It organises lifelong learning programs to improve labour skills and competencies, and to ensure the workforce meets international standards. The Department provides training to enhance employees' knowledge, skills, and work attitudes, with a minimum training duration of 6 hours for skill development and 18 hours for career changes. Training must be relevant to business needs and conducted by qualified instructors.

4. *The Equitable Education Fund (EEF)*

EEF has launched the community-based learning innovation and career development project, aimed at providing educational opportunities for marginalised and underprivileged youth and informal

workers aged 15 and above. The project's primary objectives are to enhance access to alternative education for these individuals and to promote systemic change that fosters an ecosystem conducive to quality education and lifelong learning.

This initiative seeks to transform alternative education by developing tailored educational models that address the specific needs of its beneficiaries, particularly in vocational skills. By leveraging local social and cultural resources, the project aims to improve the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the target groups.

Beneficiaries are categorised into two groups: economically underprivileged individuals with education levels below grade 12 or those earning less than 6,500 Thai baht per month, and socially disadvantaged individuals affected by various socioeconomic challenges, including natural disasters and limited access to essential services.

The project adopts a collaborative approach, engaging over 110 partners, including public and private agencies, educational institutions, community organisations, and social enterprises. Together, these stakeholders share a vision of developing vocational skills and community innovations through community-based learning, ultimately supporting the empowerment and education of the target populations.

5. The National Science Museum (NSM)

NSM plays a pivotal role in promoting lifelong learning through its various educational programs and initiatives aimed at people of all ages. The NSM, through its network of science centres and museums across the country, fosters public understanding of science and technology by offering interactive exhibitions, workshops, and educational activities that are accessible to the general public. These activities are designed not only to enhance scientific literacy but also to engage people in critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative exploration. These make science both fun and relevant to everyday life.

For instance, the NSM organises programs such as Science for All, which include hands-on workshops and interactive learning experiences tailored to different age groups. These workshops cover topics ranging from environmental sustainability to digital literacy, helping participants acquire new knowledge and skills. Additionally, the NSM's Mobile Science Units travel to remote and underserved communities, providing educational outreach and engaging people in lifelong learning experiences. Through these efforts, the NSM helps cultivate a culture of continuous learning, encouraging people of all ages to explore new areas of knowledge, stay intellectually active, and contribute to a knowledge-based society.

By offering accessible educational experiences, the NSM plays a crucial role in Thailand's broader vision of lifelong learning, particularly for populations that may not have access to formal educational institutions. Its efforts contribute to a more inclusive society where science and technology are seen as essential tools for personal and societal development (National Science Museum, 2023).

6. TK Park (Thailand Knowledge Park)

TK Park plays a pivotal role in fostering lifelong learning in Thailand by providing an inclusive and accessible platform for people of all ages to engage in learning activities. As a national public library and learning hub, TK Park offers a wide range of educational programs and resources that cater to the diverse needs of the Thai population, including senior citizens, students, and working professionals. TK Park's mission is to promote a culture of knowledge-sharing and learning, with a focus on empowering individuals to continuously develop new skills, enhance their intellectual capabilities, and contribute meaningfully to society.

One of TK Park's flagship initiatives is the "Lifelong Learning for All" program, which includes a variety of workshops, seminars, and events aimed at promoting continuous education. These activities cover a broad spectrum of topics such as digital literacy, creative thinking, health and well-being, and career development, helping individuals of all ages acquire new skills and knowledge. Additionally, TK Park collaborates with local communities and educational institutions to offer resources and training that are relevant to local needs, ensuring that lifelong learning is accessible even to those in remote areas.

TK Park also utilises innovative technologies, such as interactive digital platforms and online courses, to reach a wider audience, especially older adults who may face barriers to attending physical learning events. By providing flexible learning opportunities and promoting a learning environment that encourages curiosity and personal growth, TK Park contributes significantly to Thailand's broader goals of fostering a knowledge-based society and promoting lifelong learning for all (Thailand Knowledge Park, 2021, 2023).

7. Public universities

Several universities in Thailand aim to promote lifelong learning for different learners and people. The details are as follows:

7.1 Chulalongkorn University

Chulalongkorn University has established a lifelong learning program aimed at enhancing professional skills. The university provides a range of courses, workshops, and seminars for working professionals, allowing them to update their knowledge and skills in various fields. Lifelong learning in Chulalongkorn University's context includes dimensions of study management, training and development of individuals' lives and careers in three areas: 1) continuous learning and self-development throughout life (lifelong learning), 2) in-depth learning regarding all subjects in life using all methods and systems (life-wide learning), and 3) in-depth learning through experience, varied lifestyles, cultures and local wisdom (life-deep learning). Examples of Chulalongkorn University's lifelong learning ecosystem are Chula MOOC, CU Neuron, CBS Academy, Chula MOOC Flexi (platform of digital and AI literacy), CUGS, MDCU MedUMORE, etc. These are teaching and learning arrangements in the form of training modules and courses, offered on-site and online. Chulalongkorn University also supports reskilling and upskilling of students and interested outsiders, including employees of various departments/organisations to improve the necessary skills for professional practice. Students who have completed the course requirements will receive a certificate of participation in the training or accumulate credits in the credit library system (credit bank) to apply for credit transfer when entering the university (Chulalongkorn University, 2021).

7.2 Chiang Mai University

Chiang Mai University promotes lifelong learning through its faculties and School of Lifelong Education, which offer various training programs and workshops. The university emphasises rural development, providing practical knowledge for community improvement such as:

- **Inclusive courses:** This project is performed with the goal of achieving lifelong learning for everyone in society. Learners can select any courses to study based on their needs and goals such as Skills 4 Life Courses, MEDEE Courses (Multi-generation Entrepreneur Development Educational Ecosystem), and Collaborative Courses. Learners can take collaborative courses from different faculties and departments at the university through MOOC, for which learners will receive a certificate of completion.
- **Reskill/Upskill courses** are short courses designed to improve the specific skills required for a respective profession and can be evaluated by precise standards. In collaboration with the

College of Lifelong Education, Chiang Mai University, there are several types of learning styles, including on-site workshops, online training, and hybrid learning (Chiang Mai University, 2024).

7.3 Mahidol University

Mahidol University has created an online course for continuing education through the MUX platform which provides a comprehensive range of online courses for lifelong learning. The courses cover various disciplines, including health sciences, social sciences, and the arts. The platform is designed to be user-friendly, allowing students to learn at their own pace. Additionally, Mahidol University offers workshops and seminars that focus on current trends and innovations, making it easier for professionals to stay updated in their fields. This platform serves as a learning resource that meets the needs of learners, allowing them to access educational materials anytime, anywhere. It saves time and eliminates distance constraints by providing an online teaching and learning system. Therefore, students can attend classes at their convenience. Easy access is provided, as learners can join classes using various communication devices. Students can choose the subjects they wish to study and interact with instructors through the Personal Message system on the MUX platform.

7.4 Thammasat University

Thammasat University focuses on social responsibility and community development through its lifelong learning initiatives. The university offers a range of non-degree programs aimed at skill development in areas such as public policy, business management, and environmental studies. It also organises public lectures and forums that encourage community engagement and knowledge sharing. The Senior Citizens School at Thammasat University, through its Lifetime Program, offers a distinctive approach to lifelong learning specifically for the elderly population. This program is designed to promote the continuous development of knowledge and skills in older adults, in alignment with the principles of adult education and sustainable self-development. By integrating the philosophy of lifelong learning, the program empowers senior citizens to remain engaged, active, and intellectually stimulated, thereby enhancing their quality of life in their later years (Thammasat University, n.d.). The Lifetime Program at Thammasat University provides a diverse range of academic courses that not only address cognitive and practical skills but also emphasise the importance of mental well-being, physical health, and social engagement. These offerings are crafted with the specific needs and interests of older adults in mind, ensuring that participants can acquire new competencies in a supportive and inclusive environment. This initiative reflects a broader educational trend that values learning as a lifelong pursuit, recognising that education does not cease with age but rather evolves to meet the needs of different life stages. The Lifetime Program fosters an environment of self-improvement, encouraging seniors to explore new academic disciplines, develop personal interests, and gain skills that can enrich both their personal lives and contribute to the community. Furthermore, the program aligns with global educational trends that emphasise the importance of lifelong learning as a means to address the challenges of an aging population. By offering flexible, accessible, and relevant learning opportunities, Thammasat University supports the broader goal of sustainable human development in all age groups.

7.5 King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT)

KMUTT offers continuing education programs specifically designed for professionals in technology and engineering. Courses include advanced topics in robotics, data science, and renewable energy. The university also provides hands-on workshops and seminars led by industry experts, ensuring that learners gain practical skills that are directly applicable to their work.

These universities in Thailand are committed to promoting lifelong learning by providing flexible, accessible education tailored to the diverse needs of their communities. Through various programs, workshops, and online platforms, they aim to empower individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

8. Thailand Professional Qualification Institute (TPQI)

TPQI is a private organisation dedicated to enhancing professional skills through standardised qualifications. It aims to improve the workforce's capabilities in various industries. The programs provided by TPQI are certification programs and vocational training tailored to market demands, helping individuals gain recognised qualifications that enhance their employability.

9. Local Administrative Organisations (LAO)

In Thailand, LAOs play a crucial role in promoting lifelong learning, particularly by offering educational programs tailored to local needs and supporting community-based learning initiatives. LAOs collaborate with various government agencies, including the Ministry of Education, to provide educational opportunities for all age groups, especially marginalised and elderly populations. Their initiatives often include the establishment of Community Learning Centres, vocational training programs, and digital literacy workshops, aimed at enhancing the skills and knowledge of residents throughout their lives. For instance, in several provinces, LAOs have implemented Senior Citizen Learning Centres, where the elderly are offered courses on health, technology, financial literacy, and local crafts, contributing to both personal development and community engagement. In addition, LAOs support mobile education units that travel to remote areas, providing learning resources and educational materials to those who might not have access to conventional education facilities. These programs reflect the ongoing efforts of LAOs to reduce educational inequalities and promote continuous, accessible learning within local communities. By focusing on lifelong learning, LAOs help foster social inclusion, sufficiency economy, and overall community resilience. These efforts are integral to the Thai government's broader vision of creating a learning society, where education is not limited by age, location, or social status.

APPENDIX C: KEY STAKEHOLDERS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR: PROFIT AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS

1. *The Saturday School Foundation*

The Foundation's projects include:

- 1) Main Season: Grit & Growth Mindset and Self-Awareness through Saturday Extracurricular Classes
- 2) Community Project: Active Citizenship and Social Awareness via Problem-Based Learning
- 3) Saturday School International: Language Literacy & Global Citizenship
- 4) Saturday Film: Critical Thinking through Media Information and Digital Literacy
- 5) Saturday School Student Support: Coaching to Help Students Achieve Their Dreams
- 6) Sapling School: Providing Opportunities for Other Children to Join Saturday School Classes

Through various initiatives, Thai banks contribute to creating a knowledgeable and financially responsible society. Such as:

2. *Siam Commercial Bank (SCB)*

Siam Commercial Bank is committed to fostering lifelong learning through various initiatives that empower individuals and businesses to enhance their financial knowledge and skills. For example, “SCB Academy” provides training programs for employees and customers alike, focusing on financial education, entrepreneurship, and digital banking skills. Via “Community Engagement Programs”, SCB collaborates with local communities to host educational events and seminars aimed at promoting financial awareness and responsible banking practices.

3. *Kasikorn Bank*

Kasikorn Bank seeks to promote lifelong learning and continuous skill development among its clients, contributing to their personal and professional growth. Examples of activities held by Kasikorn Bank are: “K-Expert Workshops”, where the bank organises workshops and seminars led by financial experts, covering various topics such as investments, savings, and retirement planning; or “Youth Financial Education Programs”, where the bank actively engages with schools and universities to provide financial education sessions for students, preparing them for responsible financial decision-making.

4. *Krungthai Bank*

Krungthai Bank aims to enhance the quality of life for individuals through financial literacy and lifelong learning initiatives, thereby contributing to national development. The activities Krungthai Bank runs include: “Financial Literacy Campaigns” aiming to educate the public on managing personal finances and understanding banking services, often targeting underserved communities. Moreover, the bank collaborates with educational institutions such as universities to offer scholarships and training programs that promote financial education among students.

APPENDIX D: NAMES OF LIFELONG LEARNING EXPERTS

The following lists all experts who provided comments and suggestions on lifelong learning in Thailand, for the purpose of this case study:

1. Professor Emeritus Dr. Sumalee
Sangsri Field: Non-Formal Education
Institution: School of Educational Studies, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University
2. Dr. Chaiyos Imsuwan
Former Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education
Former Deputy Secretary-General, Office of the Education
Council
3. Dr. Watchareewan Kandeck
Acting Specialist in Network Development
4. Professor Dr. Jintavee Klaisang
Department of Educational Technology and Communications
Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University
5. Ms. Sowirin
Chuanprapan UNESCO
Thailand
6. Mr. Prueks Paholkulbutr
Secretary-General, Folk Media Foundation (Makham Pom)
President, Thammasat University

APPENDIX E: ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The following lists additional suggestions from the experts to fulfil lifelong learning in Thailand.

National policy and government support

- **Lifelong learning should be a national priority**, with continuous and consistent implementation as a key agenda for the country's development.
- **The government must provide adequate budgetary support** to facilitate the development and implementation of lifelong learning programs across all sectors.
- **A national lifelong learning policy framework** should be developed, emphasising formal, non-formal, and informal learning, with a particular focus on integrating flexible education at all levels.
- **Promote national campaigns, exhibitions, or activities** to highlight the successes of lifelong learners and emphasise the importance of lifelong learning to the public. These initiatives could include organising national campaigns, offering scholarships, or providing recognition to lifelong learners.

Role of educational institutions and curriculum development

- **Universities should play a pivotal role** in researching and advancing knowledge related to lifelong learning, incorporating various educational theories and frameworks to support operational activities.
- **Curricula should be designed to be flexible** and adaptable to meet the evolving needs of learners, supporting individualised learning pathways.
- **Support the development of curricula** that emphasise life skills through flexible learning models, particularly focusing on equipping learners with essential competencies for personal and professional development.
- **Support vocational training curricula** that align with market demands and enable learners to simultaneously work and study.
- **Develop curricula for learning promoters and knowledge managers**, who will support lifelong learning, moving beyond traditional teaching roles to foster broader educational environments.

Expanding access and opportunities for all learners

- **The education system must cultivate a learning culture** that is inclusive of all ages and promotes the exchange of diverse opinions, ensuring that learning is accessible to everyone without barriers.
- **Increase opportunities for learning through open education**, removing age and educational qualification restrictions to allow a wider range of learners to access educational resources.
- **Support alternative learning pathways** that are tailored to meet the needs of diverse target groups, ensuring that non-traditional learners are also able to engage in lifelong learning.
- **Establish Community Learning Centres** to promote local access to educational opportunities, facilitating learning in diverse communities.

- **Support a national online learning platform development**, offering a variety of courses accessible to all age groups, free of charge, to expand access to educational resources.

Technological support and infrastructure

- **Leverage digital technology to enhance learning experiences**, integrating new tools and platforms to create flexible, dynamic educational environments.
- **Provide technological resources** to reduce disparities in technology access, particularly in remote areas, and promote out-of-classroom learning opportunities through technological platforms.
- **Establish a system for the transfer of learning outcomes** that supports non-formal learning, recognising and validating knowledge gained outside traditional educational frameworks.
- **Develop processes to certify skills acquired through real-life experiences**, enabling learners to apply their life skills for career advancement or further academic pursuits.

training and professional development for educators

- **Enhance the professional development of educators**, particularly in rural or remote areas, by developing specialised curricula and training processes for teachers who focus on flexible and creative learning methods.
- **Provide funding support for educators** in underserved regions to increase access to flexible education and improve learning outcomes in these areas.
- **Design learner-centred learning processes** that emphasise participatory teaching methods, enabling more interactive, and engaging learning experiences.

Collaboration and partnerships

- **Promote collaboration between government ministries and the private sector** in the development of curricula or training programs that are linked to career opportunities, ensuring that education is aligned with labour market needs.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING IN THAILAND

1. Policy recommendations to promote lifelong learning in Thailand. (Policy Recommendations)

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2. From the suggested policy recommendations, please provide the strategies to promote lifelong learning in Thailand. (Strategies to Promote Lifelong Learning in Thailand)

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3. Additional Recommendations

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APPENDIX G: THE 2025 ACTION PLAN FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF LIFELONG LEARNING ENCOURAGEMENT

The 2025 Action Plan for the Department of Lifelong Learning Encouragement aims to (1) **Promote quality lifelong learning** by providing inclusive, accessible, and high-quality lifelong learning opportunities to ensure equitable education for all, aligned with the needs of diverse population groups. (2) **Empower Communities** by enhancing the potential of marginalised and vulnerable groups (e.g., individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and those in remote areas) through specialised learning and skills development programs to improve quality of life and foster self-reliance. (3) **Support vocational and career development** by creating opportunities for income generation and economic stability through comprehensive vocational training, career skill enhancement, and entrepreneurial education. (4) **Leverage digital transformation** by developing innovative tools like the **Credit Bank System** and digital learning platforms to expand access to flexible, modern education tailored to individual needs and circumstances. (5) **Foster collaboration** by building partnerships with public, private, and community sectors to maximise resources and collaboratively drive lifelong learning initiatives across Thailand. (6) **Advance sustainability** by incorporating environmental education and behavioural shifts towards sustainability through green education initiatives and innovative awareness campaigns. Lastly, (7) **streamline governance** by modernising internal operations and improving efficiency by embedding governance principles into the department's administration, ensuring accountability and effective delivery of services. These goals collectively position Thailand to achieve its vision of becoming a nation with a robust culture of lifelong learning, equipping individuals to thrive in a dynamic and evolving world.

The 2025 Action Plan of the Department of Lifelong Learning Encouragement outlines several key projects to promote inclusive, sustainable, and innovative lifelong learning across Thailand:

1. Enhancing learning opportunities:

- **Support for marginalised groups:** Educational programs for people with disabilities, elderly skill development, and scholarships for underprivileged youth in remote areas
- **Special area learning:** Initiatives for students in highland areas, islands, and border zones, focusing on skill enhancement and regional education needs

2. Vocational and skill development:

- **Community-based vocational training:** Programs like the **Community Career Training Centres** engage thousands of participants to build skills for economic independence.
- **Southern Border Development:** Lifelong learning for peacebuilding and economic sustainability in southern provinces

3. Digital learning innovation:

- **National Credit Bank System:** A platform that allows individuals to accumulate and transfer learning credits for career advancement
- **Digital learning platforms:** Accessible education modules tailored to diverse groups, including career-focused content

4. **Promoting sustainability and literacy:**

- **Environmental awareness programs:** Campaigns to foster sustainable habits and engage communities in eco-friendly practices
- **Reading promotion:** Nationwide efforts to improve literacy rates and foster a culture of reading

5. **Strategic partnerships:**

- Collaborative agreements with over 3,000 networks to drive innovation and resource-sharing in education
- Expanded creative spaces like **NAN POLE Creative Space** for fostering lifelong learning in vibrant community hubs

6. **Workforce development:**

- **Upskilling and reskilling programs:** Targeted support for workers to adapt to market demands with digital and vocational competencies
- **Signature market initiatives:** Showcase local craftsmanship and digital expertise in regions like Nan Province

These projects emphasise inclusivity, accessibility, and alignment with global standards to empower all age groups across the nation.

In conclusion, the 2025 Action Plan of the Department of Lifelong Learning Encouragement in Thailand is committed to fostering accessible, inclusive, and innovative lifelong learning opportunities for all. The plan emphasises supporting marginalised groups, enhancing vocational training, leveraging digital tools, promoting environmental literacy, and building strong partnerships with various sectors. By aligning its strategies with national development goals and global educational standards, the department aims to empower individuals to thrive in an ever-changing world. These initiatives contribute to creating a culture of continuous learning and improving the quality of life across the country.

CHAPTER IV e

COUNTRY CASE STUDY VIETNAM

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SEAMEO REGIONAL CENTRE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Chapter IV e – COUNTRY CASE STUDY VIETNAM

By Khau Huu Phuoc and Phan Anh Minh

I COUNTRY OVERVIEW

1.1 PURPOSE

This study was conducted as part of the cross-country project that studies lifelong learning policy implementation in four countries: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam. The present country study aimed to explore the status of lifelong learning policy implementation in Vietnam since 2015, with a focus on recent developments.

1.2 DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study, utilising a qualitative approach. The information and data are gathered from five sources: official government documents, official reports by the government and reputed organisations, reliable Vietnamese and global websites, personnel working in the education sector of the government, and learners. A thorough literature review of official documents, reports and websites was conducted to

- grasp a comprehensive picture of the lifelong learning-related policies in effect,
- recap the governance structure and cross-sectoral coordination mechanism in place, and
- assess policy implementation.

One interview was conducted with a senior government official in the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The interview's thematic categories included:

1. Legislation and policies for lifelong learning
2. The interviewee's assessment of the system of lifelong learning policies (policy goals and their alignment with national education strategies)
3. Their opinions about the impacts of the policies
4. Barriers to policy implementation
5. Their thinking on policy improvement (strategies for mobilising resources and engaging local communities, etc.)

A second round of interviews was conducted by phone with an official of the Department of Education and Training of Hoa Binh Province, an official from Son La City, and 10 selected learners known to the research team, using convenient sampling and ensuring anonymity to encourage honest responses. Questions in the second round of interviews were based on the above-listed thematic categories 3, 4, and 5. The aim was to gain deeper insights into the practical challenges of and successes in the implementation of lifelong learning policies. As the interviews were conducted with a small number of interviewees, and using the convenience and purposive sampling techniques, the findings may not be representative. This bias, however, was mitigated by comparing the results of the interviews and triangulating them with official reports by the government and reputed organisations.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE COUNTRY

1.3.1 GEOGRAPHY AND RECENT HISTORY

Vietnam, officially the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is a Southeast Asian country on the Indochina Peninsula, covering 327,480 square kilometres (Thư viện pháp luật, 2023). It borders China, Laos and Cambodia by land, and the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia by sea. The nation's terrain is diverse, with hills, mountains, and tropical forests covering about 75 per cent of the total area, and

with over 3,400 kilometres of coastline (Chính phủ, 2024). Its climate varies from the subtropical in the north to the tropical in the south.

Vietnam's history is marked by centuries of struggle against foreign invasions, including an approx. 1,000-year-long occupation by China and colonisation by France in 1862. Under French rule, Vietnam's natural resources were exploited, and the local population was impoverished (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). After defeating the French in 1954, Vietnam was divided into the communist North Vietnam and the US-backed South Vietnam, leading to the Vietnam War. The country was reunified in 1975. 'The country has remained politically stable since, but only took a significant socio-economic leap after the Reform in 1986, which aimed to transition the economic system from a centrally planned to a socialist-oriented market economy' (Khau and Tran, 2019). These reforms have 'produced dramatic change in the lives of Vietnamese farmers, workers and their households' (Boothroyd, and Pham, IX), leading to improved living standards for the people and a strengthened global standing for the country. With a population of over 103 million as of 2023 (GSO, 2023), Vietnam has continued to gain international recognition both economically and diplomatically.

1.3.2 DEMOGRAPHY

Ethnically, Vietnam is a diverse country with 54 ethnic groups, predominantly Kinh (85.3 per cent), followed by ethnic minority groups such as the Tay (1.92 per cent), Thai (1.89 per cent), Muong (1.5 per cent), and Khmer (1.37 per cent) (Ethnic Committee and GSO, 2019), speaking more than 100 different local languages. The population has a median age of 32.9 years (database.earth, 2024; danso.info, 2024), with a nearly even gender split, with males and females accounting for 49.9 per cent and 50.1 per cent of the population respectively (GSO, 2023). Most of the population identifies as non-religious or follows traditional practices, with small percentages following Catholicism (6.1 per cent) and Buddhism (4.79 per cent) (GSO, 2019).

In 2023, 38.1 per cent of the population lived in urban areas, with major cities like Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Da Nang being the most populous (GSO, 2023). However, urbanisation is on the increase, and 58.2 per cent of the population are projected to live in cities by 2049 (GSO, 2016). Vietnam has a large workforce relative to its population, with 52.5 million people aged 15 and above in 2023 (GSO, 2023). The trained workforce accounted for 27.0 per cent of the population aged 15 years and above in 2023 (GSO, 2023).

1.3.3 ECONOMY

The Vietnamese economy is a relatively fast-growing one, achieving an average of 5.99 per cent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth from 2016 to 2020 (GSO, 2020). GDP per capita in 2023 was at VND 101.9 million per person, equivalent to USD 4,284.5, an increase of USD 160 compared to 2022 (GSO, 2023). Vietnam is in the process of shifting its economic structure from agriculture to industry and services (VNEconomy, 2024). After a slowdown in 2023, Vietnam's economy is gradually recovering. According to the World Bank, the country's GDP growth is projected to reach 5.5 per cent in 2024 and 6.0 per cent by 2025, due to increasing exports and gradual increases in consumption and private domestic investment (World Bank Group, 2024). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) highlights Vietnam's transition towards a green economy, emphasising the importance of public infrastructure projects to stimulate economic growth and address critical infrastructure gaps (ADB, 2021; ADB, 2024).

1.3.4 EDUCATION

Vietnam's education system follows a 5-4-3 structure: five years of primary, four years of lower secondary, and three years of higher secondary school, with students continuing to higher education at their discretion. Figure 1 illustrates the current Vietnamese education system as approved by the Prime Minister in 2016. The blue arrows indicate advancement in level while red arrows show paths of articulation.

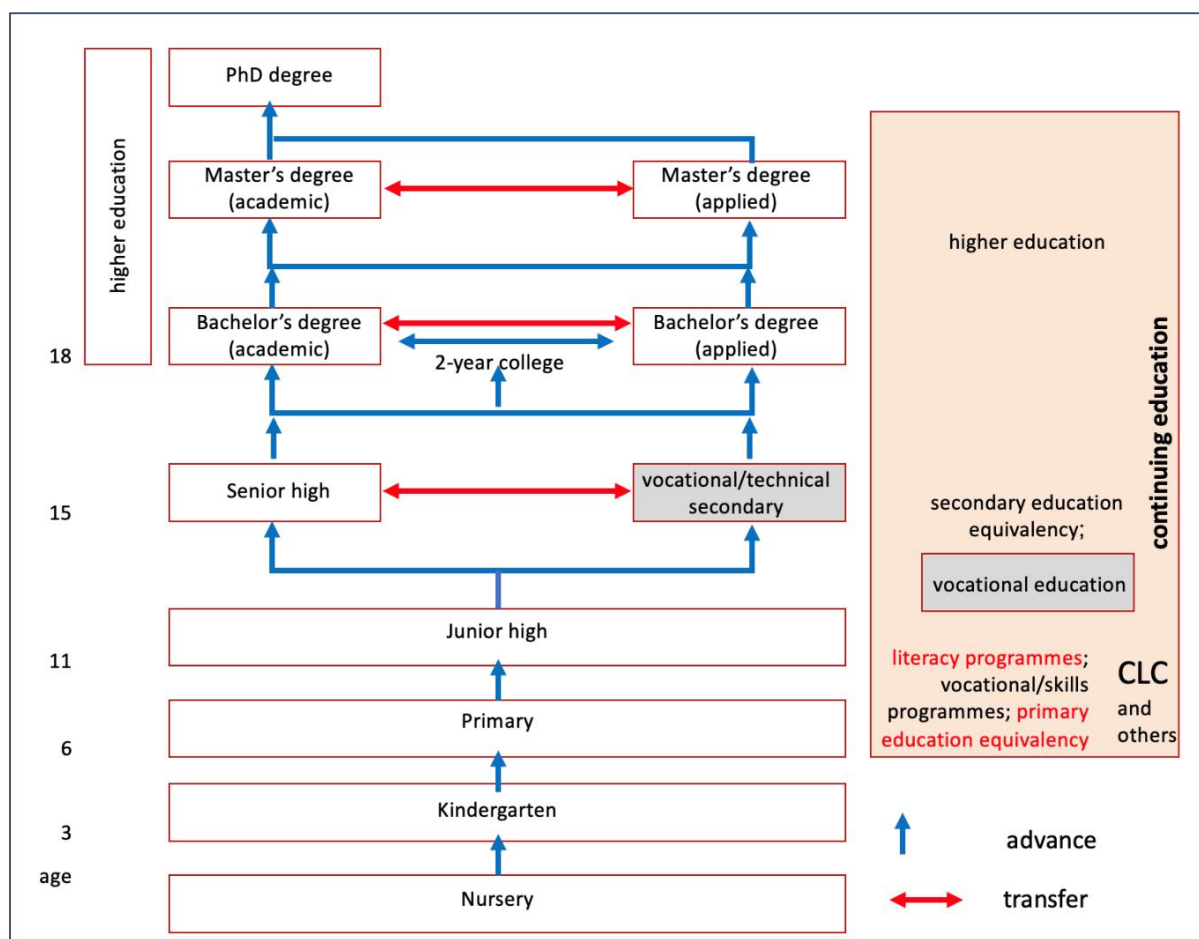


Fig. 1: Vietnam's Education System since Oct 2016.

Diagram by the authors based on Prime Minister Decision 1981/QĐ-TTg (2016). *Phê duyệt khung cơ cấu hệ thống giáo dục quốc dân [Approving the national education system]*.

This new system features two major changes from the previous one: It stratifies education into eight levels which are almost equivalent to the International Standard Certification of Education (ISCED) 2011; and vocational education has become an integral part of the whole education system, rather than an exit pathway from the national education system as previously.

Education and training are mainly governed by MOET, but the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) plays a key role in overseeing vocational training. Since the beginning of 2017, all colleges and vocational schools and centres (grey boxes in the diagram) have been under the governance of MOLISA. The two ministries are working towards improving the coordination of education and training delivery to facilitate transition from one pathway to another.¹

Another key stakeholder is the Vietnam Association for Learning Promotion (VALP), founded in 1996. It has contributed significantly to promoting learning by raising funds, and by encouraging education through its newspaper, the *Dan Tri* (literally: Knowledge for the People Newspaper), and its journal, *Dạy và Học Ngày nay* (Journal of Teaching and Learning Today). VALP further collaborate with other government organisations such as the Vietnam Women's Union, the Communist Youth Union, and the Farmers' Union to promote health, gender equality, and good farming practices.

Eight years of implementing the current national education system framework and Vietnam's national qualifications framework has revealed several shortcomings, particularly in terms of articulation, educational pathways, and alignment with the qualifications frameworks of other countries as well as the standards set by UNESCO. There are also ongoing challenges related to the recognition of qualifications, diplomas, and academic levels for students pursuing studies abroad. For these reasons, MOET is planning to amend the system (MOET, 2024a).

In 2018, the overall school attendance rate was 101.0 per cent for primary education; 92.8 per cent for lower secondary education; and 72.3 per cent for upper secondary education. There was no difference in the overall attendance rate between urban and rural areas (100.9 per cent compared to 101.0 per cent), but the higher the educational level, the greater the gap. Specifically, there was a 3.4 per cent difference in urban areas at the lower secondary level and a difference of 13.0 per cent at the upper secondary level (GSO, 2019).

On average, children in Vietnam can expect to have completed 12.3 years of schooling by age 18. However, when adjusted for quality of learning, this is only equivalent to 10.2 years, as there is a learning gap of 2.1 years compared with the worldwide average (World Bank, 2018). The World Bank suggests that this learning gap results in lower lifetime productivity: 'A child born in Vietnam [in 2018] will be 67 per cent as productive when she grows up as she could be if she enjoyed complete education and full health'.

Formal education is preferred by the Vietnamese population, as degrees are still favoured over actual competency in job recruitment. Non-formal education, or continuing education as it is named in Vietnam, however, is gaining importance, albeit slowly. This shift is being caused by recent policies determining that graduates from both the formal and continuing education systems receive identical certificates and diplomas if they successfully pass the national secondary education graduation exams. The Law on Higher Education, amended in 2018, stipulates that university degrees will not indicate which type of education (formal or continuing) the holder has attended. It also confirms transferability within the system (MOET, 2021a). This practice not only supports lifelong learning but also promotes social equity and improves employment prospects.

¹ The cut-off time of this report is December 2024. In 2025, Vietnam will start to restructure the administration for higher efficiency, leading to the merger of several ministries. MOLISA and the Ministry of Home Affairs will be combined into the Ministry of Home Affairs and Labour. The governance of vocational education, previously under MOLISA, will be transferred to MOET, an ongoing process at the conclusion of this project.

Article 6. The national educational system

The national educational system is an open, transferrable educational system consisting of formal education and continuing education (National Assembly, 2019).

Vietnam's large population is exerting pressure on education, especially in the public school sector. The pressure is quite significant at post-primary levels until the late 2020s but is projected to gradually decrease at the preschool and primary levels in the coming years (Fig. 2).

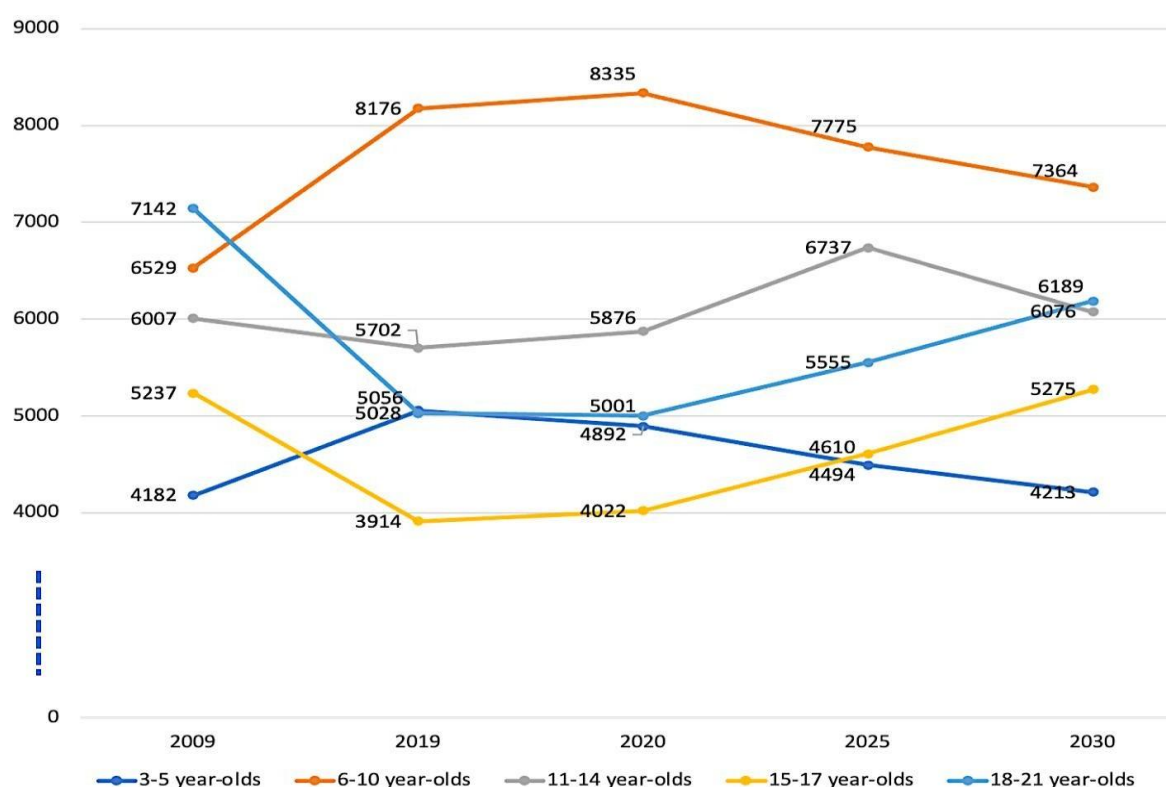


Fig. 2: Current status and projected changes in school-age population, 2009-2030 (1,000 people).

Chart by the authors using statistics from VNIES (2020). Education sector analysis report. UNESCO.

II LIFELONG LEARNING EVOLUTION

2.1 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The term “non-formal education” is seldom found in Vietnamese government policy documents; instead, “continuing education” is frequently used. There was a shift in the usage of terminology from “non-formal education” to “continuing education” through the 2005 Education Law, replacing the 1998 Law on Education, Vietnam's first legal educational framework. The 2019 Education Law confirms this change by defining only formal and continuing education, with no reference to non-formal education. This lexical shift signifies a conceptual reorientation in the educational paradigm, where “non-formal” is perceived as subordinate to “formal” education, whereas “continuing education” underscores the principle of lifelong learning. However, Vietnam's definition of “continuing education” differs from UNESCO's broader concept. While UNESCO views “continuing education” as encompassing formal, non-formal, and informal learning (UNESCO, 1984), in Vietnam, “continuing education” specifically refers to non-formal education that runs parallel to formal education, with some equivalency programs.

Although Adult Learning and Education (ALE) is not explicitly defined in the 2019 Law on Education, it is implicitly encompassed within Article 43, which outlines continuing education programs, modes of delivery, content, and methods, all of which align with the scope of adult learning. Thus, it can be taken that ALE is situated within the broader framework of continuing education in Vietnam.

There is not yet an official definition of lifelong learning in legal government documents. However, lifelong learning is commonly understood by policy makers, government leaders, educators, and education stakeholders as learning that takes place anytime, anywhere, for everyone, at all ages and levels, regardless of the form of learning, training, or certification. The term is increasingly used in the media and government outreach (posters, signs in public areas, banners in and outside schools, etc.), but not many people reflect on the term's meaning. The authors of this report are often met with looks of confusion when they share that they work for the Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning. Many people do not know of the concept of lifelong learning, and they are not aware that they engage in lifelong learning throughout their lives, by acquiring knowledge and skills needed to live, work, collaborate, socialise, and contribute to the development of their country.

2.2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

Vietnam has a long tradition of learning. In as early as the 11th century, parents sent their children to learn with *Thầy Đồ* (village teacher). They would go to the village teacher's house to learn how to read, copy texts, write poems, and to receive lessons on history and moral. *Thầy Đồ* had a status of high respect in old Vietnamese social life, even higher than parents, hence the common hierarchical order "King-Teacher-Father" (Huynh, 2020).

The concepts of "learning society" and "lifelong learning outside the school" date back to 1945 in Vietnam, when President Ho Chi Minh launched the *bình dân học vụ* (BDHV), the Popular Education Movement. At that time, when 95 per cent of the people were illiterate (MOET, 2015 cited in Khau and Tong), the focus was on eradicating illiteracy and gradually increasing people's knowledge. The idea was to encourage all citizens to learn, with the literate teaching the illiterate, the well-learned teaching the less well-learned. Within a single year, the Popular Education Movement successfully eliminated illiteracy among more than 2.5 million individuals. At the First National Conference on Training and Learning in 1950, Ho Chi Minh stated: '*Học ở trường, học ở sách vở, học lẫn nhau và học Nhân dân*' ('Learn at school, learn from books, learn from each other, and learn from the people') (Ho Chi Minh, 2020).

In 1954, with an improved literacy rate, the Popular Education Movement transitioned into complementary education, expanding its scope to deliver foundational knowledge and practical skills in farming and aquaculture. The country entered a new phase after the 1986 release of the *Đổi Mới* Policy (Renovation Policies). During the renovation period, lifelong learning became crucial in the knowledge economy. In 1993, complementary education was changed to continuing education, a term still in use today to serve a wider range of learning needs for new socio-economic growth and to reflect the goal of creating conditions for continuous learning for people of all ages. This idea aligns closely with the three purposes outlined by Aspin and Chapman: 'economic progress and development, personal development and fulfilment, as well as social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity' (2000). In 2005, a new Law on Education was enacted. It stipulated that all citizens have equal rights to education. This understanding is reflected in the Strategy for Education Development 2011 to 2020 which ensures equal learning opportunities, particularly for ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups. The strategy for the next phase of 2021 to 2030 is under development.

2.3 LIFELONG LEARNING LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

Though lifelong learning has been practised since 1945, its denotation has not been static. In the 2000s, there was a shift from understanding lifelong learning as an alternative form of education for disadvantaged groups and those who had not participated in basic education levels, to lifelong learning for workforce and professional skills to meet the diverse needs of the population (VNIES, 2022). Since 2015, the government has enacted laws and implemented policies to encourage participation in learning, provide financial support, and ensure flexibility in education. Table 1 presents the primary legislation and policies currently in effect, including those issued prior to the 2015 milestone. The items are arranged hierarchically, with the Communist Party at the highest level, overseeing all government's activities.

Table 1: Key legislation and policies related to lifelong learning promotion in Vietnam

DOCUMENT	DATE OF ISSUE	KEY POINTS
Communist Party's Resolution 29-QĐ/TW	4 November 2013	Fundamentally and comprehensively reform the education system for standardisation, modernisation, socialisation, democratisation, and international integration. Reform in the education system should be orientated toward more openness, flexibility and continuity between levels and modes of education and training (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013). In 2024, after 10 years of implementation, this Resolution was set to continue in effect by the Party's Conclusion No.91 (Vietnam Communist Party, 2024)
National Assembly's Constitution	28 November 2013	The 2013 Constitution was built upon the 1946 Constitution and the 1992 Constitution with new articles on the right to learning: 'Learning is both a right and a duty of all citizens' (Article 39); 'the government prioritizes the development of education in mountainous areas, islands, regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, and areas with particularly challenging socio-economic conditions' (Article 61).
National Assembly's Document 51/2010/QH12: Law on Persons with Disabilities	17 June 2010	The Law on People with Disabilities includes a chapter on education for persons with disabilities (from Articles 27 to 31), emphasising the state's responsibility in ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education. The law mandates staffing for educational support of children with disabilities within Vietnamese schools; the establishment of provincial Support Centres for Inclusive Education; development of resource centres that provide technical assistance and training to schools; the responsibilities of teachers, administrators and educational institutions; and the provision of needed educational materials for students with disabilities (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2010).

National Assembly's Document 43/2019/QH14: Law on Education	14 June 2019	This law was built upon the 2005 Law on Education, adding an entire section dedicated to continuing education. The section provides detailed regulations on the objectives, tasks, programs, forms, content, and methods of continuing education; lifelong education institutions; assessment and recognition of learning outcomes; and policies for the development of lifelong education (see Appendix 1). The law reiterates a clause of the 2005 Law on Education, reflecting the orientation toward lifelong learning: 'All citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion, sex, family background and social standing are equal in learning opportunities' (Article 13), and provides that the national education system is an open articulated system that includes both formal and continuing education (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019). The law further encourages organisations and individuals to participate in and provide high-quality continuing education services to meet learners' lifelong learning needs. This new legislation reflects the directive outlined in the Communist Party Resolution 29.
Government Resolution 44/NQ-CP	June 2014	Government's Action Programme to Implement Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW: It stresses that 'the national education system should be improved toward more openness, flexibility and continuity between levels and modes of education and training to meet the needs for lifelong learning and international integration' (Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2014).
Prime Minister Decision 622/QĐ-TTg	10 May 2017	The Decision approves the National Action Plan for the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. It specifies that MOET is responsible for leading on the following targets: 4.1, 4.2, 4.3.a, 4.5.a, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, and 13.3.b; and MOLISA is responsible for leading on targets: 4.3.b, 4.4, 4.5.b (Prime Minister, 2017).
Prime Minister Decision 1373/QĐ-TTg	30 July 2021	The Decision approves the Scheme for Building a Learning Society 2021 to 2030. The Scheme's objective is to 'create a fundamental transformation in building a learning society, ensuring that by 2030 all citizens have equal opportunities to access a diverse, flexible, interconnected, and modern open education system, with multiple models, methods, and levels of training, contributing to advancing human resource development, especially high-quality human resources, to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and international integration'. This Scheme was built upon the previous two Schemes for Building a Learning Society (2005 to 2010 and 2012 to 2020). The former aimed to increase literacy rates, especially among ethnic minorities, and to attain equal rates between men and boys, and women and girls. The

		more recent Scheme gave priority to illiteracy eradication among women, girls, and ethnic minority groups, and to foster computer literacy. (Prime Minister, 2021). The Schemes rely on the bottom-up strategy of moving from "learning citizens" to "learning families and clans", and progressing toward "learning communities", "learning units", and "learning cities". The four objectives of building a learning society 2012 to 2020 were: eradicating illiteracy; improving proficiency in information technology (IT) and foreign languages; advancing knowledge to work more effectively and accomplish tasks better; and learning to enhance life skills, creating a happier personal and community life.
Decision No. 1705/QĐ-TTg	31 December 2024	This Decision stipulates that Vietnam aims to develop a modern, open, and inclusive education system that preserves national traditions, embraces global advancements, and fosters the comprehensive development of individuals to meet the demands of a new era; promotes lifelong learning through the issuance of a Law on Lifelong Learning; and contributes to a prosperous, democratic, and civilised society.
National Steering Committee for lifelong learning promotion 2750/BCĐQG-XHHT	28 May 2014	Vietnam needs to promote lifelong learning within families, clans, and communities by 2020 (National Steering committee, 2014). ²
Decision 01/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT	2 January 2007	The Decision issues the regulation on the establishment, management, and operation of Continuing Education Centres (CEC) (MOET, 2007).
Decision 10/VBHN-BGDĐT	14 March 2014	The Decision issues the regulation on the establishment, management, and operation of Community Learning Centres (CLC). This regulation is an update to the regulation issued in 2008 (MOET, 2014).
Joint circular 39/2015/TTLT-BLĐT BXH-BGDĐT-BNV	19 October 2015	Guidelines for the merger of District-level Public Vocational Training Centres, CECs, and General Technical and Career Orientation Centres into Vocational Education and Continuing Education Centres; functions, duties, authority, and organisational structure of Vocational Education and CECs (MOLISA, MOET, and MOIA, 2015).

Among these documents, the Scheme for Building a Learning Society 2021 to 2030 is the most directly relevant to promoting lifelong learning for all citizens. It outlines six task and solution areas aimed at effectively advancing the Party's policy on fostering learning, developing talent, and building a more comprehensive, high-quality learning society, specifically:

1. Promoting, disseminating, and raising awareness of the concept of building a learning society where inclusive education and open learning opportunities are for all

² The National Steering Committee was established in 2007 and was dissolved in 2016. However, provincial committees are still in operation.

2. Refining mechanisms and policies for building a learning society
3. Accelerating digital transformation and applying IT in organising lifelong learning activities³
4. Enhancing the activities of CLCs
5. Organising movements and campaigns to promote lifelong learning
6. Strengthening international cooperation in lifelong learning, building a learning society, and developing open and distance learning technologies

Governance, stakeholders and financing

In the absence of a law on lifelong learning, and given the lack of a definition of this practice in the 2019 Law on Education, it is not possible to accurately discuss lifelong learning governance and other related matters. The 2019 Law, however, refers to lifelong learning in four articles:

Article 4: Educational development

Develop an open educational system, build a learning society to provide life-long educational access of every level and every form to all the people (Clause 3).

Article 5: Definitions

"Continuing education" means education that follows a certain educational programme and has flexible organisation regarding programme implementation formats, time, methods, locations, satisfying the learners' need for lifelong learning (Clause 2).

Article 41: Objectives of continuing education

Continuing education enables people to learn while in-service, to learn continuously and through life [...].

Article 46: Policies on development of continuing education

The State shall issue policies for investment in the development of continuing education, providing education to all the people, promoting the learning of adults, building a learning society; for encouraging organisations and individuals to participate and/or provide continuing educational services of quality, meeting learners' need for lifelong learning (Clause 1).

Authorities and organisations shall facilitate the frequent learning and lifelong learning of officials, public employees and labour workers with a view to developing their abilities and improving quality of life (Clause 2).

It is worth noting that all the references to lifelong learning in the 2019 Law, except the first, appear within the section on continuing education. This suggests that the responsibility for promoting lifelong learning falls more on continuing education rather than on formal education. Institutions of continuing education include CLCs, CECs, Vocational-Continuing Education Centres, foreign language centres, informatics centres, and life-skill centres. The final three are operated either by state-run organisations, universities, or private entities. While all education centres are under the governance of MOET and, for vocational programs, under MOLISA, decentralisation is partially implemented. The state budget for institutions of continuing education is provided through respective local governments who do not make budget details readily available to the public. Many mass organisations such as the

³ On 30 December 2021, MOET released the decision to establish the Steering Committee for Digital Transformation, showing the country's commitment to integrating digital technology to education.

Vietnam Communist Youth Union, the Women’s Union, and the Farmers’ Union contribute to continuing education provision under the umbrella organisation Vietnam Fatherland Front. Figure 3 illustrates the governance and public funding of CLCs as an example.

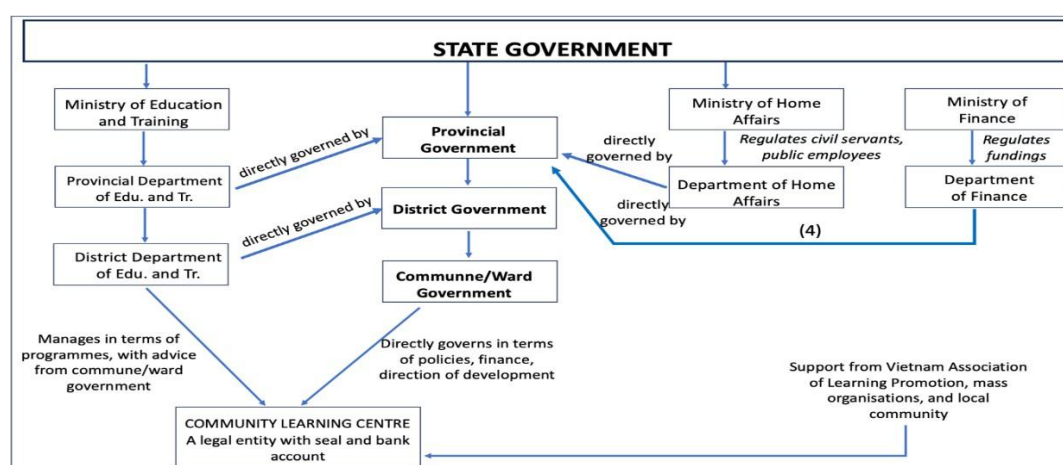


Fig. 3: Governance and funding of Community Learning Centres.
Adapted from Khau, 2025.

2.4 STATUS OF LIFELONG LEARNING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES

2.4.1 PROGRESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

This section reviews the progress of lifelong learning in relation to relevant legislation and policies.

Table 2: Review of legislation and policy implementation

DOCUMENT	KEY POINTS
Communist Party's Resolution 29-QĐ/TW	The Resolution is the key guidance for all education development pathways. In 2024, after 10 years of implementation, this Resolution was set to continue in effect by the Party's Conclusion No. 91 (Vietnam Communist Party, 2024). However, the Party acknowledged that the implementation of the Resolution still faces limitations and challenges such as slow institutionalisation of the Resolution into policies and laws to support educational and training reform. Education institutions' autonomy is obstructed by conflicting regulations, and articulation between educational levels, modes of education, and transfer of credits are still difficult (Propaganda, 2024). The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) theoretically enables the transfer of learning outcomes across different educational levels and modalities; however, its practical implementation has been limited.
National Assembly's Constitution	The 2013 Constitution is still in effect. It provides that developing education is the foremost national policy, and that primary education is mandatory and free. The country has been striving to allocate an average of 20 per cent of the general national budget to education over the past decade. The country has achieved free universal primary education.

National Assembly's Document 51/2010/QH12: Law on Persons with Disabilities	Vietnam has been establishing special education and support centres for children with disabilities, though there is still a gap between demand and supply. Further, the higher the level of education, the wider the disparity (Fig. 4). Inclusive education for adults with disabilities is not widely provided due to the lack of appropriate teaching and learning facilities as well as specialised teachers. In 2021, Vietnam had four universities of education and three colleges of education that have established Departments of Special Education and offer training programs for teachers of children with disabilities (MOLISA, 2021).
National Assembly's Document 43/2019/QH14: Law on Education	The 2019 Law on Education receives much attention from both the government and the people. In July 2024, MOET issued Decision 2012/QĐ-BGDĐT, requiring all key government stakeholders to review the implementation of the Law. A report on the review is yet to be published. Vietnam has achieved progress in providing education to people with disabilities (Fig. 4). Articulation between continuing education and formal education, stipulated in Article 6 of the 2019 Law, has only addressed training articulation between vocational education and higher education on the generic level. No specific policies or detailed guidance on the articulation between other educational levels are available (Bui, 2024).
Government Resolution 44/NQ-CP	This Resolution is the key guidance for the implementation of Resolution 29-QĐ/TW.
Prime Minister Decision 622/QĐ-TTg	Literacy: The literacy rate of the population aged 15 and older was 95.8 per cent in 2019, an increase of 1.8 percentage points compared to 2009. Between 2009 and 2019, the female literacy rate increased by 7.7 percentage points, significantly narrowing the illiteracy gap between men and women, 7.0 per cent and 2.4 per cent respectively (GSO, 2019).
Prime Minister Decision 1373/QĐ-TTg	Of its four main objectives, the Scheme for Building a Learning Society 2012 to 2020 has achieved two major goals: "Eradicating illiteracy and universalising education" and "Learning to improve life skills, creating a happier personal and community life". All 63 provinces and cities have reached Level 1 literacy standards, and 34 out of 63 have achieved Level 2 literacy standards. Localities have organised literacy programs for over 300,000 people aged 15 to 60 years. All 63 provinces and cities have achieved universal preschool education standards for 5-year-olds, Level 2 primary education standards, and Level 1 lower secondary education standards. Additionally, 21 out of 63 provinces and cities (33.3 per cent) have reached Level 3 primary education standards, and 11 out of 63 (17.5 per cent) have achieved Level 2 lower secondary education standards, with three provinces meeting the highest standard — Level 3—in lower secondary education (MOET, 2021b). The Scheme's greatest achievement has been the establishment of a learning society model at the commune level. This is a strategic approach unique to Vietnam. While other countries build learning societies at the city level and above, we have extended this approach to the grassroots level, motivating and mobilising citizens to participate in learning. This distinctive approach has been recognised by UNESCO and other nations.
Decision No. 1705/QĐ-TTg	MOET is assigned to lead the drafting of the Law on Lifelong Learning, to be submitted to the National Assembly in October 2029.

National Steering Committee for lifelong learning promotion 2750/BCĐQG-XHHT	The set of criteria for assessing learning families, learning clans, learning community, and learning units was issued by VALP in July 2022. (See Appendix 2)
Decision 01/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT	(For more information on CLCs, CECs, see “Continuing education” below)
Decision 10/VBHN-BGDĐT	
Joint circular 39/2015/TTLT-BLĐTBXH-BGDĐT-BNV	

Inclusive education

Inclusivity is a priority in education provision in Vietnam and was made a mandate in the 2019 Law on Education:

Develop an open educational system, build a learning society to provide life-long educational **access of every level and every form to all the people** [emphasis added] (Article 4, Clause 3).

The State shall encourage and enable ethnic minority people to learn their spoken and written languages as prescribed in Governmental regulations; hearing-impaired and speaking-impaired persons to learn via sign language, vision-impaired persons to learn via the Braille alphabet as prescribed in the Law on Persons with Disabilities (Article 11, Clause 3).

The State shall give priority in enabling children with special backgrounds as prescribed in the Children Law, disabled and handicapped persons as prescribed in the Law on Persons with Disabilities and learners from poor and near-poor households to exercise their learning rights and obligations (Article 13, Clause 3).

Vietnam's legal system ensures a comprehensive legal foundation for inclusive education for children with disabilities. It contains various provisions on the right to education, the right to inclusive learning for children with disabilities, and the necessary conditions and standards for inclusive education (Le and Nguyen, 2019; UNDP, 2020). However, MOET has not yet developed a continuous and complete strategic (long-term) and short-term plan to promote and improve special education and inclusive education (Hoang, T. N., 2022, 12 May).

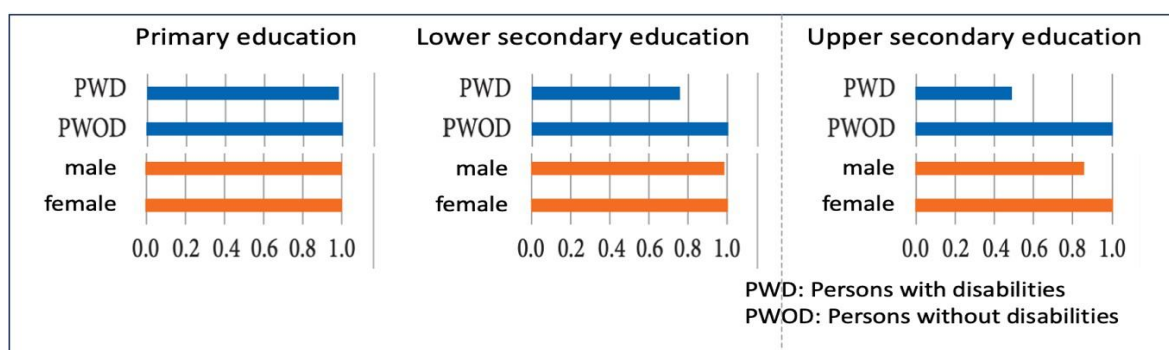


Fig. 4: Educational disparities between persons with and without disabilities, and between males and females across different education levels.

VNIES (2022). Báo cáo phân tích ngành giáo dục 2011-2020 [Education sector analysis report 2011-2020]. National University Hanoi Publishing House.

Figure 4 illustrates disparities in access to education (education index) between individuals with and without disabilities at the different levels of education. The index for individuals without disabilities at the upper secondary level is double that of those with disabilities. Regarding gender equity, Vietnam has been relatively successful: There is almost no gender disparity in education at low levels, but the difference increases towards higher levels (Fig. 4). Equity is also a challenging goal when it comes to ethnic minorities in comparison to Kinh people. As Vietnamese is the official language of Vietnam and the medium of education (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013), the 53 ethnic minorities with their own languages, especially young children, face serious challenges in learning and education. The government has taken measures to alleviate this problem by using ethnic languages at low levels of primary schools or by developing special curricula for ethnic people in remote areas. With the support of various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) such as ChildFund Australia, Oxfam Hongkong, Save the Children, World Vision, UNICEF, etc., Vietnam has piloted several promising models to increase Vietnamese literacy among these groups. Models include the Friendly Community, the Friendly Schools, the Friendly Library, Commune Reading Clubs or Mothers as Teaching Assistants.

Formal education

Figure 5 illustrates the actual enrolment rates of 2022 compared with the targets set in the National Action Plan for implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. There is a big gap at pre-school level; however, at primary and lower secondary levels the country has achieved its goals. There is no goal set for upper secondary level, but the actual enrolment rate of 88.41 per cent reflects a 1.3 percentage point dropout toward or upon finishing lower secondary schools.

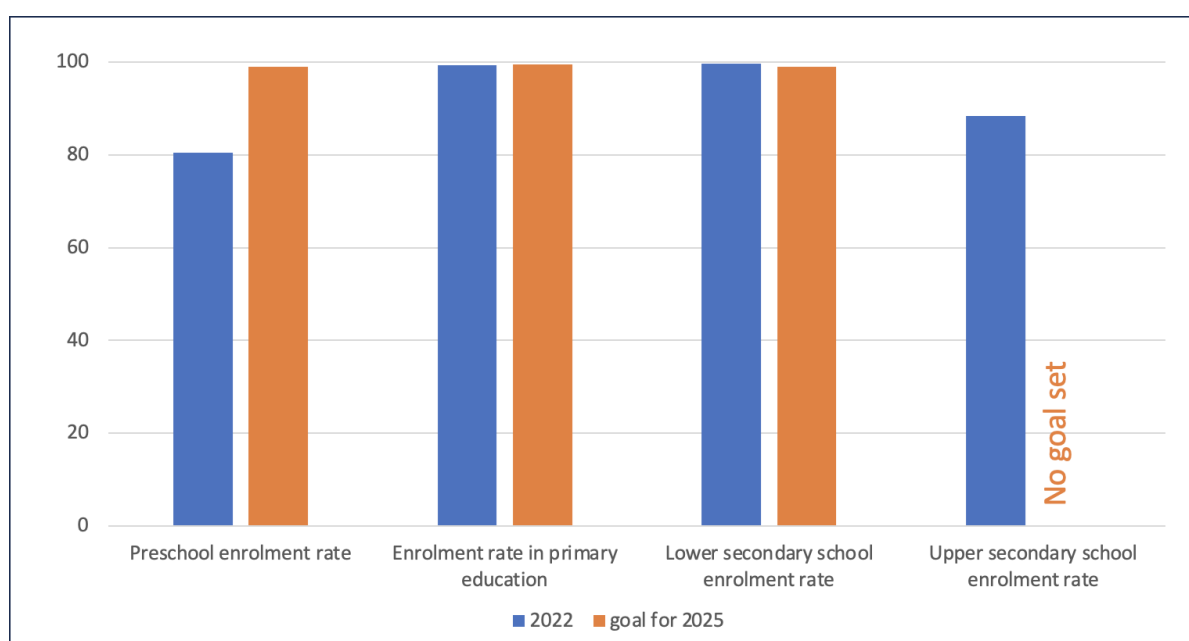


Fig. 5: Actual enrolment rates by levels of education compared with 2025 goals in the National Action Plan for the Implementation of SDG 4.

Data retrieved from Cổng dịch vụ dữ liệu [Portal of data] (2022). Tỷ lệ học sinh đi học phổ thông phân theo cấp học và phân theo giới tính [Percentages of Enrolment in General Education by Levels and Gender]. <https://congdu lieu.vn/dulieuchitiet/912833>, and from MOET (2019). Decision 2257/QĐ-BGDĐT amending and adding Item 3 of the National Action Plan for Sustainable Development Goal 4 till 2025, vision 2030.

In order to reach SDG 4, Vietnam has encouraged the establishment of Open Education Resources (OER). So far, some are in operation, but mostly by private and non-governmental organisations, including universities, such as the Sail OER, an open source software platform, the Royal

Melbourne Institute of Technology's (RMIT) OER Library, the Vietnam Open Educational Resources (VOER) program, and the Khan Academy (<https://vi.khanacademy.org/college-careers-more/kien-thuc-tai-chinh-ca-nhan>). The country also has a TV channel (VTV7) dedicated to education for children.

Continuing education

Continuing education is a strand in the Vietnamese education system that aims to facilitate lifelong learning for individuals to enhance their competencies, improve their personalities, broaden their understanding, and raise their qualifications for employment and social adaptation, thus contributing to a learning society (National Assembly, 2019) (see discussion of the term of lifelong learning in 2.3).

The key objectives are to eliminate illiteracy and provide training programs that improve work competencies and update knowledge and skills. Apart from designated institutions of continuing education such as CECs, foreign language centres, and CLCs, higher education institutions also provide intensive programs to upgrade work skills for job seekers and those in employment who want to secure their jobs and / or strive towards promotion. In 2021, MOET issued Circular 09/2021/TT-BGDĐT on the management and organisation of online teaching in general education institutions and continuing education institutions as the first legal document regulating online teaching and learning. This document serves as a legal framework to standardise online teaching and learning activities nationwide. It enables schools to be proactive in utilising Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for teaching and learning, and increases opportunities for students to learn anytime, anywhere.

CECs offer equivalency programs comparable to those of formal education. They follow the curricula of formal education schools from primary to upper secondary level, with some condensed subjects or minor subject omission to suit the local context (MOET, 2021; MOET, 2022). In October 2015, a new policy concerning the management of CECs was issued in the Joint Circular among three ministries – MOLISA, MOET, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA). The Circular provides guidance for merging district-level CECs with Vocational Education Centres into Vocational-Continuing Education Centres, a process that has been implemented with varying degrees of success in different parts of the country. Some merged centres fail to attract learners; some do not have enough instructors, while in others there is a surplus of teachers.

The main reason for the limited functionality of these centres is the lack of coordinated management. CECs were originally managed by the Department of Education and Training, and Vocational Education Centres by the Department of Labour, Invalids, Social Affairs; however, the merged centres fall under both departments' realms of responsibility, causing serious overlaps and confusion. The centres themselves do not receive the same level of government support for facility purchases or upgrades as the original centres. This lack of support also applies to learners at Vocational-Continuing Education Centres compared to students at the Vocational Education Centres (Tran, 2024; Thanh, 2024; My, 2024; Thai, 2024).

A CLC is an autonomous learning centre at the community level, under the management and support of the state (MOET, 2014; MOET, 2019). CLCs are ubiquitous across Vietnam, operating on the principle 'of the people, by the people and for the people' (Belete, et al, 2022). After the first two CLCs were piloted in Hoa Binh and Lai Chau provinces in 1998, their numbers soared 11,019 in 2018, covering 98.93 per cent of all communes and wards of Vietnam. Due to the merger of communes, in 2020, the total number of CLCs in Vietnam sat at nearly 10,000. CLCs are considered an effective model for education for all, and for the learning society (VALP and MOET, 2021). The programs they

offer include ‘literacy, post-literacy programmes, equivalency programmes, income-generating programmes, quality of life improvement programmes, individual interest promotion programmes, and future-oriented programmes’ (Belete et al, 2022 cited in Khau and Duke, 2023).

Despite the lack of a comprehensive study on the implementation of lifelong learning policies, surveys conducted in various areas across Vietnam (Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, Gia Lai, and Dong Thap) showed that the majority of survey respondents have a relatively positive view of the creation and enactment of policies related to lifelong learning (Fig. 6). The respondents assessed coordination as good between educational institutions, agencies, departments, and organisations; and they did not see great variations in the levels of lifelong learning opportunities provided across institutions. However, formal education policies receive more attention from policy makers and the public, and they are rated higher than those for continuing education (Bui, 2024). These findings are confirmed by information we collected via the present study’s interviews.

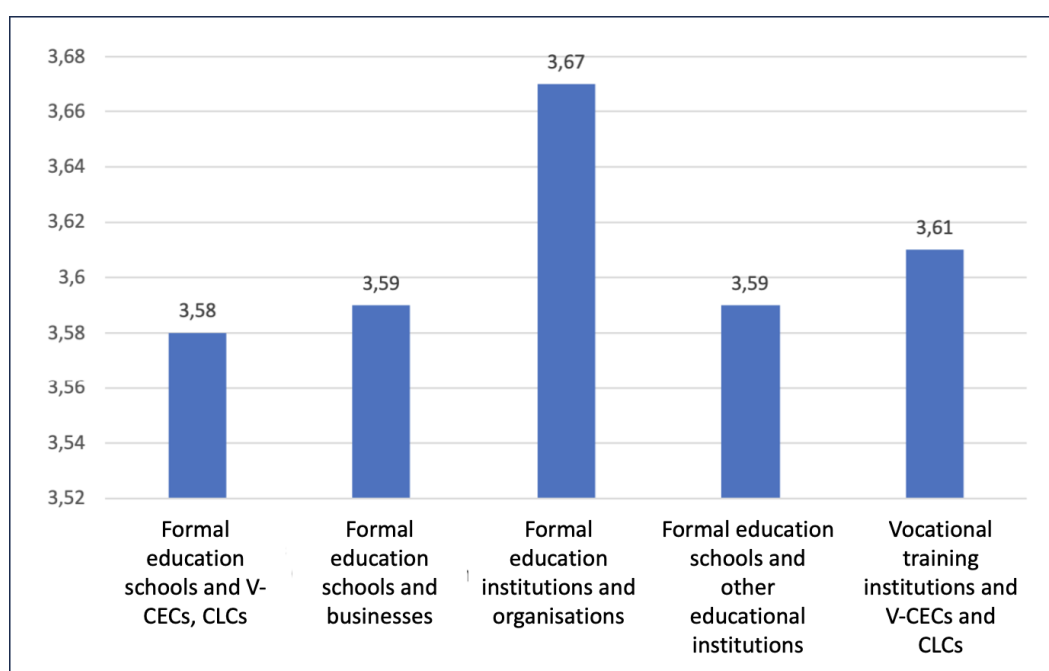


Fig. 6: Perceived quality of coordination among educational institutions, agencies, and organisations in providing lifelong learning opportunities for all (rated on a scale of 1 to 5).

VNIES (2024). *Nghiên cứu định hướng xây dựng luật học tập suốt đời [Research on Guidelines for Developing a Law on Lifelong Learning]*.

2.4.2 CHALLENGES

Overall, the major challenges to continuing education in Vietnam are limited government budgets, old infrastructure, inappropriate policies, legislation, and a limited number of reliable research papers (Thuy et al., 2022; Khuc, 2019; Thuy and Thuy, 2019; Quyen, 2019; Do et al., 2019; Vuong et al., 2018; Lee and Nguyen, 2006 - all cited in Phan, T. K. T. 2022). Further challenges can be found in the legislative status, the governance of the provision of lifelong learning services, and the access to lifelong learning participation, as outlined below.

Lifelong learning has not received a definite status in legislation despite political will, positive media coverage, and the programs and initiatives in which lifelong learning is mentioned or named. The lack of an official, concrete definition of lifelong learning and the absence of a law on lifelong learning mean that lifelong learning is merged into all other categories of education such as general

education, higher education, and vocational education.⁴ Lifelong learning in Vietnam is everywhere but seen as subordinate. Programs and activities are scattered and there is neither a strong mechanism for coordination, nor a specific budget for the development of lifelong learning for all in the country.

Lifelong learning is a cross-sectoral endeavour that requires collaboration and coordination across various levels of government, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders. In the absence of a law on lifelong learning, there is no dedicated government agency or ministerial department in charge of promoting lifelong learning and coordinating stakeholders in a shared effort to provide free and affordable learning opportunities to the citizens. MOET is, by the Prime Minister Decision No. 1373/QĐ-TTg, the lead of the Scheme for Building a Learning Society, with many other ministries tasked to provide services and support. However, coordination mechanisms, such as inter-ministerial committees or task forces have remained limited.

Despite the Law on Persons with Disabilities enacted in 2010, people living with disabilities still face much difficulty immersing themselves into social life or accessing the labour market. In 2023, Vietnam had 14 Inclusive Education Development Support Centres, 25 specialised schools at the provincial level, and 23 specialised schools at the district level. Among these:

- Only 2.9 per cent of schools were designed for children with disabilities
- Only 9.9 per cent of schools had toilet facilities appropriate for children with disabilities
- Only 16.7 per cent of primary schools and 10 per cent of lower secondary schools had teachers specially trained to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities
- Only 14.3 per cent of preschool teachers were trained to care for and nurture children with disabilities (MOET, 2023)

Despite the national education system foreseeing transfer and advancement between modes and levels of education, the articulation between formal and continuing education has yet to be achieved, except at the end of lower and upper secondary programs. The main reason is the weak practice of recognition, validation and accreditation, especially in continuing education. The NQF issued by the Prime Minister in 2016 has not been effectively applied as there are 'limitations regarding articulation, educational streaming, and benchmarking with other countries' qualifications frameworks', and MOET organised a consultation meeting in 2024 to discuss a revision of the NQF (People's Deputies Online, 2024). In addition, the transfer from vocational/technical secondary education to higher education faces challenges because the former is governed by MOLISA, while the latter is regulated by MOET.

III GOOD PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY-BASED LIFELONG LEARNING

Vietnam has initiated a number of programs for lifelong learning promotion. This section will showcase two good practices, one of a CLC in Hoa Binh Province, and another of a new learning city registered in the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities.

3.1 XUAT HOA COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE, A PLACE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN HOA BINH PROVINCE

Hoa Binh is a mountainous province of 4,662 square kilometres in area and with a population of 875,380 (2022) in the northwest of Vietnam. It ranks below the median of Vietnam's 63 provinces in terms of gross regional domestic product (Thuvienphapluat.com). The poverty rate stood at 9.20

⁴ As Vietnam lacks an official definition of lifelong learning, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education, both within the domain of lifelong learning according to UNESCO's definition, are not often thought of as providers of lifelong learning from the perspective of grassroots people.

per cent in 2023 (Hoa Binh Portal, 2023). The commune of Xuat Hoa has experienced significant socio-economic development over the years. Today, Xuat Hoa enjoys a decent living standard, with an annual per capita income of approximately USD 2,600, and a low poverty rate of 5.52 per cent. However, the situation was markedly different in 2009, when the per capita income was only USD 300, and the poverty rate stood at 21.9 per cent.

Much of this transformation can be attributed to the efforts of the Xuat Hoa Community Learning Centre (Xuat Hoa CLC), which has brought positive change to many aspects of the community. Established in 2002, the centre initially underwent a period of trial and error before identifying three key focus areas: Providing information and consultancy services, offering education and training, and promoting community development.

Information and consultancy provision mainly involves the dissemination of laws and news. For example, the Law on Gender Equality gave women the confidence to contribute to the community, hence winning respect from male members in the community. Education and training cover a wide variety of activities from science and technology transfer to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in crop cultivation, animal husbandry, production of textile and bamboo handicrafts, etc. This equips the residents with updated knowledge to improve their productivity and income. For instance, a household raising pigs was able to produce three annual litters of piglets instead of two due to new techniques learned at Xuat Hoa CLC. Community development includes culture conservation, music and dance performance, environmental protection, health activities, and sports. Such activities help strengthen community cohesion through maintaining local traditions and improving people's spiritual and physical lives. Xuat Hoa CLC has achieved the promotion and implementation of these activities due to the timely, well-coordinated and flexible policy of the CLC, especially its connection with other commune level organisations that have helped programs to reach more residents.

Xuat Hoa CLC's management follows a triangular model. At the top corner is the director, who is also the Head of the commune's People's Committee. This dual role allows the director to mobilise all relevant parties for CLC activities, and to ensure their alignment with the general direction of the country. On the lower left corner is the deputy director, who is also a leader of the local branch of VALP, a strong advocate of and fundraiser for education. On the last corner is the second deputy director, who is a principal or vice-principal of a local school, thus with experience in education. What stands out in the structure of Xuat Hoa CLC is the presence of 16 community development clubs in the commune's 16 hamlets. These clubs are composed of various smaller groups of occupations. This cohesive and to-the-grassroots structure enables the CLC to actively respond to inputs from the residents, hence connecting its activities to people's daily lives.

These well-targeted initiatives and strong management has begun to yield results, and by 2016, the annual per capita income in the commune had risen to USD 1,212, while the poverty rate had declined to 8.3 per cent. Xuat Hoa CLC has brought many benefits to the local people, the most important of which is providing the chance of learning to everyone, especially applied, hands-on learning, not merely theoretical study in classrooms. With its comprehensive organisation and practical activities that meet people's learning needs, Xuat Hoa CLC has received positive feedback from the Hoa Binh Department of Education and Training. It is really an institution of the people, by the people, and for the people, and has become not only an education facility but also an indispensable part of communal life.

3.2 SON LA LEARNING CITY: A HUB OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Son La City, located in the heart of Vietnam's northwest region, is a political, economic, cultural, and social hub of Son La Province. Covering over 323 square kilometres, the city comprises 12 administrative units — seven wards and five communes — with a diverse population of nearly 120,000 people, representing 12 ethnic groups, contributing to the city's rich, diverse, and invaluable cultural heritage. The Thai ethnic group forms the majority, accounting for more than 54 per cent of the population. Approximately 60 per cent of the population resides in urban areas, and the city's per capita income matches the national average of USD 4,300 annually.

Son La City places a strong emphasis on education and lifelong learning. Annually, 30 to 40 per cent of the city's total budget is allocated to education. By the end of 2024, over 90 per cent of schools had met national standards. The city also boasts specialised educational institutions, such as the Provincial Centre for Supporting Inclusive Education, the British Council Vietnam English Accreditation Centre, and numerous other, foreign language and IT centres. Digital transformation and IT application in teaching and learning are priorities, providing students at all levels with opportunities to engage in domestic and international intellectual competitions, often achieving high accolades.

Son La City is rich in cultural heritage, with festivals and events that reflect its unique identity. The Ban flower festival captures the essence and beauty of the Northwestern Mountains, while the Coffee Festival marks the harvest season. In 2021, the city achieved international recognition when Thai Xoe Art was recognised by UNESCO as a representative of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In February 2024, Son La City became a member of UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). Following this admission, the city launched a comprehensive plan to meet the GNLC's six focus areas, guided by the determination outlined in Conclusion No. 1604 of the Standing Committee of the City Party Committee which aligns local policy and development efforts with criteria defined by the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC). The key initiatives include:

- Establishing a Steering Committee: Led by the Secretary of the City Party Committee and Chairman of the City People's Council, this underscores the political commitment to achieving Learning City goals.
- Raising awareness: Engaging authorities and citizens through targeted outreach to enhance awareness and accountability.
- Organising celebratory activities: Events include the establishment of a Centre for Community Integration Education, conferences on digital transformation in education, and activities to preserve ethnic cultural identities.
- Promoting reading culture: During the Vietnam Book and Reading Culture Day 2024, the city organised a book introduction contest, attracting over 20,000 participants.
- Lifelong Learning Week: Activities included environmental protection campaigns such as cycling and marathons and promoting the city's learning culture.
- Innovative preschool education models: Workshops emphasised the role of preschool education in lifelong learning, featuring Finland's "Lau Lau Learning" model.
- Creative competitions: The "Son La – The Global Learning City I Love" contest inspired entries across literature, art, and environmental solutions.
- International collaboration: The city actively participates in UNESCO's conferences, sharing experiences at the ASEAN+3 Regional Learning Cities Conference in Bangkok.
- Building learning spaces: Over 112 "Intellectual Houses" and "Human Libraries" have been established in hamlets, fostering community-driven learning initiatives.

Son La City has successfully met 57 of the 60 GNLC indicators and exceeded many national targets for learning models set by MOET. Over 90 per cent of citizens are registered as learning citizens, while 96 per cent of households qualify as learning families. All communes, wards, and neighbourhoods have achieved learning community status, surpassing the national average target for 2025. Son La City views the title of UNESCO Learning City not as a destination, but as a milestone enroute to the next journey and keeps adhering to its slogan “Lifelong learning, sustainable culture, bright future, deep integration”.

IV RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Raising awareness across society — particularly among ministries, sectors, and businesses — about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning and building a learning society is essential. A clear understanding of what lifelong learning is in practice, and what roles it plays for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and social inclusion may be a motivation for everyone to practice learning throughout life.

The movement of building learning families, learning clans, and learning communities in order to turn Vietnam into a learning society has been promoted, but practical outcomes have not been confirmed in places. Learning from the family and the community should, through more awareness raising and government-led community activities, become a practice, a way of life where everyone involved feels the joy and sees the benefits of this practice.

A law on lifelong learning is needed to secure its position in the national education system. From this law, a robust legal framework can be established for working mechanisms, improved coordination, and stronger voluntary participation from all social groups in lifelong learning development. Once lifelong learning will be given a legal status, it will enjoy increased financial and physical investment, and greater involvement from the private sector.

Such a law, when formulated, should regulate and stipulate:

- The development of an open, flexible, interconnected education system with high adaptability
- The enhancement of the role of cultural and educational institutions outside the national education system
- The promotion of a learning society from the grassroots level, fully leveraging the potential of community-based and workplace learning models
- The establishment of mechanisms for assessing, recording, verifying, and recognising learners' lifelong learning outcomes and experiences
- The assurance of quality education in lifelong learning
- The strengthening of digital transformation and the application of educational technology (edtech) to support lifelong learning
- The improvement of management mechanisms of the lifelong learning system
- The development of mechanisms to ensure active and engaged participation from all levels of government in the management, guidance, and implementation of lifelong learning activities
- The enhancement of the quality and gradual professionalisation of the lifelong learning teaching workforce by establishing adult education majors in universities and providing pedagogical training specifically for teachers working with adult learners in lifelong learning

Inclusive education, particularly for persons with disabilities, must be prioritised to ensure equitable education for all, while a flexible and open education system can enable learners to access, navigate, and benefit from diverse learning pathways. Facilities for persons, especially children, with disabilities should be installed in more schools and education institutions to enable these people to partake in inclusive education and learning. Once children with disabilities have mingled with other children at an early age, they will not feel inferior as grown-ups, and other people in society and workplaces will accept them as equals.

Improvements are needed for the national education system to become truly open and flexible, with articulation between modes and levels, allowing everyone to access education and to learn in ways that suit their mental and physical abilities, and economic backgrounds. The system should also facilitate transfer among disciplines of study to enable everyone to, ultimately, select the major most suitable to their potential. Vietnam has an NQF in place. It should serve as the basis for articulation among learning outcomes from different modes of learning.

Education provision is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders. Relevant ministries, such as MOET and MOLISA, should strengthen coordination and collaboration to create synergies and facilitate smoother policy implementation for education providers. A well-aligned approach will help ensure that policies do not conflict and are effectively translated into practice, thus addressing systemic challenges and improving access, quality, and equity in education.

Public-private partnerships should be strengthened to utilise and mobilise private sector resources. Entities that are outside the national education system should be recognised and accredited according to a national standard system to allow them to form an extensive network of informal education providers that can cater to specific learning needs. This approach may lead to the recognition of prior learning experiences.

Conclusion: Vietnam has made significant progress in promoting lifelong learning and building a learning society through legislative efforts, policy initiatives, and grassroots movements. However, gaps remain in the legal framework, cross-sectoral coordination, public-private partnerships, and people's attitudes towards lifelong learning that limit the full realisation of these goals. For Vietnam to become a lifelong learning society, addressing these challenges requires raising public awareness, supporting learning families and communities, and integrating lifelong learning into the national education system. A dedicated law on lifelong learning could provide structural and financial support to enhance stakeholder coordination, encourage voluntary participation, and attract private sector investment.

As this country study is concluded, a process of government restructuring is taking place in Vietnam. Vocational education is transferred from MOLISA to MOET, promising seamless integration of lifelong learning pathways into the national education system. This streamlined governance structure with MOET now overseeing the full spectrum of learning pathways could facilitate the development and implementation of a more cohesive legal framework, including the needed law on lifelong learning which is expected to accelerate the implementation of a unified qualifications framework, promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and encourage innovation in curriculum development and digital learning. An education system which is open, flexible and with seamless articulation between levels and modes of education and training is not far on the horizon.

The government is making vigorous efforts to realise its goal of expanding learning opportunities for all citizens. In March 2025, the government issued Resolution 51/NQ-CP tasking MOET with developing a comprehensive plan for articulation across education modalities and between levels, and drafting a Lifelong Learning Bill to be submitted to the National Assembly in October 2029 (Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam). In November 2024, MOET introduced eight open and flexible curricula designed to meet diverse learner needs, with no restrictions on entry age or time limits for completion. These developments reflect a strong political commitment to enhancing the governance and policy framework, aiming to establish a coherent and integrated system for educational reform and innovation.

APPENDIX 1

LAW ON EDUCATION

Issued 2019

Extract translation by the authors

Section 1 of the Law on Education provides for education from kindergarten to tertiary levels. Section 2 is for continuing education exclusively. Below is the English translation of Section 2.

Section 2

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Article 41. Objectives of continuing education

Continuing education enables people to learn while in-service, to learn continuously and for lifelong for development of their capacity, refinement of their personality, broadening their understanding, and for educational, professional and operational enhancement with a view to improving their employability, self-employability, and adaptation to the social life; contributing to the building of a learning society.

Article 42. Objectives of continuing education

- 1 Illiteracy eradication for citizens of suitable age as prescribed by law.
- 2 Training, upgrading and enhancing professional capacity; updating and supplying knowledge and skills necessary to people's life; enabling those with the needs for education to improve their educational qualifications.

Article 43. Programmes, forms, contents and methods of continuing education

- 1 Programmes of continuing education include:
 - a. literacy eradication;
 - b. Educational programmes responding to the needs of learners, updating of knowledge and skills, transfer of technology;
 - c. Programmes for training, upgrading and enhancing professional qualifications;
 - d. Educational programmes leading to degrees/diplomas of the national educational system.
- 2 Forms of conducting continuing educational programmes are as follows:
 - a. In-service learning;
 - b. Distance learning;
 - c. Guided self-learning;
 - d. Other learning forms per learner's needs.
- 3 Educational contents of the programmes defined in point a, b, and c of clause 1 of this Article must guarantee the usefulness and help learners improve their working productivity and quality of life. Educational contents of the programmes defined in point d clause 1 of this Article must lead to the completion of a qualification in the structural framework of the national educational system or the Vietnamese Qualifications Framework, must guarantee the requirements on contents of the educational programme of the same educational level/

training qualification defined in Article 31 of this Law, the Law on Vocational education and Law on Higher education.

- 4 Methods of continuing education must promote the activeness of learners, with an emphasis on the development of their self-learning ability, using modern facilities and technology to improve quality and efficiency of teaching and learning.
- 5 Within the scope of their duties and authorities, the Minister of Education and Training and Minister of Labour - War Invalids and Social Affairs shall provide for educational programmes, textbooks, syllabi, materials of continuing education.

Article 44. Institutions of continuing education

- 1 Programmes of continuing education are conducted at institutions of continuing education, general education, vocational education or higher education, cultural institutions, at the workplace, residential communities, through mass media or other means.
- 2 Institutions of continuing education are as follows:
 - a. Institutions of continuing education
 - b. Institutions of vocational education - continuing education;
 - c. Community learning centers;
 - d. Other centers that conduct continuing education.
- 3 The implementation of continuing educational programmes of continuing education institutions are prescribed as follows:
 - a. Continuing education centers and vocational - continuing education centers shall implement educational programmes defined in clause 1 Article 43 of this Law, except for educational programmes leading to diplomas of vocational secondary education, college degrees, bachelor's degrees;
 - b. Community learning centers shall implement educational programmes defined in point a and point b of clause 1 of Article 43 of this Law;
 - c. Other centers shall implement educational programmes defined in point b and point c of clause 1 of Article 43 of this Law.
- 4 General education institutions, vocational education institutions, higher education institutions implementing continuing educational programmes shall guarantee their educational and training duties, only implement educational programmes defined in point d clause 1 of Article 43 of this Law when authorised by competent education authority.
- 5 Cooperation in offering in-service courses with higher education institutions shall be implemented in accordance with the Law on Higher education.

Article 45. Assessment and recognition of students' performance

- 1 Learners who complete the illiteracy eradication programme and meet the requirements set by the Minister of Education and Training, will be certified to have completed the illiteracy eradication programme.

- 2 Learners who complete lower secondary educational programmes defined in point d clause 1 Article 43 of this Law and meet the requirements set by the Minister of Education and Training, will be issued with diplomas of lower secondary education by the head of an educational specialized agency under the management of a provincial People's Committee.
- 3 Learners who complete upper secondary educational programmes defined in point d clause 1 Article 43 of this Law and meet the requirements set by the Minister of Education and Training, will be eligible to take the examination. Those who pass the examination are issued with diplomas of upper secondary education by the head of an educational specialized agency under the management of a provincial People's Committee. Those who do not take the examination or fail the examination are issued with certificates by the head of an institution of continuing education that they have completed general education.
- 4 Learners who complete training programmes and meet the graduation standards of a training qualification as prescribed in the Vietnamese Qualifications Framework, are Issued with diplomas corresponding with their training qualifications.
- 5 Learners of upgrading courses conducted via various forms are eligible to take the examination. If they meet the requirements on outcomes of educational programmes prescribed in point b and point c clause 1 Article 43 of this Law, they are issued with certificates of corresponding learning programmes.

Article 46. Policies on development of continuing education

- 1 The State shall issue policies for investment in the development of continuing education, providing education to all the people, promoting the learning of adults, building a learning society; for encouraging organisations and individuals to participate and/or provide continuing educational services of quality, meeting learners' need for lifelong learning.
- 2 Authorities and organisations shall facilitate the frequent learning and lifelong learning of officials, public employees and labour workers with a view to developing their abilities and improving quality of life.
- 3 Institutions of vocational education and of higher education shall be responsible for cooperating with continuing education institutions in providing learning material sources to continuing education institutions following learners' learning need; teachers' training institutions shall be responsible for conducting research on educational science, training and upgrading teachers of continuing education institutions.

APPENDIX 2

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING LEARNING FAMILIES, LEARNING CLANS, LEARNING COMMUNITY, LEARNING UNITS

for the period 2021-2030

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Criteria	Indicators	Points
Family learning outcomes (60 points)	All school-age children attend school and complete the universal education programme as required.	10
	Students' academic performance must meet the standards set by the Ministry of Education and Training. Primary school children acquire basic online learning skills through programmes organized by schools in accordance with regulations.	10
	Students' conduct must meet the requirements set by the Ministry of Education and Training. Children are expected to be respectful to family members, neighbours, and society. Youth Union members must fulfil their duties and strive to achieve the goals set by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union while actively participating in community activities in their place of residence.	10
	100% of individuals aged 16-60 must achieve at least level 2 literacy according to state regulations (90% in mountainous, remote, and particularly difficult areas). Elderly individuals who are still in good health should engage in at least one beneficial learning activity to support their daily lives.	15
	90% of officials, civil servants, and public employees within a family must undergo training and professional development in digital transformation, digital skills, and specialized knowledge according to state regulations. 70% of adults who are officials, civil servants, public employees, or workers should explore or participate in life skills education programmes. 40% of adults in a family should achieve the title of "learning citizen."	15
Learning conditions of family (20 points)	Family members should support each other in learning, supporting each other to learn in schools, community learning centres, cultural houses, libraries, and participate in conferences and seminars. Families should have reward and encouragement mechanisms to motivate members to engage in self-learning and lifelong learning.	10
	Each family should have a dedicated learning space for children, as well as books, newspapers, a television, an internet-connected	10

	computer, or a smartphone to support self-learning and continuous learning. Adults who are officials, civil servants, or public employees in the family should know at least one foreign language or ethnic minority language (as required) for work purposes.	
Learning impacts on family (20 points)	Families should develop and implement plans for production, business, or services that contribute to economic growth at both the household and local levels. Families should rise above poverty or maintain a stable livelihood, ensuring all members have a profession or stable employment (except those beyond working age).	10
	Families should live harmoniously, fostering strong bonds and sharing with other families in their villages, hamlets, and residential groups. They should actively participate in learning promotion efforts and movements such as “The entire population unites to build a cultural life in residential areas” and “The entire population unites to build new rural areas and civilized urban areas,” along with other local initiatives. Families should also contribute to maintaining a clean, green, and beautiful environment while complying with legal regulations.	10
Learning clan		
Learning outcome of clan (55 points)	80% of families within the clan achieve the title of "Learning Family" (60% for mountainous, remote, and particularly difficult areas). Children with disabilities also have access to education, except those with severe illness or inability to learn. 90% of Youth Union members within the clan participate in short-term courses to develop skills in using electronic devices for work.	20
	100% of individuals aged 16-60 must achieve at least level 2 literacy according to regulations; for mountainous, remote, and particularly difficult areas, the rate must be at least 90%.	15
	40% of adults within the clan achieve the title of "Learning Citizen."	20
Learning conditions of clan (25 points)	The clan implements various forms of encouragement and timely rewards for members who demonstrate self-learning and active participation in lifelong learning. It also supports disadvantaged families to ensure that all children in the clan attend school and meet the Ministry of Education and Training's requirements.	15
	The clan's scholarship fund reaches 32,000 – 35,000 VND per person and continues to grow.	10
Impacts of learning on clan (20 points)	There are no poor households within the clan. Families within the clan maintain unity, supporting each other in education, production, business, and services. All working-age individuals have a profession or stable employment.	10
	The clan actively participates in movements such as building new style rural areas, developing civilized urban areas, fostering cultural life in residential communities, promoting reading culture, and engaging in learning at community learning centres, cultural houses, libraries, and other related local initiatives.	10
Learning community		
	80% of families in the village/hamlet or residential group register for the title of "Learning Family" (60% for mountainous, remote, and	20

Learning outcomes of the community (50 points)	particularly difficult areas), with at least 70% of registered families achieving this title.	
	40% of working-age individuals achieve the title of "Learning Citizen." 90% of Youth Union members in the community participate in short-term courses to develop skills in using electronic devices for work.	20
	100% of adults engage in lifelong learning, achieving at least level 1 literacy. 100% of individuals aged 16-60 must achieve at least level 2 literacy according to regulations (90% for mountainous, remote, and particularly difficult areas).	10
Learning conditions of the community (30 points)	The local Party cell and village/hamlet or residential group set goals and action plans to establish models of "Learning Family," "Learning Community," and "Learning Citizen."	10
	The village/hamlet or residential group's learning promotion association actively encourages and rewards those who engage in lifelong learning. The learning promotion fund reaches 32,000 – 35,000 VND per person and continues to grow.	10
	The village/hamlet or residential group has at least two community learning resources (such as bookshelves, libraries, communal activity rooms, public broadcasting systems, televisions, computers, etc.).	10
Impacts of learning on the community (20 points)	In the village/hamlet or residential group, all working-age individuals are in employment, and there are no poor households.	10
	Residents actively participate in learning activities at community learning centres, cultural houses, and libraries. They also engage in movements such as "Building a United Cultural Life in Residential Areas," "Developing New Rural Areas," and "Creating Civilized Urban Areas."	10
Learning Units		
Learning outcomes of the unit (50 points)	90% of officials, civil servants, and public employees receive training in essential life skills.	10
	90% of officials, civil servants, and public employees participate in learning programmes as required by the state, their organization, or their affiliated unions. 90% of workers in enterprises, agencies, and organizations have at least a high school diploma or equivalent.	10
	90% of officials, civil servants, and public employees receive training in digital transformation and digital skills to use digital devices in their work. 40% of officials, civil servants, and public employees are adequately proficient in a foreign language or ethnic minority language for jobs.	10
	60% of officials, civil servants, and public employees achieve the title of "Learning Citizen."	20
Learning conditions of the unit (30 points)	The unit's leadership and Party committee establish annual plans and goals for learning in the organization, creating a supportive environment for members to strive toward becoming "Learning Citizens" and allocating an annual budget for training and education. Unions and organizations within the unit develop initiatives and take responsibility for motivating and encouraging their members to engage in lifelong learning effectively.	10

	The unit provides resources for continuous learning, especially digital equipment and technology, to support learning and access to reliable online information.	10
	The unit's learning promotion association operates systematically and effectively, establishing a learning promotion fund with a target of 32,000 – 35,000 VND per person, with a commitment to continuous growth.	10
Impacts of learning on the unit (20 points)	Each year, the unit attains at least the title of "Advanced Labour Unit" or higher. It fulfils its duties and obligations to the state and complies with legal regulations. Members actively participate in community movements and initiatives.	10
	Families of unit members register and strive to achieve the title of "Learning Family," with at least 80% of families of officials, civil servants, and public employees attaining this recognition.	10

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Chapter V

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

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Chapter V – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

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Introduction

This chapter will undertake a comparative analysis of the four country case studies on lifelong learning policies and implementation (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam). It follows the general outline of the country case studies and aims to examine the: (a) Role of lifelong learning in addressing broader development issues and contributing to national socio-economic development; (b) state and effectiveness of current lifelong learning legal frameworks, policies and action plans; and c) implementation of these legal frameworks, policies and plans through current country initiatives and programs and best practices.

The first part of the chapter on lifelong learning legal frameworks, policies and action plans will present, examine and undertake a comparative analysis of: current legal frameworks, policies, and action plans of lifelong learning as well as the national definition and understanding of lifelong learning in each country; governance structures and cross-sectoral coordination; flexible learning pathways, equivalency, recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of learning outcomes and credit transfer; equity and inclusion in and through lifelong learning, and budget and financing for lifelong learning.

The second part of this chapter will present, examine and undertake a comparative analysis of: key stakeholders and provision of lifelong learning, country initiatives and programs as well as examples of best practice.

Each section will begin with a summary description of the current situation of each of the areas above in the four countries, followed by a critical discussion and a comparative analysis. Effective practices as well as gaps and challenges across the four countries will be identified, and main issues to be addressed highlighted. Best practices will be presented and examined including how these could be adapted and replicated in other countries.

Methodology

This comparative analysis comprised three methods: Review of the four national case studies; review of legislative frameworks and policy document analysis; key informant interviews (KIIs) as well as written exchanges with the authors of the studies.

PART I:

Section I. Role of lifelong learning in addressing broader development issues and contributing to national socio-economic development

This section discusses how the four countries understand the role of lifelong learning in addressing broader development issues and contributing to national socio-economic development.

In the case of **Cambodia**, the National Lifelong Learning Policy (2019) is framed by the long-term vision of the Royal Government of Cambodia to transform Cambodia from an upper middle-income country by 2030 to a developed country by 2050 that must be fuelled by labour forces who have strong technical and 21st century skills (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2019).

Based on socio-economic, political, environmental, cultural, industrial and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) changes, there was the need to ‘update and upgrade the former non- formal education policy and program to a lifelong learning policy and program’ (MoEYS, 2019, p. 2).

Responding to challenges such as high dropout rates, low learning levels, low productivity and a new vision of education, the ‘National Policy on Lifelong Learning aims to develop potential human resources

towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals’ (MoEYS, 2019, p. 3).

In **Laos**, lifelong learning responds to the needs of the country for education and human resource development, preserving cultural and ethical values, national socio-economic development and regional and international integration.

The Lifelong Learning Decree (Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), 2020) recognises the importance of providing access to learning opportunities to create knowledge societies to fulfil the needs for the country’s development and lifelong learning as an important element for human resource development. This is echoed in the National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030 (MoES, 2025), which highlights the need for increased human resource development for national socio-economic development (MoES, 2025, Part one, Chapter II, Section 2.2). Moreover, the Plan states that in addition to providing learning opportunities for all, ‘lifelong learning also has an important potential to help reduce poverty, protect and preserve the world environment, uphold the level of human rights, help to build peace, create a just and equal society as well as to promote economic, social, cultural and technological progress contributing to creating a learning society’ (MoES, 2025, Part one, Chapter I, p. 1).

In **Thailand**, lifelong learning and building a learning society is seen within a context of a fast-changing economy and the labour market, environmental degradation and climate change, demographic changes and migration, changing lifestyles, learning and work culture, digital transformation, limitations of the present education system with inequitable access and overall low learning achievements as well as a mismatch between education and labour market requirements. There is a need for improved equality, efficiency and effectiveness of the education system as well as raised standards. This, in turn, is key to producing a more skilled workforce and strengthening the competitiveness of the nation within the global context. These major trends reinforce the need to embed lifelong learning throughout the national education system and link it to other development sectors (Charunkaittikul, 2020; Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023; Thailand Case Study).

One special feature which stands out in the context of Thailand is local wisdom, which plays a prominent role in enabling lifelong learning in Thai society. It strengthens the community's economic situation on the basis of self-sufficiency, also boosting moral values and local culture (Charungkattikul, 2020).

The **Vietnam Case Study** notes that learning has always been given high importance in the Vietnamese society. The concepts of a learning society and lifelong learning outside school in Vietnam date back to 1945. As early as 1986, lifelong learning became crucial in the knowledge economy and continuing education pursues to serve a wide range of learning needs for new socio-economic growth. It reflects the goal to create conditions for continuous learning for people of all ages.

Resolution 29-NQ/TW of 2013 reiterates that education is a top national priority, a key investment for development, and therefore at the forefront of socio-economic development plans (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013). This is echoed in the 2019 Law on Education, which refers to the need that educational development must be linked with the requirements of socio-economic development, [...] and must link education to employment (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019, Article 4, Clause 2).

Moreover, the current Scheme for Building a Learning Society (2021-2030) aims to 'create a fundamental transformation in building a learning society, [...] contributing to advancing human resource development, especially high-quality human resources, to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and international integration' (Vietnam Case Study).

Summary discussion and comparative analysis

Across the four countries, in addition to meeting diverse and changing learning needs throughout life, lifelong learning is generally understood as contributing to personal development and fulfilment, social cohesion, and as key to supporting national socio-economic development.

Most country case studies highlight the importance of lifelong learning for addressing broader development issues such as economic shifts, evolving labour markets, climate change, aging populations, the ubiquity of ICT and emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), persistent inequity and the limited performance of the education sector as well as the need for human resource development for advancing national socio-economic development, regional and international integration and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). A strong recurrent feature to be highlighted across the four countries is the role of lifelong learning in the development of human resources for advancing national socio-economic development.

Section II. Lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

Section II starts by providing a short summary overview of how lifelong learning is featured in legislative frameworks, policies and plans across the four countries. It lists the main legislative frameworks, policies and plans that are either dedicated to lifelong learning or have embedded it as a key component.

It then presents, examines and discusses in detail how lifelong learning is expressed in these different policy documents, and provides a comparative analysis across the four countries. It draws on the guiding principles for lifelong learning policy development spelt out in Chapter III on 'Global Trends in Lifelong Learning', which, inter alia, note that 'lifelong learning should be enshrined in national education laws, development strategies and sector-wide frameworks. It must be treated not as an optional add-on, but as a central organizing principle for system transformation'.

If lifelong learning is to become the organising principle of the education system, it will need to become a basic parameter of education policy, and embedded within the policies, plans and strategies of the various sub-sectors of the education system, taking a holistic, sector-wide, and interdisciplinary approach. In this perspective, this section will discuss how lifelong learning is enshrined in legislative frameworks and policies and analyse to what extent it is understood as an overarching legal and policy imperative.

Cambodia

1. Summary overview of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

In **Cambodia**, there are a number of legislative frameworks and policies which guide lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is embedded in the **Constitution (1993, revised in 2008)** (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2008) and the **Law on Education (2007)** (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007) as well as in the **Education Strategic Plan 2024-2028** (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2024). Importantly, there is a stand-alone **National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019)** (MoEYS, 2019), approved by the Prime Minister, followed by the **Royal Decree on Operations and Functions of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning** adopted by H.M. the King (Royal Government of Cambodia, August 2020), the **Sub- Decree on the Operations and Functions of the Secretariat General** adopted by the Prime Minister (Royal Government of Cambodia, December 2021), and the **Sub-Decree on forming the Committee**, adopted by the Prime Minister (Royal Government of Cambodia, June 2023). Moreover, Cambodia is in the process of developing a **National Lifelong Learning Action Plan** (MoEYS, 2024) for the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy.

2. Detailed presentation and discussion of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

One of the first guiding legislative frameworks for lifelong learning in Cambodia is the **Law on Education** which provides a comprehensive vision of the education system. Its objective is ‘to develop the human resources of the nation by providing a lifelong education for the learners [...]’ (Royal Government of

Cambodia, 2007, Article 2). It stipulates that: ‘The state shall prepare a comprehensive and unique education system, which includes formal education, non-formal education, and informal education’ (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007, Article 15).

National Policy on Lifelong Learning (2019)

The National Policy on Lifelong Learning (henceforth: Lifelong Learning Policy) is the most important policy document on lifelong learning in Cambodia. Based on the need to ‘update and upgrade the former non-formal education policy and program to a lifelong learning policy and program’ (MoEYS, 2019, p. 2), it has the **vision** to empower every Cambodian citizen with the ‘knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to contribute to economic growth and promote individual and social harmony (by) providing lifelong learning opportunities in all contexts anytime, anywhere, and (through all possible) means’ (MoEYS, 2019, p. 3), with the **goal** to provide and support access to diverse forms of education for all, enabling them to apply acquired knowledge to enhance effectiveness, quality, job productivity, and income in today’s advanced and knowledge-based society (MoEYS, 2019). To achieve this vision and goal, a number of key strategies have been set:

1. **Developing and strengthening legislative frameworks and mechanisms** for the institutionalisation and effective implementation of lifelong learning
2. **Providing inclusive lifelong learning services for all** through formal, non-formal education and informal learning with special attention to vulnerable groups

3. **Developing comprehensive and flexible lifelong learning programs** that respond to learning needs and are adaptable and responsive to the evolving demands of society and the economy
4. **Establishing lifelong learning centres** that are safe and conducive to learning, and with adequate learning materials, equipment and technological resources
5. **Enhancing the capacity of lifelong learning program coordinators and educators** to effectively deliver lifelong learning programs
6. **Improving the recognition, validation and accreditation of knowledge, skills, and competencies** acquired from lifelong learning programs in accordance with the Cambodian National Qualifications Framework
7. **Fostering multi-sectoral support** by mobilising ministries, institutions, the private sector, development partners, and NGOs to collaborate and support lifelong learning initiatives
8. **Promoting global citizenship and inclusion** and fostering values of global citizenship, and social inclusion within lifelong learning programs
9. **Promoting gender equality, equity, and inclusion** by putting special focus on access to lifelong learning opportunities for disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised groups
10. **Promoting education through the media and harnessing technology for education** to enhance the delivery and accessibility of educational content
11. **Fostering private sectors, development partners, and NGOs** to participate in providing lifelong learning services

(MoEYS, 2019)

These strategies collectively aim to build a robust framework for lifelong learning, enabling all Cambodian citizens to continuously develop their skills and knowledge in alignment with national development goals.

Moreover, a **National Lifelong Learning Action Plan (2024-2028)** (henceforth: Lifelong Learning Action Plan) is in the process of being developed, which specifies priority activities for each of the strategies outlined in the Lifelong Learning Policy, as well as achievement indicators, a baseline, and targets, and indicates the responsible institution for implementation. A few key elements of the draft Lifelong Learning Action Plan—such as basic education equivalency programs—are already being practiced. The Cambodia Case Study points out that the issues listed in the proposed Lifelong Learning Action Plan are interrelated with Cambodia's Non-Formal Education growth and implementation. This points to an ongoing strong linkage between lifelong learning and non-formal education in the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy.

In the **Education Strategic Plan 2024-2028** (henceforth: ESP 2024-2028), lifelong learning is embedded in Priority Program 3: Promoting 21st Century Skills for Youth (Non-Formal Education/Lifelong Learning and Youth Development) as a sub-program on non-formal education and lifelong learning, with the expected outcome: 'NFE and Lifelong Learning: Children, youth, and adults, including those who did not complete formal education, have increased opportunities to improve their education level and benefitted from lifelong learning programs to improve the quality of their life' (MoEYS, 2024, p. 47).

The ESP 2024-2028, citing the “*Pentagonal Strategy – Phase I*,” identifies human capital development— particularly through improved education—as central to Cambodia’s efforts to remain competitive and diversify its economy. One aspect of human capital development is ‘reskilling and upskilling based on the “Lifelong Learning” approach to ensure flexibility and responsiveness of socio-economic transformation as well as sufficient capacity to seize new opportunities’ (MoEYS, 2024, p. 1).

The ESP 2024-2028 further stipulates that ‘the state [...] strengthens vocational training and reskilling programs to respond to labor market needs [...]’ (MoEYS, 2024, p. 31). One of its strategies for non-formal education and lifelong learning includes the provision of life-skills, income generating training and of simple vocational skills (MoEYS, 2024, pp. 89-90).

Discussion

In Cambodia, the Lifelong Learning Policy, supported by the Royal Decree on Operations and Functions of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning, as well as other relevant national development strategies, education policies and plans discussed above provide strong policy frameworks for the development and implementation of lifelong learning. The various policy documents cited above also show that vocational training, upskilling and reskilling are understood as important components of lifelong learning in Cambodia.

However, despite these strong lifelong learning policy frameworks, there is a certain risk of its practice focusing more on traditional NFE activities. The continued focus on NFE becomes apparent in the four objectives under the sub-program on non-formal education and lifelong learning of the ESP 2024-2028¹ and their respective strategies, which do not fully align with the Lifelong Learning Policy. They focus on the provision of NFE and lifelong learning for out-of-school children and youth, adult literacy, life skills and income generating programs and the establishment of lifelong learning centres (MoEYS 2024).

Moreover, NFE and lifelong learning are referred to jointly and sometimes interchangeably without making a clear distinction between the two.

Overall, despite a strong political will towards lifelong learning in Cambodia, policy implementation is hampered by a number of challenges such as diverse or limited understandings of lifelong learning including within the different policy documents, limited collaboration across line ministries and absence of a coordination mechanism between key stakeholders, limited personnel and financial resources and implementation of the lifelong learning policy at local levels. These will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections.

Laos

1. Summary overview of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

In Laos, the main legislative framework for lifelong learning is the **Prime Minister’s Decree of Lifelong Learning of 2020** (Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), 2020). The **Prime Minister’s Agreement on National Commission for Lifelong Learning** (MoES, 2024) further supports the implementation of the Decree. Lifelong learning is also included in the **Law on Education** (National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2015). Subsequent legislative frameworks, policies and action plans support the implementation of

¹ Objectives: 1. Increase access to NFE programs and lifelong learning with specific attention to out-of-school children, youth, and illiterate adults; 2. Provide NFE programs and lifelong learning which respond to the needs of community development; 3. Increase access to life skills and income generating programs for out-of-school children, youth and adults; and 4. Enhance the quality and relevance of life skills and income generating programs.

the Lifelong Learning Decree: Lifelong learning is prominently featured in the **Ninth Five-Year National Socio- Economic Development Plan (2021-2025)** (Ministry of Planning and Investment (MoPI), 2021) as a governmental priority, and referred to in the **Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025** (MoES, 2021). Specific human resource policy documents such as the **Minister’s Agreement on Sharing Human Resources between the Non-Formal Education and the General Education Departments** (MoES, 2021) and the **Minister’s advice on collaboration and sharing human resources between Non- Formal Education and Vocational Education Departments** (MoES, 2022) support lifelong learning implementation, such as through increased collaboration. Laos also has a stand-alone **National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030** (MoES, 2025), which has been recently approved.

2. Detailed presentation and discussion of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

The **Law on Education of 2015** (National Assembly of Lao PDR, 2015) lays a strong foundation for the development of lifelong learning in Laos and emphasises lifelong learning across multiple Articles. It recognises the right to access to quality education and equal opportunities for lifelong learning (Article 6), refers to lifelong learning in post-secondary, vocational, and higher education (Article 17), includes non-formal education (Article 19) and informal education (Article 24), and addresses lifelong learning in a dedicated article (Article 26).

The **Prime Minister’s Decree of Lifelong Learning of 2020** (henceforth: Lifelong Learning Decree) is the main legislative framework for the provision of lifelong learning in Lao PDR. It determines the principles, regulations and measures regarding the supervision, monitoring, inspection and promotion of lifelong learning with the aim to guarantee that teaching-learning, assessment, recognition, certification, and the transfer of learning outcomes—whether acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal education—are implemented consistently and to a high standard (MoES, 2020, Article 1).

The goal is to provide all Lao citizens with equitable access to education, enabling them to enhance their knowledge, vocational and professional skills, uphold strong morals and ethics, and contribute effectively to national socio-economic development and regional and international integration (MoES, 2020, Article 1). Principles for lifelong learning implementation include: **adherence** to national laws, political directives, and strategies for socioeconomic and human resource development; **systems for assessment, recognition, validation, and accreditation** for all types of learning—formal, non-formal, and informal— and **alignment with the national qualifications frameworks** and regional and international standards; **continuous and flexible learning**, adapted to diverse learning contexts and approaches; **shared responsibility and collective commitment** of government bodies, organisations, and local stakeholders; as well as **compliance with international agreements and treaties** to which Laos is a party (MoES, 2020, Article 5).

The subsequent legislative frameworks, policies and the Lifelong Learning Action Plan discussed below comprise important references to lifelong learning and support the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Decree.

The promotion of lifelong learning is one priority activity in the **Ninth Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025)** (henceforth: 9th NSEDP), within the framework of one of its broader objectives to enhance access to and quality of education to prepare the country for regional and international integration and the demands of Industry 4.0. Lifelong learning focuses on eradicating illiteracy, improving education especially for those aged 15 to 40, and providing vocational training for school dropouts and the unemployed (MoPI, 2021). The recognition of lifelong learning as a priority in the 9th NSEDP holds significant importance towards its implementation. However, the

areas of action are more traditional areas of non-formal education and do not correspond to the broader vision of lifelong learning as expressed in the Lifelong Learning Decree.

The **Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021-2025** (henceforth: ESSDP 2021-2025), which supports the social and economic priorities of the 9th NSEDP, is a key policy document for translating the Lifelong Learning Decree into practice. One of its policy actions is the implementation of the Decree, covering all forms and levels of education and learning, from early childhood to tertiary education, non- formal and informal learning and the development of quality standards for the recognition and accreditation and certification of learning outcomes acquired through different modalities, including informal learning (MoES, 2021). Lifelong learning is mentioned more specifically under the Non-formal Education Sub-Sector Plan of the ESSDP 2021-2025. However, the focus of the strategies and activities of the Sub-Sector Plan is NFE. Lifelong learning is mentioned in a separate strategy, which does not refer to the broad range of learning types and levels mentioned earlier in the ESSDP, but only to multiple (learning) channels such as flexible learning, informal education, distance learning, etc.

In short, while the initial policy action for lifelong learning in the ESSDP 2021-2025 is comprehensive, this notion is not translated into concrete strategies across the different education sub-sectors, and the main focus remains non-formal education.

The **National Action Plan for Lifelong Learning to 2030** (MoES, 2025) (henceforth: Lifelong Learning Action Plan) aligns with various national legislative frameworks and policies which embed lifelong learning and serves as a major instrument for the implementation of the Prime Minister's Lifelong Learning Decree.

With the vision of ensuring equitable, quality lifelong learning for all Lao people, enabling personal growth, and contributing to the development of the community, society, and country, the **Lifelong Learning Action Plan has three main objectives:**

- Lifelong Learning for development: Ensure quality lifelong learning opportunities for all Lao people to support human resource development and the creation of knowledge-based societies.
- Accessible and recognised learning: Facilitate access to diverse learning forms with recognition and accreditation based on the National Qualifications Framework.
- Strategic implementation: Plan to be used as a reference for each sector in translating lifelong learning into strategies, plans, and programs.

It emphasises the importance of lifelong learning for human resource development, driving socio-economic growth, achieving the SDGs, and adapting to Industry 4.0; promoting equitable access to quality education, especially in underserved areas, enhancing workforce readiness, supporting digital transformation, and fostering cultural and social sustainability by preserving national heritage.

The Plan spells out detailed corresponding **strategies** with **targets, indicators** and **activities** to achieve these main targets. It also provides information on governance, implementation mechanisms, and financing. Notably, it adopts a comprehensive approach by clearly detailing the roles and responsibilities of various other sectors in implementing lifelong learning (MoES, 2025).

Discussion

The various national legislative and policy documents and plans provide a very strong and comprehensive framework to institutionalise and effectively implement lifelong learning in Laos, in particular the Lifelong Learning Decree and the Lifelong Learning Action Plan. The inclusion of Lifelong Learning in the 9th NSEDP and the ESSDP 2021-2025 is an important step towards the recognition of its importance for broader national development goals and other sectors.

However, and as mentioned earlier, lifelong learning still seems to be understood as NFE by other line ministries and key actors. This leads to a misalignment between the ambitious aspirations of the Lifelong Learning Decree and the Lifelong Learning Action Plan, the broader ESSDP 2021-2025, and the 9th NSEDP, with the risk of a continued reduction of lifelong learning to NFE. Therefore, further work is required to ensure a comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning as an overarching principle for the education system and its benefits for national development across all relevant ministries.

Furthermore, the Lao Case Study notes that translating lifelong learning policies into practice remains a major challenge. Despite the approval of the Lifelong Learning Decree and the establishment of the Lifelong Learning National Committee, progress in policy implementation has been slow due to a lack of shared goals across ministries, and of clear implementation and coordination mechanisms. It further notes that although the Lifelong Learning Action Plan was successfully developed, its implementation would still require additional support mechanisms, including technical expertise, strategic planning and clearly defined operational strategies.

Policy implementation is uneven across the country — urban areas show more progress, while small towns and suburbs lag behind. The lack of monitoring tools impedes tracking progress, and poor coordination between educational providers and businesses leads to skill mismatches, making it difficult for graduates to enter the workforce.

This challenge, which is also linked to other factors such as the lack of understanding and engagement for lifelong learning of other line ministries and stakeholders, lack of coordination, low human capacity, inequity between urban and rural areas, and limited financing, needs to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. Each of these areas will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Thailand

1. Summary overview of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

In Thailand, the main legal document on lifelong learning is the **National Learning Encouragement Act, B.E. 2566 (2023)** (MoE, 2023), which has a stand-alone pillar on lifelong learning and contains stipulations on learning for personal development, economic growth and social cohesion. Moreover, there are several noteworthy national legal frameworks and policies which include lifelong learning, such as the **13th National Economic and Social Development Plan 2023-2027** (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023); the **National Education Act 1999 and its amendments** (Kingdom of Thailand, 1999); the **Promotion of Non-Formal and Informal Education Act, B.E. 2551 (2008)** (Office of the Council State, 2008); **Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy, B.E. 2561-2580 (2018-2037)** (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2018) and the **Thailand 4.0 Policy** (Government of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2016). Taken together, these policies have been instrumental in laying a foundation for the development of building a learning society which is crucial for the education system to respond to global change (Thailand Case Study).

2. Detailed presentation and discussion of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

The Thailand Case Study notes that with the enactment of the **National Learning Encouragement Act B.E. 2566 (2023)** (MoE, 2023) (henceforth: Learning Encouragement Act), the focus for education has shifted towards accelerating the development of foundational education to foster a learning-oriented society, driven by the transition from the Promotion of Non-Formal and Informal Education Act B.E. 2551 (2008). Education management is to be conducted across formal, non-formal, and informal education systems, either as a single integrated system or a combination of these three, with provisions concerning lifelong learning for personal development, economic growth, and social cohesion.

The Learning Encouragement Act elevated the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE) to the Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE). The new department status allows for more flexible operations and comprehensive coverage of educational needs for people of all ages and backgrounds.

The Learning Encouragement Act emphasises three main forms of learning:

- **Lifelong learning:** Self-directed, continuous learning for personal fulfillment and societal benefit, with potential certification or accreditation (MoE, 2023, Section 7)
- **Learning for self-development:** Skills development for job performance, career development, quality of life improvement, with certified or accredited qualification (MoE, 2023, Section 9)
- **Learning for qualification levels:** Non-formal education to obtain basic or vocational education certificates for out-of-school children or marginalised groups beyond school age (MoE, 2023, Sections 11 & 12)

The provisions of the Learning Encouragement Act reflect Thailand's commitment to fostering a culture of continuous learning and personal development across all segments of society. Its implementation is facilitated through the 2025 Action Plan for DOLE, which aims at:

- **Promoting lifelong learning:** Ensure inclusive, accessible, and high-quality education for all, tailored to the needs of diverse population groups.
- **Empowering communities:** Provide specialised learning and skill development for marginalised and special-needs groups to enhance self-reliance and quality of life.
- **Supporting vocational and career development:** Expand opportunities for income generation through vocational training, skill enhancement, and entrepreneurship education.
- **Leveraging digital transformation:** Use tools like the Credit Bank System and digital platforms to offer flexible, personalised education.
- **Fostering collaboration:** Strengthen partnerships across public, private, and community sectors to support lifelong learning efforts.
- **Advancing sustainability:** Promote environmental education and behavioural change through green learning initiatives and awareness campaigns.
- **Streamlining governance:** Improve coordination, policy implementation, and resource management to efficiently drive lifelong learning initiatives.

(Thailand Case Study, Annex G)

Ministry of Education management policies

Over the past several years, various editions of the Ministry of Education's management policies have emphasised the promotion of lifelong learning across all levels of education through multiple approaches. These policies also advocate for the development of a flexible learning system, the establishment of credit banks, and stronger linkages between different types and levels of education. Additionally, they stress the importance of ensuring equity by specifically addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. The education management policies for the fiscal year 2024 aimed to change the Thai education system sustainably (Sawasdee Thailand, 2023, July 31).²

The Ministry of Education Notification of the Education Policy of the fiscal year 2025-2026

As spelt out in this Notification, the Education Policy for 2025-2026 foresees the development of a flexible education system covering formal, informal, and non-formal education as well as lifelong learning, supported by the integration of modern technology. More specifically, key initiatives for promoting lifelong learning and education equity are:

- **Free education anytime, anywhere:** Implement a no-cost, learner-centred system to ensure education accessibility and lifelong learning (point 2.1).
- **Support for out-of-school youth:** Assist children and young people in enrolling in formal, non-formal, or informal education (point 2.2).
- **Flexible learning & certification:** Develop a system that recognises skills through professional certifications, supplemental learning, and credit-based assessments via a credit bank (point 2.5).
- **Equal access to quality education:** Provide learning opportunities from early childhood to lifelong learning, fostering scientific, technological, and analytical skills (point 2.9).

(Thai Government Gazette, 2024, November 13)³

Thailand's 20-Year National Strategy, B.E. 2561-2580 (2018-2037) (henceforth: 20-Year National Strategy) refers to lifelong learning under its “Strategy for Human Capital Development and Strengthening”, by promoting human development at all stages in life (i.e., early childhood, school age, working age and elderly people), encouraging citizens ‘to [...] acquire lifelong learning and development habits’. Indicators include ‘study and lifelong learning results’ (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2018, p. 8).

The **13th National Economic and Social Development Plan 2023-2027** (henceforth: 13th NESDP), under Milestone 12: “Thailand Has a High-Capability Workforce Committed to Lifelong Learning and Responsive to Future Developments”, recognises lifelong learning as ‘an important tool for the development of people in an ageing society. Learners need to constantly adapt, learn, and build new competencies together with being able to transfer their skills effectively and seamlessly across training institutions. [...] An enabling ecosystem is therefore needed in order to support quality lifelong learning among all population groups both online and offline. Inclusive measures are also required so as to eliminate obstacles for those without access to education and enable them to learn and enhance their skills’ (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023, p. 110). Key strategies for promoting lifelong learning of the 13th NESDP (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023, Strategy 3, sub-strategies 3.1 and 3.2), are:

² Online: https://www.thailand.go.th/issue-focus-detail/001_06_055

³ Online: <https://dprd.moe.go.th/moe-policy-2025-2026/>

1. **Developing learning environments:** Encouraging all sectors to establish learning cities, facilities, and creative spaces—both physical and virtual
2. **Inclusive learning materials:** Designing affordable educational resources in local languages and for learners with disabilities to ensure that no one is left behind
3. **Developing learning credit banks,** connecting all forms of education (formal, non-formal, informal) across different levels to provide flexible and diverse learning pathways
4. **Incentives for lifelong learning:** Supporting self-learning through financial aid and training credits
5. **Alternative learning:** Developing learning alternatives for those who cannot attend formal education

These strategies aim at developing an ecosystem for lifelong learning by promoting the development of learning cities, creating affordable learning materials to leave no one behind, developing learning credit banks to connect all levels and types of learning in basic, vocational, formal, non-formal and informal educations, ranging from secondary, vocational to higher levels, providing funds and training credits as incentives for lifelong learning, and developing learning alternatives for those who cannot attend formal education (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023, p. 117-118).

Discussion

In summary, lifelong learning is a clear policy objective of Thailand as expressed in various relevant legal frameworks and policy documents including its national socio-economic development strategies and plans. The focus of Thailand's education system has shifted toward a comprehensive lifelong learning approach, also recognising it as a key driver of human resource development and a vital tool for reaching vulnerable and marginalised learners (Thailand Case Study).

The Learning Encouragement Act provides a strong legal foundation for advancing learning which includes lifelong learning. The transformation from non-formal and informal education to lifelong learning with the ultimate aim to build a learning-oriented society should be underscored. At the same time, the Learning Encouragement Act focuses on providing educational opportunities for those outside the formal education system, applying non-formal education management principles (Thailand Case Study). Despite the overall policy intent of a comprehensive lifelong learning approach, this could lead to a limited focus on non-formal education in the implementation of the Act.

Moreover, there is not yet a stand-alone law or dedicated policy on lifelong learning, even if the Learning Encouragement Act is perceived as the key legislative framework for promoting it. This is highlighted in the policy recommendations and strategies for implementation of the Thailand Case Study, which recommends to establish clear and comprehensive legislation and policies to operationalise the lifelong learning concept and to reform laws and policy measures to ensure that the education system and labour market can support the concept of lifelong learning in a systematic and sustainable manner, which entails reforms within different sectors.

Vietnam

1. Summary overview of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

In **Vietnam**, while there is not yet a stand-alone lifelong learning law nor a dedicated lifelong learning policy, lifelong learning is referred to in various key legislative and policy documents which are listed and described in the Vietnam Case Study. Also, many educational policies have a strong connection with learning and education provision for all, which is a goal of lifelong learning promotion. These include the **Communist Party's Resolution 29-NQ/TW** of 2013 (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013), the **National Assembly's Constitution** of 2013 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013) and the **National Assembly's Document 43/2019/QH14: Law on Education** of 2019 (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019), the **Prime Minister Decision 1373/QĐ-TTg** of 2021 (Prime Minister, 2021), among other legislative documents. Importantly, **Prime Minister Decision 1705/QĐ-TTg** of 2024 (Prime Minister, 2024), decided to propose the formulation of the Law on Lifelong Learning.

2. Detailed presentation and discussion of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

The **Communist Party's Resolution 29-NQ/TW of 2013** on "Fundamental and Comprehensive Innovation in Education" emphasises that education is the top national priority, underscoring that investment in education means investment in development, and is therefore put at the top of socio-economic development plans. It calls for a comprehensive reform of the education system and a change towards openness, flexibility, and connections between (educational) levels and methods (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013, Viewpoint 5). Developing the national education system towards openness, lifelong learning and building a learning society is identified as a key task (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013, Tasks and Solutions 4).

One of the key targets of the Resolution is continuing education, which aims to provide (learning and training) opportunities for everyone, especially the most disadvantaged, to acquire knowledge, access education, enhance professional skills and quality of life, enable workers to change jobs, support the ongoing eradication of illiteracy, and to develop continuing learning institutions (Vietnam Communist Party, 2013).

The commitment to continuing education and lifelong learning is reinforced by the **2019 Law on Education**, which dedicates an entire section to continuing education and makes several references to lifelong learning. Importantly, it stipulates to 'develop an open educational system, build a learning society to provide lifelong educational access of every level and every form to all people' (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013, Article 4, Clause 3).

As indicated in the Vietnam Case Study, the Law provides a definition of continuing education, which means education that follows a certain educational program and has flexible organisation regarding program implementation formats, time, methods, locations, satisfying the learners' need for lifelong learning (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013, Article 5, Clause 2). The Law on Education provides detailed regulations on its objectives, tasks, programs, forms, content, and methods; continuing education institutions; assessment and recognition of learning outcomes (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013, Articles 41-45).

It further stipulates that the state shall issue policies for the development of continuing education, providing education to all, promoting adult learning, building a learning society, and for encouraging organisations and individuals to participate and provide quality educational services, meeting learners' needs for lifelong learning (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2013, Article 46, Clause 1).

While there is no stand-alone lifelong learning law nor a dedicated lifelong learning policy yet, a lot of attention has been given to the **development of a learning society in Vietnam since 2005**. In this view, the *Prime Minister Decision 1373/QĐ-TTg* of 2021 approved the *Scheme for Building a Learning Society 2021-2030*, building on two earlier phases. The objectives of the Scheme evolved based on the educational and socio-economic needs of the country, with earlier phases addressing basic education and skilling needs, including the eradication of illiteracy. As noted in the Vietnam Case Study, the current Scheme for 2021-2030 aims to ‘create a fundamental transformation in building a learning society, ensuring that by 2030 all citizens have equal opportunities to access a diverse, flexible, interconnected, and modern open education system, with multiple models, methods, and levels of training, contributing to advancing human resource development, especially high-quality human resources, to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and international integration’ (Prime Minister, 2021).

Recent developments demonstrate the firm political will of the Government of Vietnam to develop an open, flexible and diversified education system providing fair and equal access for all to continuous and lifelong learning, with transferability between educational and training levels, towards the establishment of a learning society. This is expressed in the Prime Minister Decision 1705/QĐ-TTg (Prime Minister, 2024), on the *Approval of Education Development Strategy By 2030, Orientation Towards 2025*, which decided to [...] ‘propose the formulation of the Law on Lifelong Learning; review, propose amendments to the Law on Education, Law on Higher Education, [...]’ (Prime Minister, 2024, III. Tasks, Solutions, 1. Completing the Constitution).

Moreover, in March 2025, the government issued *Resolution 51/NQ-CP* tasking the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with developing a comprehensive plan for articulation across education modalities and between levels, and drafting a Lifelong Learning Bill to be submitted to the National Assembly in October 2029 (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2025).

Discussion

Vietnam has successfully embedded the principles of openness, flexibility, and lifelong learning into its legal, strategic, and policy frameworks. There is strong state leadership and vision to transform the education system into an open and inclusive one by 2030.

However, as outlined in the Vietnam Case Study, there is not yet a dedicated lifelong learning law, and consequently no official definition nor clear governance mechanism for lifelong learning, despite the strong commitment of Vietnam to providing inclusive quality education and learning for all and building a learning society. Lifelong learning is seen as part of other education categories (general, higher, vocational), giving it a subordinate role (Vietnam Case Study).

Currently, the implementation of an open and flexible education system is hindered by the lack of recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, and inter-sector mobility. The institutional divide between ministries and education streams (vocational versus higher education) continues to be a major bottleneck.⁴ Overall, significant system-building efforts for lifelong learning are still needed to fully achieve Vietnam's open and flexible education vision by 2030.

⁴ The cut-off time of this report is December 2024. In 2025, Vietnam will start to restructure the administration for higher efficiency, leading to the merger of several ministries. MOLISA and the Ministry of Home Affairs will be combined into the Ministry of Home Affairs and Labour. The governance of vocational education, previously under MOLISA, will be transferred to MOET, an ongoing process at the conclusion of this project

Therefore, the Vietnam Case Study strongly recommends the development of a lifelong learning law, underscoring that a dedicated law is required to formally integrate lifelong learning into the national education system. Legal recognition of lifelong learning would provide a solid framework for coordination, encourage broad participation, and attract greater public and private investment in lifelong learning. In this context, it should be underscored that, as mentioned above, the government decided to develop a Lifelong Learning Bill by 2029 through Resolution 51/NQ-CP, which will significantly change the current situation. The Case Study provides detailed suggestions on what this law should regulate and stipulate (see Vietnam Case Study for details).

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans

Over the past decade, all four countries have clearly embraced lifelong learning and developing a learning society as strategic objectives in national development and education reform efforts, as expressed in their legislative frameworks and policies discussed above. They share the intent to move beyond traditional formal education as well as non-formal education systems, reflecting broader international commitments (e.g., SDG 4 on Inclusive, Equitable Quality Education).

However, the four countries are at different stages of institutionalising lifelong learning through strong stand-alone legislative frameworks and/or policies with a credible and feasible action plan. Two countries – Cambodia and Laos – have developed a stand-alone lifelong learning legislative framework and/or policy and action plan, while the two others – Thailand and Vietnam – have embedded it in various key legislative and policy documents on education and/or learning at different degrees, as well as in their national socio-economic development plans. The presence or absence of strong legal instruments to operationalise lifelong learning is critical:

- Cambodia has a National Lifelong Learning Policy but lacks a binding legal mechanism (such as a law or decree) to enforce and coordinate lifelong learning implementation.
- Laos is the only country with a dedicated Lifelong Learning Decree providing relatively strong legal grounding.
- Thailand's main legal document for lifelong learning is the Learning Encouragement Act, which includes lifelong learning as one of its learning areas, but there is the possible risk of implementation focusing more on NFE and vocational skills, targeting the out-of-school population.
- Vietnam does not yet have a dedicated lifelong learning law, though laws like the Law on Education reference lifelong learning and an open educational system.

Legal gaps in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam allow lifelong learning to be treated as a subsidiary or supplementary aspect of education rather than a central organising principle of national education systems.

The emphasis on creating a more open, flexible, and interconnected education system and lifelong learning, ultimately fostering a learning society, is a common theme across the legal frameworks and policies of the four countries, but they are at different stages in developing lifelong learning systems that enable learners to transfer across different modes of education.

Despite strong policy intent, the respective translations into practice show recurring systemic challenges across the four countries:

- Cambodia has elevated lifelong learning to a central pillar of human resource development and national socio-economic development in its Lifelong Learning Policy and other legal and policy documents. However, practical systems to realise open and flexible learning pathways are still limited. Implementation of lifelong learning mainly continues to rely on traditional NFE programs. Activities such as adult literacy, basic life skills, and vocational training dominate. There is insufficient effort across all ministries to operationalise lifelong learning as a mainstream lifelong process accessible to all.
- Laos has made significant legal commitments to lifelong learning through its LLL Decree and LLL Action Plan, promoting open access to education and the flexible recognition of learning outcomes across sectors. However, implementation lags behind policy ambitions. There is no fully operational mechanism to link informal, non-formal, and formal learning pathways, which limits system-wide flexibility. Similarly to Cambodia, lifelong learning is largely understood and practiced as NFE. While national frameworks are advanced, practical understanding among ministries and stakeholders remains narrow, risking the reduction of lifelong learning to NFE services, particularly in rural areas.
- Thailand presents a more developed lifelong learning system, with the Learning Encouragement Act and other legal frameworks and policies providing strong legal support for open and flexible lifelong learning. At the same time, although the policy discourse on education shifted toward lifelong learning, there is a risk that the operationalisation of the Learning Encouragement Act will remain focused on out- of-school populations using a NFE approach, instead of transforming the entire education system.
- Vietnam has shown a clear and consistent political will to transform its education system toward openness, flexibility, and lifelong learning through various laws and policies. It has made substantial institutional progress towards building a learning society, but the lack of a legal framework for lifelong learning and operational challenges still prevent the full realisation of an open, flexible, and interconnected system. Also, despite lifelong learning concepts being embedded in laws and plans, lifelong learning remains institutionally subordinate to formal education.

Conclusion

Overall, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam have taken substantial steps toward building effective lifelong learning systems and learning societies through the establishment of lifelong learning legal frameworks and/or policies. These foundational efforts demonstrate strong political will and a shared commitment to inclusive, continuous learning throughout life for all. At the same time, while all four countries have demonstrated commendable government commitment and leadership resolve to promote lifelong learning, they are at different stages of its institutionalisation and gaps remain between policy ambition and implementation as discussed above. The next critical step is to fill legal and/or policy gaps where required; and in countries where laws/policies exist, to consolidate current lifelong learning policies, align them across sectors, and focus on their operationalisation—translating strategic intent into coordinated, measurable actions that reach all learners, particularly those who are most vulnerable. This will be discussed more in detail in the following Chapter on Policy Recommendations (Chapter VI).

Section III. Definition and understanding of lifelong learning

This section will present, discuss and compare how lifelong learning is defined and understood across the four countries. It will also analyse to what extent the definitions are aligned with the global understanding of lifelong learning as the organising principle of the education system as described in Chapter II.

Cambodia

A comprehensive definition of lifelong learning is provided in the Law on Education and the Lifelong Learning Policy. The Law on Education stipulates that: ‘The state shall prepare a comprehensive and unique education system, which includes formal education, non-formal education, and informal education’ (National Assembly of Cambodia, 2007, Article 15).

However, such a comprehensive vision is not found in the other legal or policy documents which refer to lifelong learning. As mentioned earlier, the ESP 2024-2028 includes non-formal education and lifelong learning as a sub-program, but without a comprehensive vision.

As discussed in the Cambodia Case Study, there is a challenge in terms of the understanding of lifelong learning, which is perceived as upgraded non-formal education. This might be since, in the Lifelong Learning Policy, NFE was replaced by lifelong learning and the ESP refers to both NFE and lifelong learning without making a clear distinction between the two.

In addition, the Case Study notes that in Cambodia, adult learning and education (ALE), NFE and lifelong learning are understood as connected, but separate concepts supporting human growth outside the formal education system. This can lead to confusion or an interchangeable use of terms, which impacts effective implementation.

It also highlights that there is a lack of knowledge and comprehension of lifelong learning at the institutional and community levels which impacts local commitment to implementation as well as program demand.

The Cambodia Case Study therefore recommends enhancing public awareness and institutional understanding of lifelong learning as an inclusive, continuous process that extends beyond literacy to encompass vocational, digital, and civic skills, while fostering a shared national vision that positions lifelong learning as a catalyst for sustainable development, inclusive growth, and human capital advancement.

Discussion

A comprehensive vision and understanding of lifelong learning are intrinsically linked to a comprehensive legislative and policy framework and action plan as well as their effective implementation. If the understanding of lifelong learning is reduced to NFE, for example, the implementation of the lifelong learning policy will also be limited.

In this view, the proposal of the Cambodia Case Study to establish a new conceptual framework which recognises lifelong learning as the overarching framework for the education system would be an important step towards establishing a truly comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning.

Also, more awareness raising needs to be undertaken with all line ministries to enhance their understanding of lifelong learning and its benefit within their respective sectors. There is a need to integrate learning into all relevant national policies and development strategies. Moreover, according to a PowerPoint Presentation of Prof. Dr. Sok Soth, Faculty of Education of the Royal University of

Phnom Penh on *Implementation of Lifelong Learning: Case Studies of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam - Case Study of Cambodia*, presented at the DVV International Conference on Lifelong Learning - Policies and Best Practices, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 21-22 November 2024, awareness campaigns should be launched to promote the importance of lifelong learning and create a culture where continuous education is valued and encouraged.

Laos

The LLL Decree defines lifelong learning as incorporating different forms of learning including formal, non-formal and informal learning with the aim to provide all people, both male and female, with access to learning opportunities throughout life, to create knowledge societies to fulfil the needs for the country's development (MoES, 2020, Article 2). This is echoed in the Lifelong Learning Action Plan, which presents a very comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning (MoES, 2025).

The ESSDP 2021-2025 stipulates that the Lifelong Learning Decree will be implemented covering early childhood education, primary to tertiary education, non-formal education and informal learning (MoES, 2021). At the same time, when reference is made to lifelong learning in the specific Non-Formal Education Sub-Sector Plan of the ESSDP 2021-2025, it is reduced to a few activities and no longer encompasses all sub-sectors, as already mentioned in Section II (MoES, 2021).

Discussion

In Laos, there is a disconnect between the official definition of lifelong learning in key legal and policy documents and its understanding across ministries and the broader society.

The Lifelong Learning Action Plan states that there is a general misconception of lifelong learning, which is often misunderstood as synonymous with adult learning and education and for those who missed out on formal education, excluding broader learning opportunities (MoES, 2025). Many stakeholders perceive lifelong learning as the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Non-Formal Education Department, and collaboration with other sectors remains unclear (MoES, 2025). This is echoed by the Lao Case Study which points out that there is limited societal understanding of lifelong learning, also highlighting that there is a general negative attitude towards non-formal and technical education.

In order to address this challenge and create a deep understanding of lifelong learning among stakeholders, the Lao Case Study recommends disseminating the Lifelong Learning Decree to wider audiences, importantly to governors as local governments play a pivotal role in translating policy into action by addressing the learning needs of their communities; hosting a national policy dialogue on lifelong learning, to facilitate discussions among policy makers from various ministries and units; and embedding lifelong learning into human resource development strategies, to enable ministries to enhance individual and team learning at all organisational levels (Lao Case Study).

Thailand

The Thailand Case Study states that lifelong learning in Thailand is now viewed holistically, encompassing all forms of learning—formal, non-formal, and informal—throughout an individual's lifespan. Delivered through diverse providers and facilities, lifelong learning aims to meet a wide range of learning needs and demands. It focuses on developing knowledge, skills, and mindset, enhancing employability, personal development, active citizenship, and social inclusion. The emphasis has shifted from adult learning and education towards a comprehensive lifelong learning approach.

The **National Education Act** (1999 and amendments) indicates that ‘education means the learning process for personal and social development [...] by creating a learning environment and society with factors available conducive to continuous lifelong learning’ (MoE, 1999, Section 4). It defines ‘lifelong education as education resulting from integration of formal, non-formal, and informal education so as to create ability for continuous lifelong development of quality of life’ (MoE, 1999, Section 4). It also stipulates that lifelong education for all is one of the principles based on which the provision of education shall be based, as well as that all segments of society shall be participating in the provision of education (MoE, 1999, Section 8). This definition is echoed throughout the various legislative frameworks and policies presented, which take a comprehensive view of lifelong learning, encompassing all types and levels of learning in formal, non-formal and informal education, ranging from early childhood, primary, secondary, and vocational to higher education levels, and which can take place anywhere, anytime (e.g., Office of the Education Council, 2017).

Discussion

The National Education Act provides a comprehensive definition of lifelong learning, a vision which is echoed in other policy documents. At the same time, while the recent Learning Encouragement Act is perceived as the key legislative framework for promoting lifelong learning, it provides a more limited conception of lifelong learning, presenting it as one among three areas of learning which aims at self-directed and continuous learning for personal fulfilment and benefiting society. Given the Act’s three areas of learning, there is a potential risk that more focus will be put on the areas of NFE and vocational skills development in its implementation, and that the understanding and implementation of lifelong learning will remain limited. It is therefore recommended to develop a clear comprehensive conceptual framework for lifelong learning.

To ensure a broad public understanding of and engagement with lifelong learning, and to embed the concept of lifelong learning in Thai society, the Thailand Case Study points out that it is crucial to create a culture of lifelong learning. This requires awareness raising through diverse communication methods such as national campaigns, community outreach and organisational initiatives as well as the promotion of the value of both formal and non-formal learning, and inviting the public to participate in learning activities. Recognising informal learning experiences as well as integrating lifelong learning themes into school and university curricula will also help foster a broader acceptance of lifelong learning as a societal norm (Thailand Case Study).

Furthermore, the Thailand Case Study puts forward a recommendation and strategy for more effective implementation on the establishment of a unified lifelong learning standard framework, which includes: all types of learning—formal, non-formal, and informal—at every stage of life, ensuring flexibility and inclusivity, and equal access for all through open, digital, and alternative methods. It should align with labour market needs and build digital and soft skills. Strong collaboration between the government and other key stakeholders is essential for developing such a standard framework (Thailand Case Study).

Vietnam

The Vietnam Case Study highlights that while there is not yet an official definition of lifelong learning in legal government documents, it is commonly understood by policy makers, government leaders, educators, education stakeholders as learning that takes place anytime, anywhere, for everyone, at all ages and levels, regardless of the form of learning, training, or certification. The term is increasingly used in the media and public government outreach, but not many people actually give serious thought to the meaning of the term.

Discussion

As mentioned in Section II of this chapter, lifelong learning is seen as part of other education categories (general, higher, vocational), giving it a subordinate role. In order to address this challenge, the Vietnam Case Study recommends to:

- a.) Develop a clear, shared, practical understanding of lifelong learning and its role in personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and social inclusion, which is a motivation for everyone to practice learning through life.
- b.) Raise awareness across society – in particular among ministries, sectors, and businesses – about the importance and benefits of lifelong learning and building a learning society.

The development of a law on lifelong learning will also require the development of a clear and a shared official definition of lifelong learning.

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of definition and understanding of lifelong learning

Across the four countries, while comprehensive visions and definitions of lifelong learning exist and are expressed in some key policy documents based on the UNESCO/UIL definition, its understanding remains reduced to NFE in others (e.g., education sector plans, national socio-economic development plans). The case studies also indicate that lifelong learning is generally understood as NFE across other ministries and the general public, which has an important impact on its implementation.

There is a disconnect between legal and policy frameworks and implementation: legal or strategic frameworks in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand articulate broad views, but practice often focuses narrowly on NFE and income generation/vocational skills. In some countries, there is a lack of a clear distinction between NFE and lifelong learning: In Cambodia and Laos especially, confusion persists between NFE and lifelong learning, limiting its transformative potential.

Societal awareness is low across all countries. Public understanding of lifelong learning remains limited, as it is still perceived as remedial education for out-of-school or adult learners rather than continuous development. Moreover, there is fragmentation of responsibility. In Laos and Cambodia, lifelong learning tends to be seen as the responsibility of education ministries only, limiting its broader societal application.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for common conceptual frameworks of lifelong learning. A clear, shared understanding of lifelong learning is critical for moving from policy ambition to meaningful practice. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam each have foundational strengths to build upon and the four case studies all strongly recommend developing a clear common understanding of lifelong learning. In order to realise the full promise of lifelong learning, each country must move beyond traditional non-formal education models, adopt system-wide lifelong learning frameworks, raise societal awareness, and foster deep cross-sectoral ownership of the lifelong learning concept.

Section IV. Governance and coordination with other ministries and stakeholders

This section will present and discuss the governance structures of lifelong learning across the four countries, as well as coordination mechanisms and collaboration with other line ministries and stakeholders. Lifelong learning is multi- and cross-sectoral by nature, and therefore active and functioning coordination mechanisms with clear roles and responsibilities of each sector and stakeholder are key for its effective implementation. By the same token, decentralisation and the empowerment of provincial, district and communal authorities are other important factors for its operational success.

Effective collaboration does not only depend on the existence of functional coordination mechanisms, but also on the buy-in into lifelong learning by other line ministries and partners and the recognition of their roles and responsibilities in its implementation. This is determined by a shared understanding of lifelong learning and its recognition as an overarching principle for the education system and crucial for national socio-economic development.

In this view, the section will also examine how far existing governance structures and coordination mechanisms are functional and to what extent all stakeholders collaborate in the implementation of lifelong learning.

Cambodia

As spelt out in the Cambodia Case Study, the National Committee for Lifelong Learning (NCLLL) was established in 2020 through Sub-Decree No. 220 ANKr.BK (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2020). Chaired by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sport, it is composed of representatives of 28 ministries. Its main responsibility is to oversee, coordinate, and give strategic direction for the nation's implementation of lifelong learning initiatives. Moreover, a General Secretariat of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning was set up in 2021 through Sub-Decree No. 237 ANKr.BK. As the Committee's technical and administrative branch, it oversees liaising with line ministries, creating action plans, and planning lifelong learning awareness raising campaigns.

However, the Cambodia Case Study points out that Cambodia's institutional capacity to manage lifelong learning is still limited and requires strengthening at national, sub-national and local levels. Key challenges include insufficient staffing, budget constraints, and limited technical expertise within MoEYS and its supporting structures like the NCLLL.

Discussion

Although the NCLLL and its Secretariat represent a strong governance structure to oversee the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy of Cambodia, it is facing various challenges. As the Cambodia Case Study demonstrates, Cambodia's lifelong learning governance structure and its strategic direction remain under development, which impedes its capacity to effectively organise stakeholders, track progress, and promote coordinated implementation. One issue is the current composition and coordination mechanisms of the NCLLL which limit representation from key stakeholders, including relevant ministries, development partners, civil society, and the private sector (MoEYS, 2022). This lack of inclusivity hampers its ability to mobilise resources, provide strategic leadership, and integrate lifelong learning into national development planning.

Moreover, while the inter-ministerial structure of the NCLLL provides a strong basis for a comprehensive implementation of lifelong learning across all sectors, this still does not seem to be fully functional. One challenge is the insufficient understanding and engagement of line ministries and, according to a PowerPoint Presentation by Dr. Samsideth Dy, Secretary-General, NCLLL, MoEYS on *Development of the National Policy on Lifelong Learning in Cambodia*, presented at the DVV International Conference on Lifelong Learning - Policies and Best Practices in Vientiane, 21-22 November 2024, there is not yet buy-in into the concept of lifelong learning by the city/provincial administrators. At the local level, authorities often lack a clear understanding of their role in education, perceiving it as outside their responsibility and approaching it more as passive recipients than active contributors (Prof. Dr. Sok Soth, Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh, personal communication, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 22 November 2024).

The Cambodia Case Study further highlights that the absence of a central mechanism to monitor, evaluate, and coordinate lifelong learning programs across diverse stakeholders is a major barrier to building a cohesive and effective lifelong learning system. This results in resource inefficiencies, service gaps, and duplicated efforts.

In order to address these issues, the Cambodia Case Study recommends that the NCLLL be restructured, strengthened, and provided with clear mandates, adequate resources, and authority for coordinating and monitoring efforts nationwide, while establishing functional lifelong learning committees or focal points at provincial, district, and commune levels to promote localised implementation, ownership, and accountability. It also recommends creating a centralised coordination mechanism for lifelong learning.

Laos

The Lifelong Learning Decree states that the Ministry of Education and Sports is the lead agency in the implementation of the lifelong learning policy. The Ministry works in collaboration and coordination with other relevant ministries, agencies and relevant local authorities to implement lifelong learning through assigned roles and functions (MoES, 2020, Article 24). The coordination and participation of ministries, organisations, local authorities and other relevant sectors in the implementation of lifelong learning is also noted as one of its principles (MoES, 2020, Article 5).

The Government of Lao PDR established the National Committee for Lifelong Learning through the *Agreement on the National Commission for Lifelong Learning (NCLLL) No. 47/PM*, dated 14 March 2024 (Prime Minister, 2024). Chaired by the Minister of Education and Sports, this Commission includes representatives from all ministries, the Party Central Committee, the National Assembly, the Prime Minister's Office, and other key stakeholders including provincial governors. Also, a Secretariat of the National Lifelong Learning Commission has been set up, which comprises the Department of Non-Formal Education and representatives from all departments of the Ministry of Education and Sports. It is responsible for fostering and coordinating lifelong learning practices across ministries and the development of the Lifelong Learning Action Plan and its translation into concrete projects.

As lifelong learning requires multi-sectoral collaboration and coordination, the existing ministerial agreements and official advices on increased collaboration and sharing of human resources between Non-Formal Education and the General Education Departments (MoES, 2021); and between the Non-Formal Education and Vocational Education Departments (MoES, 2022) to support lifelong learning implementation are key.

The Lifelong Learning Action Plan reinforces this notion and calls for an 'expansion of the Lifelong Learning Decree by integrating lifelong learning into the mandates of each development sector [...]' (MoES, 2025, Part II, Chapter II, Section 2.2, p. 30) and to improve coordination and cooperation across sectors for implementation (MoES, 2025, Part II, Chapter II, Section 2.2). It provides information on the roles and responsibilities of each sector for the implementation of lifelong learning and underlines the role of the Secretariat of the NCLLL to coordinate and encourage sectors from ministries, organisations and localities to implement and develop the national action plan for lifelong learning into a detailed project plan and activities of their respective departments (MoES, 2025, Part III, Chapter II, Section 1 and Section 2).

Discussion

Laos has put in place strong governance and coordination mechanisms for lifelong learning. However, there are various challenges, one of which is the buy-in and active participation of other line ministries in implementing lifelong learning. The Lao Case Study points out that while there is a National Lifelong Learning Commission and Secretariat, there is a lack of dedicated lifelong learning coordination and implementation structures within each ministry to act on behalf of the NCLLL and strengthen implementation mechanisms.

It argues that in order to enable the effective implementation of the Lifelong Learning Decree, additional mechanisms beyond the NCLLL need to be established to ensure active participation and a shared mission across ministries. It therefore recommends that each ministry establish a dedicated committee for lifelong learning to facilitate their respective contributions to lifelong learning initiatives (Lao Case Study).

At the same time, the Case Study notes that efforts have been undertaken to engage ministries and other stakeholders in taking responsibility for promoting lifelong learning within their respective mandates. For instance, ministries are now required to submit annual reports detailing their lifelong learning practices and initiatives (Prime Minister, 2024). Also, representatives from various ministries and partners participated in the drafting of the Lifelong Learning Action Plan.

Thailand

The Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE), situated under the Ministry of Education, replaced the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE). It is responsible for the coordination and implementation of the Learning Encouragement Act.

At provincial level, Sections 17 and 18 of the Act stipulate the creation of Provincial Learning Encouragement Offices in every province (77 provinces in total).

DOLE establishes sub-district learning centres tailored to local needs, particularly in remote, border, disaster-prone, or challenging areas (MoE, 2023). District-level Learning Promotion Centres coordinate and support community learning networks, managing local learning centres and facilitating learning promotion.

Discussion

A potential concern is the lack of a cross-ministerial Lifelong Learning Committee or mechanisms to ensure a coordinated collaboration of line ministries as well as other stakeholders in the implementation of the Act.

Therefore, the Thailand Case Study recommends establishing a unified governance mechanism as follows:

- Establishing a lifelong learning governance mechanism: Create a National Lifelong Learning Council (NLLC) under the Prime Minister to set strategic policies, develop a Lifelong Learning Promotion Act for regulatory clarity, and design a National Lifelong Learning Master Plan aligned with the National Economic and Social Development Plan.
- Developing coordination and collaboration mechanisms: Set up a National Coordination Centre for Lifelong Learning (NCCLL) to connect agencies like the Ministries of Education, Labour, Digital Economy, and Interior; foster public-private partnerships; and empower local administrative organisations to support lifelong learning at the community level.

Vietnam

In the absence of a stand-alone lifelong learning law and a dedicated policy on lifelong learning, there is no specific governance structure for lifelong learning.

At the local level, there are provincial steering committees responsible for respective provinces which are operational. In addition, there are many other stakeholders supporting lifelong learning implementation, such as corporations and associations like Vietnam Television, the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union Central Committee, and many more (Vietnam Case Study).

Discussion

The Vietnam Case Study affirms that given its cross-sectoral nature, lifelong learning requires collaboration across government levels, NGOs, and the private sector. However, there are the following challenges:

- **Weak coordination mechanisms:** Inter-ministerial committees and task forces to support collaboration remain underdeveloped or inactive.
- **MOET's limited leadership role:** MOET leads the Scheme for Building a Learning Society (as per PM Decision No. 1373/QĐ-TTg), but coordination with other ministries has not yet been perfected.

It recommends that the coordination and collaboration between relevant ministries (i.e., MOET, MOLISA, etc.) should be strengthened to facilitate a well-aligned and smooth policy implementation process and effective translation into practice, addressing systemic challenges and improving access, quality, and equity in education.

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of governance of lifelong learning and coordination with other ministries and stakeholders

Governance of lifelong learning and inter-ministerial coordination in the four countries will be examined across three areas: 1. Institutional structures and leadership; 2. Inter-ministerial coordination and stakeholder engagement, and 3. Decentralisation and local-level engagement.

1. Institutional structures and leadership

- **Cambodia** developed strong foundational institutional structures through its National Committee for Lifelong Learning (NCLLL), comprising representatives from 28 ministries and supported by a General Secretariat for Lifelong Learning. However, operational leadership of the Committee remains weak, and its restructuring is planned. Within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, the overall authority for lifelong learning still lies with the Non-Formal Education Department, despite plans to establish a dedicated lifelong learning department. Implementation is hampered by insufficient resources and expertise, especially at local levels.
- **Laos** has adopted a more integrated and legally anchored governance model. The Ministry of Education and Sports leads implementation, with a National Commission for Lifelong Learning (NCLLL) that includes line ministries and provincial governors. A supporting Secretariat promotes interministerial coordination. This structure provides a solid base for cross-sectoral leadership but lacks fully operational coordination units within individual ministries.

- In **Thailand**, governance is centralised under the newly formed Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE), which replaced ONIE. While provincial and district offices help implement policies locally, leadership remains confined to the education sector. The absence of a national cross-ministerial body or formal policy framework limits intersectoral integration.
- **Vietnam** does not yet have a stand-alone lifelong learning law, which results in the absence of a dedicated governance body for lifelong learning. The Ministry of Education and Training coordinates some key initiatives, particularly the Building a Learning Society Scheme, but without a strong mandate or coordinating body, governance remains dispersed across various ministries and stakeholders.

In short, while Laos has developed the most formalised cross-sectoral governance structure, its functionality is constrained by internal ministerial silos and lack of dedicated lifelong learning units within each ministry. Cambodia has set up a strong foundational governance structure for lifelong learning, but its operational leadership requires strengthening. Thailand has an overall governance structure through DOLE, but has yet to set up a dedicated cross-ministerial lifelong learning coordination mechanism, while Vietnam lacks a coherent national leadership mechanism for lifelong learning per se.

2. Inter-ministerial coordination and stakeholder engagement

- Although the NCLLL exists in **Cambodia**, coordination with other ministries remains mostly nominal. Ministries beyond education exhibit low ownership, viewing lifelong learning as outside their core mandates. At local levels, administrators often do not see education as part of their responsibility. The Committee lacks authority and effective mandates, leading to fragmented efforts.
- In **Laos**, coordination is more robust, supported by legal mandates and interdepartmental agreements (e.g., between NFE, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and General Education). Efforts have been made to involve all ministries and stakeholders in implementing lifelong learning within their respective mandates. Collaboration has been further reinforced through agreements and guidelines for sharing expertise and teaching staff. However, dedicated lifelong learning units within each ministry are still needed to effectively translate national strategies into concrete, actionable plans.
- In **Thailand**, local coordination is strong, with subnational learning centres tailoring programs to local needs. However, national-level cross-sector collaboration is weak. Proposed mechanisms such as the National Coordination Centre for Lifelong Learning are yet to be implemented.
- In **Vietnam**, there are government decisions and policies that prescribe collaboration among line ministries and key mass organisations in building a learning society, but they are not explicitly titled lifelong learning. MOET is the central coordinating body of the learning society scheme, but there is no central coordinating agency of lifelong learning. Ministries operate in silos, and there are few mechanisms for joint planning or monitoring of lifelong learning.

Overall, Laos has initiated robust interministerial cooperation and collaboration backed by interministerial agreements but needs to deepen it through dedicated operational coordination units for lifelong learning within each ministry. Cambodia and Vietnam, despite policy intent, still lack active buy-in from other ministries. Thailand has strong local coordination but weak national-level, inter-ministerial integration.

3. Decentralisation and local-level engagement

- **Cambodia:** Local authorities often do not perceive lifelong learning as their mandate, leading to weak engagement. Provincial and commune-level structures are not empowered or equipped to support lifelong learning implementation.
- **Laos:** Involving provincial governors in the Lifelong Learning Committee helps promote decentralisation. The Lifelong Learning Decree explicitly mentions local authorities as implementers, though their operational capacities require strengthening.
- **Thailand:** Thailand presents a strong example of decentralised lifelong learning governance. Learning Encouragement Offices and sub-district centres offer tailored programs in alignment with local needs. However, alignment with national policies and inter-sector strategies remains limited.
- **Vietnam:** Decentralisation is uneven. Provincial steering committees exist but lack consistency and institutional support.

In summary, Thailand is the most advanced in operational decentralisation among the four countries, while Laos has laid supportive legal foundations. Cambodia struggles with weak or unclear mandates and insufficient resources at local levels and in Vietnam, decentralisation is uneven. Also, in the absence of a dedicated lifelong learning law, it does not have local lifelong learning governance structures yet.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis reveals varied progress in governance and coordination for lifelong learning across Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. While institutional mechanisms exist in each country, functional integration and inter-ministerial collaboration remain uneven. Decentralisation efforts are most advanced in Thailand and emerging in Laos, while Cambodia and Vietnam face structural and/or capacity challenges.

Section V. Flexible learning pathways, equivalency, and recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) and credit transfer of learning outcomes

An effective lifelong learning system requires flexible, open learning pathways that clearly articulate formal and non-formal education as well as informal learning, vocational, and higher education, with multiple entry and re-entry points at all ages and educational levels. These must include systems and mechanisms for recognising and certifying learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning through equivalency frameworks, and/or Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) mechanisms linked to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and systems for credit accumulation and transfer, all supported by norms, standards, regulations, and monitoring processes.

This section will identify and compare across the four countries if and to what extent flexible learning pathways, equivalency and RVA mechanisms are in place, as well as what mechanism for gaining credits and credit transfers for lifelong learning programs (e.g., credit banks, micro-credentials, etc.) exist. It will investigate how far these systems are institutionalised and implemented, and identify common challenges.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, there is an equivalency program for primary and lower secondary levels, the Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP), which is run by the MoEYS and the Ministry of Telecommunications with the support of UNESCO. This program has been identified as a best practice by the Cambodia Case Study. The certificate obtained from NFE programs is the same as in formal education and enables the learner to enter employment more easily. One challenge is that there is no equivalency program for upper secondary, where the dropout rate is highest (30 per cent) (Cambodia Case Study).

As spelt out in the Cambodia Case Study, beyond BEEP, there is a lack of articulation between formal and non-formal education systems and of organised ways for re-entry into higher levels of formal education. This is exacerbated by the lack of an RVA system and the absence of credit recognition, transfer, and accumulation mechanisms for lifelong learning programs. As a result, the current system neither enables learners to transfer their skills and competencies from one type of learning to another, nor does it re-integrate formal education at higher levels or have the flexibility to allow them to accumulate credits and receive recognition of different types of learning or skilling.

Discussion

This situation impacts the effectiveness of lifelong learning policies in Cambodia. Therefore, there is a need to establish flexible learning pathways with different entry and re-entry points and mechanisms for the recognition and accreditation of learning outcomes acquired through different types of learning. In this perspective, the Cambodia Case Study recommends establishing and institutionalising an RVA system linked to the Cambodia National Qualifications Framework (CNQF). The Study further recommends establishing credit accumulation and transfer mechanisms—such as micro-credentials or a national credit bank—to facilitate seamless transitions across learning systems.

It also points out that a national certification system should be established that recognises and awards credits for existing skills and talents (Recognition of Prior Learning). This system should also involve collaboration with certified skilled individuals or institutions to offer training and internship opportunities to apprentices, helping to expand both the skill sets and professional networks of these individuals.

In order to address the challenge of high dropout rates at upper secondary level, the Study further recommends the broadening of BEEP to also encompass upper secondary education.

Laos

Laos has equivalency programs for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels, which provide a condensed curriculum similar to formal education. At the same time, the ESSDP 2021-2025 calls for a more affordable and realistic expansion of equivalent secondary education and for better learning outcomes from equivalency primary programs (MoES, 2021, Part V. Non-Formal Education Sub-Sector Plan, 2. p. 107). Also, the Lao Case Study points out that while there is recognition of NFE diplomas, they do not give an easy or automatic entry to formal education nor into the labour market.

The Lifelong Learning Action Plan notes that ‘as for the equivalency and transfer of learning outcomes of each education form and of each sector, there are still only a small number of sectors that recognize each other. Most of them are at the level of vocational education, professional training and higher education [...]’ (MoES, 2025, Part one: Chapter IV., Section 4.1, Point 6., p. 10). Also, currently, there

is no system of recognition and acceptance of the learning outcomes attained from experiential or informal learning’ (MoES, 2025, Part one: Chapter I, Section 2.3., p. 4). In terms of RVA, Laos does not yet have such a mechanism in place, but its establishment is a key objective in relevant legislative frameworks and plans. The Lifelong Learning Decree stipulates that ‘lifelong learning shall be embedded within a system that includes assessment, recognition, equivalency, accreditation and transfer of learning outcomes between formal, non-formal and informal learning approaches’ (MoES, 2020, Article 5, Clause 2, p. 2). It also specifies that ‘lifelong learning shall be flexible, continuable, shall encompass various learning approaches and be relevant to the contexts in which the learning takes place’ (MoES, 2020, Article 5, Clause 3, p. 2), and that it ‘shall be implemented in line with the national education qualifications framework and be compatible with regional and international standards’ (MoES, 2020, Article 5, Clause 4. p. 2).

The ESSDP 2021-2025 stipulates that ‘[t]he Lifelong Learning Decree will be implemented covering early childhood education, primary to tertiary education, non-formal education and informal learning. Quality standards will be developed to recognize of all forms of learning to be accredited by issuing certificates together with a review of existing accreditation systems in order to acknowledge the learnings gained from various sources, including informal learning experiences of learners, based on international and regional qualifications frameworks’ (MoES, 2021, p. 17).

This is reinforced through one of the objectives of the Lifelong Learning Action Plan, which aims to facilitate access to diverse learning forms with recognition and accreditation based on the National Qualifications Framework. One of the Plan’s targets details this aim: ‘System and mechanism for assessment, recognition, accreditation, equivalency and transferring of learning outcomes are established and continuous development’ (MoES, 2025, Part II: Chapter II. Section 2.3., p. 31). Further, in one of its strategies: ‘Development of learning approaches, curriculum, teaching-learning materials, and quality assurance system for all forms of lifelong learning’ (MoES, 2025, Section 2.4, p. 31.), and one of its programs: ‘Review, create and improve quality assurance system about assessment, recognition, accreditation, equivalency, and transferring of learning outcomes of all forms of lifelong learning and ensuing target, indicator and activity’ (MoES, 2025, Programme 2.2, p. 33).

Discussion

The above illustrates that much remains to be done to reach the objectives Laos has set in its various lifelong learning legal and policy frameworks to ensure that flexible learning pathways are put in place enabling an articulation between formal, non-formal and informal learning with the learning outcomes from these different types of learning being recognised and accredited. While the equivalency program is advanced, more work is required to obtain full recognition of diplomas obtained from NFE. The Laos Case Study also highlights the recognition of prior learning outcomes as a critical challenge. Learners from informal education often face barriers when transitioning to the non-formal education system or transferring their learning outcomes to formal education.

The Case Study therefore recommends the establishment of a flexible learning system with linkages between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Creating these linkages sets the stage for discussions on transfer requirements to enhance learning pathways, as well as the establishment of RVA and a system for RPL.

Thailand

Thailand has an equivalency program between formal and non-formal education at three levels: primary, basic and secondary level. The National Qualifications Framework currently links Educational Qualifications with Occupational Standards (Office of the Education Council, Revised Version, 2017) and the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. There is no system for RVA or for credit transfer of learning outcomes yet (Associate Prof. Dr. Suwiditha Charunkaittikul, Department of Lifelong Learning, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, personal communication, Bangkok, Thailand, 4 December 2024).

Many of the legislative documents and policies discussed earlier refer to the establishment of certification and accreditation of different forms of learning and include the creation of credit transfers through credit banks. For example, the **Learning Encouragement Act** stipulates that the learning units shall be authorised to certify qualifications for graduates for accreditation (MoE, 2020, Section 14). It spells out: ‘There shall be a system of equivalency determination of educational levels, equivalency comparison, or transfer of learning results, skills, knowledge, experiences and competencies’ and thus the transition from one type of learning under the Act to another, and from a learning unit to educational institutions and vice versa (i.e., non-formal to formal education, between learning institutions, or between institutions and schools) (MoE, 2020, Section 15).

The need for developing a flexible learning system linked to setting up a learning credit bank system is also recognised in various other policy documents, including the **13th NESDP** (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023) and **the Education Policy of the Ministry of Education, fiscal year 2025-2026**, of which one objective is to ‘develop a flexible education system that responds to the learner’s potential by having a measurement system to certify professional standards (Skill Certificate), supplemental learning to receive the professional certifications, and the general education development test and educational assessment test via Credit Bank’ (MoE, 2024, Point 2.5).

Discussion

The above are important steps for the establishment of an effective flexible lifelong learning system; however, further work is required and RVA of learning outcomes linked to National Qualifications Frameworks for formal and non-formal education is yet to be established.

In this view, the Thailand Case Study recommends to develop education policies which promote flexible learning pathways, enabling access to learning via formal, non-formal, and informal modes and digital platforms; development of micro-credentials and modular systems which allow accumulation and transfer of credits; transfer and accreditation of qualifications through the establishment of a National Qualifications Transfer Centre, as well as the development of RPL and of competencies for workers without formal education. Legal and regulatory frameworks are required to institutionalise flexible pathways, qualification transfer, and RPL. It also recommends establishing a unified national lifelong learning standard framework, which includes: all types of learning—formal, non-formal, and informal—at every stage of life, ensuring flexibility and inclusivity, and equal access for all through open, digital, and alternative methods. It should align with labour market needs and build digital and soft skills. Strong collaboration between the government and other key stakeholders is essential for developing such a standard framework.

Vietnam

RVA of continuing education is a target that the country is striving for, but which has yet to be achieved. The articulation of formal and continuing education is stated in the 2019 Law on Education, which stipulates that ‘the national educational system is an open, transferrable educational system consisting of formal education and continuing education’ (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019, Article 6, Clause 1).

Policies on the integration between continuing education and formal education have so far only addressed the articulation between vocational education and higher education. Policies on the integration between other educational levels are not in place, thus there is a lack of literature on RVA of continuing education. A National Qualifications Framework is in place, issued by the Prime Minister in 2016 (Decision 1982/QĐ-TTg) (Dr. Khau Huu Phuoc, SEAMEO CELLL, personal communication, December 2024).

There is equivalency between primary, secondary education and continuing education programs. As indicated in the Vietnam Case Study, the Law on Education enables graduates from both the formal and continuing education systems to receive identical certificates and diplomas if successfully passing the national secondary education graduation exams.⁵ The exam at the end of primary and secondary and continuing education programs is the same, which enables learners to transfer to formal education.

Also, degrees obtained in both systems have the same value and do not indicate which system provided them, thus facilitating learners to obtain jobs more easily.

By the same token, the Law on Higher Education, amended in 2018, stipulates that university degrees will not indicate which type of education (formal or continuing) the holder has attended. It also confirms transferability within the system (MOET, 2021).

Discussion

The Vietnam Case Study summarises the main challenges in this area:

- **Limited articulation and transfer:** Although the national education system allows for transfer and progression between education modes and levels, alignment between formal and continuing education is still lacking—except after lower and upper secondary education.
- Transfers from vocational/technical secondary education (under MOLISA) to higher education (under MOET) face structural and administrative challenges due to divided governance.
- **Weak recognition and accreditation systems:** Limited implementation of RVA practices, particularly in continuing education, hinders the articulation between formal and continuing education.
- **Ineffective application of the NQF:** The NQF, issued in 2016, has not been effectively implemented due to issues with articulation, educational streaming, and international benchmarking.

⁵ For details, see Article 45 of the 2019 Law on Education

It therefore recommends the following actions:

- **Promote the transformation of the national education system to become truly open and flexible**, enabling articulation between different modes and levels of learning, accommodating learners' diverse needs, and allowing a smooth transfer between disciplines to support individuals in finding their most suitable educational pathways, leveraging the Vietnam NQF for the articulation of learning outcomes from different modes of learning.
- **Strengthen coordination and collaboration between relevant ministries** (i.e., MOET, MOLISA, etc.) to facilitate well-aligned and smooth policy implementation and effective translation into practice, addressing systemic challenges and improving access, quality, and equity in education.
- **Acknowledge prior learning:** Recognising and validating prior learning to broaden access to further educational opportunities.

All of the above will require the establishment of a dedicated law on lifelong learning.

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of flexible learning pathways, equivalency, RVA and credit transfer of learning outcomes

The four countries examined are all at different stages in developing open and flexible learning systems that enable learners to transfer across different modes of education, as already highlighted in Section II. While all have introduced equivalency programs, the extent of institutionalisation of RVA, RPL or credit transfer systems varies considerably. Each of these components, which are key features of an open and flexible lifelong learning system, will be examined below across the four countries.

1. Equivalency education: Coverage and certification

Equivalency education has been widely recognised across all four countries as a key component of non-formal education, second-chance and flexible learning opportunities. However, the level of implementation and coverage differs.

Cambodia has an operational equivalency program—the Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP)—which however only covers primary and lower secondary education. Certificates granted under this program are fully equivalent to those issued in formal education, thereby facilitating learners' access to further education or jobs. Yet, the lack of an equivalency program at the upper secondary level is an important issue, particularly given the high dropout rate at that stage. This limits learners' ability to re-enter the formal system or to transition to post-secondary and vocational education.

In contrast, Laos has developed equivalency programs that span primary through upper secondary levels. The curriculum in these programs is condensed but aligned with formal education content. Despite this, Laos faces challenges in ensuring cross-sector recognition of learning outcomes, as most recognition occurs only in vocational or professional contexts rather than across the entire education system. This indicates that while Laos has wider coverage in terms of educational levels, the functional integration of equivalency programs remains limited.

Thailand also offers equivalency education at all three levels—primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary—and has policies that provide for certification of non-formal learning outcomes. The equivalency examinations are designed to mirror those in formal education, and learners who pass

receive the same type of certification. While the policy environment is supportive, the mechanisms to ensure full articulation and fluid learner mobility are not yet fully implemented, particularly with regard to non-formal learning at post-secondary levels.

Vietnam, meanwhile, appears to be the strongest in terms of the legal equivalency of certificates between continuing and formal education. Basic education learners in both systems take the same national exams, and successful candidates receive certificates that are identical in form and status. The Law on Education and Law on Higher Education stipulate that neither secondary school diplomas nor higher education degrees should indicate whether the holder graduated from the formal or continuing education track. This practice not only supports lifelong learning but also promotes social equity and improves employment prospects.

Thus, while Cambodia lags in terms of upper secondary equivalency, Laos and Thailand offer broader levels but struggle with implementation and systemic integration, whereas Vietnam combines full coverage with a stronger legal commitment to certificate parity.

2. Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of learning outcomes across sectors: Policy intent versus operational reality

In the area of RVA, all four countries have policy commitments or legislative mandates, but none has a fully operational national system. The gap between policy intent and implementation is a recurring pattern.

Cambodia is at an early stage in this regard. There is currently no formal RVA system, and learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning are not recognised or accredited within the formal education structure. The Cambodia Case Study makes an explicit recommendation to establish an RVA system, ideally linked to the Cambodian National Qualifications Framework. It also proposes the introduction of credit accumulation and transfer mechanisms, such as micro-credentials or a national credit bank. However, as of now, these remain aspirational, with no regulatory or institutional framework in place.

Laos has a stronger policy environment for RVA. The Lifelong Learning Decree and subsequent national action plans explicitly call for recognition and transfer of learning outcomes across formal, non-formal, and informal learning modalities. These documents envision a system that is flexible and compatible with the National Qualifications Framework. However, the practical systems for assessment, validation, and recognition are not yet established, meaning that RVA remains a future goal rather than an implemented mechanism.

Thailand has perhaps the most robust legal and policy foundations for RVA of the four countries. The Learning Encouragement Act includes clear provisions for the certification of competencies and the transfer of learning outcomes between different learning types and institutions. It stipulates that non-formal and informal learning should be recognised and transferable to the formal system. Additional national strategies envision the creation of a credit bank and certification systems for professional skills. Despite this strong legal scaffolding, implementation is limited, and there is no operational RVA system in place to date.

Vietnam, while legally mandating a unified and transferrable education system, also struggles with actual implementation of RVA, especially in continuing education. While the National Qualifications Framework exists, it has not been effectively utilised for the recognition or articulation of learning

outcomes across education streams. The Vietnam Case Study highlights limited articulation and weak recognition practices, particularly at the interface of vocational and higher education, where governance is split between different ministries (MOET and MOLISA).

Overall, Thailand and Laos show stronger policy alignment, while Vietnam and Cambodia remain weaker in terms of both practice and system development. However, none of the countries has successfully established a functioning national RVA mechanism.

3. Recognition of Prior Learning: A common weakness

RPL remains largely underdeveloped in all four countries.

In **Cambodia**, RPL is not formally recognised in the education system. The Case Study recommends creating a national certification system that would validate and award credits for prior learning and experience, including informal skills acquisition, but this remains in the planning phase.

Laos, too, lacks an operational RPL system. Its Lifelong Learning Action Plan recognises RPL as a vital need, particularly to help informal learners re-enter the education system. However, no functional mechanism currently exists to assess or accredit prior learning outcomes.

Thailand acknowledges the need for RPL in several key policy documents, and its legislative texts make provisions for the transfer of skills, knowledge, and experience, suggesting a pathway toward formal RPL mechanisms. Yet, there is little evidence of widespread or standardised implementation.

Vietnam similarly lacks a national RPL framework. The country recognises the importance of acknowledging prior learning as part of its strategy for open education, but concrete mechanisms for RPL have yet to be developed or piloted.

This consistent gap in RPL across all four countries represents a major barrier to inclusive and lifelong learning, especially for adult learners and those with substantial informal work experience.

4. Credit transfer and accumulation: Foundations without functionality

All four countries have expressed interest in developing credit accumulation and transfer systems, such as credit banks or micro-credential systems, to facilitate learner mobility. However, the actual implementation of these mechanisms remains largely conceptual.

Thailand is most advanced in this area, with multiple policy references to the creation of a credit bank and mechanisms for skills certification aligned with the NQF. This vision is also integrated into Thailand's 13th NESDP and the Education Policy for 2025-2026. However, operational systems are still not in place, and much of the policy intent has yet to be translated into functioning pathways.

Laos and **Cambodia** also propose similar systems in their strategic education plans. The Lao Lifelong Learning Action Plan includes detailed targets for developing a national mechanism for assessment, recognition, and credit transfer. Cambodia recommends developing micro-credential frameworks and linking them to an RVA system. Still, these proposals remain high-level plans without institutional structures or piloting.

In **Vietnam**, the NQF theoretically provides for the transfer of learning outcomes between educational levels and modes. However, its implementation has been weak, and the structural divide between vocational and higher education remains a significant barrier to credit transfer, especially given the fragmented governance by different ministries and educational institutions.

Overall, while all countries are moving toward credit transfer mechanisms on paper, the lack of functional credit systems continues to impede learner progression and the realisation of flexible learning pathways.

Conclusion

In summary, while Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam all demonstrate a policy commitment to developing flexible and inclusive lifelong learning systems, the extent of actual implementation varies considerably. All four countries have equivalency systems, but for different education levels, and at different stages of systemic integration and implementation. Also, all countries face common challenges in establishing operational systems for RVA, RPL, and credit accumulation and transfer. For these countries to fully realise the promise of lifelong learning, the next crucial step is to translate policy into practice, building coherent, institutional frameworks that support flexible learning pathways and the recognition and transfer of learning outcomes across all education sectors.

Section VI. Equity and inclusion

One of the guiding principles of lifelong learning policy development is that ‘policies must actively address barriers faced by marginalised groups, such as women, older adults, people with disabilities, migrants and Indigenous populations’ (see Chapter II). In this view, this section examines how equity and inclusion in and through lifelong learning are addressed across the four countries.

Cambodia

Equity and inclusiveness are core principles in the national development strategies and legal frameworks and policies of the Royal Government of Cambodia. This is expressed, *inter alia*, in the Law on Education which makes specific reference to the right to education for disabled persons (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007, Article 39) and encourages and promotes having special education for disabled persons (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007, Article 38); in the Pentagon Strategy, in which equity is one of its five mottos (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2024); and in the ESP 2024-2028 (MoEYS, 2024), which spells out, for example, that ‘public resources and programs should benefit first those institutions, schools, families, and students most in need of them, leaving no one out of the system’ (MoEYS, 2024, p. 44). One the 15 Recommendations in the Education Congress 2024 which is reflected in the ESP 2024-2028, is the provision of inclusive education (MoEYS, 2024 p. 40).

The focus on equity and inclusion is also highlighted in the Lifelong Learning Policy. One of its strategies focuses on promoting gender equality, equity, and inclusion by ensuring that lifelong learning opportunities are accessible to disadvantaged and marginalised groups—especially women, children, people living with disabilities, ethnic minorities, dropouts, migrant workers, and the unemployed—through vocational training, skill development, and inclusive learning practices (MoEYS, Strategy 5.9, p. 8).

At the same time, the Cambodian Case Study points out that despite these clear policy directives towards equity and inclusion in education as well as in and through lifelong learning, there are still

numerous challenges in this area. Lifelong learning opportunities are not provided equally between urban and rural areas, and vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, people living with disabilities, and learners from low-income backgrounds have less access to lifelong learning programs due to issues such as lack of programs in their local language or location, transportation issues, and learning opportunity costs. Furthermore, there are continued gender disparities with women having less access to lifelong learning.

Laos

The provision of lifelong learning can be a key instrument for ensuring equity and inclusion to education and learning for all. A number of legislative and policy documents refer to ensuring equal access to quality education and mention the need to pay particular attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable target groups. The 9th NESDP for example aims to ensure equal rights in accessing education for rural residents, vulnerable groups and those with special needs, and pays particular attention to the needs of women (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2021, p. 66).

The ESSDP 2021-2025 makes reference to promoting inclusive education, including support to students with disabilities. It includes strategies to reach students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those living in rural and remote areas, and female students, and gives special focus to priority districts considered as educationally disadvantaged to reduce disparities. For the non-formal education sub- sector, special focus is given to disadvantaged groups, creating conditions for them to receive equal and equitable education as well as to ensure gender equality (MoES, 2020).

While the Lifelong Learning Decree makes no specific reference to equity and inclusion, the Lifelong Learning Action Plan underlines the need to overcome educational disparities due to gender, ethnicity, disability, geographic location and social status and refers to the role of different sectors towards this objective (MoES, 2025). These are major steps toward ensuring equal access to education for all throughout life.

Thailand

Thailand places great importance on achieving equity and equality in education and learning, an objective which is included in its different education legislative frameworks and policies.

Lifelong learning is seen as an important means to achieve this objective. The Learning Encouragement Act, for example, under the area of learning for qualification levels, aims to provide educational opportunities to those who are not in school or who live in remote areas (MoE, 2023, Sections 11 & 12). Under Milestone 12 on lifelong learning, the 13th NESDP refers to the need for inclusive measures to eliminate obstacles for those without access to education and to enable them to learn and enhance their skills (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023, p.110). The Education Policy for 2025-2026 also aims at minimising inequality in access to quality education (MoE, 2024).

As the Thailand Case Study notes, the Equitable Education Fund (EEF) established under Thailand's Equitable Education Act of 2018 with the aim of reducing education inequality, is a key player in this endeavour. Of note is the Zero Dropout initiative launched in 2024 which aims at bringing out-of-school children back into the formal education system, preventing dropout and promoting flexible lifelong learning. The government has shown its commitment to this work by increasing the budget of EEF (Government Public Relations Department, 2023).⁶

⁶ Online publication: <https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/48/iid/360588>

Vietnam

The Vietnam Case Study underlines that the provision of education for all and inclusivity is a priority in education provision in Vietnam. It underscores that Vietnam's legal system, including through the *National Assembly's Document 51/2010/QH12: Law on Persons with Disabilities*, provides a strong legal foundation for inclusive education for children with disabilities, outlining their rights and the necessary conditions for inclusive learning.

However, there is still a lack of comprehensive long-term and short-term strategic planning by the Ministry of Education and Training to advance and improve special and inclusive education, hampering the implementation of existing laws. Vietnam has established special education and support centres for children with disabilities, but there is still a gap between demand and supply. Overall, the Case Study highlights that there are ongoing challenges in this area and despite the Law on Persons with Disabilities, they continue to face significant barriers to social inclusion and participation in the labour market (Vietnam Case Study).

Equity is another difficult goal to achieve in particular for ethnic minorities mainly due to language barriers which lead to educational challenges. To address this, the government has implemented measures such as using ethnic languages in early primary education and creating specialised curricula for remote areas (Vietnam Case Study).

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of equity and inclusion in lifelong learning

The following examines to what extent equity and inclusion in and through lifelong learning are included in lifelong learning legal frameworks and policies and their implementation across the four countries.

1. Legal and policy commitments

All four countries have incorporated equity and inclusion into their national education frameworks and lifelong learning policies and plans, though the depth and specificity of commitments vary.

- **Cambodia** embeds equity and inclusion in its Law on Education, national strategies like the Pentagon Strategy, and the ESP 2024-2028. The Lifelong Learning Policy includes explicit strategies for reaching marginalised groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and unemployed individuals.
- **Laos** also emphasises inclusive education in documents like the ESSDP 2021-2025 and the 9th NESDP. Although the Lifelong Learning Decree lacks explicit reference to equity, the Lifelong Learning Action Plan addresses disparities related to gender, ethnicity, geography, and disability.
- **Thailand** integrates equity into laws like the Learning Encouragement Act and policy documents such as the 13th NESDP and the Education Policy 2025-2026. The country has a dedicated Equitable Education Fund which has targeted programs such as Zero Dropout, emphasising reintegration and flexible learning pathways for out-of-school children.
- **Vietnam** puts major emphasis on inclusion, which is legally grounded in the Law on Persons with Disabilities, and efforts are made to promote equity through multilingual education and localised curricula. However, the lack of strategic planning and resource gaps hinders the full implementation of inclusive practices.

2. Implementation gaps and challenges

Despite policy commitments, all countries face systemic implementation challenges, including limited resources, insufficient infrastructure, and geographic or linguistic barriers.

- **Cambodia:** Persistent urban-rural disparities, insufficient support for ethnic minorities, people living with disabilities, learners from low socio-economic backgrounds and women, and logistical obstacles limit lifelong learning access, in particular in remote areas.
- **Laos:** There is a strong policy intent, but limited reach of non-formal education, lack of disaggregated data, and geographic challenges which make equity goals difficult to achieve consistently.
- **Thailand:** Thailand demonstrates one the most institutionally developed approaches (e.g., EEF) but still struggles with reaching remote populations and sustaining alternative education pathways in the long term.
- **Vietnam:** Despite strong legal provisions, implementation is patchy and under-resourced. Language remains a barrier for ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities still face exclusion from mainstream education and the labour market.

Conclusion

All four countries have taken meaningful policy steps toward making lifelong learning more equitable and inclusive. However:

- **Cambodia** and **Laos** have clear policy commitments, but implementation gaps remain substantial, especially for rural and vulnerable populations.
- **Thailand** stands out for its systemic mechanisms such as the EEF and multi-sector partnerships which are structured to reduce education inequality.
- **Vietnam** has a strong legal framework for inclusion but limited strategic planning. Persistent systemic barriers restrict meaningful access, especially for ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities.

Section VII. Budget and financing

Typically, the education sector in many countries suffers from limited financing and the Non-Formal Education Sector, an important sub-sector for the implementation of lifelong learning, is often chronically underfunded. In order to ensure the effective implementation of the recent lifelong learning legal frameworks, policies and plans across the four countries, adequate funding needs to be secured. In this view, this section will provide information on how lifelong learning is budgeted for and financed across the four countries.

Cambodia

The Lifelong Learning Policy stipulates that funding for implementing lifelong learning activities should come from the budget of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and other ministries, sub-national administration, development partners and contribution from private sector stakeholders and communities, as well as from the budget of other various sources (MoEYS, 2019, p.10). However, no information regarding budget requirements for lifelong learning activities and management is provided, nor an indication on the percentage of the financial contributions from the various sources mentioned.

Overall, the national budget for lifelong learning activities and for the operation of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning and its Secretariat is low, limiting their ability to coordinate and manage lifelong learning. This lack of funding negatively affects access, quality, and sustainability of lifelong learning, especially in rural and poor areas. Community Learning Centres (CLC), and the newly established Lifelong Learning Centres (LLLC), which are key platforms for lifelong learning, often lack resources, skilled staff, and basic infrastructure (Cambodia Case Study). This is a key concern and one of the main challenges for the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy and the effective running of LLLCs and programs. Therefore, increased and sustained public investment for lifelong learning—supported by a national finance plan—and stronger partnerships with donors, NGOs, and the private sector are urgently needed.

Laos

Both the Lifelong Learning Decree and the Lifelong Learning Action Plan (MoES, 2025) refer to financing for lifelong learning.

The Lifelong Learning Decree stipulates that the Ministry of Education and Sports, other relevant ministries, and provincial departments among others have the duty and responsibility to develop annual short-term and long-term budget plans for the implementation of activities based on lifelong learning development plans. The budget may be derived from various sources, including government subsidies and grant money or loans, etc. (MoES, 2023, Article 33).

The Lifelong Learning Action Plan states that funding for lifelong learning will not come from a separate or increased education budget. Instead, it will use existing budgets within each sector which will allocate funds to support lifelong learning activities. This approach is meant to ensure that lifelong learning is effectively integrated and aligned with all sectoral work (MoES, 2025, Part III: Chapter I, Section 4, p. 41).

In terms of financial sources, the Plan underlines that these should be internal. At the same time, external fundraising will be required. It states that all central and local sectors must allocate their budgets for the implementation of lifelong learning in their sectors using the principle of budget allocation for lifelong learning (MoES, 2025, Part III, Chapter I, Section 5, p. 41).

Discussion

Despite the inclusion of financing in both the Lifelong Learning Decree and the Lifelong Learning Action Plan, the Lao Case Study underlines that the limited budget for lifelong learning is a significant challenge for Laos in promoting lifelong learning. The allocated budget for the non-formal education sector is consistently limited in general, and the implementation of lifelong learning activities is heavily reliant on donor support.

While the proposal of the Lifelong Learning Action Plan to draw on existing budgets from all relevant sectors is interesting, it only provides the general principles for financing lifelong learning. No specific proposals on the percentage of the allocation for lifelong learning operations of the overall budgets of the different sectors are made, nor is there any reference to equitable and effective funding. It is suggested to undertake a cost projection exercise to properly budget for lifelong learning operations and activities, based on which more concrete financial planning can be undertaken.

Thailand

The Thailand Case Study points out that the Department of Learning Encouragement (DOLE) may utilise traditional state funding and explore alternative models like public-private partnerships to support its initiatives. Examples include leasing educational television channels, outsourcing science centre management, and partnering with higher education institutions for vocational training centres and library activities. These strategies aim to enhance resource utilisation and expand learning opportunities.

However, no specific indication on the percentage of funding from the government, nor indicative amounts or cost estimates for planned activities are provided.

Vietnam

As education is a priority, 20 per cent of the national budget is dedicated to education. The 2019 Law on Education, Article 96 indicates: “The State shall prioritise national education budget allocation, maintaining this at 20 per cent and above of the total national budget”. The national budget for continuing education is estimated at 2 per cent, but this is not provided in official government reports. As there is no dedicated lifelong learning law, policy or plan, the budget for lifelong learning is unknown (Dr. Khau Huu Phuoc, SEAMEO CELLL, personal communication, December 2024 and Mai 2025).

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of budget and financing of lifelong learning

All four countries acknowledge the importance of financing lifelong learning in their policies or strategic documents. They also mention low financing of lifelong learning as a major concern and key obstacle for effective implementation. Budgeting and financing of lifelong learning will be examined across the four countries in terms of legal and policy frameworks, funding sources, and strategic budgeting and financial planning.

1. Legal and policy frameworks for budgeting

- **Cambodia** references the plan for multiple funding sources in its Lifelong Learning Policy—including government ministries, local administrations, development partners, private sector, and communities—but provides no concrete figures nor allocation guidelines. The lack of financial planning is a major bottleneck for implementation.
- **Laos** incorporates financing guidelines in both the Lifelong Learning Decree and Action Plan, assigning responsibility for budgeting to ministries and provincial departments. However, funding relies on existing sectoral budgets rather than providing new or dedicated allocations for lifelong learning, and like Cambodia, specific amounts or percentages are not provided.
- **Thailand** presents a flexible and innovative approach, combining traditional government funding with public-private partnerships. While these strategies offer potential, the policy documents lack details on funding levels or cost estimates for specific programs.
- **Vietnam** mentions its high constitutionally mandated education budget (20 per cent), but in the absence of a dedicated lifelong learning law, there is no specific budget for lifelong learning. Only about 2 per cent of the education budget is believed to go to continuing education, though this is unofficial and not systematically tracked.

2. Funding sources

Each country draws on a mix of funding sources, but reliance on external or non-governmental support is more prominent in some contexts.

- **Cambodia** mentions multiple potential funding streams but lacks clear mechanisms for mobilising or tracking them. The Lifelong Learning Secretariat reportedly suffers from chronic underfunding, affecting program delivery.
- **Laos** expects funding from both internal (state budget) and external (donors, grants, loans) sources. However, donor dependence, particularly in non-formal education, is high. The Lifelong Learning Action Plan encourages all sectors to contribute but without clear budgeting models or equity principles.
- **Thailand** leverages public-private models effectively—e.g., partnerships for science centres and educational media—but there is no clear breakdown of public versus private contributions or how resources are distributed across programs.
- **Vietnam** depends almost exclusively on government funding, with the lifelong learning component folded into continuing education and broader education spending. The lack of a specific lifelong learning law or policy makes financial tracking difficult.

3. Strategic budgeting and financial planning

None of the four countries have costed lifelong learning plans or dedicated financial strategies for lifelong learning.

- **Cambodia** and **Laos** both identify the absence of specific budget planning—including cost projections and allocation percentages—as a major obstacle to effective lifelong learning implementation. There is no formal budgeting framework to support Lifelong Learning Centres or non-formal programs.
- **Thailand** emphasises efficiency and resource maximisation rather than dedicated lifelong learning budgeting. Its innovative financing mechanisms are project-specific, but it lacks a long-term lifelong learning financing strategy.
- **Vietnam's** high-level commitment to education does not translate into targeted investment in lifelong learning, largely due to the absence of a legal or policy framework for lifelong learning.

Conclusion

All four countries face significant funding challenges for lifelong learning. The main challenge is the absence of concrete, costed financial planning for lifelong learning. While frameworks and responsibilities are generally defined, none of the countries have dedicated budgets, clear allocation formulas, or expenditure tracking mechanisms for lifelong learning.

- **Thailand** stands out for its alternative financing models but lacks transparency in funding breakdowns.
- **Vietnam** demonstrates strong top-level commitment to education funding, but currently there is no funding for lifelong learning, and limited funding for continuing education.
- **Cambodia and Laos** both identify important budget shortfalls and lack of strategic planning as major barriers to lifelong implementation.

PART II: LIFELONG LEARNING IN PRACTICE

Section I. Key stakeholders and lifelong learning provision Cambodia

Lifelong learning programs are being implemented by numerous ministries, agencies, and development partners (e.g., UNESCO, UNICEF, DVV International, etc.) as well as local NGOs in Cambodia.

While the lead for lifelong learning is the MoEYS, other ministries, such as the Ministry of Labour also provide important activities such as TVET and up-skilling and reskilling. The Ministry of Civil Service is undertaking professional and skills development to ensure that all ministry personnel are aware of their tasks in implementing lifelong learning (Prof Dr. Sok Soth, Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh, personal communication, 22 November 2024).

In terms of higher education, universities and in particular the Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh and its Lifelong Learning Department, are playing an important role in supporting the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy.

The Case Study points out that a major obstacle is the lack of a central coordinating body or mechanism to efficiently monitor, assess, and harmonise implementation. This leads to inefficient use of resources, gaps in service delivery, and overlapping activities (MoEYS, 2022). Also, the absence of a centralised framework to match activities with national goals and monitor progress makes it difficult to ensure that programs are inclusive and respond to the needs of learners. Therefore, it recommends establishing an inter-ministerial coordination platform and partnership framework that engages NGOs, development partners, the private sector, and civil society, while conducting regular stakeholder dialogues and joint planning sessions to harmonise efforts, minimise fragmentation, and align with national priorities.

Laos

Lifelong learning is implemented by a number of ministries, with the Ministry of Education and Sports taking the lead. The Lao Case Study points out that efforts have been made to engage various ministries in taking responsibility for promoting lifelong learning within their respective sectors and to foster a shared vision and mission among local and regional communities.

Collaboration between sectors has been strengthened through agreements and guidelines on the sharing of expertise and teaching staff. Notably, partnerships have been formed between the non-formal education and technical/vocational education sectors (MoES, 2022) and between non-formal education and general education sectors (MoES, 2021) (Lao Case Study).

These commendable efforts should be expanded and strong partnerships and networks established, fostering collaboration among local governments, educators, and CLCs/LLCs as well as with private organisations which can further support implementation by providing funding, expertise, and connections to communities.

Thailand

Lifelong learning in Thailand is supported by a broad network of stakeholders, including ministries, educational institutions such as universities, NGOs, foundations and the private sector. Beyond the Department of Learning Encouragement under the Ministry of Education, which serves as the lead agency for these efforts, other Departments under the MoE contribute to lifelong learning, such as the Departments of Learning Promotion, Community Development, Agricultural Promotion, and Health.

Also, other ministries such as the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation foster and/or provide lifelong learning programs.

Vietnam

As there is no stand-alone law on lifelong learning in Vietnam yet, the Case Study provides information on the stakeholders and provision of continuing education.

Under the governance of the Ministry of Education and Training, responsible for educational programs, and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA), tasked with vocational programs⁷, continuing education is provided mainly by community learning centres, continuing education centres, vocational-continuing education centres, foreign language centres, informatics centres, and life-skill centres. Mass organisations such as the Vietnam Communist Youth Union, the Women's Union, and the Farmers' Union also offer continuing education programs (Vietnam Case Study).

In addition, higher education institutions deliver intensive programs in work skills for job seekers and those in employment who want to secure their jobs and/or promotion.

Various other ministries, including the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Information and Communications, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism provide diverse programs to support lifelong learning. Moreover, the Vietnam Association for Learning Promotion plays a significant role in advocacy, communication, and organising educational promotion activities

The use of ICT for teaching and learning, including lifelong learning was promoted in 2021, through Circular 09/2021/TT-BGDĐT issued by MOET on the management and organisation of online teaching in general education institutions and continuing education institutions. This document serves as a legal framework to standardise online teaching and learning activities nationwide, enabling students to learn anytime, anywhere.

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of key stakeholders and provision

Across the four countries, the following key trends can be noted:

- **Cambodia:** Multiple actors are involved in the provision of lifelong learning, without strong central coordination, with the effect of fragmented implementation.
- **Laos:** In Laos, there are strong ministry-led efforts, supported by a number of partners with growing cross-sector partnerships, but there is a need for stronger collaboration with the private sector.
- **Thailand:** Thailand stands out as having a highly integrated system with robust multi-ministerial involvement, extensive use of universities and the private sector.
- **Vietnam:** Vietnam is characterised by decentralised, community-based provision for continuing education led by MOET and MOLISA and strong community engagement, but there is a need for more strategic legal and coordination frameworks.

⁷ As indicated in “Lifelong learning legislative frameworks, policies and plans” above, MOLISA has been merged with the Ministry of Home Affairs

Section II. Country initiatives/programs

This section will present a short summary and comparative analysis of the main lifelong learning country initiatives and programs across the four countries.

Cambodia

The transformation of CLCs into LLLCs as spelt out in the ESP (2024-2028) aims at providing a diversity of learning options, including NFE programs, life skills and income-generating programs, and as such, strives to enhance the relevance and efficiency of lifelong learning programs. However, as the Cambodia Case Study notes, efforts towards this transformation have been limited and inconsistent. While some pilot projects have upgraded CLCs into more dynamic hubs, most still struggle with outdated curricula, poor infrastructure, and low capacity.

Therefore, a clear national strategy for LLLCs, increased funding, trained facilitators, and stronger links to education and the labour market are required. Without these changes, CLCs/LLLCs in Cambodia will remain ineffective in promoting lifelong learning (Cambodia Case Study).

Moreover, as the Case Study points out, although there are a number of lifelong learning programs in place, there is still a disconnect between the programs' content and the nation's socio-economic development objectives as well as the changing learning requirements of learners. Instead of emphasising emerging competencies like digital literacy, green skills, entrepreneurship, and labour market-relevant training, many of the programs provided by CLCs still concentrate on fundamental skills, mainly literacy and numeracy, and rely on outdated, one-size-fits-all curricula. Teaching and learning resources are outdated and often inadequate, particularly in rural areas and for marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. There is a shortage of qualified lifelong learning facilitators, particularly in rural areas, with limited access to training or professional development. Many facilitators lack formal credentials or pedagogical support, and CLCs are often run by untrained volunteers or part-time staff, leading to inconsistent instructional quality and outcomes. This situation restricts Cambodia's ability to achieve its goals of reducing poverty, promoting inclusive growth, and developing human capital.

Therefore, the Cambodia Case Study recommends that there should be a revision of lifelong learning programs to adopt modern, learner-centred approaches such as competency-based, blended, and modular learning to better engage adult learners and school dropouts, develop updated, inclusive, and locally relevant teaching-learning materials, and invest in professional development for lifelong learning facilitators.

TVET, non-formal skills development, as well as upskilling and reskilling are important areas of lifelong learning in Cambodia. The responsibility for TVET mainly lies with the Ministry of Labour, which also provides vocational training for out-of-school children and youth. It is also working on developing micro-credentials, as well as on skills bridging programs (Prof Dr. Sok Soth, Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh, personal communication, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 22 November 2024). At the same time, the MoEYS provides vocational training, income-generating programs and re- and upskilling. This is linked to the importance of education and technical training for human capital development, which is also one of the key strategic areas of the Pentagon Strategy.

Higher education institutions have also played a key role in implementing lifelong learning, in particular through the Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh and its Lifelong Learning Department, which serves as a key academic unit dedicated to institutionalising lifelong learning in Cambodia. Its mission ranges from addressing diverse educational and training needs across

communities and workplaces, conducting research and training in ALE and NFE, to supporting the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy in collaboration with MoEYS and development partners, while actively promoting a culture of continuous learning to advance national development goals (Cambodia Case Study).

In terms of **managing and monitoring lifelong learning**, a non-formal education management information system (NFE-MIS) is in place. However, the system is not yet comprehensive or fully functional and does not cover the full range of lifelong learning activities across sectors, nor does it collect detailed information on adult learning outcomes, skill development, and informal learning, and disaggregated data to assess equity and inclusion is missing. Therefore, to effectively support policy, planning, and resource allocation, Cambodia needs to upgrade its NFE-MIS into a robust, integrated LLL- MIS that includes standardised, cross-sectoral data. This requires greater institutional capacity, interministerial coordination, and clear data-sharing protocols to support evidence-based decision-making and national development goals (Cambodia Case Study).

Laos

As stated in the Lao Case Study, the promotion of lifelong learning in Laos can be summarised across four key aspects: skills development and adult education, dissemination and integration, facilities and infrastructure improvement, and partnerships. Lifelong Learning initiatives of key stakeholders include:

The **Non-Formal Education Department** provides opportunities for youth and adults who have previously dropped out of formal education to access second-chance education and vocational training. It also provides equivalency programs at primary and secondary levels.

The **labour and social welfare sector** offers job-related skills training to diverse groups, such as employed individuals seeking job changes, unemployed individuals, and those preparing for their first jobs. In **higher education**, lifelong learning has been incorporated into university programs, and students can engage in soft skills training. Recently, the Faculty of Education of the National University of Laos has integrated lifelong learning as a course across all three levels of teacher education curricula (kindergarten, primary, and secondary teacher training) in teacher training institutions nationwide.

Youth organisations have integrated lifelong learning concepts into their vocational and technical training activities by empowering target populations with soft skills including teamwork, conflict management, communication, and time management.

The Lao Case Study recommends establishing a Centre for Lifelong Learning to create broader opportunities for lifelong learning through diverse activities, such as research, coordination, prior learning assessment, certification, skills training, and on-the-job training. These activities could involve collaboration with national, regional and international partners and stakeholders. Such a centre could be established at the National University of Laos.

Thailand

As outlined by the Thailand Case Study, various activities are being implemented by DOLE based on its 2025 Action Plan, which aims at fostering accessible, inclusive, and innovative lifelong learning opportunities for all. Key projects are: a national credit bank system, digital learning platform development, support for marginalised groups, vocational training and upskilling programs, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education expansion, creating environmental literacy awareness, and developing creative learning spaces. Programs range from non-formal

education, vocational skill training, and inclusive education for people with disabilities to digital literacy and English and other language training programs.

Central to Thailand's lifelong learning strategy is its dedication to developing initiatives and programs that ensure education is both accessible and suitable for diverse populations. Local learning hubs, such as CLCs, which are transitioning to become Sub-District Learning Centres or Learning Encouragement Centres, play a pivotal role in facilitating and the provision of learning activities, the transmission of local wisdom, and the exchange of experiences among community members.

TVET is a crucial component of the lifelong learning system, providing practical skills and training that are essential for the workforce. The Thai government has been actively promoting TVET through various initiatives, including:

- Work-based learning: Projects like ProWoThai focus on developing and implementing work-based learning models within the TVET system. This approach integrates classroom learning with practical, on-the-job training.
- Dual vocational training: Thailand has adopted dual vocational training systems, which combine theoretical education with hands-on experience in industries.

Another key strategy is digital technology as a critical component of Thailand's lifelong learning practices. The Thai government, in collaboration with private sector stakeholders, has launched e-learning platforms that facilitate remote learning, which is particularly valuable for individuals residing in remote areas as well as learners with disabilities (Thailand Case Study).

The higher education system and universities in Thailand also provide lifelong learning. Key initiatives include implementing a credit bank system for transferable course credits, reforming learning models to enhance accessibility and affordability, and shifting from closed to open-access education systems. Moreover, the Ministry of Labour organises lifelong learning programs aimed at improving workforce skills and competencies to align with international standards.

Micro-credentials can become an important contribution to lifelong learning provision and constitute important learning opportunities for NFE learners. Courses are offered by Chulalongkorn University and other universities. They are provided in a hybrid format (online and through workshops) to obtain credits. Currently, courses focus more on TVET. Chulalongkorn is developing a platform for these courses with open free access, starting with a course on digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI) literacy. Chulalongkorn has the manpower to run online courses and can become the hub to do this for the country (Associate Prof. Dr. Suwiditha Charungkattikul, Department of Lifelong Learning, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University, personal communication, Bangkok, Thailand, 4 December 2024).

In addition to these providers, another key stakeholder offering lifelong learning opportunities is the Equitable Education Fund, which supports programs aiming to reduce educational disparities and providing continuous learning opportunities for marginalised groups, particularly in underserved areas, through community-based, flexible, and mobile learning initiatives.

Another area to be taken into consideration for effective lifelong learning is the improvement of curricula in both formal and non-formal settings, as recommended by the Thailand Case Study. Curricula should focus on equipping learners with essential skills for life, including basic literacy, critical thinking, communication, technology use, and vocational training, skills required for the labour market and arts- based soft skills. This broad approach ensures that learners of all ages can gain valuable skills applicable to their personal and professional lives.

Finally, the Thailand Case Study recommends the development of a transparent monitoring, evaluation, and supervision system, i.e., a Lifelong Learning Monitoring System (LLMS), including the definition of national lifelong learning indicators that align with international standards and undertaking regular evaluation of lifelong learning activities, allowing for continuous improvement.

Vietnam

The Vietnam Case Study highlights that overall, the implementation of the various legal frameworks and policies has encountered several challenges. As mentioned earlier, a main issue is that while lifelong learning is part and parcel of various policy documents and legal frameworks, there is no stand-alone law or dedicated policy on lifelong learning, nor a strategy or action plan to guide the implementation of lifelong learning. At the same time, a number of achievements are highlighted:

The second phase of the Scheme for Building a Learning Society 2012-2020 Project achieved two out of its four main goals: "Eradicating illiteracy and universalizing education" and "Learning to improve life skills, creating a happier personal and community life". As spelt out in Part I, Section III, the current phase of the Scheme for 2021 to 2030 now focuses on 'creating a fundamental transformation in building a learning society, ensuring that by 2030 all citizens have equal opportunities to access a diverse, flexible, interconnected, and modern open education system, with multiple models, methods, and levels of training [...]'. The Vietnam Case Study highlights that the greatest achievement of the Project has been the establishment of a learning society model at the commune level, starting with the family and progressing upward to the community. This is a strategic approach unique to Vietnam. While other countries build learning societies at the city level and above, Vietnam has extended this approach to the grassroots level, motivating and mobilising citizens to participate in learning.

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of country initiatives and programs of lifelong learning

While all four countries are implementing noteworthy lifelong learning initiatives, their effectiveness varies. Thailand offers the most comprehensive and decentralised model, driven by local innovation and strong digital integration. Laos has established solid institutional foundations, particularly in adult education and teacher training, but requires expanded infrastructure and national coordination. Cambodia's efforts remain constrained by outdated content and under-resourced delivery systems, despite strong policy intentions. Vietnam demonstrates strong community engagement but lacks a unified strategy and coordination. A more detailed analysis by type of activity is provided below.

Comparative analysis by type of activity

1. Non-formal and second-chance education

- **Cambodia:** CLCs provide basic literacy and numeracy education, with equivalency programs forming a core part of the lifelong learning offering. However, content remains outdated, with limited responsiveness to contemporary learning needs.
- **Laos:** The Non-Formal Education Department offers second-chance education through equivalency programs at primary and secondary levels. These are supported by vocational training and facilitated by a growing teacher training initiative.
- **Thailand:** Thailand's non-formal education system is expansive, covering second-chance education, vocational skills, and inclusive education for marginalised groups, all embedded within the national lifelong learning strategy.

- **Vietnam:** After the achievement of eradicating illiteracy and addressing basic education and skilling needs under the Learning Society Scheme, the emphasis of activities now lies on ensuring that by 2030, all citizens have equal opportunities to access a diverse, flexible, interconnected, and modern open education system, with multiple models, methods, and levels of training. Continuing education programs are offered. However, second-chance education lacks a unified framework and is inconsistently implemented across provinces.

2. Vocational training and skills development

- **Cambodia:** CLCs offer limited income-generating and vocational programs, with most lacking alignment to labour market demands. Curriculum modernisation is needed to integrate green skills, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship. At the same time, the Ministry of Labour offers vocational training for out-of-school children and youth, and MoEYS also provides vocational training, income-generating programs and re- and upskilling. These different efforts should be linked and coordinated.
- **Laos:** Skills development is a strategic pillar. The labour and social welfare sector also plays an important role in providing job-specific training for unemployed individuals and career changers. Youth organisations contribute by embedding soft skills into vocational programs.
- **Thailand:** A wide array of vocational and upskilling programs is offered through public and private actors. Digital tools and micro-credentials are used to support TVET expansion and labour market alignment.
- **Vietnam:** Vocational training is provided both as part of the commune-level learning society model and in the system of vocational schools, which is a strand of the formal education system (see Fig. 1 of the Vietnam Case Study). People used to prefer the academic pathway, but an increasing number of young people are now enrolling in vocational schools. However, clearer strategies and coordination are needed.

3. Higher education and teacher training

- **Cambodia:** Universities and in particular the Faculty of Education of the Royal University of Phnom Penh have played an important role in implementing lifelong learning, including institutionalising lifelong learning as a major field of study, building capacity for local LLLCs in Cambodia and supporting teacher upgrading programs, which has been identified by Cambodia as one of its best practices.
- **Laos:** The National University of Laos has made significant strides by embedding lifelong learning in teacher training for all levels of education, indicating systemic reform in teacher training and professional development.
- **Thailand:** Universities contribute to lifelong learning through open access hybrid courses and micro-credentials, which has a significant potential for further growth.
- **Vietnam:** Higher education is not yet a major driver of lifelong learning programs, taking into consideration the common understanding of lifelong learning in Vietnam, though universities do participate in community education and skills training.

4. Digital learning and technology integration

- **Cambodia:** Digital learning initiatives are underdeveloped. Most CLCs lack infrastructure to support technology-enhanced learning, particularly in rural areas.
- **Laos:** Some integration exists, but digital strategies are not yet widespread. There is potential to expand digital learning through the LLLCs.
- **Thailand:** Strong digital learning integration through national platforms, hybrid learning models, and digital micro-credentials. Programs are designed for remote learners and people with disabilities.
- **Vietnam:** Digital learning is mentioned within the Learning Society model. On 30 December 2021, MOET released the decision to establish the Steering Committee for Digital Transformation, showing the country's commitment to integrating digital technology into education.

5. Community-based learning and local hubs

- **Cambodia:** CLCs serve as local learning hubs, though many struggle with capacity, infrastructure, and relevance to community needs. The transformation of CLCs into LLLCs is a key strategy of the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy, which is still in progress and requires further efforts.
- **Laos:** CLCs and youth organisations promote community learning and life skills, but coordination is fragmented. CLCs are being transformed and upgraded to LLLCs.
- **Thailand:** As part of its lifelong learning strategy, Thailand will develop CLCs and Learning Encouragement Centres as local learning centres to facilitate traditional knowledge, local wisdom and peer learning.
- **Vietnam:** Commune-level learning societies are a unique feature, representing a deep integration of lifelong learning at grassroots levels and serving as a model for other countries.

6. Curriculum and pedagogical reform

- **Cambodia:** Curricula are outdated, focused mainly on basic literacy. A shift toward competency-based, modular learning is recommended.
- **Laos:** Pedagogical reform is ongoing, particularly through teacher education reforms and youth training programs.
- **Thailand:** Significant attention is given to curriculum relevance, soft skills, digital literacy, and labour market alignment. Reforms aim to be learner-centred and future-ready.
- **Vietnam:** Basic education began a curriculum reform in 2018. The full implementation at all grades is to finish in 2025. Continuing education offers equivalency programs, and a range of other programs that meet learners' needs. These programs are subject to change; thus, they do not have a fixed curriculum. As mentioned in the Vietnam Case Study, in November 2024, MOET introduced eight open and flexible curricula designed to meet diverse learner needs, with no restrictions on entry age or time limits for completion.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems

- **Cambodia:** An NFE-MIS exists but lacks cross-sectoral integration and detailed disaggregated data. Upgrading to a national LLL-MIS is recommended.
- **Laos:** M&E systems are nascent, with efforts underway to centralise data collection. LLLCs could play a coordination role in this area.
- **Thailand:** A national LLL Monitoring System is in development, with indicators aligned to international standards to guide policy and resource allocation.
- **Vietnam:** No formal national LLL-MIS exists. Implementation varies across provinces, and monitoring relies heavily on project-specific data and donor evaluations.

Conclusion

- **Cambodia** has the policy intent but faces execution challenges, especially in modernising content, professionalising facilitators, and integrating digital tools.
- **Laos** is making progress in adult education and teacher training but lacks systemic coherence and widespread infrastructure.
- **Thailand** demonstrates comprehensive coverage across all types of activities, with a strong digital infrastructure, institutional backing, and a coherent national strategy.
- **Vietnam** excels in community-based learning with a unique grassroots model but needs an overarching policy framework and strategic coordination.

Moving forward, each country can benefit from aligning lifelong learning activities more strongly with national development goals, improving key stakeholder coordination, cross-sectoral governance and coordinated implementation by all sectors, fostering and supporting localised implementation, revising the curriculum to correspond to learners' needs in rapidly changing societies and economies, using flexible and learner-centred pedagogies, providing professional development to teachers, enhancing digital and physical infrastructure, and creating robust M&E frameworks.

Section III. Best practices

This section will present a short overview and comparative analysis of best practices in the field of lifelong learning across the four countries as presented in their respective Case Studies.

Cambodia

Cambodia has implemented several key initiatives to promote lifelong learning and skills development which it considers best practices:

- The Basic Education Equivalency Programme, led by MoEYS, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and UNESCO, which provides out-of-school youth with basic education and skills training.
- A national vocational training program which aims to train 1.5 million poor and vulnerable youths, offering free training and a monthly stipend of USD 70.
- The Factory Literacy Programme which supports women in the garment industry with literacy and skills to boost industry sustainability.

- The Teacher and Principal Upgrading Programmes (TUP & LUP), running since 2018, have upskilled thousands of teachers and school leaders across all education levels, with ongoing targets through 2029.
- LLLCs supported by DVV International and the Royal University of Phnom Penh are being professionalised and have plans for regional expansion in partnership with Laos and SEAMEO.
- Other notable efforts include the Local Life Skills Programme (UNICEF, since 2015) and a pre-school training program for indigenous communities, also supported by UNICEF.

The above initiatives collectively strengthen Cambodia's education system by promoting flexible learning, upskilling educators, and expanding access to marginalised groups.

Of note is the **Learning Cities Initiative** by the General Secretariat on Lifelong Learning, which is the main strategy for the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Policy in Cambodia, based on the UNESCO Learning Cities model. It is currently in the process of being developed. Another key objective of Cambodia's lifelong learning strategy is the **transformation of CLCs into LLLCs**.

Laos

In Laos, lifelong learning is promoted through coordinated efforts at micro, meso, and macro levels, involving policy makers and practitioners from both formal and non-formal education. Key best practices include the recognition of lifelong learning as a national priority through dedicated policies like the Lifelong Learning Decree and cross-sector collaboration between general, vocational, and non-formal education.

The role of higher education institutions in the promotion of lifelong learning is of note. As the Lao Case Study points out, lifelong learning initiatives are included in institutional strategic plans of universities. This approach has shifted the traditional view of lifelong learning being the realm of non-formal education to a broader, institution-wide responsibility—an effective model for promoting lifelong learning through formal education.

Lifelong learning has also been integrated into teacher training curricula as a compulsory subject at all levels in school and an elective at the master's level, helping to broaden the understanding of lifelong learning to also be part of formal education. Additionally, the government is investing in capacity building to train lifelong learning specialists and supports the future development of a national lifelong learning centre (Lao Case Study).

Thailand

Best practices in Thailand include the **Community Learning Centres in Tak Province**, the **Community Empowerment Program for the Elderly**, Rangsit Municipality, and the **Chiang Dao Learning City**, which exemplify a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning that leverages innovative methods and community engagement.

Chiang Dao Learning City has implemented several best practices to promote lifelong learning in the community through accessible, inclusive education for all age groups through both formal and non-formal learning programs, tailored to local needs and resources. 'Learning Stations' (or Learning Centres) are created where learners can collect their learning credits and transfer credits to the Chiang Dao Learning Encouragement Centre at district level and local schools' credit banks.

Vietnam

The Vietnam Case Study presents two best practices:

The **Xuat Hoa Community Learning Centre** in Hoa Binh Province was instrumental in bringing positive changes to the community. Established in 2002, the centre identified three key focus areas: Providing information and consultancy, offering education and training, and promoting community development. The activities of the centre contributed to raising the per capita income of 300 USD in 2009 to an annual per capita income of approximately 2,600 USD in 2025. Thus, it contributed to reducing the poverty rate from 21.9 per cent to 5.52 per cent during the same period.

The **Son La Learning City** has become a hub of cultural heritage and lifelong learning. Son La City prioritises education and lifelong learning, allocating 30 to 40 per cent of its annual budget to education. The city hosts specialised institutions and emphasises digital transformation, enabling students to excel in national and international competitions. Over 90 per cent of citizens are registered as “Learning Citizens”, while 96 per cent of households qualify as “Learning Families”. All communes, wards, and neighbourhoods have achieved “Learning Community” status. Culturally, Son La is rich in heritage, celebrating events like the Ban Flower and Coffee Festivals. In 2021, its Thai Xoe Art was recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Vietnam Case Study).

Summary discussion and comparative analysis of best practices in lifelong learning

Across Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, several types of best practices are showcased. The majority of the four countries highlight Community Learning Centres and Learning Cities as best practices, which the countries see as models for implementing lifelong learning going forward.

- **Community Learning Centres:** Thailand and Vietnam demonstrate the most effective use of CLCs as dynamic community hubs. Cambodia and Laos are in the process of transitioning their CLCs into fully functional, modern lifelong learning centres.
- **Learning Cities:** Vietnam’s Son La and Thailand’s Chiang Dao are regionally distinctive examples of how cities can institutionalise lifelong learning across governance, infrastructure, and cultural life. Cambodia is developing its Learning Cities Initiative as its key strategy for lifelong learning implementation. Laos may also benefit from such an initiative.
- **Digital integration:** Thailand is leading on the integration of digital platforms and hybrid learning, while other countries are in earlier phases of infrastructure development.
- **Teacher training and institutionalisation:** Laos sets an important precedent by embedding lifelong learning into teacher training curricula, an approach that could be replicated across the region.
- **Higher education:** The role of higher education institutions in the promotion of lifelong learning as showcased in Laos could also be further explored, in particular as both Cambodia and Thailand have demonstrated the strong involvement of universities in the implementation of lifelong learning.

The experiences of the four countries illustrate that success in LLL governance and implementation depends on systemic alignment, strong local institutions, digital integration, and inclusive approaches. Strengthening CLCs/LLLCs and advancing the Learning Cities concept offer promising pathways to embed lifelong learning more deeply in national development agendas and local realities.

Concluding remarks: Advancing lifelong learning as a national priority

Lifelong learning is more than a policy goal—it is a foundational principle for inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking societies. It is a continuous, dynamic process that equips individuals with the competencies to adapt, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to society across all stages of life in a rapidly changing world. As such, it must be understood and practiced not just as a set of diverse educational programs, but as a holistic, flexible, and inclusive system accessible to all, at all stages of life. Importantly, lifelong learning is a shared responsibility—requiring coordinated efforts of governments, institutions, communities, and individuals alike. For policy makers, this means moving beyond rhetoric to embed lifelong learning as a guiding principle across all sectors of governance, not only education.

The comparative analysis shows that lifelong learning has been integrated into the policy discourse of the four countries as a strategic lever for inclusive development, human capital formation, and national resilience with the vision to foster learning societies that are inclusive, flexible, and future-ready.

The experiences of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam demonstrate a strong collective commitment to lifelong learning over the past decade. All four countries have made notable strides in either developing dedicated lifelong learning laws or policies or embedding it into legal and policy frameworks, national development plans and strategies, aligned with global commitments such as SDG 4. However, lifelong learning remains at different stages of institutionalisation and implementation. Laos has a dedicated, legally binding National Lifelong Learning Decree, offering a clear mandate for cross-sector engagement, but is still facing various implementation challenges. Cambodia has a National Lifelong Learning Policy but is hampered by operational challenges. Thailand's Learning Encouragement Act includes lifelong learning but the country does not yet have a dedicated lifelong learning law and/or policy. While Vietnam references lifelong learning across several laws and strategies, it does not have a stand-alone lifelong learning law yet—though such a law is planned to be developed by 2029.

Similarly, the operationalisation of lifelong learning policies remains uneven across Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Cambodia and Laos continue to rely largely on traditional non-formal education, with limited cross-sector coordination and little integration into the broader education system. Thailand shows more developed subnational implementation and infrastructure but lacks a comprehensive national policy. Vietnam demonstrates political will and institutional progress, yet without a dedicated legal framework, efforts remain fragmented and lifelong learning is still secondary to formal education.

The analysis of the four countries suggests that the following factors are associated with more effective implementation of lifelong learning:

- **Strong legal instruments:** The presence of dedicated lifelong learning legislation (as in Laos) provides a clearer mandate for cross-sectoral cooperation and sustained institutional commitment.
- **Coherent policy frameworks and action plans:** Countries with specific, sequenced, and feasible action plans are better positioned to translate policy intent into measurable outcomes.
- **Policy clarity and integration:** Embedding lifelong learning as a cross-cutting objective within national development and education frameworks strengthens its legitimacy and facilitates multi-sectoral engagement.
- **Political commitment:** High-level endorsement and strategic alignment with national priorities support resource mobilisation and institutional buy-in, even in the absence of a formal legal basis.

In sum, legal clarity, sectoral integration, and operational coordination are essential to move from policy ambition to system-wide lifelong learning in practice. Moving forward, countries should address legal and policy gaps where they exist, ensure greater coherence across strategic documents, and prioritise actionable, inclusive implementation strategies to fully realise the potential of lifelong learning as a driver of human development and social equity.

One of the most persistent challenges across all four countries is the **limited and fragmented understanding of lifelong learning**. While national policies increasingly adopt broad, UNESCO-aligned definitions, the practical interpretation of lifelong learning remains overly narrow—often equated with non-formal education and adult learning and education, particularly for marginalised groups. This disconnect between conceptual ambition and practical understanding curtails the transformative potential of lifelong learning to foster full, lifelong personal and professional development.

Governance and cross-sectoral cooperation of lifelong learning also shows a diverse picture across the four countries. Laos has advanced the furthest in constructing an integrated national governance and cross-sectoral coordination framework, though its functionality is still constrained by limited buy-in from other ministries and capacity gaps at subnational levels. Thailand has progressed the most in decentralisation and community-based delivery, albeit without sufficient national integration. Cambodia has established promising governance scaffolding, but implementation capacity and cross-ministerial coordination require further strengthening. As Vietnam does not yet have a dedicated lifelong learning law, it has not yet developed a lifelong learning governance model per se.

The analysis shows that **inter-ministerial coordination remains weak** across the four countries. Fragmentation across ministries often leads to siloed implementation. Policy makers must therefore establish or reinforce national coordination bodies, clarify roles and mandates, and ensure accountability for results. Moreover, this comparative picture suggests that effective lifelong learning systems require not just formal governance structures, but empowered leadership, cross-sectoral engagement and accountability, and robust local engagement mechanisms. Countries that combine legal mandates with institutional depth and decentralised ownership are better positioned to transform policy into meaningful lifelong learning. Thailand's decentralised model and Vietnam's community-based delivery offer useful lessons, but all four countries would benefit from stronger governance and monitoring frameworks.

Flexible learning pathways and the recognition of prior learning are cornerstones of any functional lifelong learning system. While policies in all four countries emphasise openness and flexibility, actual mechanisms—such as equivalency systems, credit transfer, and recognition of prior learning (RPL/RVA)—remain underdeveloped or inconsistently implemented. Thailand shows the most systemic integration, but learning pathways remain largely segmented. In Cambodia and Laos, despite strong policy intent, learners still face significant barriers moving between formal, non-formal, and informal learning tracks. Vietnam shows the most advanced system for equivalency, which can serve as a model for other countries.

Equity and inclusion are core to the lifelong learning agenda. Encouragingly, all four countries have prioritised these goals in national strategies. Yet implementation gaps persist, particularly in rural and remote areas, and among vulnerable populations such as ethnic minorities, women, persons with disabilities, and out-of-school youth. Thailand has demonstrated promising approaches through targeted financing mechanisms and cross-sectoral partnerships, while Cambodia and Laos face structural and resource constraints that limit inclusive outreach. Vietnam's community-based learning model shows potential but requires better coordination and stronger national policy integration.

A **common limitation across all four countries is budget and financing**. While lifelong learning is often emphasised in high-level strategies, it is rarely matched with dedicated, costed financial plans. Funding tends to be fragmented, often reliant on project-based support or donor initiatives. Thailand stands out with innovative financing models, but these lack transparency and sustainability. Without robust investment frameworks, lifelong learning systems cannot scale or sustain impact.

Finally, the **actual implementation of lifelong learning policies remains uneven**. Thailand has made progress in establishing digital infrastructure and integrating lifelong learning across sectors. Vietnam has leveraged strong community engagement to extend reach, albeit without a comprehensive legal framework. Laos and Cambodia have well-articulated policies, but implementation is hindered by limited capacity, coordination, and awareness at both national and local levels. Across the four countries, there is a need for stronger inter-ministerial coordination, improved governance, and professionalisation of lifelong learning facilitators.

In sum, while the policy direction countries have taken is encouraging and momentum is building, lifelong learning must now move from political aspiration to practical transformation. This means not only strengthening laws and institutions but also cultivating a broader societal culture that values and supports continuous learning. Further work should be undertaken with the recognition that lifelong learning is not a supplementary policy—it is a cornerstone of national development in the 21st century. For policy makers, the task is now to translate strategic intent into tangible, systemic change.

Governments must lead the way—with a long-term vision, and through investment, coordination, and policy coherence - but success ultimately depends on fostering shared ownership among all actors, including individuals, communities, employers, and civil society.

To truly elevate lifelong learning as a driver of national transformation, the next phase should involve:

- **Harmonising definitions** and raising public awareness to foster a national culture of lifelong learning
- **Operationalising flexible pathways** through robust legal frameworks, recognition systems, and learner mobility tools
- **Prioritising inclusion** by reaching marginalised groups through targeted financing and localised delivery
- **Securing sustainable funding** with dedicated budgets and expenditure tracking mechanisms
- **Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination**, both vertically (national to local) and horizontally (across ministries and sectors)
- **Integrating lifelong learning into broader development strategies**, including labour, health, digital innovation, and climate adaptation
- **Prioritising implementation**, capacity building, and localised action with measurable outcomes
- And most importantly, **nurturing a lifelong learning culture** that empowers every citizen to learn, grow, and contribute meaningfully throughout life.

As the four countries move forward, the next phase must focus on creating and fostering a culture that values continuous learning and self-improvement. Policies and strategies, while crucial, must be accompanied by public awareness, societal buy-in, and concrete actions that embed lifelong learning across all levels of education and society. Only then can lifelong learning fulfil its promise as a foundation for inclusive development, social equity, and economic development.

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Chapter VI

OVERALL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Chapter VI – OVERALL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By Margarete Sachs Israel

Introduction

This chapter will provide policy recommendations on lifelong learning (LLL) legal and policy frameworks and their implementation across Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, based on the current status, challenges and recommendations described in the respective country case studies as well as the subsequent comparative analysis and identification of cross-cutting challenges.

It will also refer to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) LLL framework and its four dimensions: lifelong learning includes all age groups, spans all types and levels of education, takes place in all settings, and serves all purposes, as well as to the guiding principles for lifelong learning policy development as referenced in Chapter III. For ease of reference, the key guiding principles of a lifelong learning system can be summarised as below:

Guiding principles of a lifelong learning system

- Organising principle of the education system, and a basic parameter of education policy, embedded within the policies, plans and strategies of the various sub-sectors of the education system, taking a holistic, sector-wide, and interdisciplinary approach
- Anchored in legislation, guaranteeing the right to lifelong learning, system-wide policies, plans and strategies, with sustainable financing, robust data and monitoring systems, and mechanisms for quality assurance and stakeholder participation
- Holistic and sector-wide approach, with cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration, inter- ministerial coordination and partnerships
- Flexible learning and skilling pathways with multiple entry and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, allowing learners to transition flexibly between learning modes and levels, building bridges between different types of formal and non-formal education and informal learning
- Mechanisms of Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of diverse learning outcomes such as through non-formal education and/or informal learning, work experiences, skills and knowledge acquired at home, the community or the workplace, as well as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms, and credit accumulation and transfer systems
- A wide array of spaces for lifelong learning are accessible for all with special attention to the local level; inclusive and equitable programs that are responsive to learners' needs are widely available and digital learning technologies are harnessed with special attention to equity and inclusion.
- Promotion of a learning culture and a shift towards valuing learning throughout life in order to build a learning society

These are the principles countries should consider when setting up a lifelong learning system and work towards an understanding of lifelong learning as an overarching vision and organising principle of the education system. It is understood that such a broad vision can only be achieved incrementally and according to the context of each country.

As mentioned in Chapter III, 'adopting lifelong learning as an organising principle transforms how education systems are structured, governed and financed. It implies a fundamental shift from

education as a finite phase of life to learning as a continuous, inclusive and participatory process. This shift has deep implications not only for curriculum and pedagogy, but for legislation, institutional design and stakeholder coordination in enabling learning opportunities throughout life' (UNESCO, 2015).

Such a transformation requires a holistic, systems-based approach in order to be effective. This means recognising the interdependence of the different components of the system, including laws, policies, programs, governance, stakeholders, financing, and community participation for lifelong learning, and addressing them in an integrated and coherent way. Moreover, this transformation must align with broader socio-economic, technological, and ecological shifts, and be linked to systems such as health, labour, and social welfare. Therefore, while policy recommendations are offered in this chapter for each of the components of the system in alignment with the country case studies and the comparative analysis, they must be understood as part of an interconnected whole.

Overall status of lifelong learning across the four countries

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam have demonstrated highly commendable political will to promote lifelong learning and setting up a learning society in the last decade through strategic and focused legislative and policy development and dedicated national governance structures, the promotion of community and lifelong learning centres as well as efforts in capacity building and increased implementation. At the same time, the four countries are not at the same stage in this endeavour and face a number of challenges, many of which are common.

Overall, there is still an important gap between ambitious and comprehensive policy intents and their implementation. Most critically, the risk of a continued reduction of lifelong learning to traditional non-formal education practices rather than adopting a comprehensive approach may undermine the transformational potential of lifelong learning as a driver of economic competitiveness, social equity, and individual empowerment.

Lifelong learning laws, policies and action plans

Current status

All four countries have embedded lifelong learning in various lifelong learning legal frameworks and policies and have recognised it as key for individual advancement, social cohesion and national socio-economic development. However, only one country (Laos) has developed a binding legislative framework to operationalise lifelong learning fully. By the same token, only one country (Cambodia) has a lifelong learning policy and only two have a lifelong learning action plan (Cambodia and Laos) out of which only one has been finalised (Laos).

Challenges include non-alignment between existent comprehensive and dedicated lifelong learning laws and policies with subsequent broader plans (i.e., ESSDP 2021-2025 and 9th NESDP in Laos, ESP 2024- 2028 in Cambodia), which take a narrower approach and focus on non-formal education. Also, there is limited public and institutional understanding and awareness of lifelong learning across most line ministries, affecting engagement and demand.

Overall, despite encouraging advances and the ambitious and holistic intent of the legal and policy lifelong learning frameworks in the four countries, implementation often remains limited to a narrow interpretation of lifelong learning as non-formal and/or vocational skills training for marginalised populations. This significantly undercuts the transformative vision of lifelong learning as a driver of equity, social cohesion, and socio-economic development.

Legal Frameworks for Lifelong Learning in the Republic of Korea

Constitution	Article 31 Government Duty	(1) All citizens shall have an equal right to receive an education corresponding to their abilities. (5) The State shall promote lifelong education .
Framework Act on Education	Article 31 Right to Learn	Every citizen shall have a right to learn throughout life and to receive education according to his or her abilities and aptitudes.
Lifelong Education Act	Article 2 Definition	Lifelong education is all types of systematic educational activities including schooling supplement education, adult basic and literacy education, career competency development education, general arts/humanities education, culture arts education, citizenship education, etc. other than regular school education.
	Article 31 NILE	The State shall establish the National Institute for Lifelong Education to assist the affairs related to the promotion of lifelong education.

Source: Sachs-Israel, M., 2023.¹

Policy recommendations

1. Develop a national lifelong learning conceptual framework

- In those countries which have not yet developed a legal framework for lifelong learning, it is recommended to develop, adopt and promote a national conceptual framework for lifelong learning that aligns with the national development vision, integrating all forms of learning under a cohesive system. Lifelong learning should be set as the framework's overarching vision and organising principle of the education system and a basic parameter of education policy, embedded within the policies, plans and strategies of the various sub-sectors of the education system as well as other relevant sectors, taking a holistic, sector-wide, and interdisciplinary approach. Such a conceptual framework is recommended to be developed jointly with other line ministries and key stakeholders, under the auspices of the head of government.
- For those countries which have a lifelong learning legal framework and/or policy, it is recommended to draw on the lifelong learning definitions of existing legal and/or policy frameworks to encourage the recognition of lifelong learning as an overarching guiding principle of the education and development system and to promote its inclusion within the policies, plans and strategies of the various sub-sectors of the education system as well as of other relevant sectors, taking a holistic, sector-wide, and interdisciplinary approach.

2. Promote development of lifelong learning legal frameworks, policies and action plans

- For those countries which do not yet have a binding legal framework for lifelong learning, encourage the development of a lifelong learning legal framework and/or a lifelong learning policy.
- For those countries which do not yet have a lifelong learning action plan, encourage the development of a comprehensive costed and targeted lifelong learning action plan, encompassing the entire education sector and other relevant line ministries.

¹ Sachs-Israel, M. (2023). PowerPoint presentation on Flexible Education Systems at a Capacity Building Workshop for Education System Transformation through Policy and Sector Plan Revision and Reform, Bangkok, Thailand, 8–12 May 2023

- Encourage the development of supporting legal instruments to operationalise lifelong learning policies such as sub-decrees or guidelines and clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and mandates of diverse implementing institutions.

3. Promote policy alignment and coherence

- Ensure that all education laws, policies, sector plans, and national development plans' strategies consistently reflect a comprehensive and holistic definition of lifelong learning and are aligned with lifelong learning laws and policies. This is particularly relevant when new education legal frameworks, sectoral policies, education sector plans and national development plans are developed.
- Encourage integration of lifelong learning within economic, labour, health, digital and other development policies and strategies.
- Align lifelong learning strategies with national development plans to ensure integration into broader socio-economic objectives.
- Include lifelong learning promotion in the strategies and plans for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and other relevant SDGs.

Overall, a paradigm shift from 'lifelong education' for the marginalised towards 'lifelong learning' for everyone, everywhere, across all life stages is needed as per the definition of lifelong learning cited in Chapter II and as spelt out in the various policy documents of the four countries. The next phase for each country must involve a deep systemic shift—embedding lifelong learning as a core principle not only for education but for society at large and linking it to national development and the global sustainable development agenda.

Lifelong learning definition and understanding

Current status

- Despite comprehensive definitions in high-level legal and policy documents, lifelong learning is often still narrowly interpreted as adult learning and education or non-formal education, undermining its holistic intent.
- There are inconsistent conceptual frameworks and terminologies across policy documents which lead to confusion and weak implementation.
- Lifelong learning is generally understood as non-formal education across most line ministries.
- Public and institutional awareness of lifelong learning is limited, affecting demand and engagement.

Policy recommendations

1. Launch awareness and advocacy campaigns on lifelong learning across the four countries

- Promote and showcase lifelong learning as a societal value and strategic imperative for sustainable development, inclusive growth, and human capital formation across line ministries, the private sector and development partners.
- Leverage mass media, digital platforms, and community outreach and use platforms such as learning cities to shift societal and learners' perceptions for personal growth, jobs, life, etc. and promote a learning culture.

2. Strengthen understanding across sectors in the four countries

- Develop training programs across the four countries for policy makers, administrators, educators, and community leaders, etc. to deepen their understanding of lifelong learning principles and implementation.
- Facilitate peer learning and exchange of best practices through regional forums and networks.

Governance and cross-sectoral coordination of lifelong learning

Current status

- **Governance structures:** While three out of the four countries have set up governance structures for lifelong learning and two have set up National Lifelong Learning Committees which include a wide array of line ministries, these face functional and budgetary difficulties.
- **Inter-ministerial collaboration and coordination:** Lifelong learning is often treated as an education sub-sector rather than a national development strategy, which hampers buy-in from other line ministries. There is insufficient understanding of the role and responsibility each ministry should play in the management and provision of lifelong learning in some countries. Countries which have initiated inter-ministerial collaboration need to deepen it through institutionalisation. A number of other line ministries do provide lifelong learning activities as well, but there is insufficient coordination which often leads to duplication and inefficiency.
- **Decentralisation and local ownership:** The situation is mixed across the four countries. While some countries like Thailand have a well-functioning system of operational decentralisation, others face challenges such as weak local ownership or unclear mandates as well as insufficient resources at local levels.

Policy recommendations

1. Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination

- Establish national cross-ministerial lifelong learning coordination mechanisms in those countries lacking them, involving key stakeholders like NGOs, development partners, and the private sector.
- In those countries with national coordination mechanisms, ensure their functionality by providing them with clear mandates, implementation authority, and adequate funding.
- Establish lifelong learning focal points within each line ministry to support the work of the national coordination committee and/or its secretariat.

2. Promote shared understanding and policy and implementation coherence

- Increase awareness among non-education ministries about their role in lifelong learning.
- Strengthen communication across all key stakeholders to build shared ownership.
- Encourage coordinated planning of activities across ministries and stakeholders at all levels to increase coherence and impact and avoid duplication.

3. Empower local governance and decentralised implementation

- Build capacities of local authorities through training, resourcing, and clarity in mandates.
- Establish provincial and district-level lifelong learning committees to facilitate localised ownership.
- Encourage local innovation to reflect diverse community learning needs.

4. Institutionalise multi-stakeholder collaboration

- Formalise platforms that bring together government, civil society, private sector, and development partners.
- Develop integrated Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) frameworks to ensure accountability across stakeholders.
- Promote public-private partnerships for scaling up lifelong learning opportunities.

Moving forward, a coherent governance and coordination framework that combines strong national leadership with local ownership and cross-sectoral engagement is essential across the four countries to realise the full potential of lifelong learning as a driver of national socio-economic development.

Flexible learning pathways

Flexible learning pathways require:

- Articulation and ‘bridges’ and ‘ladders’ between different learning pathways that allow learners to transition flexibly between learning modes and levels according to their circumstances and needs
- Recognition and articulation mechanisms, i.e., equivalency frameworks, Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) systems linked to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), credit accumulation and transfer schemes and institutional arrangements for transfer
- Regulatory mechanisms: Ministries of Education and Labour provide norms and standards and undertake quality control of implementation and certification.
- National coordination between ministries and other actors/providers (provision, advocacy, quality assurance, monitoring)
- Strong partnerships with the private sector and industry

Source: Author, based on UIL and UNESCO materials.²

Current status

All four countries have clear policy commitments to building open, flexible, and interconnected education systems, supported by legal and policy frameworks. However, implementation varies, and significant efforts are still needed. More specifically, while equivalency programs exist in all four countries, their coverage and certificate recognition differ. Even though there is a clear policy ambition,

² Author’s summary based on publications by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (see references), as well as PowerPoint presentations delivered at UIL, Hamburg, and UNESCO Bangkok on lifelong learning.

flexible pathways allowing for easy transition between formal and non-formal education and informal learning are mostly only nascent, limiting the possibilities of transition from one type of learning to another in a number of countries. By the same token, countries also share challenges in establishing effective Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation (RVA) mechanisms, hindering mobility across education and employment. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms are absent, and credit accumulation and transfer systems are in early stages of development.

Recognition, validation and accreditation of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning

RVA refers to the establishment of arrangements to make visible and value all learning outcomes (including knowledge, skills and competences) against clearly defined and quality-assured standards.

RVA covers the whole process, including identification, documentation, assessment and accreditation of learning outcomes from different settings (Yang, 2015, p. 10). There are different RVA processes for non-formal education and informal learning:

- Non-formal education is a structured educational experience, and RVA processes can therefore be based on standards and norms developed for the learning cycle/course in question, with periodic assessments of some kind.
- Informal learning cannot be assessed as part of a structured learning process, but only its results and applications in the life of the individual; thus, RVA would include processes to assess the actual level of knowledge and skills as observed through their use. Norms can be established for these assessments.

A further step in RVA is to link it with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). NQFs are systems of equivalences and classifications of qualifications relating to a set of nationally agreed standards/criteria for describing the achievements required to attain each level, thereby making them easier to understand and to compare. These are often linked to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels. NQFs typically recognise learning outcomes and competences from all forms of learning.

Source: Sachs-Israel, 2019.

Policy recommendations

1. Equivalency

- Ensure comprehensive equivalency coverage from primary to upper secondary levels in those countries which have not yet covered all levels.
- Guarantee parity of recognition for equivalency program certificates in those countries where this is yet to be achieved.
- Where not yet existent, align non-formal curriculum quality standards with formal education.
- Develop/ensure uniform certification standards across non-formal/continuing and formal education where this is still required.
- Develop articulation pathways into Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and higher education.
- Promote investment in digital platforms and open learning resources to support flexible delivery and assessment in equivalency programs, especially for marginalised and rural learners.

2. Recognition, validation and accreditation

- Build national RVA mechanisms linked to National Qualifications Frameworks in the four countries.
- Standardise assessment and validation procedures across sectors and types of learning.
- Encourage cross-sectoral coordination and governance alignment.
- Pilot scalable RVA models at local and national levels.

3. Recognition of prior learning

- Develop a national RPL framework with clear guidelines for assessment, recognition, validation and accreditation in each of the four countries.
- Link RPL to general education and TVET to support adult learners and those with predominant experience from the informal sector.
- Increase awareness among employers and institutions.

4. Credit accumulation and transfer

- Establish national systems for credit transfer and credit banks for credit accumulation.
- Introduce/strengthen micro-credentials to support flexible and modular learning (higher education).
- Promote linkage and credit transfer across formal, non-formal, and vocational education aligned with NQFs.
- Invest in integrated digital credentialing systems and digitise learner records to support flexible learning, mobility and recognition of learning outcomes.

5. Joint activities across the four countries

- Promote Vietnam's experience in equivalency programs as a model by facilitating policy dialogues, technical exchanges, and peer learning platforms with Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand and possibly beyond.
- Establish a cross-country task force or working group on equivalency education, RVA and RPL to harmonise standards, share best practices, and promote mutual recognition of non-formal education qualifications.
- Develop a common cross-country template for equivalency certification and RVA that adheres to ASEAN guidelines while allowing national customisation.

Example of good practice: Credit accumulation and transfer system in the Republic of Korea

The Republic of Korea has established the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) and Lifelong Learning Account System (LLAS) to support individuals in developing their e-portfolios, curriculum vitae or learning records, documenting informal learning outcomes. LLAS functions like a “savings account” for lifelong learning, allowing users to “deposit” diverse learning experiences—including academic (higher education), vocational and other learning that can be translated into educational credits or vocational qualifications—and “invest” them for educational or career advancement. The National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) is responsible for recognising and approving the diverse experiences and documenting them for the convenience of learners.

(Source: UIL, 2023)

Equity and inclusion in and through lifelong learning

Current status

Despite strong policy commitments for equity and inclusion, all four countries continue to face systemic challenges. Learners from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities, those in remote areas, from low- socio-economic backgrounds, and girls and women face persistent barriers to access education and lifelong learning. Insufficient infrastructure, limited resources, geographic or linguistic barriers and logistical obstacles impede equitable and inclusive implementation. Moreover, there is lack of disaggregated data which impedes targeted planning and delivery.

Policy recommendations

- Develop or enhance costed implementation plans focused on vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen monitoring systems and collect, analyse and use disaggregated data to track inclusion efforts and outcomes.
- Expand language-accessible and location-sensitive programming, especially in multilingual and rural settings.

Budget and financing for lifelong learning

Current status

There are significant funding challenges for lifelong learning across the four countries. There is no concrete financial planning for lifelong learning and none of the countries have dedicated lifelong learning budgets. The insufficient budget for lifelong learning activities at Community Learning Centres (CLC)/Lifelong Learning Centres (LLLC) has been highlighted as a key challenge.

Policy recommendations

- Increase public investment for lifelong learning and develop costed lifelong learning plans, or to cost those plans that exist (e.g. Laos).
- Ensure targeted, effective and efficient financing, with a particular focus on marginalised populations.

- Coordinate multi-source funding strategies and clear budget allocations across sectors to ensure sustainable and equitable lifelong learning systems.
- Increase public-private partnerships for lifelong learning, including direct contributions of the private sector to lifelong learning activities and LLLCs.

Lifelong learning in practice

Current status

Lifelong learning is supported by a wide range of stakeholders in all four countries—including education and labour ministries, universities, vocational centres, unions, youth organisations, NGOs, international partners, and the private sector—with education ministries and their lifelong learning departments serving as lead agencies. Local delivery is led by institutions such as CLCs/LLLCs, continuing education centres, and vocational training centres, depending on the country context.

CLCs, often upgraded to LLLCs, are key providers of non-formal and adult education. A strong model at the grassroots level are Vietnam’s commune-level learning societies. Programs of LLLCs span literacy, numeracy, equivalency, vocational training, and community outreach in areas like health and agriculture. Common challenges include outdated curricular content and pedagogies, limited teacher training, inadequate materials and funding, and the need for stronger monitoring systems across sectors.

Vocational training and upskilling constitute one key program of lifelong learning and is delivered by both public and private actors, though coordination remains a challenge. Higher education institutions also contribute through teacher training and LLLC support. Teacher upgrading programs have been identified by Cambodia as one of its best practices, and in Thailand, universities also offer hybrid courses and micro-credentials, highlighting scalable potential.

Despite the promise of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-supported learning—especially for remote areas or learners with disabilities—digital lifelong learning initiatives remain underdeveloped, with Thailand being the only country offering national digital platforms and hybrid learning models.

Policy recommendations

Overall, lifelong learning programs will have to be designed and made available with the premise that individuals are able to continuously learn, update and expand their knowledge, competencies and skills throughout their lives. This requires adaptability and openness for innovation in program design and offer and close collaboration with key stakeholders including higher education institutions, the private sector and industry, as learning needs rapidly evolve and change.

Meeting the needs of the learner and program effectiveness

Lifelong learning plans, strategies and programs must be designed with the diversity of target groups in mind—from early school leavers, vulnerable and marginalised groups to individuals seeking new skills for work or for knowledge, personal fulfilment and enjoyment. Effective lifelong learning plans and programs should address the root causes of educational exclusion and respond to learners’ varied contexts, needs, prior learning levels and competencies, which should then be reflected in the learning content, pedagogical approach and learning modality of programs.

In response to the current situation in the four countries and to ensure effectiveness of lifelong learning programs, it is recommended to:

- Align lifelong learning activities more strongly with national development goals.
- Ensure that lifelong learning programs meet the diverse learning needs, respond to the learning levels of different target groups and adapt content, learning formats, modalities and assessments accordingly.
- Revise lifelong learning curricula to be competency-based and correspond to learners' needs in rapidly changing societies and economies (including digital literacy, Artificial Intelligence (AI), green skills, soft skills).
- Use flexible and learner-centred pedagogies.
- Strengthen teachers' professional development and ensure their motivation.
- Enhance digital infrastructure to support technology-enhanced learning and harness ICT in education for lifelong learning.
- Further expand the potential of higher education institutions to promote lifelong learning, with the ultimate goal to turn them into lifelong learning institutions. This should be backed by policies, which should establish lifelong learning as a core mission of higher education institutions, adhering to all three missions of higher education—teaching, research and wider societal engagement. Actions include widening access and increasing participation for new categories of higher education learners, including from the most disadvantaged strata of society and offering a wide array of courses (UIL, 2022.)

Enabling conditions:

- Improve cross-sectoral collaboration and coordinated implementation by all sectors and stakeholders, fostering and supporting localised implementation to strengthen effectiveness and avoid duplication.
- Create robust M&E frameworks (e.g., LLL-MIS) and undertake data collection and analysis.
- Ensure the allocation of adequate financial, human, and materials resources.
- Promote regional collaboration and knowledge sharing on effective practices.

CLCs and Learning Cities

CLCs and Learning Cities have been identified as best practices across the four countries and in some, Learning Cities will be a key implementation mechanism for their lifelong learning policy.

Recommendations:

Policy and governance

- While CLCs and Learning Cities operate at the local level, they should be backed by national policies and supported by national institutions, and the provision of capacity development and resource allocation. Also, mechanisms for collaboration between national and local actors should be set up.
- A bottom-up, decentralised approach should be adopted, and local communities and local governments/cities should be given the autonomy to lead lifelong learning initiatives tailored to their communities (see Chapter III).

Programs and implementation

- Identify key factors of success and effectiveness of the model CLCs and Learning Cities in the respective countries as well as from other good practices from other countries for replication and expansion of this model.
- Plan an incremental expansion which should include piloting new approaches and innovations.
- Develop and offer flexible programs which respond to diverse learning needs.
- Build awareness and mobilise partners, community members and local citizens on the ground to actively participate in and support implementation.
- Develop/strengthen a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess the effectiveness and relevance of programs and allow for adaptation/revision if necessary.
- Develop funding mechanisms including innovative fundraising.

Example of good practice: The Alternative Learning System in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System (ALS), institutionalised through Republic Act No. 11510, is a parallel learning system that provides opportunities for out-of-school children, youth and adult (OSCYA) learners to develop basic and functional literacy skills, and to access equivalent pathways to complete basic education. It encompasses both non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills (Department of Education (DepED), Republic of the Philippines. 2022). Learners can earn official certificates equivalent to formal school diplomas through accreditation and equivalency (A&E) tests. This, in turn, helps them qualify for further education and vocational training, and earn higher incomes. In a World Bank study (2016), ALS graduates were found to be earning twice as much as the average of high school dropouts (Yamauchi et al., 2016).

The major programs under the enhanced ALS Program (ALS 2.0) are:

- **Basic Literacy Program (BLP):** Aims to eradicate illiteracy among OSCYAs by developing basic literacy skills of reading, writing, numeracy, and simple comprehension.
- **Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program:** Aims to provide an alternative pathway of learning for OSCYAs who have not completed basic education, enabling school dropouts to finish elementary or secondary education outside the formal school system.

Other programs which enrich the A&E program include:

- **Life Skills for Work Readiness and Civic Engagement Program:** Aims to address the mismatch between skills taught in school and skills demand in the workplace.
- **Academic-Focused Bridging Program:** Aims to provide continuing learning opportunities to A&E test secondary level passers to prepare for academic and study skills requirements of tertiary level education or post-secondary vocational training.
- **Indigenous Peoples Education:** Supports education initiatives with a focus on indigenous knowledge systems, practices, indigenous languages, learning systems and educational goals and competencies specific to the indigenous cultural community.
- **Functional Education and Literacy Program:** Short-term non-formal education programs designed to help socio-economically disadvantaged learners to upgrade a targeted set of skills and competencies in the ALS K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum.

Source: Department of Education (DepED), Republic of the Philippines, 2022

Conclusion

The proposed policy recommendations attempt to provide a coherent and strategic response to the current challenges and the evolving needs of the four countries in their journey towards building an effective lifelong learning system. They call for a systemic transformation with lifelong learning as the overarching vision and organising principle of the education system, in which lifelong learning is not a peripheral policy concern, but a foundational driver of national development and social progress. To realise this vision, countries must move beyond policy formulation toward coordinated, sustained, and equitable and inclusive implementation—anchored in a shared understanding of lifelong learning as a right, a value, and a necessity in today’s rapidly changing world.

In sum, to achieve system-wide impact and build inclusive, future-ready learning societies, countries must ensure a clear definition and shared understanding of lifelong learning, legislative clarity, policy coherence, institutional integration as well as functional governance structures, decentralised delivery, capacity development, sustainable financing, robust data and monitoring systems and, most importantly, access to learning and skilling opportunities for all, at all stages of life, and through diverse learning modalities. As a key parameter, lifelong learning systems must provide flexible learning pathways that support mobility and lifelong progression with multiple entry and re-entry points across formal, non-formal, and informal learning, supported by robust mechanisms for RVA, RPL, and credit accumulation and transfer.

Going forward, the path toward inclusive and effective lifelong learning systems should be incremental and context-specific, guided by a clear and ambitious vision. It is recommended for the four countries to identify their specific national priorities areas of action and take concrete, sequenced actions across multiple dimensions, while keeping a system approach in mind. At the same time, areas which are of common concern could be worked on jointly by the four countries, thus fostering knowledge exchange and supporting each other. Such endeavours could also be supported by external partners through technical support, capacity building and offering a platform for exchange.

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CHAPTER VII a

LEARNING AND RESEARCH FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: ASEM LIFELONG LEARNING HUB BUILDING RESEARCH LINKS IN ASIA AND EUROPE

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Chapter VII a- LEARNING AND RESEARCH FOR LIFELONG LEARNING: ASEM LIFELONG LEARNING HUB BUILDING RESEARCH LINKS IN ASIA AND EUROPE*

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ABSTRACT: The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub) is a key ongoing project of ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting), an intergovernmental process that engages with 51 countries in Asia and Europe as well as the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. Under the patronage of the Government of Ireland, the Hub has set out to facilitate a vibrant and impactful research community built on partnership and parity of esteem between the two regions. It is also consciously framed in the context of global sustainability challenges, which adds a layer of complexity both conceptually and diplomatically. This paper examines its activities, challenges, successes, and philosophical underpinning.

Background context on the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub

The ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning (ASEM LLL Hub) was established in 2005 in Copenhagen with the goal of extending research and policy advice around lifelong learning in the ASEM Region, which encompasses 51 countries in Asia and Europe as well as the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. The term ASEM refers to the Asia- Europe Meeting, an informal inter-governmental process which was established in 1996. It does not have a central secretariat; instead, it relies on the coordinating function of the ministries of foreign affairs of its members. The ASEM LLL Hub was initially hosted by Denmark and is currently hosted at University College Cork in Ireland, through the support of the Government of Ireland.

The rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s has tended to create a more pragmatist or technocratic orientation in adult education/lifelong learning. The acceleration of climate change and a cocktail of significant other global challenges are creating a context that requires an urgent reappraisal of neoliberalism. This has specific resonance in adult education/lifelong learning, which in the 1970s was engaging with the ‘global nature of social problems’ (Gouthro, 2022, 108), before the onset of the neoliberal turn. At the inception of the Irish residency of the ASEM LLL Hub, there was already a growing concern about sustainability amid a melange of global challenges, and there is an explicit call out to address these challenges in its five-year plan. That document was framed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but before the flashing lights generated by subsequent dramatic climate episodes like those experienced in the northern hemisphere in 2023. The ASEM LLL Hub is then more than just a collaborative enterprise across 51 countries; it is a process that is conscious of a need to address, with urgency, the critical issues of our day. It cannot be framed as a business-as-usual process, but one that has ‘a willingness to engage with complex ideas, seemingly obtuse language, and perspectives that can challenge one’s worldview and create discomfort’ (Gouthro, 2022, 116). In a network of this scale and diversity not all participants will necessarily share agreement on the current crisis, but nonetheless the Hub’s success will not ultimately be about the

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extent of its membership and its outputs, but the degree to which it has in fact challenged worldviews and created discomfort.

Objectives and philosophical rationale

The ASEM LLL Hub was established within the ASEM framework to enhance collaboration between the two regions in the field of lifelong learning. Ireland, in taking on stewardship for the initiative, endorsed its original mission, but also sought to shape its next phase in line with international policy frameworks and a restated philosophical understanding of lifelong learning. The ASEM LLL Hub's understanding of lifelong learning closely aligns with how it is described on the homepage of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning, which frames it as 'being rooted in the integration of learning and living', applying to everyone from children to older adults, in all life contexts, regardless of how and where it is generated and that it meets the needs and demands of the learner (<https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/unesco-institute/mandate/lifelong-learning#:~:text=Lifelong%20learning%20is%20rooted%20in,and%20through%20a%20variety%20of>).

These principles were outlined in University College Cork's bid for support from the Government of Ireland (see Ireland Hosting ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning, 2019). In terms of a policy frame, it referred to instruments such as the Global Commission on the Future of Work, which supports a push towards a 'universal entitlement to lifelong learning'; the OECD report *Envisioning the Future of Education & Jobs*; the United Nations' Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the World Economic Forum's assessment of future skills needs. It also wove in more specific Asia-Europe statements of intent, including a history of dialogue between the European Union and ASEAN dating back to 1977. It drew on the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2018-2022), which supports 'mutually beneficial cooperation', including Priority 3: Socio-Cultural Cooperation. It referenced *Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy*, which seeks to 'increase cooperation in education, research, innovation, culture, sport, and tourism, helping to promote diversity and the free flow of ideas'.

Philosophically, the Irish hosts subscribed to the view that universities, as elite institutions, should be 'addressing the complexities of contemporary social, political, economic, environmental and wellbeing challenges' (Ó Tuama, 2019, 95). These complexities, often described as global challenges, include climate change, migration, security, including food and health security, advances in communications, and technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) that impact ordinary people, very often disproportionately negatively impacting the most vulnerable. Lifelong learning is key to enabling everyone in society to better understand and appreciate the complex nature of the challenges, and enable them to respond in considered, proactive and novel ways to mitigate the challenges' impacts locally and globally. In the context of the ASEM LLL Hub, that also includes the concept of "learning to live together" as understood in the Delors Report (1996).

In its approach, the ASEM LLL Hub seeks to address how lifelong learning is essential in a myriad of ways in helping people stay current in areas like skills and careers, but equally in terms of having the basic toolkit to be an actively engaged member of society. This approach understands lifelong learning almost as an essential software or operating system, that allows individuals to engage across the full spectrum of life's challenges and opportunities, and which, like software, needs regular upgrades and indeed bug fixes. It subscribes too to the idea that lifelong learning is an enabler of cognitive flexibility, an 'openness to consider ideas, concepts, and solutions that are novel and emerging from worldviews to which we may not personally subscribe' (Ó Tuama, 2019, 95). From these premises, it set about re-energising the ASEM LLL Hub drawing on the traditions,

state-of-the-art, innovations, and potentials in Europe and Asia to drive a research agenda that would not only extend scholarship but also help shape policy and practice.

Adopting a mission and vision

In September 2021, the ASEM LLL Hub adopted a strategic vision: *A Framework for Lifelong Learning Research in the ASEM Region: 2020-2025*, to cover the period of Ireland's stewardship. In this vision, it sets out why lifelong learning is critical in helping societies address the many grand challenges impacting people in their ordinary lives all the way up to major global ones. At a global level, we are increasingly impacted by climate change, which is part of a complex cocktail that includes sustainability, migration, security, food security, health, the future of work, among others, to which we should add the changing landscape posed by advances in AI. Through its then six research networks (now seven), the ASEM LLL Hub sought to support a research agenda, which is scaffolded by leading international researchers but also includes the voices of practitioners and policymakers, to generate evidence that would deepen our understanding of lifelong learning and influence practice and policy in the ASEM region.

In the vision statement, the Hub set out a ten-point statement of intent and adopted a common research agenda which have shaped the core of its work. The statement of intent is framed in an ambition to 'enable people to thrive in a carbon-neutral, digital age', and to flourish in a time of unprecedented uncertainty. It acknowledges global challenges like climate change, mass migration, economic transformation, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been layered since by huge concerns around security and the potential impacts of AI. The statement made a strong commitment to partnership building both regionally and within the ASEM process itself. In its 'Common Research Agenda' it set out a very clear statement that specifically established the following core priorities: 'equity and inclusion; identity, respect and dignity; digital education and ICT; demographic trends such as ageing and migration; knowledge, policy and capacity building in lifelong learning across the ASEM region; and engagement with civil society and community-based lifelong learning'.

This vision and mission have been bolted onto new governance structures to support the process. Ensuring parity between Asia and Europe in the leadership, fostering collaboration between the two regions and enhancing impact have been prioritised. Some of the research networks transitioned from the period when the Hub was hosted in Denmark, but as there was a hiatus prior to the transfer to Ireland, some had lost momentum. Six research networks were included in the 2021 framework document, with a seventh network established in 2023.

Research Network 1, e-ASEM, was rejuvenated under new leadership and extended its remit to also consider advances in AI. Research Network 2, Workplace Learning, remained active through the transfer period and continued under the existing leadership. Research Network 3, Professionalisation of Adult Teachers and Educators, in ASEM Countries, transitioned to a new leadership and adopted a new program of activity. Research Network 4, National Strategies for Lifelong Learning, continued through the transfer period, and the existing leadership continue in place. Three new Research Networks were generated in 2021. Research Network 5, Learning Transitions, which addresses the lifelong learning challenge on how to facilitate the many transitions people need to increasingly make in and out of education throughout their lives and especially how under-represented populations can transition in. Research Network 6, Learning Cities and Learning Regions is engaged around the upsurge in the development of learning cities. This Network is very closely aligned with the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities

(<https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities>) and other networks of learning cities and regions. Research Network 7, Non-formal, Informal Learning, and Civil Society, is the newest network, established in 2023. It aims to both raise the visibility of non-formal, informal learning, community learning, and civil society activity in this field and to drive a research agenda that can support policy formation and leverage existing good practices in both regions.

Indicative activities and achievements of the research networks

Each network develops an annual work plan, aligned to the overall mission of the ASEM LLL Hub, and which is supported by an annual budget from the Hub. Progress is reported at regular meetings of the Council of Research Network Coordinators, and additional support is offered by a small secretariat located at Cork, Ireland. An indicative list of recent activities gives a better sense of the kinds of activities the networks currently support.

Research Network 1, e-ASEM, organised a webinar, aimed at graduate students, drawing from the Asia-European Open Class project, which focused on digital learning design. They also hosted virtual sessions on “AI - A Changing Landscape of Learning” and ‘The Digital University,’ drawing on the work of its researchers.

Research Network 2, Workplace Learning, initiated and edited a special thematic issue of the Hungarian Educational Research Journal focused on workplace learning in changing contexts. The thematic issue was guest edited by an international group from the research network, comprising Karen Evans (UK), Helen Bound (Singapore), and Gabor Erdei (Hungary). They showcased current research and trends in workplace learning, emphasising its importance across diverse contexts. The research network relates to how workplaces serve as lifelong learning spaces, offering different types of learning opportunities. They also covered topics such as workplace learning in higher education, the challenges of connecting academic learning with professional practices, informal and non-formal learning in the IT sector, and the impact of remote working.

Research Network 3, Professionalisation of Adult Teachers and Educators, organised a webinar titled “Developing a Professional Qualification for Adult Educators”, sharing good practices from the new postgraduate program at University College Cork, Ireland and has devised a new research trajectory under its new leadership.

Research Network 4, National Strategies for Lifelong Learning, has published a report on National Lifelong Learning Policies and Learning Cities. It discusses the limited evidence of national policies for adult education and lifelong learning explicitly linked to learning city development in the ASEM 51 countries, with some exceptions in China and the Republic of Korea. It highlights national and supra-national initiatives in the United Kingdom and Germany, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), emphasising the importance of considering the policies of the European Union as a whole and the role of the European Commission and city administrations in learning city development. It also mentions the significance of place in learning, exemplified by Community Learning Centres (CLCs) and research on neighbourhoods.

Research Network 5, Learning Transitions, is leading a special issue in the “Journal Studies in Adult Education and Learning”. The 2023 International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) World Assembly in Bali will host a symposium exploring four themes on transitions in lifelong learning, which will also feed into a peer-review publication. It will host a hybrid conference in India also in 2023. Research Network 5 collaborated with Research Network 6 in delivering a workshop at the 10th ESREA Triennial Conference (2022), titled “New Communities of Learning: Sowing Seeds of Change in post-Covid adult education”. Like other networks, Research Network 5 is organised

into sub-clusters to facilitate a greater level of granularity in the research, regional focus and devolved leadership across the two regions.

Research Network 6, Learning Cities and Learning Regions, is working in partnership with EUCEN (European University Continuing Education Network) towards the publication of a book on learning cities globally, which is due to be published in 2024. It has also led several webinars, including one on "New Trends of Learning Cities & Learning Communities in Japan". It highlighted the unique approach of considering the entire city as a campus and promoting interaction among different generations. Besides the shift to online learning during the pandemic, the importance of offering free classes and the need for dialogue platforms were important. The webinar also showcased Japan's efforts in lifelong learning and emphasises the commitment to collaboration and promoting learning opportunities. It has also collaborated with the COLLO (Coalition of Lifelong Learning Organizations) and with individual learning cities on webinars. The concept is quite new in many developing countries and serves in several cases as the concrete form to create lifelong learning opportunities for all, offering a platform for stakeholders to discuss challenges and solutions.

In 2023, Research Network 7, Informal and Non-Formal Learning, and Civil Society, was launched. It hosted a webinar pulling together research and case studies from Asia and Europe, specifically from Ireland, Greece, Thailand, and the Philippines, attracting an audience of over two thousand across both regions. It is currently developing research on the impacts of civil society in informal and non-formal learning in Asia and Europe.

In 2022, the ASEM LLL Hub hosted a global lifelong learning week in Cork, Ireland, which was its first major post-Covid in-person event. In line with its stated objective to work closely with national and international partners, this week drew on the activities of its own six research networks, and included contributions, events in collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Higher Education Lifelong Learning Ireland Network (HELLIN), Empower Competences for Online Learning in Higher Education (ECOLHE), International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame, and Cork Learning City. Researchers from 22 countries contributed to the event.

During 2023, the ASEM LLL Hub appointed two regional representatives, Dr Shalini Singh (India) for South Asian countries and Dr Suwithida Charungkaittikul (Thailand) for Southeast Asian countries. This considerably expanded contacts and activities in both regions. Additionally, three National Liaison Officers were appointed to expand membership and engagement in specific countries. Dr. Laphoune Luangxay represents Lao PDR; Prof Uranchimeg Tudevdaya, Mongolia and Professor Midori Sakaguchi, Japan. Additional Regional Coordinators and Liaison Officers may be appointed to deepen and expand the network across the ASEM region.

A second Global Lifelong Learning Week (GLLLW 2024) was held at University College Cork, Ireland in May 2024. In line with the stated goal of extending international partnerships, this event was hosted in collaboration with EUCEN, whose annual conference was hosted during the same week under the general umbrella of the GLLLW 2024. The event fostered international collaboration, bringing together over 50 speakers and 200 participants from more than 40 countries to discuss critical global challenges and the role of lifelong learning in addressing them. The event highlighted several key takeaways including adaptation to AI; combating misinformation and fake news; climate change education; and navigating a VUCA World, i.e., a world experiencing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity and especially how lifelong learning and education can prepare societies to navigate these challenges. It was a week of

insightful discussions, networking, and collaboration, including engagement with Cork UNESCO Learning City, reflecting the critical role of lifelong learning in addressing both local and global challenges.

Benefits and challenges of research collaboration between two key global regions

The ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub is not research funded per-se. Rather, it creates the conditions for collaborative research, supported by very modest funding. The intention is to generate long-term, sustainable, and collaborative relationships between researchers in the two regions and to demonstrate the value in a culture of collaboration between the two regions. These collaborations can address the realisation that ‘cooperation in humanities and social sciences often takes a long time, only by identifying high-quality collaborators, can the sustainability and scalability of research be ensured’ (Zheet et al., 2021, p.1). Zheet et al.’s (2021) analysis also indicates that ‘international collaboration in scientific research is conducive to improving the quality of scientific research output’, that ‘international collaboration has a positive impact on the research performance of the institution’ (p. 2) and that ‘the impact of international research collaboration papers is higher than that of local papers’ (p. 3). These conclusions are not surprising in themselves; they confirm some key central assumptions about the value of international research. However, Zhe, Lu, & Xiong point out that much international collaboration can enhance the Matthew effect, where well-placed individuals and institutions gain disproportionate advantage. They also point out that overcomplexity, like excessively large consortiums and administrative burdens can limit the advantages of international research. Lauerer (2023) speaks against the Matthew effect and the primacy of the administrative or efficiency imperatives of an overly pragmatic orientation. Addressing research in a different field of the social science, journalism studies, Lauerer (2023) advocates for placing a strong focus on inclusivity. They espouse an inclusive, open science approach, while ensuring that the diversity of voices shapes the research. Inclusivity is about who people are and where they are in their careers as much as where they are on the planet. In succinct terms, they see this inclusive approach as a bulwark against ‘research imperialism’ and that ‘true international collaboration illuminates blind spots’ (p. 395).

In their critique of the concepts of North and South to delineate the world between relatively richer and poorer countries, Sabzalieva et al. (2020) highlight the inherent problems with the model. They point out that it ‘overemphasizes national contexts while obscuring the specific capabilities and constraints of those engaged in research partnerships’ (p. 3). In the case of the ASEM LLL Hub, the designation might be more East and West, but nonetheless, a bias still exists in Europe that assumes that European practice, policy and research in the field of lifelong learning is more advanced than in Asia. Countering that narrative through ensuring shared leadership in the network was a stated aim from the beginning. The idea is that each region has its relative advantages and deficits in all three spheres. A mutually respectful acknowledgment of this can enable the leveraging of experience, reputation and achievement from both regions and simultaneously support emerging researchers and help advance new research, policy and practice themes emanating from either or both regions.

Dusdal & Powell (2021) list key determinants of successful international collaboration. These include ‘existing relationships, repeated interactions, and intellectual synergies’, the social, cultural, and institutionally complex contexts in which team members’ work give rise to ‘constraining and enabling factors’ that need to be addressed; individual motivations as diverse as ‘personal reasons includ(ing) friendships..., the ambition to maximize personal scientific

output'; a well-functioning communications strategy that facilitates 'valuable opportunities to advance scientific knowledge production, yet also imply challenges, risks, and drawbacks' (p. 237). These realities exist within the ASEM LLL Hub too, but overall, it has achieved a reasonable geographical spread of researchers across the two regions; there are researchers from 33 countries currently active in the seven networks. The Hub also has a good balance between early career researchers and more established ones, and the research addresses issues across both regions.

The ASEM LLL Hub process has inherent advantages, disadvantages and significant challenges. It operates with a very low budget and is not entirely in tune with a new public management drive that pushes universities into a constant race to improve their ranking in various international league tables. League tables are not always consistent with this sort of process, which may explain why Weinrib & Sá (2020) noted less willingness by Norwegian academics to participate in the Norwegian Program for Development, Research and Education (NUFU). They factor in their assessment of why NUFU lost vitality, due to a Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) push towards 'setting the agenda and ensuring the delivery of preestablished outcomes' which operates against NUFU's traditional 'decentralized and bottom-up approaches' (Weinrib & Sá, 2020. p. 20). Norway was able to articulate a narrative, for a considerable period, that was against promoting asymmetrical relationships, but a changing political climate made that more difficult. This demonstrates clearly that a project like ASEM LLL Hub which has neither the resources nor the heft of an entire national policy behind it, has to be modest in terms of what it can realistically achieve. It can make progress in the margins rather than turning the tide. However, it is critical that the process endeavours to swim against that tide, which has strong currents of counter- discourse. Skupien & Rüffin (2020) list among these 'a superior knowledge of what is needed to develop a country according to a certain (Western) model', 'categorizing countries according to their scientific capacities along a model of deficiency', and the assumption of 'an objective truth (p. 20) that makes it easier to transfer the idea of the best model from one national context to another.

Conclusion

The ASEM LLL Hub was established to promote university level research around lifelong learning in the ASEM region, which encompasses 51 countries, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission. From its inception in 2005, it was supported by the Danish government and hosted at Aarhus University. In 2021 the hosting moved to the University College Cork of Ireland, with the support of the Government of Ireland. This shift led to a refocus of the Hub's mission statement and objectives and the revitalisation and expansion of its research networks. In this process, greater emphasis was placed on partnership building, a closer alignment with international policy frameworks around lifelong learning, and an explicit acknowledgement of the serious global challenges like climate change, migration, and sustainability. It also led to a broadening of its membership to include a wider range of stakeholders. While university-based researchers still constitute the vast majority of its members, there is now greater visibility of policymakers and practitioners. Three new networks were added, bringing the current total to seven, covering e-learning, workplace learning, professionalisation of adult teachers, national strategies for lifelong learning, learning transitions, learning cities and regions, and non-formal and informal learning and civil society. The chair delivers keynotes, leads workshops, and contributes to conferences and webinars to raise the international profile of the Hub. They also engage in networking, in partnership with international organisations, universities, cities, civil society, governmental

organisations, and the Irish diplomatic service, to extend the active membership in both Asia and Europe. While each of the seven research networks develops its own annual work plan, they also meet regularly to encourage collaboration and to share information. By promoting dialogue and cooperation across continents, the ASEM LLL Hub contributes to the global agenda for lifelong learning and sustainability, aligning with international educational goals.

The Hub itself has an overall mission which was developed in 2021 and reviewed in 2022, and which is seen as a broad roadmap for its activities. It adheres to a strong commitment to inclusion, ensuring perspectives of both regions are equally represented and that the research agenda aligns with the UNESCO call that no one should be left behind. It operates with a relatively low budget, which limits the extent to which it can support the work of its individual networks. Its role is therefore more one of an enabler of research; the leadership of each of the networks is voluntary as is the general membership. However, the Hub is producing significant research, organising seminars, webinars, and international publications. It is of significant scale and is a key factor in the research field around lifelong learning in Europe and Asia. Being embedded in both regions, which accounts for over 60 per cent of the world's population and gross domestic product, it is an influential voice in global lifelong learning research and policy.

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CHAPTER VII b

TRANSNATIONAL POLICY ACTORS AND THE GOVERNANCE OF LLL ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL: THE CASES OF THE EU'S OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION AND THE LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM

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Chapter VII b - TRANSNATIONAL POLICY ACTORS AND THE GOVERNANCE OF LLL ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL: THE CASES OF THE EU'S OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION AND THE LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM

By Katharina Klimova and Stephanie Zimmermann

1. Introduction

Education is traditionally a domain of the nation-state and has historically been linked to nation- and state-building. Yet, scholars of International Relations have observed that recently, due to the influence of globalisation, a 'transnational educational space' (Lawn & Lingard, 2002) has been emerging, in which 'new global challenges meet old historical paths, trends to convergence simultaneously exist with trends to divergence, and new and emerging policy actors [...] interact with old and established ones (national states) concerning the mandate, the capacity and the governance of education' (Ioannidou, 2007, p. 338). The formation of such a transnational educational space can be observed in the 'Europeanization of education' (Lawn, 2006) and the creation of a 'European space of education' (Hingel, 2001).

A central actor in that space is the European Union (EU), a supranational organisation with regulative capacities over and beyond its members and legal power to shape national policies in some fields, such as economics or the labour market (Ioannidou, 2007, p. 338). Efforts to establish a communitarian education policy are constrained by the EU's limited competence to intervene in the content or organisation of member states' individual education systems (Alexiadou, 2014). The EU can nonetheless steer educational governance and influence national agenda-setting through 'soft governance' (Lawn, 2006). The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) and its prerogative of measuring specific educational benchmarks and indicators is considered the EU's central mechanism to achieve policy objectives in fields where it has limited regulative powers, such as education.

In 2000, the EU's Lisbon Strategy sought to make the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010 (European Parliament, 2009, p. 1). Central to that objective was the expansion of lifelong learning (LLL), a concept that became the 'new object of communitarian education policy' (Milana, 2012, p. 112). Its centrality in the discourse of the European educational space was further underlined by subsequent strategic frameworks of the field such as the *Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training* (ET 2020) and succeeding it, the European Education Area (EEA), which stress lifelong learning's contribution to employability, adaptability, and geographical and vocation mobility and hence to the functioning of the internal market (EP 2008). The OMC is thus utilised to steer lifelong learning policies in member states and to achieve the common educational objectives, exemplified by the measuring of lifelong learning-related data through the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) and the Adult Education Survey (AES).

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have emerged as another powerful policy actor and purveyor of lifelong learning in the European educational space. They 'operate as self-organised networks of linked professionals at an individual or collective level without governmental interference and without any sovereign authority' (Ioannidou, 2007, p. 338), and function as 'mediators in state-society relations' (Schrama & Zhelyazkova, 2018, p. 1031) by mobilising collective action and aggregating the interests of citizens. Furthermore, CSOs contribute to the Europeanisation of education through their roles as providers of knowledge and expertise in consultation processes with EU institutions (Seibicke, 2020, p. 3) and as 'the transmitters and mediators of European Union or European socialization logics' (Lawn, 2006, p. 282). Regarding lifelong learning, this can be observed in the work of the European

Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), a transnational consortium of 44 European CSOs. The LLL discusses education-related issues, enforces civil society participation in public debates through policy papers and strategies, and aims to influence EU policies and decisions in education. The LLL's work is grounded in the contributions of its members, who participate in various working groups and civil society coalitions. Together, they collaborate to develop evidence-based solutions and recommendations to address key educational challenges at the European level.

Considering the limited formal political authority both the EU and CSOs have in the field of education, a discussion of the means, mechanisms, and tools to govern lifelong learning is warranted. Hence, the objective of this paper is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different soft governance instruments tools to promote lifelong learning on a European level. To that end, two case studies make up the core of this paper. The first study, encompassed in Section 2, focuses on the EU's OMC and assesses the viability of specific lifelong learning measurement tools, such as the LFS, the AES and the European Lifelong Learning Indicators (ELLI) for policy making. The second case study examines the mechanisms of the LLL, as a transnational consortium of European CSOs, to engage with relevant policy actors and to steer lifelong learning policies (Section 3). It features a deliberation of the scope of the platform and its key stakeholders, the means of interaction of its members, action areas and services, its interaction with EU institutions and challenges and constraints of the platform.

2. The EU's Open Method of Coordination and lifelong learning

In 2000, the EU's Lisbon Strategy recognised the centrality of education in making the EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010 (Parliament, 2009, p. 1). This objective recognises that the globalisation of the economy and the increasing relevance of information and communication technologies demanded a reform of European educational systems. In that regard, lifelong learning became a key instrument due to its potential to foster innovation, employability, adaptability, and geographical and vocational mobility, hence contributing to the functioning of the European internal market (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, p. 77).

Efforts to enforce lifelong learning through common European education policy are constrained by the EU's limited competence to intervene in the content or organisation of member states' individual education systems (Alexiadou, 2014). This is clearly established the Treaties of Maastricht (Art. 126 and 127) and Amsterdam (Art. 149 and 150), as well as founded in the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. EU institutions can 'encourage cooperation', 'support and supplement national action' but must 'respect the responsibility of Member States for their education systems' (ibid.).

Hence, to steer member states' education policy, the EU retorts to "soft governance". As opposed to "hard law" (regulation), soft governance refers to 'policy-making upon practices, procedures and conventions that have no binding character as to their implementation', such as expert exchanges, information networks, peer review processes, monitoring, and large-scale international comparative assessments (Ahonen, 2001, p. 1). As a soft governance instrument, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) emerged around the same time as the Lisbon Strategy and encompasses a variety of practices applicable to various policy fields, including education (Lange & Alexiadou, 2007, p. 325). It 'aims to improve the effectiveness and co-ordination of a range of policies in the European Union' (Alexiadou, 2014), and typically features the following practices:

- Fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms
- Establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different member states and sectors as a means of comparing good practice
- Translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences
- Organising periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review via mutual learning processes (European Council, 2000).

The OMC ‘operates alongside traditional legal frameworks and creates a complex system of “multi-level governance” where informal normative pressures and agenda setting from the Commission attempt to direct reforms in social policy areas’ (Alexiadou, 2014).

2.1. EU benchmarks, indicators, and measurement tools for lifelong learning

Benchmarks, indicators, and large-scale assessments have become common instruments of policy actors in the transnational educational space to extort soft governance. Benchmarks are overall performance targets or “points of reference” while indicators are concrete instruments used to monitor progress (Boeren, 2014, p. 277). Data functions as a “self-regulating” tool for national education systems, as these will try to conform with the norms agreed in the form of benchmarks and indicators (Boeren, 2014, p. 277). Poor performance in international tests often incites reforms of national educational systems and policy learning from good performers (Lingard et al., 2015, p. 2). Hence, the institutions where the benchmarks and indicators originated from can extort ‘epistemic influence’ (ibid., p. 36) and shape the values, norms, and practices of national educational systems without a formal mandate to do so.¹

The first monumental performance target for adult learning emerged as part of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, aiming to achieve a 12.5 per cent participation rate in adult learning by 2010 (ibid., p. 278). The Lisbon Strategy was succeeded by *the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training* (ET 2020), which included a new set of educational benchmarks and indicators. Progress in lifelong learning is represented by the benchmark *Participation of adults in learning*, ‘an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning’ (European Commission, 2009).

The monitoring of that benchmark was based on the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), a quarterly household survey on employment coordinated by the European Commission’s statistical office, Eurostat. The survey targets people aged 15 and over, asks them about their employment status and history, and includes questions on their participation in learning activities in the last four weeks.

While the EU-LFS focuses on employment, another Eurostat survey, the Adult Education Survey (AES) specifically targets adult participation in learning activities, making it the first European comparative survey with individual adults instead of households within the field (Boeren, 2014, p. 279). The AES collects information on the participation of individuals in education and training, including formal, non-formal and informal variants. In contrast to the EU-LFS on which the 15 per cent benchmark is based, the AES uses a reference period of 12 months in their questions on participation in learning activities.

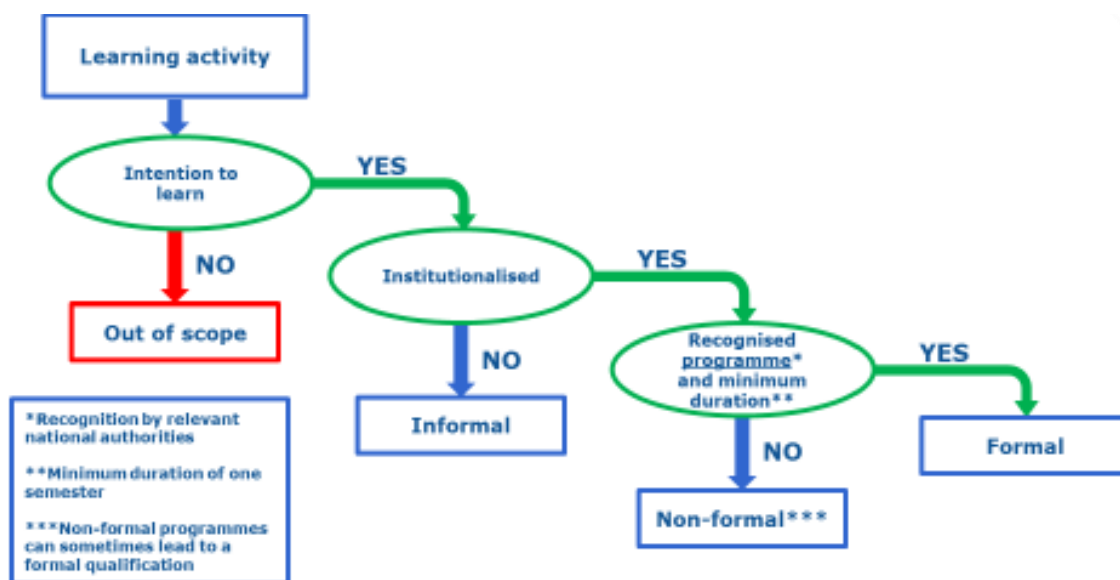
¹ The data obtained through monitoring is not a mere representation of educational realities, but rather the result of political, economic, cultural, and social discourses, which it simultaneously shapes

Up to 2016, the AES focused on people aged 25 to 64 years, a range that was widened to 18 to 69 years in the most recent survey. The following policy-relevant indicators can be obtained through the AES (European Commission, 2017, p. 7):

Valuing learning	• Participation in formal and non-formal learning activities by provider and field of learning, by training setting (during and outside working hours, source of funding, on-site and online), the purpose of participation (job-related or not) • Initiative and reasons for participation as well as outcomes • Obstacles to participation and reasons for non-participation
Information, guidance and counselling	• Search for information as well as guidance and counselling on learning possibilities • Type and characteristics of guidance/counselling services
Investing time and money in learning	• Volume of participation (time spent in learning) by type of learning activity (formal, non-formal) • Source of financing (learner, relative, government, employer, etc.)
Basic skills/key competences	• Self-reported level of foreign languages • Participation of disadvantaged groups such as those with low educational attainment or the unemployed

The Eurostat classification system categorises learning activities based on the intention to improve knowledge, skills, and competences. As seen in Figure 1, it uses a flowchart to classify activities into formal, non-formal, and informal learning, based on three key criteria.

Figure 1: Classification of learning activities based on the three broad categories (European Commission, 2016, p. 21)



- *Intention to learn*: If an activity is not intended for learning, it is excluded from being classified as a learning activity, thus omitting incidental learning.
- *Institutionalisation*: Intentional learning activities are checked for institutionalisation, which involves an organised structure with a student-teacher relationship, method determination, scheduling, admission requirements, and designated location. Informal learning activities are defined as those that are not institutionalised.
- *Inclusion in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)*: Institutionalised learning activities are further classified based on whether they are included in the NQF of the respective respondent's country. Those included are categorised as formal learning, while those not included are classified as non-formal learning.

Intended to be repeated every five years, four waves of the AES have been implemented so far. The first AES, a pilot survey, took place around 2007. Based on a gentlemen's agreement, the survey was conducted in 26 EU member states (Ireland and Luxembourg did not participate), with voluntary participation from Norway, Switzerland and Türkiye. The second wave followed in 2011, with AES participation from 27 EU member states as well as Norway, Switzerland, Serbia and Türkiye. For the first time, the AES was then conducted under the institutional mandates set in Regulation 452/2008 and Regulation 823/2010, in which the European Parliament and Council established the member states' obligation to participate in the collection of data on the participation of adults in learning. Subsequently, a third (2016) and fourth (2022) wave of the AES were conducted in EU member states with participation from selected non-EU countries (Eurostat 2023).

ET 2020 was succeeded as a strategic framework by the European Education Area (EEA) in 2021. The framework envisioned seven so-called "EU level targets" to be achieved by 2030. The target participation of adults in learning, already included in ET 2020, omits lifelong learning and instead postulates that '[a]t least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months, by 2025' (European Council, 2021). In conjunction, a new legal framework on EU data collection, the "Integrated European social statistics framework regulation – IESS", established that from 2022, the EU-LFS collects information on participation in formal and non-formal education and training in the last 12 months, every two years. This allows for regular monitoring of adult participation in learning through the EU-LFS, while AES provides very detailed information on participation in formal, non-formal and informal learning. The periodicity of the AES also changed from every five to every six years. While lifelong learning is still present in important strategic documents in the field of education policy, the omission of lifelong learning from the EEA monitoring can be seen as a 'radical departure from the policy ideas that provided focus, substance and structure to the earlier strategic framework' (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2023, p. 862).

While the LFS and the AES can be considered valuable tools for measuring the state of adult education in a population, they are not viable as measures for lifelong learning due to their limited conceptualisation of the term. Lifelong learning most commonly encapsulates a time and a space axis on which to consider learning contexts beyond formal education (Saisana, 2010, p. 10). The time axis, learning that is "life-long", refers to the successive stages of life in which learning occurs, such as early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The space axis, learning that is "life-wide", signifies the different contexts in which individuals learn, such as home, school, work community, leisure and others. These different contexts are categorised as formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Regarding the time axis, the LFS and the AES entail a time limitation when it comes to respondents' participation in learning activities. If a respondent indicates that no formal or non-formal learning activity has occurred in the 12 months prior to the survey, their participation rate in lifelong learning will stand at zero, which might not be the case (Clain, 2016, p. 10). This limitation hence contradicts the diachronic nature of lifelong learning. Furthermore, it also demonstrates limitations regarding the space axis, as informal learning activities are not counted.

The space axis is not fully realised in either survey in other regards as well. The LFS assessment of lifelong learning is limited to participation in formal and non-formal training and learning activities and strikingly omits informal learning. The AES does include informal learning in its classification of learning activities but there is no inquiry about the actual nature or location of the learning event after classifying a learning activity as informal, limiting the capacity to garner insight from the data (Rubenson, 2019, p. 304). This could be due to the difficulty of measuring informal learning, as it inherently encompasses a variety of learning contexts and activities which are challenging to classify. However, it can also be argued that assessing formal and non-formal learning is deemed more relevant as it contributes to the policy indicators outlined in the AES Manual, which focus on lifelong learning's potential for economic growth and employability.

The surveys' conceptualisations thus do not only insufficiently encapsulate the time and space dimensions of lifelong learning but also reflect a primarily economic view of learning embedded in human capital theory by excluding non-work-related learning sites such as the community, and underestimating the correlation between lifelong learning and social outcomes, such as inclusion and citizenship (Valiente & Lee, 2020, p. 162). In this view, lifelong learning, and education by extension, is focused on competencies and qualifications as tools to boost economic competitiveness, disregarding the broad humanistic tradition of adult education (Rubenson, 2019, p. 305). Considering the epistemic influence data has in shaping educational norms, values, and practices and the conceptual limitations the EU-LFS and the AES exhibit, a discussion of alternative models to measure lifelong learning is warranted.

2.2. The European Lifelong Learning Indicators

The European Lifelong Learning Indicators (ELLI)-Index was developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2010 for country-level assessment of EU member states. Its development was inspired by the Composite Learning Index (CLI), an initiative of the Canadian Council on Learning, which attempted to measure lifelong learning across the country's more than 4,500 communities from 2006 to 2010.

Conceptually, ELLI is organised around the four major dimensions of learning that were outlined in Jacques Delors' influential publication *Learning: The treasure within* (1996). According to Delors, who is a former president of the European Commission, 'each individual must be equipped to seize learning opportunities throughout life, both to broaden her or his knowledge, skills and attitudes, and to adapt to a changing, complex and interdependent world' (Delors, 1996, p. 85). There are four pillars (or four dimensions) of learning that Delors proposes:

- *Learning to know*: Acquiring the 'instruments of understanding' (Delors, 1996, p. 86), which are seen as learning tools such as concentration, memory and analysis (Saisana, 2010, p. 7)
- *Learning to do*: The ability to act creatively on one's environment, meaning occupational, hands-on and practical skills (Saisana, 2010, p. 7)
- *Learning to live together*: Learning that strengthens cooperation and social cohesion in all human activities

- *Learning to be*: The essential progress which proceeds from the previous three, understood as the fulfilment of a person, as an individual/member of a family/citizen (Saisana, 2010, p. 7)

The ELLI-Index combines 36 variables of lifelong learning, most of them from Eurostat, to holistically capture all four dimensions of learning. *Learning to know* encompasses indicators such as early childhood education, secondary education outcomes (e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores), participation in post-secondary education, and the formal education infrastructure. *Learning to do* includes indicators related to the results of formal vocational education and training (VET), participation in ongoing VET, the availability of continuous VET, and the integration of learning within the work environment. *Learning to live together* covers indicators like participation in active citizenship, levels of tolerance and openness, trust in others, and inclusion in informal social networks. Lastly, *learning to be* involves indicators of engagement in sports and leisure activities, cultural life and learning, continuing education or training, self-directed learning via media, and maintaining a work-life balance. It is worth noting that the four dimensions of ELLI intend to integrate the triad of lifelong learning contexts (formal, non-formal and informal): *Learning to know* focuses on formal learning, *learning to do* is oriented towards non-formal learning, and the last two dimensions are dedicated to informal learning. Figure 2 overleaf summarises the 36 indicators and the socioeconomic outcomes of learning.

Figure 2: Four-dimensional framework for lifelong learning in Europe (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010)



To complement the four dimensions of learning, ELLI also captures 14 social (related to health, life satisfaction, social cohesion, democracy and sustainability) and five economic (related to earning/income, productivity, employment) outcomes to determine the strength of the relationship between learning inputs and socioeconomic outcomes (Saisana 2010). These are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Economic and social outcomes of learning (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010)

Measures	Indicators
Mean equivalized net income	Earnings/Income
GDP per head	
Labor productivity per person employed	Productivity
Employment rate	Employment
Unemployment rate	
Self-perceived health	Health
Self-reported conditions or health habits	
Life expectancy at birth	
Life satisfaction	Life satisfaction/Happiness
Happiness	
Satisfaction with job	
Satisfaction with home	
Long-term unemployment rate	Social cohesion and democracy
Gini coefficient	
Material deprivation rate by poverty status in the EU	
How satisfied with the way democracy works in country	
Voted last European election	
Trust in political institutions	
Environmental Performance Index (EPI)	Sustainability

An analysis by the European Commission Joint Research Center (JRC) suggests that ELLI ‘is built according to a sound statistical methodology’ and ‘provides a reliable picture of the situation at the national level in the EU’ (Saisana, 2010, p. 43). However, Rubenson (2019) expresses methodological concerns, such as the high correlation between the four learning dimensions and the high correlation between specific indicators and a learning dimension that they were not assigned to. This supports criticisms that the four dimensions are interconnected and raises questions about ELLI’s validity. Nonetheless, ELLI employs a comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning, which does not only consider economic but also social benefits of learning. In this regard, Rubenson (2019, p. 308) points out that the *learning to be* dimension shows the highest correlation to the ELLI index scores, suggesting the significance of non-formal and informal learning for lifelong learning.

2.3. Discussion and conclusion

As argued above, the EU-LFS and AES are inadequate for comprehensively measuring lifelong learning, as they do not sufficiently encompass the time axis (learning throughout various life stages) and the space axis (learning in diverse contexts such as home, work, and community) of lifelong learning and employ a primarily economic view. Furthermore, they provide limited insight into the factors that influence adult participation in learning. The current sociological, psychological, economic and pedagogical literature locates these factors in the wider learning environment, such as the existence of the educational supply in the neighbourhood, the current offer of adult education courses, flexible learning opportunities and enrolment fees (Boeren, 2014, p. 283). While the surveys provide enough relevant information to gauge a socio-economic, socio-demographic, socio-cultural and psychological profile of the respondent, there is little information gained from them on the macro-level factors that influence participation in adult learning without collecting more data on educational systems or triangulating the data with other research methods (*ibid.*, p. 284). These conceptual limitations impact the EU-LFS' and AES' utility as a soft governance tool to foster lifelong learning on a European level, as an understanding of the factors that stimulate or constrain lifelong learning is crucial to address bottlenecks in national education systems with appropriate educational reforms.

To this end, ELLI presents a viable option. Being a composite index, ELLI facilitates comparisons of lifelong learning trends over time and across countries and thereby contributes to the self-regulation of national education systems. Although ELLI does not address the time axis of lifelong learning, it includes sound measures for informal learning and triangulates the outcomes of the four learning dimensions with social and economic outcomes, hence addressing macro-level factors that influence the status of lifelong learning within a country. Despite the JRC's engagement with ELLI and its affirmation of ELLI's methodological soundness, the index was never adopted by the EU. Also, since 2010, the Bertelsmann Foundation has not collected any additional data. This is unfortunate, as the ELLI-Index could increase the visibility of issue areas, contribute to cross-country dialogues on best practices, and facilitate progress in lifelong learning implementation.

3. European Lifelong Learning Platform

CSOs are important policy actors in the transnational educational space and have contributed to the Europeanisation of education through their involvement with EU policy processes. They are policy and knowledge transfer entrepreneurs and facilitate exchanges between actors in several countries, often operating via transitional networks. In this function, CSOs 'engage in the "soft transfer" of knowledge, broad policy ideas and norms; the intellectual matter that underpins policies, rather than in "hard" transfer of institutions or administrative tools' (Seibicke, 2020, p. 4). Their knowledge is not only crucial in identifying issues and putting them on the political agenda, but also in providing alternative policy solutions or infusing policy processes with normative and moral arguments (*ibid.*).

CSOs' involvement in EU policy making is well documented in the field of education, particularly lifelong learning. By involving CSOs in policy processes, the EU can not only expand its competencies in fields where it has limited regulatory power, but also increase its problem-solving capacities and expertise (Seibicke, 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, CSOs contribute to the EU's legitimacy, as they can hold democratic institutions and elected representatives responsible for their actions and introduce issues that would otherwise not be on the political agenda (Kröger, 2008, p. 6). CSOs can mobilise collective action, aggregate the interests of citizens, and hence act as mediators in state-society relations by

communicating societal preferences to policy-makers (Schrama & Zhelyazkova, 2018, p. 1031). Thus, they help policy makers understand the impact of their decisions on the citizens they target and take decisions that reflect EU policy requirements (ibid., p. 1033).

In 2001, several civil society actors shared their experience and expertise and contributed to the drafting of the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. A second initiative was launched in 2004 to raise awareness of the importance of basic skills as key competences for life. Those two initiatives were so successful that in 2004, six NGOs, the Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE; European Students' Forum), the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the European Forum of Technical and Vocational Training (EfVET), the European Workers Education Associations (EURO-WEA), the European Vocational Training Association (EVTA), and SOLIDAR, proposed to create and maintain a consultation platform open to all interested civil society actors in the field of education and training. The resulting European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) evolved into the European Platform for Lifelong Learning (LLLP) in 2015 (LLLP, 2023c).

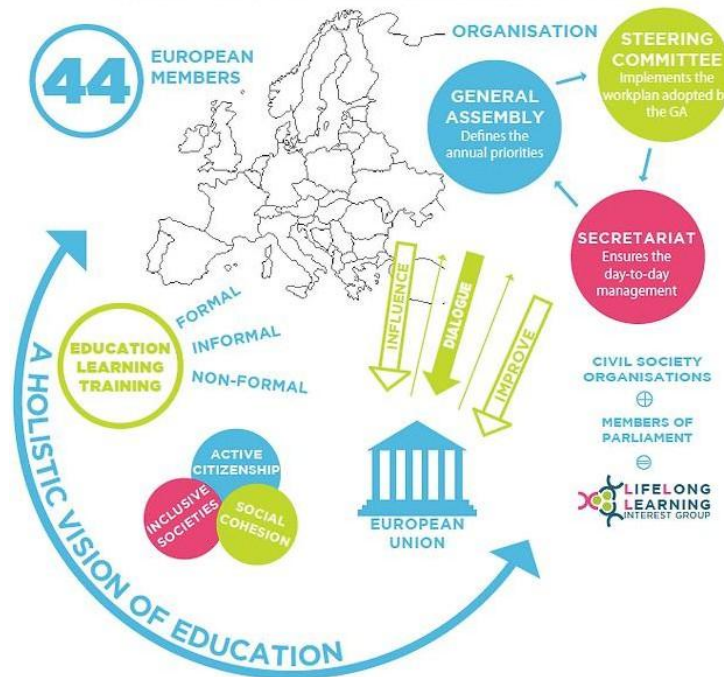
LLLP is a Brussels-based European umbrella organisation representing various European and international networks active in the field of education and lifelong learning (LLLP, 2023a). The platform is funded by the European Union's various programs and financial instruments dedicated to education, training, and lifelong learning initiatives. These funds are typically allocated through grants and projects under frameworks such as the Erasmus+ program, the European Social Fund (ESF), and other EU funding mechanisms designed to support education, training, and social inclusion across member states.

LLLP aims to improve learning in Europe by fostering lifelong learning approaches for all citizens, not solely focused on economic growth but also personal development. It represents citizens' concerns on lifelong learning, contributes to policy areas through research and publications, develops future skills, and implements projects in education, training, and youth (EfVet, 2022). By bringing together stakeholders from all education and training sectors, the LLLP contributes to enhancing flexibility between education systems and promotes a holistic version of lifelong learning (LLLP, 2023a).

Figure 4 overleaf illustrates the structure, vision and core activities of the LLLP, dedicated to shaping the future of education in Europe (EfVet, 2022). At its heart is the General Assembly, which sets annual priorities, while the Steering Committee implements these plans and the Secretariat manages daily operations. In 2024, the LLLP comprises 44 European members from diverse educational sectors, representing over 50,000 educational institutions and associations, enhancing its advocacy and policy influence. The platform has five key objectives (LLLP, 2023a):

1. Pursue active dialogue with European institutions
2. Enable exchanges of best practice, experiences and expertise
3. Disseminate information on key issues in the lifelong learning sector
4. Organise events and develop activities in transversal lifelong learning topics
5. Promote a more democratic, civic and social Europe

Figure 4: Structures of the LLP



3.2. Scope of the platform and key stakeholders

The 44 members of the LLP represent a wide array of sectors, including formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. These members encompass a broad spectrum of educational interests and initiatives, with a range of student organisation like AEGEE, associations focused on teacher education such as the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE), and advocates for digital competencies like the Platform “All Digital”. The LLP also includes networks like the Network for Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe (DARE) and Diesis Network, supporting social economy and enterprise development. Additionally, the LLP collaborates with organisations like EAEA, dedicated to adult learning, and the European Association of History Educators (EUROCLIO), promoting innovative history education. These diverse members collectively contribute to the LLP mission of advocating for inclusive, quality education and lifelong learning opportunities throughout Europe and beyond (LLP, 2023g). Collectively, these networks represent over 50,000 educational institutions and associations, reaching millions of beneficiaries across Europe. A detailed overview of the 44 European network member organisations can be found under <https://www.llplatform.eu/members>.

The collage features a variety of logos for European organizations and networks. At the top left is the 'europe' logo with the text 'EUROPE' and 'EUROPEAN UNION'. Next to it is the 'ATEE' logo for 'Association for Teacher Education in Europe'. To the right is the 'dare' logo for 'democracy and human rights education in Europe'. Below these are logos for 'diesis network', 'learn' (European Centre for Learning and Innovation), 'ea' (European Association of Educators), 'earll' (European Association of Research in Learning and Leadership), 'Réseau International des Cités des Métiers', 'EPA' (European Professional Association), 'ECNAIS' (European Council of National Associations of Instructors), 'EFMD' (European Federation for Intercultural Learning), 'EFET' (European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training), 'EMDR EUROPE' (European School Heads Association), 'esha' (European School Heads Association), 'ESN' (Erasmus Student Network), 'european federation for intercultural learning', 'ESU' (European University Foundation), 'EucA' (European Association of Universities), 'eucen' (European Council of National Associations of Instructors), 'ELUNET' (European Learning Union Network), 'Eurochild' (European Child Foundation), 'EUF' (European University Foundation), 'EURASHE' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), 'EuroClío' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), 'EVBB' (European Vocational Business Board), 'EVTA' (European Vocational Training Association), 'FEDEC' (International network for professional circus education), 'fi CEMEA' (Fédération Internationale des Cirques de Manège Artistique), 'FREREF' (Fédération Royale Européenne de la Recherche et de l'Éducation), 'ICC' (International Council of Circuses), 'ISCA' (International Circus Association), 'OBESSU' (Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions), 'Sirius' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), 'solidair FOUNDATION' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), 'volonteurpe' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), 'SCOUTS' (European Association of Universities in Higher Education), and 'Youth for Exchange and Understanding'.

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1. European institutions: The European Commission, European Parliament, and other EU bodies that influence and implement education policies
2. CSOs: Various NGOs, advocacy groups, and community organisations involved in education and lifelong learning
3. Educational institutions: Schools, universities, vocational training centres, and adult education providers across Europe
4. Policy makers and government agencies: National and regional education authorities that align their policies with EU strategies
5. Teachers and educators: Professionals in the education sector who benefit from LLLP's resources, professional development opportunities, and support
6. Learners: Individuals of all ages engaged in formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the LLLP's initiatives
7. Research institutions and think tanks: Organisations that provide data, research, and insights to support evidence-based policy making in education

LLL IMPLEMENTATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

governance, policy coherence and equity within the EEA framework. The European Commission highlighted the importance of civil society engagement in the mid-term review of EEA policies including ongoing evaluations and upcoming public consultations to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of EU and national education policies. Stakeholders emphasised the social impact of education beyond employment, advocating for a broader perspective that views learning as an investment in lifelong skills and citizenship (LLLP, 2023b).

3.3. Interaction of members

The LLLP facilitates the exchange of ideas and collaboration among its members through various types of meetings and events, such as online meetings and webinars, technical meetings and working groups, enabling continuous engagement, knowledge sharing, and collaboration on specialised issues and projects throughout the year (LLLP, 2023d).

Furthermore, the LLLP hosts the annual Lifelong Learning Lab (LLLAB) which serves as a forum for discussions, roundtables and policy debates on critical issues in lifelong learning. The LLLAB calls for stakeholders to explore transversal and strategic topics aimed at advancing education policies and practices. Previous editions of the LLLAB have been held in diverse locations including Girona, Spain (2023), and Nice, France (2022), under the patronage of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. These events fostered engaging discussions on “Lifelong learning entitlements for the future of Europe”, reflecting the LLLP’s dedication to shaping education policies that benefit individuals and societies in a rapidly evolving context (LLLP, 2023e).

Additionally, the LLLP hosts annual conferences that provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration. The LLLP Days 2024 bring together education and training stakeholders for a series of events from June 17th to June 19th, 2024, at the European Parliament Visitor Centre Zweig in Brussels, Belgium. The program aligns with Belgium’s Presidency of the Council of the EU, emphasising collaboration and strategic planning for the future of education and training in Europe. The event includes LLLab, focusing on cooperation in education and training among European and Belgian stakeholders, iBOX (Inclusion Box) trainings addressing topics of participation, inclusion, diversity and digital access gaps, and the LLLP General Assembly where members discuss key strategic developments and elect representatives. This unique gathering provides an opportunity for stakeholders to exchange ideas, discuss policy developments and make informed decisions to advance lifelong learning and inclusive education systems within civil society organisations across Europe. Participants can engage in these activities and contribute to shaping the future of education advocacy and policy within the LLLP community (LLLP, 2023f).

Other events in 2024 include an event organised with the EU Parliament for the EU Elections 2024, EuCA (European University College Association) for embedded capacity development and the 6th European Conference for Student Affairs and Services.

3.5. Action areas and services

The LLLP focuses on several action areas aimed at promoting and enhancing education across Europe (UNESCO, 2019):

- *Learner wellbeing*: LLLP prioritises learner wellbeing by advocating for policies and practices that support the holistic development and welfare of learners. This includes promoting inclusive and supportive learning environments that address learners' social, emotional, and mental health needs.

- *Learning opportunities*: LLLP works to expand learning opportunities for all individuals, emphasising access to quality education at different stages of life. By fostering inclusive education systems, LLLP aims to ensure that diverse learners have equitable access to educational resources and pathways.
- *Digital learning content*: LLLP focuses on building and strengthening digital learning platforms to enhance educational experiences. This involves creating and enabling access to high-quality digital resources, including teacher training materials, to facilitate effective online and blended learning environments.
- *Capacity development*: LLLP supports capacity development efforts aimed at strengthening distance learning capabilities and enhancing system resilience in response to future challenges or disruptions. By investing in training and resources, LLLP aims to empower educators, institutions, and systems to adapt to and thrive in evolving educational landscapes.
- *Advocacy and communication*: LLLP engages in advocacy and communication activities to raise awareness about education rights and promote the value of lifelong learning. This includes outreach to parents and communities to emphasise the importance of education, assessing the impact of educational disruptions, and evaluating the effectiveness of distance learning strategies to inform policy and practice.

3.4. Interaction with EU institutions

An essential aspect of the LLLP strategy is engaging in active dialogue, knowledge transfer and policy learning with EU institutions. The LLLP shares views on education-related issues and civil society participation in public debates through policy papers and strategies, aiming to influence EU policies and decisions in the field of education. The LLLP's work is grounded in the contributions of its members, who participate in various working groups and civil society coalitions. Together, they collaborate to develop evidence-based solutions and recommendations to address key educational challenges at the European level. Furthermore, the platform conducts regular surveys and research to gather data and enhance their capacity for evidence-based advocacy and policy making (LLL, 2023j). The following initiatives exemplify the LLLP contribution to EU policy making.

LLL participates in public hearings at the European Parliament and in expert groups gathered by the Commission. One significant initiative is the Group on Lifelong Learning initiated by LLL, EAEA and several Members of European Parliament (MEP). This Group brings together civil society representatives and MEPs to discuss key issues connected to lifelong learning and adult education. Furthermore, LLL proposed the creation of a new role for a Vice President for Lifelong Learning within the European Commission to bridge the divide and promote a cohesive, strategic approach to lifelong learning as a priority for Europe. The initiative aims to foster policy coherence, enhance social inclusion, uphold democratic values and support economic competitiveness across the EU (LLL, 2024a).

The LLL's policy papers and recommendations were instrumental in shaping the EEA's strategic goals. For example, the Position Paper 2023 highlights the critical importance of key competences in navigating contemporary challenges and fostering human flourishing across personal, professional, social and political dimensions. It underscores the historical context of discussions on key competences within the EU and the gap between policy discussions and effective implementation in learning approaches. The Position Paper highlights eight policy reforms that prioritise a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy emphasising diverse competences essential for individual societal flourishing and gives eight recommendations to foster and strengthen lifelong learning. For example: 'Education is

everyone's responsibility, Skills revolutions are not enough, we demand a competences revolution! Or Assessments as a learning tool and not a career test' (LLL, 2023h, p. 4). In general, the paper addresses the whole-of-government approach to education and training policies within the EU. It emphasises the importance of collaboration across government ministries and levels of governance to develop and implement effective strategies for lifelong learning.

In addition, LLLP is involved in research projects that advance lifelong learning policies and practices. LLLP supports and expands the Erasmus+ program which provides funding for education, training, youth, and sports projects across Europe, enhancing learning opportunities and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, LLLP leverages the European Social Fund (ESF) to support education and training initiatives that improve employment opportunities, social inclusion, and skill development (LLL, 2023j). Furthermore, the BRIDGE (2023 to 2025) and STRIDE (2024 to 2027) projects, both funded by the European Union, are key initiatives in this area. The BRIDGE project aims to bridge the gap between research and policy in education by establishing a European professional learning community, enhancing competencies for policy research. This project involves university partners and organisations representing 44 European networks in education, training and youth including the LLLP. Key partners include the Education Academy Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) and the European Institute of Education and Social Policy (France). The STRIDE project, led by the Norwegian University Oslomet, aims to provide comprehensive knowledge about effective education reforms and policies that reduce inequalities in education outcomes across Europe. It examines variables such as socio-economic background, gender, disabilities, migration status, language and childhood education and care. The project involves national and European stakeholders to develop methodologies and assessment tools for policy learning. The outcomes include a toolbox of knowledge and assessment tools for policy makers to address educational inequalities and demonstrate the usefulness of data in policy making to reduce educational disparities over the short, medium and long terms (LLL, 2024b).

3.5. Challenges and constraints of the Platform

LLL faces numerous challenges as it works to promote lifelong learning across Europe. These challenges are financial, operational, political, and technological. Each challenge presents a unique obstacle that the platform must navigate to achieve its mission.

One significant challenge is financial stability. The platform primarily relies on project-based funding from EU programs like Erasmus+ and other grants, which can be competitive and unstable. These financial constraints can limit the scope of LLL's initiatives and its ability to sustain long-term projects, requiring continuous efforts to seek new funding sources and partnerships. Additionally, efficiently allocating limited resources to various projects while ensuring their sustainability and impact remains a critical issue.

Operationally, managing a network of stakeholders, including universities, civil society organisations and policy makers across Europe, requires effective coordination and robust management strategies. The scalability of successful projects across different regions introduces logistical complexities and necessitates adaptable approaches.

Politically, harmonising diverse education policies across EU member states to create and promote a cohesive lifelong learning framework is challenging due to different national priorities and regulations. Also, effectively advocating for learning opportunities that are accessible to all, including marginalised groups, is a significant challenge LLL must continuously strive to overcome.

Technologically, transiting the digital divide to ensure equitable access to digital learning resources is crucial but challenging, especially in regions with limited technological infrastructure. Integration of innovative digital learning tools into traditional education systems involves overcoming resistance to change and ensuring adequate training for both educators and learners.

3.6. LLLP's steering of lifelong learning policy

LLLP's capacity to steer and influence lifelong learning policy implementation on a European level is mainly given by its function as a provider of knowledge and expertise and its role as a mediator in state-society relations who can expand the EU's political legitimacy. The LLLP provides knowledge and expertise through initiatives like the annual LLLAB, which involves different European lifelong learning stakeholders, as well as through its involvement in the EU-funded BRIDGE and STRIDE projects. The LLLP's members represent a broad spectrum of European CSOs working on diverse educational issues. They aggregate the interests of citizens and communicate societal preferences to EU institutions through the LLLP's participation in public hearings at European Parliament and in expert groups gathered by the Commission. Furthermore, the Platform's policy papers and recommendations, such as the Position Paper 2023, were instrumental in shaping the EEA's strategic goals.

These two roles must face the following limitations. As a provider of knowledge and expertise, the LLLP's influence is reliant on the coordination mechanisms and the opportunity structure that is established between the Platform and EU institutions. This can be seen in LLLP's funding structure, which primarily relies on project-based funding from EU programs like Erasmus+ and other grants. These funds are competitive and time-bound, limiting the scope of the LLLP's initiatives and leaving its implementation phase vulnerable to disruption. This reliance on coordination mechanisms and opportunity structures established by political institutions creates a dependency according to some critics and limits what the LLLP can put forward, including criticism (Seibicke, 2020, p. 3). Moreover, the increasing professionalisation of the LLLP risks diminishing its representativeness of civil society, as observers have noted that consultation practices push CSOs to develop specialised expertise which results in them losing their links with the grassroots level (Seibicke, 2020, p. 4).

4. Conclusion

Supranational institutions such as the EU and transnational CSOs like the LLLP have limited regulative capacities in the field of education. These policy actors hence use soft governance mechanisms, such as expert exchanges, information networks, peer review processes, monitoring, and large-scale international comparative assessments, to facilitate the implementation of lifelong learning. This paper assessed the strengths and weaknesses of EU's OMC, exemplified by lifelong learning benchmarks, indicators and measurement tools, and the LLLP's workings to promote lifelong learning on a European level.

The first major benchmark for adult learning was set in 2000, aiming for a 12.5% per cent participation rate by 2010. This evolved into the ET 2020 and, at present, ET 2030 frameworks, which include new benchmarks like a 47 per cent adult participation rate in learning by 2025. Monitoring these benchmarks relies on surveys like the EU-LFS and the AES, which assess adult learning participation across formal, non-formal, and informal settings. The EU-LFS and the AES are useful for measuring adult education but are inadequate for assessing lifelong learning due to their narrow conceptualisation of the term. Lifelong learning includes both a time axis (learning throughout different life stages) and a space axis (learning in various contexts like home, work, and community). The LFS and AES have time limitations, only considering learning activities within the past 12 months, which contradicts the ongoing nature of lifelong learning. They also inadequately address the space axis by largely ignoring

informal learning. While the AES includes informal learning activities in its classification, it fails to explore their nature and context deeply. Both surveys primarily focus on formal and non-formal learning relevant to economic growth and employability, reflecting a perspective that equates educational outcomes with employability and economic growth. This view neglects non-work-related learning and its social outcomes, like inclusion and citizenship. Furthermore, the EU-LFS and the AES fail to provide sufficient insight into macro-level factors influencing adult participation in learning, such as the availability of educational resources, flexible learning opportunities, and enrolment fees. These limitations hinder the surveys' effectiveness as tools for promoting lifelong learning across Europe. Understanding the factors that encourage or hinder lifelong learning is essential for implementing effective educational reforms.

In contrast, the ELLI Index, developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation in 2010, offers a viable alternative. It assesses lifelong learning in EU member states, based on Jacques Delors' four dimensions of learning (learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be). ELLI uses 36 variables from Eurostat to capture these dimensions, as well as 14 social and five economic outcomes to link learning with health, life satisfaction, productivity, and employment. Despite being methodologically sound, some concerns include high correlations among dimensions and indicators, which may affect validity. Nonetheless, ELLI provides a comprehensive view of lifelong learning, emphasising both economic and social benefits. The EU's JRC affirmed ELLI's methodological soundness, but no further data collection has occurred since 2010. Integrating ELLI into EU data collection on lifelong learning could highlight bottlenecks in national education systems, promote cross-country dialogues on best practices, and advance lifelong learning implementation.

CSOs play a significant role in the transnational educational space, contributing to the Europeanisation of education through their involvement in EU policy processes. Their involvement helps the EU expand its competencies and problem-solving capacities, enhances legitimacy by holding democratic institutions accountable, and introduces otherwise neglected issues to the political agenda. CSOs can mobilise collective action, aggregate citizen interests, and communicate societal preferences to policy makers, ensuring that decisions reflect the impact on targeted citizens. Significant contributions from CSOs to lifelong learning policy include their role in drafting the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2001 and raising awareness of basic skills as key competences in 2004. These efforts led to the creation of the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL), which evolved into the European Platform for Lifelong Learning (LLLP) in 2015. The LLLP is an umbrella organisation spanning 44 European members (2024) from diverse educational sectors. It is funded by EU programs such as Erasmus+ and the European Social Fund and aims to improve learning in Europe by promoting lifelong learning approaches for all citizens, emphasising both economic growth and personal development.

The LLLP influences lifelong learning policy implementation in Europe by providing knowledge and expertise and acting as a mediator in state-society relations, thereby enhancing the EU's political legitimacy. It offers expertise through initiatives like the annual LLLAB and its involvement in EU-funded projects such as BRIDGE and STRIDE. Representing a broad spectrum of European CSOs, the LLLP aggregates citizen interests and communicates societal preferences to EU institutions via public hearings at European Parliament and participation in expert groups gathered by the Commission. The platform's policy papers, such as the Position Paper 2023, have significantly shaped the European Education Area's strategic goals. However, the LLLP faces limitations in these roles. Its influence as a provider of knowledge and expertise is dependent on the coordination mechanisms and opportunity structures established between the platform and EU institutions. The LLLP's reliance on competitive, project-based funding from EU programs like Erasmus+ limits the scope and sustainability of its

initiatives and makes its implementation phase vulnerable to disruption. Additionally, critics argue that this funding dependency restricts the level of criticism the LLLP can express. The increasing professionalisation of the LLLP also risks diminishing its representativeness of civil society, as the need to develop specialised expertise for consultation practices can weaken its grassroots connections.

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BY

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AND

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