Mid-Term Review of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (Phase 2) Program

STANDALONE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
30 MAY 2025

alinea

Acknowledgements

STANDALONE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) is Australia's flagship program supporting primary education in Laos. The first phase covered the period 2015-2022 and focused on supporting the Government of Laos (GoL) with major reforms to the primary school curriculum. The second phase, BEQUAL 2, commenced in July 2022 and is expected to continue to June 2026, with the option of a four-year extension. BEQUAL 2 is working towards two end of program outcomes (EOPOs):

- EOPO 1: By 2030, primary teachers in targeted districts demonstrate inclusive teaching practices responsive to students' needs.
- EOPO 2: By 2030, primary students in targeted districts demonstrate increased engagement in learning and improved learning outcomes.

BEQUAL Phase 2 implementation is led by the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and supported by an implementation team contracted and managed by Tetra Tech International Development. It is funded with a budget of $33.3 million (inclusive of a $3.5 million contribution from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)) over four years and requires the GoL to progressively increase its ownership and funding of activities. Gender equality and inclusive education considerations are mainstreamed across components and activities, and the program is aligned to the MoES' 9th Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP) 2021-25.

As BEQUAL 2 has passed the second year of implementation, DFAT commissioned a Mid-Term Review (MTR) to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the program scope, main implementation approaches, and management and governance structures.

This Executive Summary presents high level findings and recommendations from the Review process. These have been informed by a document review, stakeholder interviews and workshop discussions. The MTR consulted with a broad range of stakeholders during a visit to Lao PDR in October - November 2024 and conducted virtual consultations with stakeholders outside of Lao PDR. The Executive Summary is organised according to the key review criteria and key review questions in the MTR Terms of Reference: relevance and coherence of design; implementation effectiveness; gender equality; disability and social inclusion; monitoring, evaluation and learning; and management and governance.

CONTEXT

The BEQUAL program is well established and has been working at a rapid pace on completing the last year of the primary curriculum roll-out, begun under BEQUAL Phase 1. Other priorities have been the printing and distribution of the Grade 5 textbooks and teacher guides; the national scale up of the Spoken Lao Program (SLP); and designing a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) approach and associated processes under the guidance of the Department of Teacher Education (DTE).

BEQUAL's support to the delivery of the new curriculum is a significant reform process, requiring time, momentum building, and sustained support. It requires behaviour change on the part of teachers and principals, as well as challenging established norms of the role of a teacher. This reform process is taking place in a context with high inflation, restricted government budgets, and an increasing shortage of teachers, due to natural attrition and leaving the workforce, and low

enrolment rates for teacher training courses. Student dropouts are also on the rise as families make difficult decisions to take their children out of school. These contextual elements are impacting on the current design and implementation effectiveness of BEQUAL and require close attention and adjustments to ensure ongoing program sustainability. The findings and recommendations in this Executive Summary should be considered against this dynamic and challenging context.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When reviewed against the framework of the current design and anticipated end of program outcomes, BEQUAL is an effective program making good progress and contributing to improved teaching practice and student learning outcomes. The SLP is a significant success story, transitioning from a pilot to a program to national policy; Improving teachers' capacity to manage multigrade classes is contributing to teachers' confidence and professional development; and BEQUAL's approach to CPD incorporates contextualised best practice approaches (noting it is currently delivering mixed results and received significant feedback from MTR stakeholders).

As BEQUAL 2 is at its midway point, approaches, models and materials are being used and tested, and feedback is being provided to the program. This is an important juncture for BEQUAL where it will need to consider and act on the feedback it is receiving, invest in building an evidence base for its work, and ensure the program is adapting to respond to a changing context.

Design: relevance and coherence of scope and approach

Findings

BEQUAL is highly relevant to the priorities and commitments of the MoES and the Australian Government to inclusive, high quality education programs but could do more to leverage Australia's profile and partnerships for maximum impact. To maintain relevance, streamlining and focus on critical areas will bolster sustainability in the next year of implementation. While the MTR observes positive messaging from the MoES in terms of ownership and sustainability, there should be a continued focus on strengthening collaboration between program stakeholders to support the realisation of this intended outcome.

BEQUAL's program logic and theory of change suggest pathways of change for teacher and student outcomes but are more muted on signposting BEQUAL's contribution to policy changes. While BEQUAL is collaborating well and harmonising its support with other development partners, overall support to the MoES is not well aligned between development partners. Existing coordination efforts are not systematic and lack sufficient traction, leading to potential duplication of effort and resources.

Recommendations

- BEQUAL focus on a smaller set of high-impact initiatives, particularly those with strong potential to drive systemic educational reform.
- The Embassy Education Team and BEQUAL to work together to leverage Australia's role as a trusted partner to enable policy harmonisation and ensure BEQUAL's support aligns with MoES' evolving needs.
- A design extension for the BEQUAL program be undertaken. As part of the design extension, revise the program logic to more explicitly map pathways of change and integrate key factors such as policy shifts and the integration of gender equality at the EOPO or IO level.

- BEQUAL, the Embassy Education Team and development partners direct their coordination and harmonisation efforts to support the MoES in managing resources and streamlining processes and activities.

Implementation: Effectiveness

Findings

BEQUAL is an effective program; its transition from an implementation approach to technical advisory and policy development is underway, and demonstrating varying degrees of maturity across workstreams. The SLP is an example of where this transition has worked very effectively. The MoES indicates SLP will be a core activity as new programs are being developed, providing increased support for the learning needs of students with diverse language backgrounds. Better integration of BEQUAL's CPD approach with MoES policies and priorities will make it more sustainable. The Review notes BEQUAL's activities have a moderate to high degree of alignment with over half of the MoES' ESSDP's objectives.

BEQUAL effectively uses multiple communication channels to share its achievements with key stakeholders and the broader public. There is a need to strengthen strategic communications for and with DFAT.

Recommendations

- BEQUAL and the Embassy Education Team support the MoES to refine the CPD system, drawing on BEQUAL's CPD approach, positive practices from the cluster-system and other CPD models. To embed ownership of one CPD system, MoES should be supported to finalise the CPD Guidelines, building on the framework of the CPD Decree and Concept.
- BEQUAL and DFAT promote coherent assistance by all development partners, strengthening established forums to align resources and support MoES to manage and direct complementarity of resources.
- BEQUAL continue to enhance collaboration with MoES to co-develop strategic communications, including by expanding outreach to provincial and district levels, establishing a feedback loop to collect input from stakeholders, and use digital platforms to share lessons and achievements. BEQUAL should be more responsive to DFAT's requirements for strategic communications and attuned to expectations of the content.

Gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI)

Findings

BEQUAL's progress on transformative GEDSI outcomes has been mixed. The program has demonstrated transformative social inclusion through the SLP, alongside high-quality gender-sensitive and responsive outputs, and emerging disability-sensitive programming. BEQUAL demonstrates full compliance with DFAT's child protection and preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH) standards. BEQUAL's GEDSI ambitions align broadly with relevant policies and strategies, but the effectiveness of its GEDSI initiatives requires ongoing attention and improvement. The MEL system is not currently placed to provide comprehensive indicators of GEDSI, particularly in relation to disaggregated child educational outcomes. BEQUAL lacks systematic engagement with civil society organisations (CSOs) and organisations of persons with a disability (OPDs), leading to limited integration of their views and expertise across program advisory, policies, and strategies.

Recommendations

- BEQUAL' s design extension ensure diverse linguistic practices are preserved and sensitively integrated into the program.
- BEQUAL leverage the expertise of the newly appointed GEDSI Strategic Advisor to strengthen GEDSI integration across all program activities, build technical capacity within BEQUAL and MoES, and expand the evidence base for BEQUAL's GEDSI impacts.
- Enhance GEDSI integration across all MEL frameworks and tools.
- Ensure the design extension identifies the GEDSI ambition intended for the program and corresponding resourcing, including nomination of a gender equality outcome at the EOPO or IO level within the program logic.
- The design extension explore how to improve formal disability inclusion advisory and representation in future programming, in line with Australia's International Development Policy and Disability Equity and Rights Strategy commitments.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL)

Findings

BEQUAL's MEL system demonstrates good alignment with DFAT's MEL Standards. Working within the parameters of BEQUAL's current program logic, the MEL system is set up to answer the key performance questions and identify progress being made against the EOPOs. The Results Framework is focused primarily on teacher and student outcomes, which may limit opportunities to capture evidence at the national level of structural or policy outcomes. BEQUAL has a good MEL toolkit and should utilise all aspects of it - not only to highlight positive outcomes but also to identify lessons and make adjustments to the program based on those lessons.

Recommendations

- BEQUAL build the evidence base for the effectiveness of its models and approaches, and demonstrate the program adjusts and is responsive to stakeholder feedback.
- As part of the design extension, revise the program logic to include a policy influence and gender equality outcome at the EOPO or IO level.
- BEQUAL to establish feedback mechanisms for program recipients and address current imbalances in reporting by including both challenges and successes in official communications with DFAT and MoES.

Management and governance

Findings

BEQUAL's Management Team has been appropriately structured and resourced throughout this phase, however some respondents raised concerns about its ability to adapt to evolving contextual and stakeholder needs. External stakeholders view BEQUAL as having a highly visible international team in leadership and decision making which is at odds with increasing DFAT and other donor focus on local leadership for development investments. While government stakeholders expressed a very favourable perception of the Australian Government's role in improving education quality and Australia-Laos relations are positive, more time may be needed to embed BEQUAL's new governance structure.

Recommendations

- BEQUAL develop a localisation strategy that will address barriers to national leadership in the program.
- BEQUAL strengthen and regularise contextual analysis, adopt a more flexible approach to program planning, and improve its use of data and feedback to inform strategic decisions, ensuring more timely adaptation to its dynamic operating context, and stakeholder needs, particularly DFAT.

BEQUAL and DFAT to re-evaluate the effectiveness of the new governance structure to foster Government of Laos ownership after it has been implemented for a 12-month period.

Mid-Term Review of the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (Phase 2) Program | Standalone Executive Summary May 2025

Page 8 of 9