



ວາລະສານການສຶກສາສາລາວແບບຍືນຍົງ  
ວິທະຍາໄລຄູສາລະວັນ

<https://www.sttcjournal.edu.la>

ດຳເນີນການວາລະສານໂດຍ ວິທະຍາໄລຄູສາລະວັນ

**ທັດສະນະຂອງຊາວໜຸ່ມ ຕໍ່ກັບແນວທາງການຮຽນຮູ້ແບບທາງເລືອກ  
ເພື່ອການປະກອບອາຊີບໃນ ສປປ ລາວ**  
**Youth Perspectives on Alternative Learning Pathways to  
Employment in Laos**

ເດືອນວັນ ພິມມະຈັກ<sup>1</sup>, ສີໄສ ດວງມະນີ<sup>2</sup>, ສິມສະໝຸກ ພິມມະຈັນ<sup>3</sup>, ລາວະລັດ ສິນປະເສີດ<sup>4</sup>, ພິມມາ ອາງຄົງສິນ<sup>5</sup>, ສຽນ ແກ້ວໃຈດີ<sup>6</sup>,  
Deuanevaty PHIMMACHAK<sup>1</sup>, Seesamai DOUANGMANY<sup>2</sup>, Somesanook PHOMMACHAN<sup>3</sup>, Lavalath  
SINPASERT<sup>4</sup>, Phomma ANONGKHONGSINH<sup>5</sup>, Sien KEOCHIDY<sup>6</sup>

**ບົດຄັດຫຍໍ້**

ປະເທດລາວກຳລັງປະເຊີນກັບບັນຫາຄວາມບໍ່ສອດຄ່ອງກັນຂອງທັກສະ (skills mismatch) ຢ່າງຮຸນແຮງ ລະຫວ່າງຜູ້ທີ່ຈົບການສຶກສາຊັ້ນມັດທະຍົມສຶກສາ ແລະ ຄວາມຕ້ອງການຂອງຕະຫຼາດແຮງງານທີ່ມີການ ປ່ຽນແປງຢ່າງວ່ອງໄວ. ເຖິງວ່າຈະມີການລົງທຶນຢ່າງຕໍ່ເນື່ອງໃນການສຶກສາແບບລະບົບ, ແຕ່ບັນຫາການຫວ່າງ ງານ ແລະ ການເຮັດວຽກບໍ່ເຕັມປະສິດທິພາບໃນກຸ່ມຊາວໜຸ່ມຍັງຄົງມີຢູ່, ເຊິ່ງມີສາເຫດມາຈາກຫຼັກສູດການ ຮຽນ-ການສອນ ທີ່ຍັງບໍ່ທັນສາມາດພັດທະນາສະມັດຖະພາບດ້ານການປະຕິບັດຕົວຈິງ ແລະ ທັກສະທີ່ສາມາດນຳ ໃຊ້ໄດ້ໃນຫຼາຍຂະແໜງການ. ການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ມີຈຸດປະສົງເພື່ອຕິດຕໍ່ມຸ່ງຫວ່າງຂອງຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ສຳຄັນ ໂດຍການ ສະໜອງຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ເປັນລະບົບ ເຊິ່ງເນັ້ນໃສ່ຊາວໜຸ່ມເປັນສູນກາງ ເພື່ອເປັນແນວທາງໃນການອອກແບບການຮຽນ ຮູ້ແບບທາງເລືອກ ໃຫ້ສອດຄ່ອງກັບຄວາມມຸ່ງຫວັງຂອງນັກຮຽນ ແລະ ຄວາມຕ້ອງການຂອງຜູ້ປະກອບການ.

ການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ໄດ້ສຳຫຼວດຄວາມມັກໃນການຮຽນຮູ້, ການຮັບຮູ້ດ້ານທັກສະ ແລະ ຄວາມມຸ່ງຫວັງຕໍ່ ເສັ້ນທາງອາຊີບຂອງຊາວໜຸ່ມໃນລະດັບມັດທະຍົມສຶກສາຕອນປາຍໃນ ສປປ ລາວ, ໂດຍມີເປົ້າໝາຍເພື່ອສ້າງຂໍ້ ມູນຫຼັກຖານທີ່ສາມາດນຳໄປຈັດຕັ້ງປະຕິບັດໄດ້ ສຳລັບຜູ້ອອກແບບຫຼັກສູດ, ຄູອາຈານ, ຜູ້ສະໜອງການຝຶກ ອົບຮົມວິຊາຊີບ ແລະ ຜູ້ກຳນົດນະໂຍບາຍການສຶກສາລະດັບຊາດ.

ວິທີການສຶກສາໄດ້ນຳໃຊ້ການສຳຫຼວດແບບປະສົມປະສານ (mixed-methods) ກັບກຸ່ມຕົວຢ່າງ 150 ຄົນ (ອາຍຸ 16–20 ປີ) ຢູ່ໂຮງຮຽນມັດທະຍົມສຶກສາສົມບູນນາຊາຍທອງ ໃນລະຫວ່າງເດືອນກັນຍາ 2023 ຫາ ເດືອນ ກຸມພາ 2024. ຂໍ້ມູນເຈາະປະລິມານໄດ້ຖືກວິເຄາະຜ່ານການແຈກຢາຍຄວາມຖີ່ ແລະ ສ່ວນຮ້ອຍ; ສ່ວນຄຳຕອບ ແບບປາຍເປີດ (ຂໍ້ມູນເຈາະຄຸນນະພາບ) ໄດ້ຖືກວິເຄາະເນື້ອຫາຕາມຮູບແບບ Theme ຢ່າງເປັນລະບົບ ໂດຍອີງຕາມ ວິທີການຂອງ Braun ແລະ Clarke (2006).

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> ຄະນະສຶກສາສາດ, ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລຈຳປາສັກ/ ສປປ ລາວ

Corresponding author: Deuanevaty PHIMMACHAK, Tel: +85620 99206964

ຜົນການສຶກສາຜູ້ເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໄດ້ສະແດງຄວາມມັກຢ່າງໂດດເດັ່ນຕໍ່ກັບວິຊາ ເຕັກໂນໂລຊີຂໍ້ມູນຂ່າວສານ ແລະ ຄອມພິວເຕີ (96.67%), ພາສາອັງກິດ (93.33%) ແລະ ຄະນິດສາດ (94.00%) ເຊິ່ງເປັນວິຊາທີ່ມີປະໂຫຍດທີ່ສຸດ. ສະພາບແວດລ້ອມການຮຽນຮູ້ທີ່ບໍ່ມີຄວາມກົດດັນ, ເນັ້ນການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມ ແລະ ການຮຽນຮູ້ຜ່ານກິດຈະກຳ ແມ່ນຮູບແບບທີ່ໄດ້ຮັບຄວາມນິຍົມສູງສຸດ. ທັກສະທາງສັງຄົມ ຫຼື Soft skills (86.67%), ການສື່ສານພາສາອັງກິດ (85.33%) ແລະ ການບໍລິຫານການເງິນ (83.33%) ຖືກລະບຸວ່າເປັນສະມັດຖະພາບທີ່ຈຳເປັນທີ່ສຸດສຳລັບຄວາມພ້ອມໃນການປະກອບອາຊີບ. ນອກຈາກນີ້, ສື່ສັງຄົມອອນລາຍ ເຊັ່ນ: Facebook (92%), TikTok (57%) ແລະ YouTube (52%) ແມ່ນຊ່ອງທາງດິຈິຕອນຫຼັກ ທີ່ຈະສາມາດນຳໃຊ້ເຂົ້າໃນການສົ່ງເສີມເນື້ອຫາການສຶກສາແບບທາງເລືອກໄດ້ຢ່າງມີປະສິດທິພາບ.

**ຄຳສັບສຳຄັນ:** ທັກສະທາງສັງຄົມ (soft skills), ການຄິດແບບມິວິຈາລະນາຍານ, ຄວາມພ້ອມໃນການປະກອບອາຊີບ, ຄວາມຮູ້ເທົ່າທັນດິຈິຕອນ, ແນວທາງການຮຽນຮູ້ແບບທາງເລືອກ,

## Abstract

Laos confronts an acute skills mismatch between secondary school graduates and the demands of a rapidly evolving labor market. Despite sustained investment in formal education, youth unemployment and underemployment persist, driven by a curriculum that inadequately develops practical, transferable competencies. This study addresses a critical evidence gap by providing systematic, youth-centered data to inform the design of alternative learning pathways aligned with both student aspirations and employer demands.

This study investigates the learning preferences, skill perceptions, and pathway aspirations of upper secondary youth in Laos, with the aim of generating actionable evidence for curriculum designers, educators, vocational training providers, and national education policymakers.

A mixed-methods survey design was employed with 150 participants (aged 16–20) at Pakse Upper Secondary School during September 2023–February 2024. Structured quantitative items were analyzed through frequency and percentage distributions; qualitative open-text responses were subjected to systematic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006).

Participants demonstrated strong preference for Computer and Information Technology (96.67%), English (93.33%), and Mathematics (94.00%) as most useful subjects. A low-pressure, participatory, and activity-based learning environment was overwhelmingly preferred. Soft skills (86.67%), English communication (85.33%), and financial management (83.33%) were identified as the most essential competencies for employment readiness. Social media platforms—Facebook (92%), TikTok (57%), and YouTube (52%)—constitute primary digital channels through which alternative education content can be effectively delivered.

**Keywords:** Alternative Learning Pathways, Critical Thinking, Digital Literacy, Employment Readiness, Soft Skills

## Introduction

Laos stands at a pivotal juncture in its economic and social development trajectory. Following decades of growth driven by natural resource exports, hydropower development, and expanding regional trade, the country faces the fundamental challenge of transitioning

toward a diversified, knowledge-based economy capable of generating sufficient productive employment for its growing youth population. Approximately sixty percent of the Lao population is under thirty years of age, rendering youth employment readiness not merely an educational aspiration but an urgent national economic priority (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Yet the formal education system, despite sustained reform efforts since the early 2000s, continues to produce graduates whose competencies are misaligned with the skills that employers identify as most critical for productive employment (UNESCO, 2021). This mismatch manifests in high youth underemployment, unfilled skilled positions, and a persistent paradox common to economies undergoing structural transition. The COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded these challenges by devastating tourism and hospitality sectors that had emerged as key sources of youth employment, while simultaneously elevating digital skills, adaptability, and entrepreneurial capacity as labour market imperatives (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

This study is grounded in three interconnected theoretical traditions. First, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides the primary motivational framework, positing that effective learning environments must satisfy three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—to generate intrinsic motivation, sustained engagement, and the development of self-directed learning capabilities essential for lifelong employability. High-pressure, examination-dominated, authority-centred environments that characterise much Lao secondary schooling are theorised to undermine all three needs, producing compliance-based rather than intrinsically motivated learning. Second, constructivist learning theory, developed from Vygotsky's (1978) foundational work, holds that meaningful learning occurs through active knowledge construction in interaction with peers, teachers, and real-world problems, directly supporting the pedagogical approaches preferred by study participants. Third, the twenty-first century skills framework, synthesised across the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the OECD Learning Framework 2030, and UNESCO's transversal competencies model, provides the competency architecture against which the essential skill perceptions of Lao youth are interpreted and the curricular implications of study findings are developed.

The Lao formal education system comprises five years of primary, four years of lower secondary, and three years of upper secondary schooling. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) prescribes a nationally standardised curriculum characterised by academic orientation, knowledge transmission pedagogy, and high-stakes summative examination as the primary assessment modality. Pakse Upper Secondary School, located in a rapidly urbanising peripheral district of Pakse City, serves a socio-economically diverse student body drawing from both established urban communities and adjacent rural settlements, making it a representative setting for investigating youth perspectives on alternative learning pathways. The school operates within the national curriculum framework, with English language, Computer studies, and Mathematics as core subjects, and has participated in Ministry of Education digital learning initiatives. Research on comparable ASEAN contexts documents persistent stigma associated with vocational education (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2019), underperformance of TVET systems in quality and labor market alignment (ADB, 2021), and the growing significance of digital and social media platforms as informal

learning environments for youth (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014)—all directly relevant to the Lao context investigated in this study.

Notwithstanding the recognized importance of alternative learning pathways for improving youth employment readiness, their design and implementation in Laos have been constrained by a fundamental absence of systematic, youth-centered empirical evidence. Policy and program design have been driven by top-down frameworks derived from labor market data, international development prescriptions, and expert opinion, without adequate grounding in the expressed preferences and aspirations of Lao youth as learners and prospective workers. This evidence deficit is particularly significant at the secondary school level, where students navigate education-to-employment transitions shaped by specific local, institutional, and social factors that aggregate national data cannot capture. The present study directly addresses this gap by deploying a mixed-methods survey with 150 upper secondary youth at Pakse Upper Secondary School, generating the first systematic, student-articulated evidence base for the design of effective, motivationally resonant, and labour-market-aligned alternative education programs in this school and comparable Lao secondary institutions. By centering youth voices in the evidence base for reform, the study contributes to a participatory paradigm of education policy development that is both epistemologically sound and practically essential for program success.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate youth perceptions and attitudes: To examine the perspectives of Lao youth toward alternative learning pathways and their significance in enhancing employability within the current socio-economic context.
2. To analyze skill gaps and barriers: To identify the discrepancies between existing secondary education curricula and labor market demands, including the institutional and socio-economic obstacles that limit access to alternative learning.
3. To develop strategic recommendations for policy integration: To propose actionable strategies and frameworks for integrating vocational and non-formal learning into the national education system to mitigate youth unemployment.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods survey design integrating structured quantitative items with qualitative open-text questions within a single survey instrument. The quantitative strand captured the prevalence and distribution of preferences and perceptions across the sample through frequency and percentage analysis; the qualitative strand provided interpretive depth through systematic thematic analysis of open-text responses. A pragmatist philosophical orientation underpinned the design, prioritizing the complementary contributions of both approaches and the generation of actionable evidence for practical program improvement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This design was selected as optimally suited to research objectives requiring both population-level pattern identification and contextualized understanding of why students hold the preferences they report.

## Participants

A total of 150 participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling from Pakse Upper Secondary School. All participants were aged 16–20 years. The sample comprised 74.67% female respondents (n=112), 24.67% male (n=37), and 0.67% preferring not to specify (n=1), reflecting the gender composition of the school's student body. The majority (85.33%, n=128) resided in Vientiane Capital, with smaller proportions from Vientiane Province (2.00%) and other provinces (12.67%). A total of 93.33% had completed lower secondary schooling (Grade 9) as their highest prior educational level, and 96.67% were enrolled as full-time high school students. Ethical approval was obtained from school administration and appropriate local authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with parental consent obtained for those under 18 years. Participation was voluntary and all responses were anonymized.

## Data Collection

Data were collected across September 2023 to February 2024, spanning the first half of the 2023–2024 academic year. A paper-format survey instrument, developed specifically for this study, was administered during school hours in designated classroom sessions to ensure complete participation across varying levels of device access. The instrument was developed in Lao language to maximize accessibility and the fullness of participant expression, underwent expert review by experienced Lao teachers and education researchers, and was pilot tested with a small non-study student group prior to finalization. The instrument comprised five thematic sections corresponding to the five research objectives: demographic profile; digital media and learning preferences; learning environment and pedagogy; subject utility and real-world application; and essential skills for study and work. Completed surveys were submitted directly to the research team, without teacher intermediation, to maximize confidence in response anonymity.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data from structured items were entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed through frequency and percentage calculations for each response category. Given the descriptive and exploratory purpose of the study, findings are presented as characterizations of the sample rather than statistical inferences about a broader population; inferential testing was not applied to the main frequency data. Qualitative open-text data were systematically translated from Lao to English by a bilingual research assistant and reviewed for translation accuracy by the research team. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining and naming, and report production. Analysis proceeded through iterative cycles of open, axial, and selective coding, with inter-rater checking of coding decisions by two members of the research team to enhance reliability. Frequency counts of theme mention provided a quantitative indication of relative theme prevalence, while qualitative descriptions captured the texture and nuance of participants expressed perspectives.

## Results and Discussions

### Results

#### Demographic Profile

This table outlines the foundational characteristics of the N=150 study participants.

Category	Characteristic	Frequency/Percentage
Gender	Female	74.67%
Age Group	16–20 Years Old	100%
Location	Vientiane Capital	85.33%
Education Level	Completed Lower Secondary	93.33%
Current Status	High School Student	96.67%
Employment	Combined Study with Paid Work	2.67%

The sample is notably skewed toward young women, representing nearly three-quarters of the participants. This suggests that the findings are particularly reflective of the female educational experience in urban Laos. The high concentration of residents in Vientiane Capital (85.33%) indicates an urban-centric data set, where students likely have more access to digital infrastructure than those in remote provinces. Interestingly, while the vast majority are full-time students, a small segment (2.67%) manages employment alongside their studies, highlighting a subset of the population facing specific economic pressures while pursuing their diplomas.

#### Digital Behavior and Subject Utility

This table compares how students spend their time online versus which academic subjects they perceive as most valuable.

Digital Platform	Usage Rate	Subject Area	Utility Rating (Important)
Facebook	92.00%	Computer & IT	96.67%
TikTok	56.67%	Mathematics	94.00%
YouTube	52.00%	Foreign Languages (English)	93.33%
Instagram	46.67%	Health & Reproductive Health	90.67%
Email	6.67%	Digital & Media Advertising	88.67%
Websites	6.00%	History	70.67%

There is a stark contrast between student digital behavior and traditional institutional communication. While Facebook is almost universal (92.00%), professional channels like email are virtually ignored (6.67%). This suggests that educational outreach must pivot to social media to be effective. Regarding perceived utility, students show a pragmatic, future-oriented mindset. They prioritize "hard" technical and linguistic skills—IT, Math, and English—as highly important (>93). Conversely, traditional subjects like History and Agriculture were rated the lowest, suggesting students see less immediate personal or professional value in these fields compared to the digital economy.

#### The Ideal Learning Environment

This table categorizes qualitative themes regarding the preferred atmosphere and teacher qualities.

Preferred Atmosphere	Approx. Mentions	Desired Teacher Traits	Approx. Mentions
Low-pressure/Supportive	45	Patience & Clear Explanations	50
Interactive/Participatory	38	Modern & Open-minded	30
Fun & Engaging Activities	30	Enthusiastic Delivery	25
Clear/Understandable Teaching	25	Ethical & Punctual	20
Positive Social Dynamics	20	—	—

The qualitative data reveals a strong desire for "psychological safety." The high number of mentions for a "low-pressure environment" and "patience" suggests that students may currently feel stressed or intimidated in traditional settings. There is a clear shift away from the "sage on the stage" model toward a more "modern and open-minded" teacher profile. Students are looking for mentors who are not only subject matter experts but also emotionally intelligent and capable of creating a "warm" social dynamic. This indicates that the emotional quality of the classroom is just as important to Lao students as the curriculum itself.

#### Teaching Methodology and Assessment

This table ranks the effectiveness of various classroom methods and assessment styles as perceived by the students.

Teaching Method	Effectiveness Rate	Assessment Preference	Approx. Mentions
Case Studies/Storytelling	83.33%	Fair & Comprehensive Evaluation	35
Group Work/Presentations	82.67%	Practical/Real-world Tasks	25
Teacher-led Lectures	78.67%	Formative/Feedback-oriented	20
Role-playing	73.33%	Portfolios & Group Projects	15
Peer Review	56.67%	—	—
Debate	50.00%	—	—

Students respond best to narrative-driven and collaborative learning, with Case Studies and Group Work scoring above 82%. Interestingly, while they desire modern methods, traditional lectures still hold a high effectiveness rating (78.67%), suggesting students still value direct instruction when it is clear. The lower scores for Peer Review and Debate (50.00%–56.67%) may reflect a cultural hesitation or a lack of familiarity with critical confrontation in a classroom setting. In terms of assessment, students are moving away from "test-heavy" models, favoring "fairness" and "real-world application," which aligns with their overall pragmatic view of education.

### Essential Skills for Employment

This table highlights the competencies students believe are necessary to succeed in the modern workforce.

Skill Domain	Consensus (%)
Soft Skills (Teamwork/Communication)	86.67%
English Communication	85.33%
Financial Management	83.33%
Digital Literacy	82.00%
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	81.33%
Writing Skills	78.67%
Public Speaking & Storytelling	78.00%
Environmental & Sustainability Knowledge	77.33%

There is an incredibly strong consensus across the board; every skill listed was deemed essential by over 73% of the group. Soft skills (86.67%) and English (85.33%) are the clear leaders, reinforcing the idea that students prioritize "employability" above all else. The high demand for financial management and digital literacy suggests that students are aware of the gaps in the standard curriculum and are looking for "life skills" that will allow them to navigate the modern economy. This data provides a robust roadmap for any organization looking to design vocational or extracurricular training programs in Laos.

### Discussion

The convergent evidence across all survey sections reveals a coherent and theoretically grounded youth critique of existing educational provision and a clear directional mandate for reform. Seven key themes organise the discussion.

First, curriculum relevance is identified as a foundational challenge. The hierarchy of subject utility perceptions, with digital, linguistic, and quantitative competencies at the apex and more abstractly academic subjects at the base, reflects not student ignorance of subject value but a rational diagnosis of the curriculum's failure to make real-world connections visible and tangible. Research consistently identifies perceived relevance as a critical determinant of learning engagement and achievement motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), making curriculum reform to foreground practical application across all subjects an urgent institutional and national priority.

Second, pedagogy and the learning environment emerge as determinants of educational quality that students identify with remarkable consistency and sophistication. The alignment between student-preferred pedagogies—interactive, participatory, activity-based, and application-focused—and the constructivist and self-determination theoretical traditions provides strong convergent validity for pedagogical reform recommendations. The primacy assigned to psychological safety by approximately 100 respondents as the foremost condition for successful learning directly challenges high-pressure, authority-centred classroom norms and calls for structural changes in classroom culture, teacher-student relationships, and assessment practice.

Third, twenty-first century skills occupy the centre of students' employment readiness vision. The identification of soft skills, English communication, financial management, digital literacy, and critical thinking as the five most essential competencies—all largely absent from the formal curriculum as explicit learning objectives—presents a compelling case for systematic competency-based reform of both formal and alternative education programs. The alignment of these student-identified priorities with employer survey data from across ASEAN economies (ADB, 2021) reinforces their validity and urgency.

Fourth, financial literacy represents a particularly significant and underserved curricular gap. Rated as essential by 83.33% of respondents—and reinforced by the subject utility findings—financial management skills are strongly endorsed by Lao youth as critical for both personal wellbeing and professional competence, consistent with research documenting the long-term economic benefits of financial literacy across developing economies (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

Fifth, digital platforms constitute a practical roadmap for alternative education delivery. The 92% Facebook, 57% TikTok, and 52% YouTube usage rates are not merely descriptive data but an operational guide to the channels through which alternative education content can effectively reach this youth cohort. The potential of TikTok's EduTok ecosystem for short-form skills content delivery and YouTube's longer-form instructional affordances are particularly significant for program designers (Southgate, 2020).

Sixth, teacher quality remains the irreplaceable human centre of effective learning, rated as the second most critical success factor. Students' preferences for patient, open-minded, enthusiastic, and ethically grounded teachers underscore the enduring importance of teacher professional development, even as digital alternatives expand. These finding challenges deterministic accounts of technology replacing teachers and argues for investment in teacher professional capacity as a prerequisite for any effective education reform.

Seventh, equity and gender considerations require systematic attention. The 74.67% female respondent profile and 85.33% urban concentration introduce limitations to generalizability that future research must address through gender-disaggregated analysis and provincial sampling. Research on gender and education in Laos documents important differences in social pressures, aspiration patterns, and family constraints that shape educational engagement differentially across genders, making gender-sensitive program design an essential rather than optional component of alternative education development.

## Conclusion

This study has generated comprehensive, youth-centered evidence about the learning preferences, skill perceptions, and alternative education pathway aspirations of 150 upper secondary students at Pakse Upper Secondary School in Vientiane Capital, Laos. The convergent findings across quantitative and qualitative survey sections establish a coherent and consistently expressed set of youth priorities: Computer/IT, English, Mathematics, and Financial Management as the most practically relevant subjects; psychological safety, active participation, and application-oriented pedagogy as the conditions for optimal learning engagement; and soft skills, English communication, financial management, digital literacy, and critical thinking as the five essential competencies most critical for employment readiness.

These findings do not merely reflect individual preferences but constitute a collectively constructed, empirically grounded critique of current educational provision and a roadmap for its improvement. Their remarkable consistency across gender, year of study, and geographic background strengthens the confidence with which they may be used as the basis for program design decisions. The urgency of acting on these findings is underscored by the macroeconomic environment: a rapidly evolving Lao labor market, accelerating digital transformation, and the competitive employment context of the ASEAN Economic Community together create conditions in which the competency gaps and motivational deficits documented in this study will be increasingly costly both for individual young people and for Laos's collective human capital development. By centering the voices of youth themselves in the evidence base for education reform, this study contributes to a fundamental shift from top-down, expert-driven policy to participatory, youth-centered program design—a shift essential for realizing the full developmental potential of Laos's young population in the twenty-first century.

### Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to bridge the skills mismatch and enhance youth employment:

- **Modernize Curricula with Practical Competencies:** Educational authorities should reform secondary school curricula to prioritize practical, transferable skills and competency-based learning that aligns with industry needs.
- **Expand Access to Vocational Training (TVET):** The government should increase investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and ensure these programs are accessible to youth in both urban and rural areas.
- **Foster Industry-Education Partnerships:** Establish formal collaboration between educational institutions and the private sector to provide internships, apprenticeships, and real-world work experience.
- **Enhance Digital and Financial Literacy:** Integrate digital media use and financial literacy into alternative learning pathways to equip youth with essential 21st-century survival and professional skills.

### Acknowledgment

The research team expresses its sincere gratitude to the participants and youth organizations whose insights and cooperation were fundamental to the completion of this study. We extend our deepest appreciation to the **Ministry of Education and Sports** and local authorities for providing access to vital data and supporting the research process. Furthermore, we thank the academic advisors and peer reviewers for their insightful guidance in refining this manuscript, contributing to the development of more inclusive and effective learning pathways for the youth of the Lao PDR.

### References

- Asian Development Bank. (2021). Key indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2021. <https://doi.org/10.22617/FLS210286-3>
- Asian Development Bank. (2021). Technical and vocational education and training in the Mekong region: Pathways to employment and economic growth.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). ASEAN economic community blueprint 2025: Mid-term review.

- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969595980050102>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 109–132. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135153>
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.
- GSMA Intelligence. (2020). *The mobile economy: Asia Pacific 2020*. GSMA Association.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- ILO. (2019). *World employment and social outlook: Trends 2019*. International Labour Organization.
- Kumpulainen, K., & Sefton-Green, J. (2014). What is connected learning and how to research it? *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 4(2), 7–18. [https://doi.org/10.1162/IJLM\\_a\\_00091](https://doi.org/10.1162/IJLM_a_00091)
- Lao Ministry of Education and Sports. (2020). *Education and sport sector development plan 2021–2025*.
- Lusardi, A., & Mitchell, O. S. (2014). The economic importance of financial literacy: Theory and evidence. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 52(1), 5–44. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.52.1.5>
- Müller, W., & Gangl, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Transitions from education to work in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- OECD. (2018). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030*. OECD Publishing.
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2019). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Battelle for Kids.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
- Southgate, D. E. (2020). Youth digital media use: Understanding how young people interact with social and digital media. *Media International Australia*, 175(1), 52–65.
- UNESCO. (2021). *Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education*. UNESCO Publishing.
- UNESCO-UNEVOC. (2019). *World TVET database: Lao PDR*. UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Situation analysis of children in the Lao PDR*. United Nations Children's Fund.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- World Bank. (2020). *Lao PDR economic monitor: Coping with COVID-19*. World Bank Group.
- World Economic Forum. (2020). *The future of jobs report 2020*. World Economic Forum.