

A Tracer Study of Teacher Education Graduates of the Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood Education- Luang Namtha Teacher Training College, Academic Year 2017 – 2018*

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to 1) assess the graduates' acquired and developed skills and competencies obtained from the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed. in ECE) programme at Luang Namtha Teacher Training College (Luang Namtha TTC), academic year 2017-2018; 2) explore the employment situation of the graduates from the programme; and 3) evaluate the employers' satisfaction regarding the graduates' skills and competencies obtained from the programme. The sample size covered 31 graduates of the B.Ed. in ECE programme, academic year 2017-2018 and their 23 employers. Research tools consisted of two online questionnaires survey. Frequency, percentages, mean, standard deviations and correlation were used to analyses data. The study found that the overall results of the skills and competencies that the graduates acquired during their study were assessed to be at the very high level ($\mu = 4.53$, $\sigma = 0.21$). Regarding the relationship between the curriculum and the employment, the survey found that the correlation between the graduates' acquired skills and competencies from the programme and the required skills and competencies at work as at the high level ($\rho = 0.81$). The graduates' satisfaction level with their work was rated at high level ($\mu = 4.19$, $\sigma = 0.24$), and the employers rated their satisfaction with the graduates' skills and competencies also at high level ($\mu = 4.39$, $\sigma = 0.23$).

Keywords: Tracer study, Early childhood Education Programme

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Introduction

The Government of Lao PDR is committed to providing quality early childhood education services, following growing awareness of the importance of holistic early childhood development. The responsibility for preparing early childhood education teachers falls upon the Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs), under the supervision of the Department of Teacher Education (DTE), Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES).

Before 2012, Lao teacher training colleges only offered early childhood teacher education programmes at the Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels. The development of the first-ever four-year programme Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed. in ECE) was completed in 2012, with the support of UNESCO Bangkok. The programme was first launched in Dongkhamxang TTC in the academic year 2013/2014, followed by Luang Namtha and Salavan TTCs in 2014/2015, and Ban Keun, Luangprabang, Pakse and Savanhnakhet TTCs in 2016/2017.

Upon the completion of the programme's first cycle in 2017, a curriculum evaluation was carried out. The findings of the evaluation were used as a basis for curriculum revision in 2018 to improve the quality of the programme and ensure that it aligned with the 2012 National Early Childhood Education Curriculum. The revised curriculum was first adopted for the academic year 2018/2019 in Dongkhamxang and Salavan TTCs, and in Luang Namtha and Savanhnakhet TTCs for the following year. (Department of Teacher Education, 2012)

To ensure the quality and relevance of the programme, a graduate tracer study was conducted for the graduates of Luang Namtha TTC in the academic year 2017/2018. The results of the studies will identify the areas that need to be further improved in order to ensure that new graduates are employable and can contribute to the improvement of the quality of early childhood education in Lao PDR. (Department of Teacher Education, 2019)

Objectives

The overall objective is to assess the adequacy, quality and relevance of the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education programme offered at Luang Namtha Teacher Training College (TTC) in Lao PDR, and the employment situation of the graduates from this programme.

The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the graduates' acquired and developed skills and competencies obtained from the programme;
2. To explore the employment situation of the graduates of the programme; and
3. To evaluate employers' satisfaction regarding the graduates' skills and competencies obtained from the programme.

Research Framework

This research used the tracer study method, that is, graduates from educational institutions research. The method has been organized in many countries globally. The tracer study results provide information related to graduates and can be used as the evaluation or reference for assessing higher education institutions' quality. In the future, this information can also be used to make decisions regarding study designs and practical solutions to implement higher education (Schomburg, 2010; Cohen, 2004; Cooper, Hedges, and Valentine, 2019).

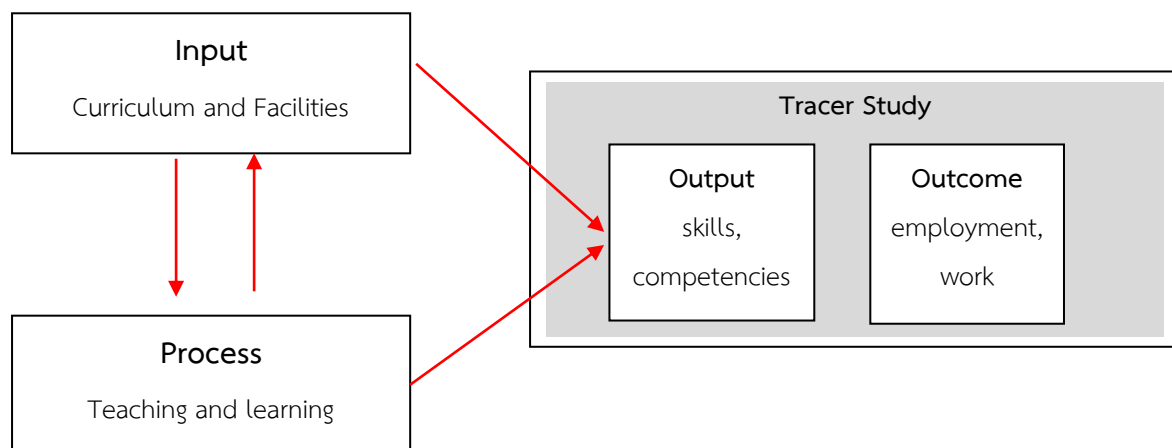


Figure 1 Research Framework of tracer study (Schomburg, 2010)

Research Methodology

Target Population

The target population of this study consists of two groups:

- 1) Graduates of the B.Ed. in ECE programme who graduated in the academic year 2017-2018 from Luang Namtha TTC, a total of 31 graduates.
- 2) Employers of the graduates mentioned above, such as directors, deputy directors (academic department), supervisors, etc., have a total of 23 employers.

Timeframe

A tracer study on the graduates of the B.Ed. in ECE programme from Luang Namtha Teacher Training College, in the academic year 2017-2018 was conducted from July to September 2021.

Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments consisted of two online questionnaires with details as follows:

1) *Graduate survey of graduates from B.Ed. in ECE programme at Luang Namtha TTC, the academic year 2017-2018*: The questionnaire consisted of a total of 32 closed-ended and open-ended questions, and is divided into four parts; Part 1: General information, Part 2: Acquired and developed skills, Part 3: Graduates' employment situation and working status (employed graduates) and Part 4: Job application and work (unemployed graduates),

2) *Employer's satisfaction survey with the graduate of the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed. in ECE) programme, academic year 2017-2018*. The questionnaire consisted of a total of sixteen closed-ended and open-ended questions. It is divided into four parts; Part 1: General information, Part 2: The employers' perception of the graduates, and Part 3: The employer's satisfaction with the graduates' skills and competencies.

3) Tool creation process

3.1) Studied and designed data collection tools.

3.2) Developed two questionnaires, i.e. a graduate survey of graduates from the B.Ed. in ECE programme at Luang Namtha TTC, academic year 2017-2018; and an employer's satisfaction survey with the graduate of the programme

3.3) Created online questionnaires with Google Forms

3.4) Piloted both versions of the online questionnaires with non-target participants to verify the accuracy and appropriateness of language used in the questionnaires

3.5) Refined both questionnaires before distribution to the target groups

Data collection method

The study team collected data for the tracer study on the graduates of the B.Ed. in ECE programme at Luang Namtha TTC, using the following steps and methods.

1) Distributed the graduate survey to graduates from the B.Ed. in ECE programme at Luang Namtha TTC, academic year 2017-2018, to the target group and use the employers'

details provided by the graduates to distribute the employer's satisfaction survey to the identified employers.

2) Collected and categorized all the data from graduates and employers answered in the questionnaires.

3) Compiled and reviewed the collected data and conduct data analysis.

Data analysis

After the tracer study team completed the data collection process, the data was entered into the database to be analyzed. For the data analysis, the team used the SPSS programme to calculate values such as frequency, percentages, mean (μ), standard deviations (σ), and correlation.

Research Results

The results of the data analysis are presented in three parts as follows:

Part 1: Evaluation results of the graduates' acquired skills and competencies from the programme

The evaluation of the graduates' acquired skills and competencies from the programme was analyzed and presented in three main topics, with the following details:

1) Graduates' acquired and developed skills and competencies from the programme; and the relevance of the acquired skills and competencies with their job requirements

1.1) The graduates' acquired and developed skills and competencies from the programme

Based on the graduates' opinions on their acquired and developed skills and competencies from the programme, the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Skills and competencies required by the employers

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
1. Knowledge in managing early childhood education	3.90	0.60	High
2. The ability to manage the learning-teaching according to the 3 characteristics and 5 core principles of education, in line with the National Kindergarten Curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Sports	3.97	0.60	High

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
3. The ability to manage plays and learning-teaching activities in nurseries, kindergartens, multi-grade classrooms and pre-primary classrooms in a creative manner	3.68	0.65	High
4. The ability to create an enabling environment for children to play and learn, regardless of their race, language, religion, gender, age, disability and socio-economic hardship	3.74	0.68	High
5. Knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research	3.68	0.65	High
6. Code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children	4.32	0.65	High
7. The ability to work with others and preserve the Lao culture and traditions	4.19	0.60	High
Summary	4.19	0.60	High

Table 1 shows that the skills and competencies that the graduates acquired during the programme, in general, are at the high level ($\mu = 4.19$, $\sigma = 0.60$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 6: ‘code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children’, has the highest average rating at the high level ($\mu = 4.32$, $\sigma = 0.65$), while the lowest average rating item is No. 5 ‘knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through research search, also at the high level ($\mu = 3.68$, $\sigma = 0.65$).

1.2) The relevance of the acquired skills and competencies with the job requirements

The opinions of twenty-three graduates who are currently being employed regarding the relevance of their acquired skills and competencies with their job requirements are presented in Table 2

Table 2: The relevance of the graduates’ acquired skills and competencies with their job requirements

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
1. Knowledge in managing early childhood education	4.09	0.73	High
2. The ability to manage the learning-teaching according to the 3 characteristics and 5 core principles of education, in line with the National Kindergarten Curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Sports	4.09	0.73	High

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
3. The ability to manage plays and learning-teaching activities in nurseries, kindergartens, multi-grade classrooms and pre-primary classrooms in a creative manner	3.87	0.63	High
4. The ability to create an enabling environment for children to play and learn, regardless of their race, language, religion, gender, age, disability and socio-economic hardship	4.09	0.67	High
5. Knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research	3.87	0.69	High
6. Code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children	4.52	0.51	Very High
7. The ability to work with others and preserve the Lao culture and traditions	4.26	0.62	High
Summary	4.11	0.24	High

Table 2 shows that twenty-three graduates who are employed rated the relevance of their acquired skills and competencies with their job requirements, in general, at the high level ($\mu = 4.11$, $\sigma = 0.24$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 6: ‘code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards of the teaching profession and children’ has the highest average rating at the high level ($\mu = 4.52$, $\sigma = 0.51$). The item with the lowest average rating is No. 5 ‘knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research, also at the high level ($\mu = 3.87$, $\sigma = 0.69$).

2) Graduates’ satisfaction with learning experiences, learning facilities, and curriculum

Regarding the analysis of the graduates’ satisfaction with learning experiences, learning facilities and curriculum, the following results were presented in table 3.

Table 3: Graduates’ satisfaction with learning experiences, learning facilities and curriculum

Evaluation Items	N = 32		Level
	μ	σ	
1. The satisfaction of the graduates with learning experiences	3.88	0.22	High
2. The satisfaction of the graduates with learning facilities	3.44	0.32	Moderate
3. The satisfaction of the graduates with the B.Ed. in ECE curriculum	3.83	0.24	High

From Table 3, it is found that the satisfaction rate of graduates with learning experiences, in general, is at a high level ($\mu = 3.88$, $\sigma = 0.22$). The overall satisfaction of the

graduates with learning facilities is at a moderate level ($\mu = 3.44$, $\sigma = 0.32$) and the overall satisfaction level of the graduates with the B.Ed. in ECE curriculum is at a high level ($\mu = 3.83$, $\sigma = 0.24$).

3) The support from the Luang Namtha TTC that enables the graduates to address the demands of their workplaces and communities

The results of the analysis of the support provided by the Luang Namtha TTC which enabled the graduates to address the demands of their workplaces and communities are as follows:

The graduates' application of the knowledge acquired from the programme

Table 4: The graduates' application of the knowledge acquired from the programme

Evaluation Items	N = 32		Level
	μ	σ	
1. To what extent can you apply the acquired knowledge from the programme to perform your current responsibilities at work?	4.13	0.69	High
2. To what extent do the acquired knowledge and skills from the programme benefit your current task?	4.22	0.60	High
3. To what extent does the programme match with the requirements of your current work?	4.30	0.64	High
4. How sufficient is the acquired knowledge and skills from the programme for you to perform your current work?	4.04	0.63	High
5. To what extent does the acquired knowledge and skills from the programme match with your current work?	4.09	0.73	High
Summary	4.16	0.26	High

Table 4 shows that the graduates use of knowledge gained from the curriculum, in general, is at a high level ($\mu = 4.16$, $\sigma = 0.26$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 3: 'to what extent does the programme match with the requirements of your current work?' has the highest average rating at the high level ($\mu = 4.30$, $\sigma = 0.64$). The lowest average rating item is No. 4: How sufficient are the acquired knowledge and skills from the programme for you to perform your current work? also at the high level ($\mu = 4.04$, $\sigma = 0.63$).

The employers' perception of the graduates' knowledge and capacities

Table 5: The employers' perception of the graduates' knowledge and capacities

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
1. The graduates can apply knowledge and experiences to complete the assigned tasks.	4.48	0.51	High
2. The graduates can complete the tasks as required by the institution.	4.35	0.49	High
3. The graduates can complete the tasks as required by the community.	4.35	0.49	High
4. The graduates have the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for the assigned tasks.	4.35	0.49	High
5. The graduates are essential to your institution.	4.65	0.49	Very High
Summary	4.43	0.21	High

Table 5 shows that the employers' perceptions of the graduates' knowledge, in general, are at the high level ($\mu = 4.43$, $\sigma = 0.21$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 5: 'the graduates are essential to your institution' has the highest average rating at the high level ($\mu = 4.65$, $\sigma = 0.49$). The lowest average rating items are No. 2: 'the graduates can complete the tasks as required by the institution'; No. 3: 'the graduates can complete the tasks as required by the community; and No. 4: 'the graduates have the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for the assigned tasks, all at the high level ($\mu = 4.35$, $\sigma = 0.49$).

Part 2: Evaluation results of the graduates' employment situation and working status

The results on the graduates' employment situation and working status are presented in three sub-topics: 1) the graduates' employment situation and working status; 2) the relationships between the graduates' study and employment; and 3) the satisfaction of the graduates with their work.

1) the graduates' employment situation and working status

The evaluation results of the graduates' employment situation and working status found that 74.19 percent of the graduates are employed. Graduates mainly work as full-time/long-term teachers at a private school (60.87 percent of those employed). In addition, 73.91 percent of employed graduates have been employed for more than a year. Regarding the relevance between the work and the graduates' qualifications, the survey found that all

of the employed graduates reported that their work is relevant to their qualifications, the highest percentage of graduates (39.13 percent) who are currently employed spent less than three months looking for a job. The most common method of job search was responding to job advertisements in the newspapers, on the internet, etc. (47.83 percent), followed by making direct contact with educational institutes (47.83 percent). It also shows that most employed graduates (65.22 percent) have been working for over a year after their graduation. In addition, it shows that most employed graduates (56.52 percent) have taken an employment examination once. Slightly more than half of the unemployed graduates (62.50 percent) reported that their problem in finding a job was because they did not know where or how to find the source of a job.

2) The relationship between the curriculum and employment

The analysis results related to the relationship between the curriculum and employment are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: The relationship between the curriculum and the employment.

The relationship between the curriculum and the employment	Graduates (Spearman's ρ : ρ)	Employers (Spearman's ρ : ρ)	Graduates VS Employers Contingency Coefficient; C)
1. Knowledge in managing early childhood education	0.68	0.43	0.50
2. The ability to manage the learning-teaching according to the 3 characteristics and 5 core principles of education, in line with the National Kindergarten Curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Sports	0.39	0.43	0.45
3. The ability to manage plays and learning-teaching activities in nurseries, kindergartens, multi-grade classrooms and pre-primary classrooms in a creative manner	0.60	0.40	0.45
4. The ability to create an enabling environment for children to play and learn, regardless of their race, language, religion, gender, age, disability and socio-economic hardship	0.39	0.54	0.40
5. Knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research	0.50	0.65	0.47

The relationship between the curriculum and the employment	Graduates (Spearman's ρ : ρ)	Employers (Spearman's ρ : ρ)	Graduates VS Employers Contingency Coefficient; C)
6. Code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children	0.66	0.69	0.42
7. The ability to work with others and preserve the Lao culture and traditions	0.72	0.50	0.31
Summary	0.81	0.66	0.47

Table 7 shows the analysis of the results found that the overall correlation between the graduates' acquired skills and competencies from the programme and the required skills and competencies at work, is at the high level ($\rho = 0.81$), the overall relationship between the skills and competencies required by the employers and the acquired skills and competencies of the graduates for work correlates is at the quite high level ($\rho = 0.66$) and the relationship between the graduates' acquired skills and competencies from the programme and the skills and competencies required by the employers, correlates at the medium level ($C = 0.47$).

3) The satisfaction of the graduates with their work

Table 8: The satisfaction of the graduates with their work

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
1. To what extent are you satisfied with your responsible task/position?	4.22	0.52	High
2. To what extent are you proud of your current responsible task?	4.22	0.42	High
3. To what extent are you motivated to complete your assigned work?	4.52	0.51	High
4. To what extent are you satisfied you're your engagement in additional assigned activities aside from your main responsibility?	4.30	0.56	High
5. To what extent are you satisfied with your salary/remuneration?	3.70	0.63	High
Summary	4.19	0.24	High

Table 8 shows that the graduates' satisfaction level with their work is at the high level ($\mu = 4.19$, $\sigma = 0.24$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 3: 'to what extent are you motivated to complete your assigned work?' has the highest average rating at the high level ($\mu = 4.52$, $\sigma = 0.51$). On the other hand, the item with the lowest average rating is No. 5: 'to what extent are you satisfied with your salary/remuneration?'

also at the high level ($\mu = 3.70$, $\sigma = 0.63$). When asking the employed graduates about their desire to seek a new job, the survey found that eighteen graduates (78.26 percent) have no desire to seek a new job, while five graduates (21.74 percent) consider looking for a new job.

Part 3: Evaluation results of the employers' satisfaction with the graduates' skills and competencies

The results of the analysis of the employers' satisfaction with the skills and competencies of the graduates are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: The employers' satisfaction with the graduates' skills and competencies

Evaluation Items	N = 23		Level
	μ	σ	
1. Knowledge in managing early childhood education	4.35	0.65	High
2. The ability to manage the learning-teaching according to the 3 characteristics and 5 core principles of education, in line with the National Kindergarten Curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Sports	4.39	0.58	High
3. The ability to manage plays and learning-teaching activities in nurseries, kindergartens, multi-grade classrooms and pre-primary classrooms in a creative manner	4.26	0.54	High
4. The ability to create an enabling environment for children to play and learn, regardless of their race, language, religion, gender, age, disability and socio-economic hardship	4.35	0.49	High
5. Knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research	4.09	0.60	High
6. Code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children	4.70	0.56	Very high
7. The ability to work with others and preserve the Lao culture and traditions	4.57	0.51	Very high
Summary	4.39	0.23	High

Table 9 shows that the employers' overall satisfaction with the graduates' skills and competencies is at the high level ($\mu = 4.39$, $\sigma = 0.23$). When considering the list of evaluation items, it shows that item No. 6: 'code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children' has the highest average rating at the very high level ($\mu =$

4.70, $\sigma = 0.56$). The lowest average rating level is item No. 5: ‘knowledge and capacities to create knowledge through action research’, at the high level ($\mu = 4.09$, $\sigma = 0.60$).

Discussion

1) The results of the assessment of skills and competencies of the graduates acquired during the programme:

The graduates rated that they received professional ethics of teachers and love for children at the highest level. Furthermore, the graduates show a high level of satisfaction with the availability of libraries and adequate teaching materials.; the curriculum relevant to their work, being up-to-date, and the range of subjects offered in the programme. In addition, the reflection of the employer also shows that the graduates are important role to their organizations at the very high level.

2) The results of the analysis on the employment situation and working status of the graduates:

Twenty-three graduates are currently employed, accounting for 74.19 percent, all of them are full-time employees. Most of the employed graduates work as a kindergarten teacher in private schools (60.87 percent) and public schools (39.13 percent). All of the employed graduates responded that their current employment matches their qualifications. From the employer’s survey, it shows that 95.65 percent of the employed graduates are employed full-time, while 4.35 percent have temporary employment. Regarding the duration of their employment, most of them (73.91 percent) have been working for more than twelve months, and some of them (4.35 percent) have been working for a period of four to six months. From the employers’ points of view, the work of the graduates is relevant to their qualifications (100.00 percent).

For the unemployed graduates, the main reason for their unemployment is because they were unable to find jobs, accounting for 50.00 percent. In addition, the majority of them (62.50 percent) reported that they have problems finding jobs. Among the employed graduates, most of them spent less than three months looking for a job (39.13 percent). Most of them to find their jobs by responding to job advertisements and by directly contacting educational institutions (47.83 percent). The majority of the employed graduates have been working for more than one year, accounting for 65.22 percent. Most of the employed graduates have taken an employment examination once (56.52 percent), while 4.35 percent of them have taken employment examinations two or three times.

3) The results of the evaluation of the employers' satisfaction on the skills and competencies of the graduates

The employers' satisfaction with the graduates' performance to abide by the code of professional ethics for teachers; and love towards the teaching profession and children has the highest average rating.

Conclusively, the respondents are generally satisfied with the delivery of the programmes, especially when considering the relationship analysis between skills and abilities graduates gained from the program and the required skills and competencies required at work, it was found that the program's outcomes were achieved. However, from the results of this study, there are some suggestions to improve the quality of the course. The curriculum should be improved to get along with update to the changing social environment. In teaching and learning management, appropriate technology is used. Additionally, the existing curriculum should be revised to conform to the skills required in the different job markets. The difficulty in locating the graduates and retrieving the data from them provide a need to improve the alumni network at the department level to update information on the graduates' whereabouts. To address these problems, Graduate Tracer Study should be done regularly in order to know their whereabouts, evaluate existing programs, assess study provisions and conditions, and design improvements to strengthen them, or to come up with new relevant programs in the future.

Recommendations

The results of this research should be used as a guideline for the next research study, which could be beneficial to the further improvement and development of the curriculum. It can also be used to motivate teachers and education administrators who are involved in the development of the curriculum. The research team would officially like to offer some recommendations below:

1. Recommendations for applying the study results

1.1 Teacher Training Colleges should include courses on 1) media design and technology, 2) evaluation of students' performance in a variety of ways, and 3) development of students' capacities through research processes.

1.2 Teacher Training Colleges should adjust the curriculum and allocate more time for learning experiences from schools or training centers.

1.3 Teacher Training Colleges should improve necessary facilities, such as high-speed internet and computers.

1.4 The Ministry of Education and Sports (in particular, the Department of Teacher Education) should provide adequate textbooks and teachers' manuals on lesson planning for learning experiences for the nursery and pre-primary levels.

2. Recommendations for future studies or research

2.1 The Department of Teacher Education and UNESCO should compile the results of the graduate tracer studies from the seven participating teacher training colleges and make the synthesis available online for information sharing and lessons learned.


2.2 The Department of Teacher Education, UNESCO, and Teacher Training Colleges should monitor the graduates in the long run.

2.3 For future tracer studies, other target groups should be added for data collection, such as parents and communities.

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