



Southeast Asian
Ministers of Education
Organization

POLICY BRIEF

**Insights into Children's
Digital Lives in
Lao People's
Democratic Republic**
Digital Kids Asia-Pacific

Introduction

The world is rapidly transforming over the past few decades into a more connected environment. And that could be attributed to the technological advancements that are affecting the economy and even education.

The global technological landscape's change was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and establishment closures pushed information and communication technology (ICT) to play a bigger role in keeping industries and businesses afloat, bridging learning, and basically just sustaining life as we know it.

Without the Internet and ICT tools, students would not continue to learn and interact with their friends and peers. But is Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) capable of serving their needs? And are the learners ready to take on the challenges that Internet access and ICT tool usage bring? Are they adept at being the

best digital citizens they can be? The Digital Kids Asia-Pacific (DKAP) survey sought to find out.

Research Objectives

To determine if Lao PDR's youth are ready to face the challenges of the 21st century, we conducted a survey of 15-year-old students across nine schools nationwide to meet the following goals:

- Establish a statistically validated and reliable framework and tool to measure their competence to become digital citizens
- Obtain comprehensive baseline data through a validation study to determine how they use ICT in education
- Identify factors that affect their digital citizenship competence

Survey Respondents and Research Methodology

Based on the guidelines provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), this quantitative study used an online survey questionnaire to collect data from 15-year-old students.

The survey questionnaire's content was translated from English to Lao by the National Research Team (NRT) via the back-translation method. It was then piloted in a school in Vientiane among 50 participants. The results were then analysed to see if the target respondents can answer the questions well.

Participating schools were chosen from each geographical division—North, Central, and South—to ensure a balanced representation of the country's 15-year-olds. Luang Prabang represented the north, Vientiane the central part, and Savannakhet the south. Target schools were selected through a purposive sampling approach after consultations with the Provincial Department of Education and Sports. All of the chosen institutions were public schools. One school each from an urban, a semi-urban, and a rural area was selected from each province.

Three data collection teams with three members each took care of each geographical division. A total of 1,288 15-year-old students responded to the survey, 55% of whom were girls.

A two-day data collection training was organised for the nine survey administrators. The research background was discussed. Printed questionnaires were distributed to the students. Each learner spent 40–50 minutes to complete the survey. Their responses were then encoded into an Excel file for analysis.

Results and Findings

This research determined how digitally competent Lao students are by gauging their digital literacy, digital safety and resilience, digital participation and agency, digital emotional intelligence, and digital creativity and innovation, given their level of access to Internet and necessary devices.

DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy refers to children's ability to seek out, critically evaluate, and use digital tools and information effectively to make informed decisions. The students scored 3.21 for this domain, which has two

subcompetencies—ICT and information literacy.

Subcompetency	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
ICT literacy	3.28	0.46
Information literacy	3.08	0.53

ICT-literate students can use available hardware and software, while information-literate ones can evaluate data to make informed decisions.

DIGITAL SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

Digital safety and resilience refers to an individual's ability to protect himself or herself and others from harm in the digital space. The students should be able to evaluate the information they gather online to make informed decisions. Lao PDR got a mean score of 3.28 for this domain.

Subcompetency	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Understanding children's rights	3.28	0.52
Knowledge of personal data, privacy, and reputation	3.44	0.53
Promoting and protecting health and well-being	3.07	0.56
Practicing digital resilience	3.29	0.59

The students got the highest score for personal data, privacy, and reputation. That indicates their awareness of the need to protect their personal information even if they put understanding their rights in the back burner.

The results also imply the need for policymakers to help children realise technology's role in promoting health and well-being.

DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND AGENCY

A person who is competent in digital participation and agency can equitably interact, engage with, and positively influence society through ICT use. This domain has three subcompetencies—interacting, sharing, and collaborating; civic engagement; and netiquette.

Subcompetency	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Interaction, sharing, and collaboration	3.42	0.47
Civic engagement	2.60	0.69
Netiquette	3.34	0.50

Lao students showed the highest competence for interacting, sharing, and collaborating. As such, they can interact, share data and information, and collaborate with others using suitable digital technologies to achieve shared goals.

Meanwhile, they are least competent in civic engagement. They need to improve their ability and willingness to act on opportunities to positively influence local and global communities online through appropriate digital technology use.

Lastly, the Lao students observe netiquette or are ethical and courteous when they interact and engage with others in different digital environments.

DIGITAL EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Digital emotional intelligence is the ability to recognise, navigate through, and express emotions in digital intra- and interpersonal interactions. The students should gain self-awareness, self-regulate and -motivate, have interpersonal skills, and demonstrate empathy.

Subcompetency	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Self-awareness	3.09	0.52
Self-regulation	3.12	0.59
Self-motivation	3.19	0.56
Interpersonal skills	3.04	0.57
Empathy	2.82	0.67

The Lao students are self-aware and can self-regulate and -motivate. They got the highest score for self-motivation. They show initiative and are committed to attaining their internal or external goals in the digital world despite setbacks. They can also manage their emotions, moods, and impulses when online and understand their moods and emotions and manage these through introspection.

On the other hand, the learners need to build more positive online relationships. They need to communicate

and build rapport with others and demonstrate trust, embrace diversity, manage conflicts, and make sound decisions. They need to be more empathic. They should show compassion and acknowledge others' feelings, needs, and concerns.

DIGITAL CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Digital creativity and innovation refers to the ability to express and explore oneself through content creation using ICT tools. This domain has two competencies—creative literacy and self-expression.

Subcompetency	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Creative literacy	2.66	0.61
Self-expression	2.89	0.59

The students scored the lowest for this domain. They can use technology to creatively present themselves and exercise their right to fun and relaxation. They were more competent in self-expression than creative literacy.

The respondents need support on improving their creative literacy. They should learn to apply their skills and use tools to create, adapt, or curate digital content.

DIGITAL DEVICE USAGE AND ACCESS

Smartphones are most accessible to the students at home and in the local community. They also use laptops at home and desktops in local community centres. Desktops are most accessible in school, followed by laptops. The survey results suggest their preference for using desktops over laptops, regardless of location.

Some learners do not have access to any of the digital devices listed (6%), suggesting the existence of a digital divide. While schools and local community centres can somehow bridge the gap, more should be done. But they may not be able to do that without the government's help.

Some 4% of the students have never used digital devices, while 11% have been doing so for less than a year. The majority have been doing so for more than five years now (34%). Further analysis revealed that the longer the learners have been using digital devices, the more competent they are in terms of digital safety and resilience and digital creativity and innovation. Thus, it is important for children to get access to digital devices as early as possible to become digitally competent.

A small share of the students hardly access the Internet (5%), while 33% do so for up to two hours a day. The majority did so for 3–4 hours daily. Further analysis

revealed that people who spend more time online daily are more competent in digital safety and resilience.

For 1–2 hours each day, 36% of the learners access the Web and use digital devices for schoolwork, 35% for personal purposes, 26% for leisure, and 32% for socialising. Note that a significant number said they hardly did so for schoolwork (19%), another indicator of a digital divide.

Unsurprisingly, wireless access is most used, regardless of location. However, a significant number do not have access to any type of connectivity anywhere, again indicating a digital divide.

Some 32% of the students learned to use computers on their own, while 50% did so from their teachers. More than half learned to access the Internet by themselves (68%).

Many students said their parents or guardians guide them in accessing the Web safely all the time compared with other stakeholders. But even more are guided by their teachers often, very often, or all the time.

Many students said their parents or guardians encourage them to learn new things on the Internet all the time compared with other stakeholders. Surprisingly, a lot of them reported getting encouragement from their peers often, very often, or all the time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research primarily sought to determine how competent Lao students are as digital citizens based on the DKAP survey, which showed they are relatively competent digital citizens.

First, digital citizenship education at the basic level is necessary. MoES needs to implement a comprehensive programme to improve the learners' digital citizenship competence.

Second, since Lao PDR is still in the nascent stage of ICT use, many parts of the DKAP survey questionnaire

may need to be contextualised to reflect the country's students' experiences.

Third, Lao PDR is currently experiencing a digital divide. As such, the government needs to address concerns related to Internet access and digital device use. Without these, the 15-year-olds may not be able to reach their fullest potential as digital citizens.

Finally, the research proved that to become competent digital citizens, multiple stakeholders need to work together.

To turn students into digitally competent citizens, the following recommendations can help:

- Develop a comprehensive training programme for teachers and other professionals who will educate 15-year-olds
- Conduct a benchmarking study in cooperation with other Southeast Asian countries to benefit from best practices for and lessons learned from successful digital literacy programmes
- Partner with universities and other academic institutions in the country to do further digital citizenship education research that would provide evidence that reflects the reality in Lao PDR
- Craft and implement policies, enabling mechanisms, and programmes to develop students' digital citizenship skills, focusing on empathy, civic engagement, digital creativity, and innovation
- Enhance collaboration with industries and the private sector to develop existing information technology (IT) infrastructures to hone the digital citizenship competence of the country's youth

In sum, the DKAP framework and survey questionnaire are important developments that give Asia-Pacific countries an opportunity to assess their students' digital citizenship competence. While much work needs to be done to accurately measure children's digital citizenship competence, this study provides important information that can serve as preliminary data for future research and other endeavors.

* This study was funded by the UNESCO and the Korean Republic Funds-in-Trust (KFIT). Special thanks to MoES and the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Community Education Development (CED) for conducting the survey, analysing the results, and producing the country report.



©2021

Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization