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**Abstract**

In late 2015, the Lao government finalized its five-year National Socio-economic Development Plan 2016–2020 (NSED) to assist Lao PDR in meeting its goal of graduating from the ranks of Least Developed Countries status by 2020. The NSED is supported by a five-year Education Sector Development Plan (2016–2020) and subsequent higher education regulations that prioritise improvements to the quality of higher education in order to meet this goal, in particular by granting increased autonomy to higher education institutions. This paper argues that the association between autonomy and quality being implemented in Lao PDR draws heavily on a neoliberal, dichotomous higher education framework. It argues that efforts to improve quality in higher education should be more nuanced, taking into consideration the internal dynamics of the unitary state structure, the possibilities arising from regional engagement, and the lessons learned by neighbours on a similar pathway. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)