

A Study on Employment Intentions and Employment Outcomes of Chinese Major Students at Souphanouvong University in Laos

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of building the China-Laos Community of Shared Future, the Chinese program at Souphanouvong University in Laos serves as a vital platform for cultivating bilingual talents, making the study of students' employment intentions and actual employment outcomes highly significant. This study, based on questionnaire surveys and interviews, provides an in-depth analysis of the employment preferences of current students and the career paths of the first cohort of graduates. It reveals a gap between market demands and educational offerings. The findings indicate that while students show strong interest in education, tourism, and trade sectors, they face challenges in career planning and practical skills. The first cohort of graduates has entered relatively concentrated employment fields, but some positions do not fully align with their expectations. To address these issues, the study proposes optimizing curriculum design, integrating teaching resources, and enhancing university-industry collaboration, aiming to provide references for the further development of the Chinese program at Souphanouvong University and offer insights for similar institutions in education reform and career guidance.

Keywords: Souphanouvong University; Chinese program; Employment intentions; Career paths; Talent cultivation

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1. Introduction

In the course of collaborative development between China and Laos, the Chinese language has become a crucial tool for promoting cultural exchanges, deepening mutual understanding, and building a community with a shared future between the peoples of China and Laos ^[1]. The Confucius Institute at Souphanouvong University was established in 2018 in the ancient northern capital of Luang Prabang, in partnership with Kunming University of Science and Technology. Since its inception, the institute has trained over 2,500 Chinese language learners, and the undergraduate Chinese program was approved for enrollment in 2020 ^[2]. The Chinese Department at Souphanouvong University currently has two full-time Chinese language instructors and primarily relies on

collaboration with the Confucius Institute at Souphanouvong University. Through mutual consultation, both parties jointly deliver the Chinese major courses ^[1]. The first cohort of 26 students graduated and entered the job market in September 2024. As of now, the program has 183 enrolled students. This paper utilizes questionnaires and interviews to investigate the employment intentions of current students and the employment outcomes of graduates from the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University. The findings aim to provide theoretical and practical support for optimizing the curriculum, enhancing students' employability, and guiding their career planning.

2. Research methodology

This study employs a combination of questionnaires and interviews. Prior to the official distribution of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with three Chinese major students from Souphanouvong University (two current students and one graduate). After ensuring the reliability and validity of the instrument, the questionnaire was disseminated through online platforms and offline classrooms, accompanied by face-to-face interviews ^[3]. A total of 96 valid questionnaires were collected, and interviews were conducted with 10 graduates from the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University. The core research questions addressed in this study are:

- (1) What are the current employment intentions of Chinese major students at Souphanouvong University?
- (2) In which sectors are the initial graduates of the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University primarily employed? Do these employment outcomes align with market demands and student expectations?
- (3) What measures can be implemented to further enhance the teaching quality and employment competitiveness of Chinese major students at Souphanouvong University?

3. Survey results and analysis

3.1. Analysis of employment intentions of current students from the questionnaire survey

The survey results show that among the 96 respondents, 69 are willing to stay in Laos for employment, 24 wish to go to China, and 3 prefer to go to other countries. The main reasons for choosing to work in China include more job opportunities, family expectations, and the desire to further improve their Chinese language skills. The obstacles include visa issues, intense competition, pressure, and high study abroad costs. The main reasons for staying in Laos include family factors, the presence of many Chinese companies, and good development prospects. The obstacles are low salaries, few job opportunities, high living costs, and poor working conditions. Those who prefer to go to other countries cite family expectations, more job opportunities, and better salary and welfare benefits as their reasons.

The employment intentions after graduation, ranked by number of respondents, are as follows: translation, working in Chinese companies in Laos, business, international trade, entrepreneurship, Chinese language teaching, inheriting a family business, working in government institutions, working in embassies, staying at home without employment, and continuing further studies.

During the job selection process, students perceive their main disadvantages as lack of practical experience, weak translation and interpretation skills, insufficient professional knowledge, limited job information channels, weak social skills, and personality factors. The factors they consider when choosing a job, in order of importance, are personal interest, job alignment with their major, salary and benefits, career prospects, parental expectations, social status, work-life balance, personal relationships, policy support, and recommendations from friends.

Regarding ideal salary expectations, the respondents have relatively high expectations: 4 expect 2–3 million

kip, 2 expect 3–4 million kip, 10 expect 4–5 million kip, 36 expect 5–7 million kip, and 44 expect more than 7 million kip. Among them, 8 expect between 10 million and 15 million kip, and 2 expect salaries above 9 million kip or over 20 million kip. Additionally, 44 respondents have internship experience, with positions including translation, waiter, teacher, and sales. In terms of future career planning, 31 respondents have clear plans (mainly focusing on translation and business), 43 have a general direction, and 22 have no plans yet. If funding were available, 91.67% (88 people) of the students would choose to start their own business.

Students believe that learning Chinese is crucial for career development and personal growth. They suggest strengthening training in listening, speaking, writing, and grammar. They hope for more internship opportunities to apply Chinese in practical work and enhance their skills. Furthermore, students would like more interactive teaching in class, especially for those with weak foundations, and more support for them. Throughout the learning process, students generally believe that patience and persistence are key, and they recommend providing more extracurricular reading materials and online learning resources to help them better master the Chinese language.

3.2. Analysis of graduate employment situation from interviews

Among the 10 graduates from the first cohort of the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University who participated in the survey, 4 are working in translation, with 1 also teaching Chinese; 2 are full-time Chinese language teachers; 2 have chosen to work in Chinese companies in Laos; 1 has started a business in Laos; and 1 is working in the service industry, such as restaurants and hotels.

Regarding the alignment of current jobs with expectations, 5 respondents stated their work meets expectations, 1 stated it exceeds expectations, 3 said it is average, and 1 felt it does not meet expectations. In terms of salary, 1 person earns 2–3 million kip, 1 person earns 3–4 million kip, 4 earn 5–6 million kip, 1 earns 6–7 million kip, and 3 earn over 7 million kip. In terms of salary satisfaction, 8 respondents felt it was average, 1 (earning over 7 million kip) was very satisfied, and 1 (earning 2–3 million kip) was very dissatisfied. As for expected salary, 6 respondents expect over 7 million kip, 1 expects over 10 million kip, 2 expect more than 15 million kip, and 1 expects 4–5 million kip.

The main issues faced by the respondents in their work include insufficient practical experience, weak oral translation skills in Chinese, and inadequate mastery of professional knowledge. To address these issues, the respondents said they would continue reading relevant books and pursue further education for a master's or doctoral degree when the opportunity arises. Finally, the respondents all expressed no regrets about choosing the Chinese major and encouraged current students to study Chinese diligently. They mentioned that the courses taken during their studies have been helpful for their current work, particularly the theoretical knowledge, and have provided some practical opportunities. However, they hope there could be more practical experiences.

4. Recommendations for Optimizing Curriculum and Employment Guidance

Currently, Chinese language and related programs in overseas universities are mainly concentrated in Southeast Asia and Africa. These studies cover various aspects, including the current situation of Chinese language teaching abroad, curriculum design, and strategies for program development^[4–6], Chinese learning motivation and cultural identity^[7,8], as well as teaching methods and effectiveness^[9,10]. Based on relevant research, this paper proposes recommendations for optimizing curriculum design and employment guidance.

4.1. Optimizing curriculum design

For undergraduate students majoring in Chinese, the goal is to cultivate local Chinese language teachers or high-level talents in language and cultural exchange and research. Therefore, the curriculum design needs to strengthen the study of Chinese language and culture courses, with teaching objectives focusing on cultivating basic skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, improving Chinese cultural literacy, broadening the perspective on Sino-foreign cultural exchanges, and laying a foundation for becoming qualified local Chinese teachers or continuing further studies after graduation ^[4]. The survey results show that students generally believe that learning Chinese plays a significant role in future career development and personal growth. They suggest further strengthening training in listening, speaking, writing, and grammar.

In response, the Souphanouvong University Confucius Institute will offer intensive classes in listening, reading, and speaking (16:00–17:30) for students at all levels of the Chinese major in October 2024. These classes will be taught by three international Chinese language education volunteers from the Confucius Institute (hereinafter referred to as “Chinese Teachers from the Confucius Institute”). At the same time, beginner-level classes and HSK2 training classes (16:00–18:00) will be offered to students inside and outside the university, taught by two Chinese Teachers from the Confucius Institute (**Table 1**).

Table 1. October 2024 Class Schedule at Souphanouvong University Confucius Institute (Main Campus)

Course time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Classes Offered	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Reading	Speaking
	Beginner Class	HSK2 Beginner Class	HSK2	Beginner Class	HSK2

In addition, according to the curriculum design, the interpretation courses for senior-year students are taught by local Lao teachers from the Confucius Institute. To strengthen the theoretical and professional aspects of the course, the interpretation classes for senior-year students in the second semester are now taught by Chinese teachers who have graduated from the Confucius Institute’s Lao language program.

4.2. Strengthening classroom interaction and integration of Chinese learning resources

Interpersonal interaction during the teaching process is a primary method for conducting learning activities and an important means of acquiring knowledge and skills ^[11]. The survey results show that students generally hope teachers will increase interaction in Chinese language teaching and offer more help to students with weak foundations, demonstrating greater patience. In response, in October this year, the Chinese Director personally attended classes in various departments and provided suggestions for improvement. Currently, the dispatched teachers have arrived, and they will continue to observe classes and provide guidance.

At the same time, students suggest providing more Chinese learning resources, such as extracurricular reading materials and online learning platforms, to support them in better mastering the Chinese language. Currently, Chinese digital resources include, but are not limited to, digital materials, digital textbooks, online courses, and digital applications, each of which can be further divided into subcategories ^[12]. For example, digital textbooks can be categorized into static media textbooks, multimedia textbooks, rich media textbooks, and intelligent textbooks ^[13].

According to statistics, there are currently 3,679 digital textbooks, of which 1,744 are developed in China, accounting for 47.40%; there are 485 MOOC courses, with 364 available on domestic platforms, accounting

for 75.05%; there are 4,865 micro-lesson resources, 404 teaching websites, and 334 apps, of which 22.46% are language-focused apps.^[12] In the classroom, teachers encourage students to use Chinese digital resources, such as “Chinese Language Alliance.” In December, a batch of Chinese books provided by the Ministry of Education’s Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation has arrived at the Souphanouvong University Confucius Institute, and teachers are currently organizing the materials.

4.3. Strengthening university-enterprise cooperation and internship practice

From a functional perspective, Confucius Institutes not only need to meet the demand for learning Chinese and Chinese culture abroad but also represent the country and serve national strategic interests. Therefore, they must fulfill the basic educational functions of an educational institution while also providing services that have both global and national public product attributes^[14]. Similar to Ethiopia, Chinese language teachers in Laos are at a disadvantage in terms of salary compared to those working in Chinese-funded enterprises. Even if the academic qualifications are met, students tend to choose to work in Chinese-funded enterprises^[15].

The survey results show that students generally expect to apply their Chinese language skills to real-world scenarios through more practical work opportunities or internships to improve their professional abilities. To meet this demand, in 2023, the Souphanouvong University Confucius Institute organized a “Chinese + Vocational Education” university-enterprise cooperation forum during the northern Laos Talent Recruitment Fair. Representatives from various enterprises expressed their recruitment needs, and the institute designed targeted teaching programs based on these demands, signing talent cultivation contracts. The Confucius Institute, in collaboration with professional colleges, has launched Chinese language reinforcement courses, training talents with “Chinese + vocational skills” to support the economic and social development of northern Laos.

To promote internships and employment, the Confucius Institute issued the “Notice on Internship and Employment Opportunities for Outstanding Chinese Major Graduates” in 2024. The notice plans to arrange internships for senior-year students at relevant institutions from February to April 2025, encouraging students to establish employment intentions during their internships. Students who meet the job requirements can sign employment agreements with employers, enabling direct employment after graduation and aligning with social needs. In addition, in writing and comprehensive courses, Chinese teachers from the Confucius Institute guide third- and fourth-year students in creating personal resumes. The resumes of fourth-year students are collected and archived by the Confucius Institute’s academic office for use in the students’ job search process.

5. Conclusion

This study, through surveys and interviews, provides an in-depth analysis of the employment intentions of current students in the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University and the employment outcomes of its graduates. It explores the relationship between the job market demands and the educational offerings of the university. Based on the research findings, recommendations are made to optimize the curriculum, enhance classroom interaction and the integration of Chinese learning resources, and promote university-enterprise cooperation and internship practices. These measures aim to improve students’ employability, career planning, and overall competence. It is hoped that this study will provide valuable theoretical support for the development of the Chinese major at Souphanouvong University and offer reference points for course reforms and career guidance at similar institutions.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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