



Ministry of Education Youth and Sport
Education Research Council

Editorial

Improving the quality of education for social development and economic growth in Cambodia

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The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) embodies a vision “to establish and develop human resources of the very highest quality and ethics in order to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia.” This vision is in line with the Rectangular Strategy Phase III and the Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025, which envisage moving the kingdom from a low-income country to an upper-middle income status by 2030 and a high-income nation by 2050.

Cambodia has garnered tremendous economic growth and poverty reduction. The average annual economic growth rate marked 7.8% during 1997–2014, with the latest growth rate of 6.8% in 2017. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita rose from USD 216 in 1992 to USD 1,330 in 2016. Poverty rate has declined dramatically, from 53.2% in 2004 to 18.0% in 2015. The sources of economic growth have relied less on agriculture (26.6% of GDP in 2015) but more on industrial (27.7%) and services (39.8%) sectors. Specifically, agro-industry, tourism, construction and garments are the mainstay of growth. Notwithstanding, the economy has recently diversified its sources and climbed up the manufacturing value chains by increasing exports of electrical machinery, equipment and auto parts.

This trajectory of economic growth has rendered harder challenges for the education sector to fulfil its vision. If we are to reach our vision, we need to upgrade our human capital from a labor-intensive, low-skilled

workforce to an innovative, high-skilled one in a more efficient and effectual fashion. The MoEYS has devised and executed many policies and strategies to address the shortage of, and to refine the skills and knowledge of, our human resources. Of salience, the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2014–2018 is devoted to “ensuring equitable access to education services for all, enhancing the quality and relevance of learning, and ensuring effective leadership and management of education staff at all levels.” Further, the Cambodian National Qualification Framework elucidates concrete levels of knowledge and skills expected of learners in order to respond to the needs of the evolving labour market and the national development.

There is a clear indication that the quantity and quality of our human capital have been enhanced, particularly as illuminated in the rapid and steady economic growth. But, despite making the great strides in human resource development, the education sector still has a long way to walk to arrive at what is aspired. Erecting a school is easy but boosting and sustaining the institutional quality of schools needs better commitments of resources and time. For instance, although we have almost achieved the goal of universal primary education (with an enrolment of 97.0%), completion rates are still low (79.9% at primary level, 42.6% at lower-secondary level, and only 20.2% at upper-secondary level). Over the last eight academic years, the average number of students who were enrolled in Grade 1 was about 700,000, but the number of students who continued and successfully graduated from Grade 12 was only about 70,000. Another need for quality improvement is reflected in the results of a nationwide assessment conducted by the Department of Education Quality Assurance. For example, around 40.0% of tested students at Grade 3 in 2016 and Grade 6 in 2015 failed to achieve the levels of knowledge in both Mathematics and Khmer Language as expected in the curriculum standard for each level.

Asian experience depicts three chief factors that contribute to education quality improvement: investment in education at the national level, appropriate class sizes, and teacher qualification at the school level. Compared with most ASEAN countries or Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Cambodia lags far behind in these indicators. Our national budget devoted to education is about 2.5% of GDP, comparing to 5.8% in Thailand and 6.8% in Vietnam. Less than 20.0% of our teaching force holds a Bachelor’s degree. Class sizes remain a challenge due to surplus of teachers in some schools but shortage in others.

In line with the fifth mandate of the Royal Government of Cambodia, the MoEYS has accelerated its focus on quality improvement as stipulated in the ESP 2014-2018. The national budget for education has increased, reaching over USD 800 million or about 2.5% of GDP in 2018. Nonetheless, to catch up with the pace of economic growth and to materialize its vision, the education sector should require a budget of at least 5% of GDP. This is to ensure adequate resources for actors in charge of education reforms so that they can be held accountable with deliverable and measurable outcomes at every level of services.

The MoEYS has set a reform agenda premised on eight mechanisms. Gradually, some of these mechanisms have become policies, guidelines and action plans to guide implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the reform agenda. However, it is the relevant General Directorates, Departments and Offices at national and sub-national levels, who are hands-on practitioners, which can rightly interpret and implement the policies and strategies and turn them into their own guidelines and action plans to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their service delivery. This can be done based on reliable and valid information and evidence collected through scientific and empirical research, which needs to be cultivated and bolstered at all educational institutions.

A number of elements of the reform agenda have been accomplished. But, much remains to be done. Observations show that the reform has not been rapid and profound as intended due to the absence or paucity of reliable and valid information to guide the policy formulation, implementation and review because of limited research into the priority areas. Education statistics and indicators, national assessments, and high school examination results contain a lot of information that relevant agencies and stakeholders should have used in order to analyse the functioning of their respective duties and set targets for improvement at the level of their authority.

The MoEYS has supported research and encouraged the use of research findings and assessment results as concrete evidence to inform innovations and practices. As part of this endeavour, the Education Research Council (ERC), a home-grown think tank, has been established and its key studies are presented in the first issue of this Cambodia Education Review. It is sincerely hoped that concerned agencies and stakeholders find these studies relevant and useful for the improvement of their work. This Review is also intended to ignite a culture among MoEYS officials at all levels to embark on doing research and utilizing research

results to reflect, review and refine their practices. Without such a culture, the mission to produce competitive and productive human capital to meet the needs of national development will not be realized. Ultimately, the MoEYS firmly believes that with sufficient resources and commitments our reform agenda will sustain the momentum to achieve the vision of producing a caring, responsible, proud and competent citizenry.