



Ministry of Education Youth and Sport
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Book Review

Book Review: Cambodia education 2015: Employment and Empowerment

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There is little literature on Cambodian education, particularly in English edition. An edited book entitled, “Cambodia education 2015: Employment and employment” contributes to this area by specifically identifying the shortcomings of education in this developing country and offering recommendations in overcoming them. The book consists of eight chapters, covering five main Cambodian educational systems. These are: higher education, technical and vocational education training (TVET), secondary education, primary education, and preschool and childhood development. In Chapter One, the authors offer justification on why the Cambodian education is the focal point of this book, which is to empower and involve their citizens in the development of the country by reforming the existing education system. The chapter also offers an overall aim and specific objectives of the book, which mainly focus on policy issues and gaps of educational systems in Cambodia. Additionally, the research methodology employed and the limitations of the book are also revealed in Chapter One.

Chapter Two, in particular, discusses curriculum issues in higher education, which highlight skill gaps between the skills provided by the higher education institutions (HEIs) and those needed by the industries (Tran, 2014). The emerging skill gaps, reported in the chapter, include a lack of both technical (hard) skills and soft skills, although the discussion of the inadequacy of the soft skills is more in-depth than that of the technical skills. On one hand, for the technical skills of low-to-medium skill intensive jobs, a major concern reported from various industries and businesses (e.g., manufacturing, services, and construction sectors) involves job-related and job-specific skills. On the other hand, the soft skills required and reported by the industries, which have been absent in the educational curriculum, include problem solving skills, organizational management skills, and foreign language proficiency (Clayton, 2008; Clayton, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2006). The chapter also provides specific examples of skill shortages in a particular industry sector, which is tourism. Finally, several impacts, specifically the impact on the economy resulting from the skill gaps, are discussed in both the local and international contexts, and recommendations are also given in Chapter Two. Policy makers, especially those involved in higher education reform, can adapt the suggested measures such as integration into the curriculum the development of cognitive skills (e.g., communication, basic computer literacy, and problem solving) and technical knowledge (e.g., specific-job related skills) through a so-called internship program.

One main focus of the book being reviewed here is a discussion of issues in the higher education system, which is illustrated in Chapter Three. In discussing the issues and offering recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders, the authors divide the chapter into four subchapters. Subchapter 3.1 covers trends, issues and policy options in the context of higher education. The authors blame most of the existing education policy documents (e.g., 2007 Law on Education, National Strategic Development Plan 2014–2018, and Education Strategic Plan) for not prioritizing and not giving enough attention on higher education, although they seem to support the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport on its two recent mechanisms (e.g., Higher Education Vision 2030, National Qualifications Framework) providing guidelines on higher education. In addition, several issues such as access and equity to higher education, quality and relevance of higher education, financing higher education, governance in higher education are still big challenges for higher education institutions, especially the private ones in dealing with the balance between enrolment rates and quality graduates,

since most of them depend entirely on student tuition fees for their revenues. However, to help the government to achieve the ambitions in becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050, quality assurance plays a crucial role in improving the quality of higher education. Moreover, to survive in a fast growing and competitive world of higher education, it is suggested that Cambodian HEIs transform themselves to be entrepreneurial universities, which is perhaps a new concept for many HEIs in Cambodia. The university entrepreneurship helps narrow skill mismatches through university-government-industry collaborations, and government policy intervention and financial support to HEIs. Another proposed initiative is a national campaign in higher education to promote the implementation of Open Online Course Platforms through the usage of mobile device (m-learning), which is claimed to contribute to an achievement of the Education Strategic Plan 2014–18. The Open Online Course Platforms might be a big challenge for old generation teaching staff; however, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport might consider this initiative for their next agenda on policy planning.

Chapter Four addresses skill gaps in TVET and offers recommendations for policy makers. The authors review the existing government policies and programs relating to TVET, including the Rectangular Strategy Phase III, the National TVET Development Plan 2008 and Strategic Planning on TVET Development 2014–2018. Although TVET significantly contributes to the industries, findings from key informant interviews, including representatives from government ministries and departments, development partners, education institutions, private sector and non-governmental organizations, as well as students and parents revealed the lack of soft skills and technical skills among graduates in the labor market. Other constraints for TVET institutions is being less popular and lower status compared to HEIs, thus attract fewer students. To increase the number of Cambodian skilled laborers, the low status issue of TVET is an urgent issue, which should be considered.

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, secondary education, primary education, and preschool and early childhood development are discussed respectively. First, Chapter Five illustrates barriers to student achievement in secondary education and ways forward to obtaining high-quality secondary education. To positively affect secondary education, the authors suggest school reform and leadership. To reform the school system, some issues, which are suggested to be solved include student

learning outcomes, teacher behavior and professionalism, school principal, student enrolment and dropout rates, curriculum, student-teacher ratios, and teacher qualifications and salary. Similar to Chapter Five, Chapter Six describes several aspects of primary education, such as enrolment, dropout, completion and repetition rates, hardware (buildings), access and affordability, and software (curriculum, teachers and teaching), governance, school leadership and management, and financing. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports might need to solve some of these continuing issues, particularly decreasing the dropout rates in order to achieve its goal of having all students complete at least grade 9.

In Chapter Seven, the authors discuss the benefits of preschool and early childhood, which include moral incentive, citizenship incentive, economic incentive, and equality and inclusivity incentive. This educational sector, compared to other sectors, seems to be given the least attention from the government, thus this leaves a gap for private sectors namely international schools to be mushrooming, especially in the urban areas. To increase the access for children elsewhere and countrywide, the government might want to improve and upgrade this sector as well.

There are a few issues in this book, which could have been improved. One downside of the book is that the authors cover the entire Cambodian education system, which makes the issues discussed in the book less comprehensive, critical analysis and lack of depth. For example, employment is mainly discussed in higher education and TVET, but it is absent in secondary education, primary education, and pre-schooling. Second, the book consists of some unnecessary information and descriptions. For instance, rather than describing irrelevant and too general background, the introduction should directly state what the entire chapter covers. There is also a lack of critical analysis on a few sections, which makes the text less academic and research based, as claimed by the authors. Since the book is an edited book, there should be at least one author responsible for each chapter; otherwise the term on the cover 'edited by' should be deleted, so that the editors become authors. Perhaps for the next edition of the book, the text should be more carefully proofread and edited by professional academic editors prior to publication.

However, the book significantly contributes to the existing literature in education, especially to research in Cambodian education, namely higher education, TVET, secondary education, primary education, and pre-

schooling and early childhood development, which is immature and insufficiently investigated and published. Thus, the book is resourceful for researchers who are interested in exploring Cambodian education; especially the book identifies the loophole and weaknesses of the entire system. In addition, this book offers justified arguments and recommendations, including identification of the lack of policy guidelines and mechanism as well as initiatives for policy makers and development partners in the context of a developing country in general, and in Cambodia in particular.

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