

Deficiency in Higher Education in Cambodia: Poverty Alleviation

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Introduction

Poverty has been a major issue the Royal Government of Cambodia has strived to address (World Bank, 2006). Recently, Cambodia has achieved the Millennium Development Goal poverty target, making it one of the most successful nations in poverty reduction globally. “Despite impressive reduction, these hard won gains are fragile,” Neak Samsen, World Bank’s Poverty Analyst for Cambodia, remarks. “Many people who have escaped poverty are still at high risk of falling back into poverty” (World Bank, 2014, para. 4). Kiani (2011) maintains that poverty reduction in developing countries is greatly influenced by education. Particularly, higher education, Kiani further explains, is important for career opportunities to expand and for an economy to prosper. Accordingly, poverty reduction correlates with higher education. However, it is not true within Cambodian context. Most Cambodian graduates still cannot earn enough to sustain their living. Taking into consideration the significance of the correlation between higher education and poverty alleviation, this paper will examine negative factors in deficiencies in Cambodia’s higher education which are generally overlooked within the context of poverty reduction in developing nations.

Deficiency in Cambodia’s Higher Education

Cambodia’s commitment to improving higher education system brings both challenges and opportunities (San, 2013). In current development of higher education, despite the increase in number, the quality of Cambodian universities suffered from resource inadequacy and mismanagement, and quality deficiencies (Ros, 2014). Offered limited relevancy and quality of education, as a result, university graduates suffer from low level of employability, which is owing to skills mismatch between demand and supply of university graduates, meaning that graduates do not have required knowledge and skills—hard and soft—in order to get employed (San, 2013, p. 28). In fact, deficiencies in Cambodia’s higher education quality gives rise to low probability of graduates to secure a decent wage in job market, thereby leading to economic challenges. To understand deficiencies in Cambodia’s higher education, it is important to take a closer look into negative factors in the system.

Teaching Quality

Poor teaching quality is partly the result of low teachers’ motivation. Despite an increase in bonuses for health, risk and rural areas, which is \$90 in total for lecturers at public universities, Mr. Rong Chhun, president of the Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association—representing 10,000 educators in the country—said salary of this amount would not be enough to sustain teachers’ livelihoods (Eang, 2014). Ros (2014) suggests that underfunded public higher education institutions (HEIs) fail to provide students with quality education. Teachers, their salary and teaching quality definitely have a clear correlation. Teachers participating in a study by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) (2008) claim that they feel resentful when provided with

much workload but are not paid accordingly. Being underpaid, teachers decide to find a second job to sustain their family expenses (VSO, 2008). Thus, time devoted to making lesson plans becomes their scarce resource. The teaching quality is doubtful when teachers cannot focus fully on their job.

Furthermore, having a second job, many teachers highly upset teaching quality. According to UNESCO (2011), a study shows that 99 percent of interviewed teacher could not survive on their teaching salaries alone, of which 93 percent had second jobs. UNESCO also points out that primary and high school teachers make tutoring a second job, through which they can earn about 70 percent of their monthly income. Based on my own experience, this is also true to university level teachers. However, when many teachers start to tutor their students at school, it poses a great threat to the integrity of the education system, creating a situation in which teachers create a gap for education in class and demand for extra tutoring as to fill the gap.

With an increasing number of private higher education institutions (HEIs), qualified teachers are concurrently employed by various institutions, giving them not enough time for doing lesson plans or research to enhance their capacity, seriously putting a question for their teaching quality.

Learning Quality: Teacher-Student Relationship

The learning quality of students tends to be low due partly to the fact that most teachers do not have time for their students. Generally, most university teachers might need to provide their students with enough time during which students come and consult academic issues. However, having a second job and no office hours, most lecturers have very limited time for students. Teaching will be a part-time job in case they have another full-time job, or they will have to rush to other classes or jobs, leaving only teaching time for their students. Vann (2013) asserts that most university teachers teach many classes in different institutions simultaneously as a second source of income. Consequently, students probably have very little time to find their lecturers for the sake of their learning.

Additionally, learning quality is partly determined by relationships and interaction between teachers and students. Lui maintains that good teacher-student relationships inside the classroom have beneficial impacts on students' learning progress and outcomes (1997). Similarly, Hughes (2011) asserts that students' perceived relationships with their teachers have influence on students' sense of belonging and academic competency, necessarily predicting class participation and academic success. On the contrary, teaching method in Cambodian system enables little teacher-student interaction (UNESCO, 2011). For example, most students are so passive, rarely asking their lecturers questions, and the lecturers hardly ever take questions, either. Also, busy lecturers teaching in a big classroom, having no office hours and rushing from one class to another will hardly have opportunity to establish a good teacher-student relationship. This really affects how students perceive lecturers' roles in their learning (Hughes, 2011). Based on my personal experience, to exemplify, most lecturers at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, will have to handle a class of more than 40 students. Since most of class hours are devoted to lecturing, teacher-student interaction is highly limited. Therefore, with almost no reading habits, minimal class interaction (UNESCO, 2011), university students seriously face learning issues.

In addition, political pressure on Cambodia's universities also negatively affects students' learning in class. Politics in this context refers to sensitive information used to criticize the Royal Government of Cambodia. From my own experience, teachers fear of losing their jobs if provoking or allowing political discussion in their social science classes. A U.S. survey shows that most students perceive classroom as a place in which they are not restricted to expressing their ideas, concerns and comments, which should be offered by teachers (Ozer, 2013). Basically, classrooms are supposed to grant students enough freedom to expression in social science classes they attend. Conversely, from my observation as an undergraduate, classroom situation in Cambodia is pressurized by fear of discussing Cambodia's politics in social science classes, namely History, Philosophy, International Relations, Sociology and Political Science. For instance, whenever raising topics on corruption or nepotism, I was always interrupted and not permitted by lecturers to discuss in class. Based on my own experience, the restriction to political expression in social science class disrupts many students' learning process in class.

External and Internal Governance: Irrelevancy and Quality

Weak external and internal governance also influences teaching and learning quality. Collaboration in creating human capital for labor market demand and sustainable economic development is made possible providing that external education governance authority exists (San, 2013). This government body will regulate HEIs to target courses demanded by job market, not courses demanded by students who can afford the tuition fee. However, since the government provides small amount of funding for state-run institutions and almost no funding for the private ones, its influence on HEIs is almost non-existent (San, 2013). Presently, private Cambodian universities are promoting popular and affordable subjects for high school graduates, mostly related to business, management, banking and finance, to gain profits than rather to provide quality higher education. Offering the aforementioned courses, private universities find it more profitable. Unlike applied science courses, such as Medicines, Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, Agricultural Studies, Engineering, and Physics, those courses do not require laboratories or sophisticated materials and highly qualified instructors, which are deemed expensive to install and have access to, and which contributes less to profits gained. Likewise, persuaded by interesting market strategies, lacking information on job market and goal-setting and following one another, high school graduates decide to study those majors. Without effective regulation from major governance bodies, this trend leads to a surplus of university graduates holding the same degrees and skills. Education Minister Hang Chuon Naron remarks:

“Currently, there are around 220,000 students studying at university ... about 50 per cent are studying their majors related to management, law, accounting, banking and finance, which is driving a surplus of human resource in this field in job market” (Chan, 2015, para. 5).

In addition to the external governance, the internal governance of Cambodia's HEIs is also weak. A survey by Vann (2013) with public university teachers, on the one hand, addresses concerns about disqualified people on top management of universities—rectors perceived as not possessing acceptable academic and leadership skills and getting in their position by means of political connection. Private university teachers, on the other hand, view rectors in their respective institution as not well-qualified academics but as rich and powerful people. VSO

(2008) additionally considers poor management to be a highly discouraging factor, explaining that an effective management promotes teachers' motivation, while poor governance systems rob professionalism and determination. Cambodia's HEIs operated within a dysfunctional internal governance system are highly likely to bring detrimental impacts on the overall teaching quality, partially contributing to students' learning outcome and progress.

Linkage between Higher Education and Poverty Alleviation

Higher education, or university education, is of great importance to poverty reduction. Putnam (2015) argues that higher education and income are so closely connected that education is the best indicator of social class and present economy. This claim is supported by a number of sources. World Bank (2012) shows much evidence which illustrates a clear correlation between higher education and economic prosperity. Cognitive skills, as also noted by Kiani (2011), have a strong connection with individual earnings, with income distribution, and with economic growth. The level of lifetime earnings of U.S. workers with high school diploma is on average 17 percent lower than university graduates and is three times lower than people with professional degrees (World Bank, 2012). Borode (2011) also raises a strong example in Sub-Saharan Africa that tertiary education can assist African countries in reducing unemployment rate and set ground for economic development. Thus, university education has a significant role in poverty alleviation. Conversely, this theory might not be workable within Cambodia's higher education system.

Irrelevancy of Cambodia's Higher Education to Poverty Reduction within Cambodian Context

As raised above, higher education is mostly perceived to help improve poverty situation. Nevertheless, it is not true in Cambodian context since there is little connection between Cambodia's higher education and poverty alleviation. As Jordan (2004) contends, structural poverty occurs when interrelated institutions within a government favor one group in a society over the other. Due to skills mismatch, surplus of human resources in certain fields and quality education, most Cambodian university graduates suffer from being unemployed and/or get poorly paid jobs, while Cambodian teachers are not paid according to workload handled.

Conclusion

The deficiencies in Cambodia's higher education and the refutable relationship between higher education and poverty reduction have been presented. As education is synonymous with class, the paper has indicated that the kind of higher education students acquire is more important. It further discussed the negative factors—teaching and learning quality, relevancy of majors' supply and demand, and internal and external governance systems of HEIs—which some theories supporting the correlation between higher education and poverty alleviation probably did not taking into account within the contexts of developing countries, particularly in Cambodia. The theories of the relationship between higher education and poverty alleviation need to be re-examined within Cambodian context due to the deficiencies in the quality of higher education which have been examined in this paper.

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