

ment? What mechanisms should be developed to give migrants a chance to opt in or out of the program? What provisions need to be developed for migrants who assumed citizenships of their host countries to participate in the program? These are a few of the details that need to be worked out.

CONCLUSION

Channeling tax monies to home countries of migrants to help build their knowledge institutions is simply an act of solidarity and fairness. Materializing such a grand scheme would essentially require the goodwill and commitment of host-country governments, regional and international institutions, Diaspora communities, and home countries. ■

Cambodian Higher Education— Growing Pains

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Cambodian higher education has recently been described by different experts in education as “vibrant and lively,” “a cause for concern,” “plagued with difficulties,” and “in a ferment of reform.” Like the six blind scientists describing an elephant, the truth is probably that all are accurate. It just depends on which parts of the sector you are describing and your point of view.

The private sector in general is certainly experiencing “lively” growth, diversification, and expansion to provincial centers, while the government institutions are certainly “plagued with difficulties” such as strangulation by government control and increasing politicization. The quality of many institutions throughout the sector is still “cause for concern,” considering the high unemployment among graduates and the fact that there are still some “universities” that occupy only a single building. But recent moves by the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) are stirring up a “ferment of reform” throughout the sector.

Cambodian higher education is still in a phase of rapid, largely unregulated, expansion with an estimated 60,000 students in just over 50 institutions, of which 80 percent are private. Most growth is in the private sector. Until recently, almost all higher education institutions were located in the capital Phnom Penh, but increasing competition and huge unmet demand have resulted in rapid expansion of the private sector into provincial centers. Competition has resulted in a lowering of fees and also at least one bankruptcy. An apparent reluctance to apply the regulations outlined in the law for establishment of universities has meant that a number of these institu-

tions are extremely weak, as indicated by unemployment data. Accurate figures are notoriously difficult to obtain in Cambodia, but estimates at present put unemployment among graduates from public universities, one year after graduating, at about 30 percent and as high as 90 percent from the private universities, in spite of the relatively small proportion of students in higher education. Many graduates only get employment in fields unrelated to their study, indicating a mismatch between higher education provision and labor force needs.

Public institutions remain handicapped by centralized ministry control, underfunding, and the fundamental weakness—given that lecturers’ base salaries (US\$75 per month) are still not liveable wages. But they are enrolling increasing numbers of students in courses for which fees are charged, to supplement teachers’ salaries and provide much-needed funds for capital works—blurring the distinction between public and private. In fact, all public institutions are expected to become quasi-government institutions, called public administrative institutions (PAI). But the expectations of greater transparency in governance and management that go with PAI status has led to some resistance to change.

An encouraging sign in the system is the recent activity of the ACC, which is charged with providing an accreditation process for higher education institutions in Cambodia. Formed in 2003, its position within the government, answerable to the Council of Ministers and not as an independent statutory body, was initially problematic—as was the selection of its members, chosen along party lines, and although highly qualified lacking the necessary experience. But with the help of some foreign technical assistance, the ACC has made some positive first steps. The terms “university” and “institute” have been defined, which caused some smaller institutions to change their names to “schools” or “centres.” Minimum standards for a foundation (first) year of broad liberal education have been defined and disseminated. External assessors have been recruited and are being trained by foreign experts from India and Australia. Credit transfer mechanisms have been established. Minimum standards for all higher education institutions are being defined, which will begin to provide a much-needed framework on which more orderly development can proceed.

ANALYSIS

Opinions vary widely, perhaps as a result of the lack of accurate published information about higher education in Cambodia. Pessimists tend to see how far from international standards the present situation is, and the numerous obstacles in the way of ever achieving them. They tend to evaluate the present situation very poorly and give little recognition of the fact that reconstruction of higher education after the disastrous Pol Pot regime only began in 1980, and the oldest private institution is less than 10 years old. They see the increasing politicization of the sector, which threatens to undermine efforts to introduce a more rule-based regulatory environment. For example, recent

statements made by the Cambodian Higher Education Association (CHEA), a supposedly independent representative body for all institutions of higher education, denounced the leader of the opposition party. These statements were unrelated to higher education and in conflict with CHEA's bylaws. Another indication of how politicized the sector has become is the recent appointments of senior positions in the ministry and public higher education institutions according to a power-sharing formula between the two ruling parties that had little reference to competence and expanded an already bloated and inefficient civil service bureaucracy.

Alternatively, optimists tend to see how far higher education in Cambodia has progressed in such a short time. They see increased international linkages, cooperation, and assistance—such as investment by US Cambodian communities and the recent US\$3 million World Bank grant to higher education. They see as cause for celebration rising numbers of returnees from graduate study overseas injecting new ideas into the system, increasing competence in management and

The mismatch between higher education provision and labor force demands has produced an oversupply of poorly trained graduates

quality assurance in some private institutions, the annual Education Sector Review conducted this year for the first time without foreign technical assistance, a growing body of graduate research being produced by the better higher education institutions, the establishment of at least one private institution as a nonprofit university, diversification of course offerings and even preparation of an “open university” by one private university, and the very existence of CHEA and the ACC.

Then there are the unashamedly probusiness types, who have great faith in the belief that universities run as commercial enterprises, “like bread shops,” will automatically deliver quality or else fail as businesses, as evidenced already. They tend to see a majority of the private institutions being run by businessmen committed to educational quality and are dismissive of the public institutions as being so crippled by government control. On the other hand, there are those who see that the commercial drive to “pack ‘em in” in the private institutions is crippling their administrations and is encouraging them to accept unqualified students, employ under- or unqualified teachers, and pass students after minimal evaluation.

There are also the idealists who focus on educational quality and social justice. They see the dangers of a future in which higher education becomes a preserve of the rich and are concerned with such things as the low participation rate of women (33 percent) and the disabled; the number of government “scholarship” places for the brightest students, which are static in absolute terms but declining in relative terms and are still in fact unfunded; the inequitable access to higher education in

rural areas; and the effect of corruption on entrance procedures, the conduct of exams, and the issuing of degrees.

CONCLUSION

The state of Cambodian higher education is a tricky elephant to describe. There are many causes for concern but also for hope. The mismatch between higher education provision and labor force demands has produced an oversupply of poorly trained graduates that may have the potential to threaten social stability. The relevance and quality of many of the degrees being granted have produced serious concerns. Tension is rising between the aging political elite, increasingly desperate to cling to power by political manipulation, and a younger generation of more qualified and capable officers, who are concerned with a sustainable future for higher education and are increasingly trying to introduce merit into decision making. There is growing international influence, perceived by some as assistance and by others as a threat to local interests, as well as rapid expansion, diversification, and the start of more orderly development in a system experiencing understandable growing pains.

The immediate future of Cambodian higher education during this phase of rapid growth will be affected by the following challenges: assuring quality and equitable access while encouraging expansion and regulating a balance between commercial self-interest and public long-term benefit. ■

A 2020 Vision for Higher Education in Vietnam

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Vietnam has recently adopted a higher education reform agenda that, if successful, will bring about a transformation of the higher education system by 2020. The agenda reflects themes in the experience of many less-developed economies seeking to mobilize their intellectual capital through a sustained investment in higher education. What is striking about Vietnam's agenda is its ambitiousness, but here-in also lies a threat to its success.

THE SETTING

Since the mid-1980s, Vietnam has vigorously pursued goals of industrialization and modernization. As a consequence, it is