

Cambodian Higher Education—Subprime Degrees?

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The Cambodian economy has achieved a healthy average growth rate of about 7 percent, over the past decade. Higher education has expanded more than tenfold, in the same period, and now includes 91 institutions (68 universities and 23 institutes or schools) of which 59 percent are private institutions, and almost 200,000 students. Access has improved greatly, as many new institutions and branch campuses of existing institutions have opened in provincial centers.

CHALLENGES

In spite of the relatively positive macroeconomic situation and being named as a priority ministry, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is the only one whose budget share has steadily declined, in each of the last five successive years. Higher education receives a smaller proportion of the national budget (less than 1%) and has the lowest participation rate (approximately 5%) of any of its regional neighbors. Consequently, the higher education sector is facing some serious challenges. Lecturers at government institutions still only receive a salary that is a fraction of a livable wage (a base of about US\$120, per month), forcing

them to seek employment in the private sector. Less than 10 percent of lecturers in both public and private institutions hold PhDs. There is virtually no government funding for research. Consequently, less than a handful of universities have created any research, and almost all have been donor initiated and funded. There are virtually no government scholarships for study abroad. Even the so-called scholarships for local study in higher education are only fee-free places at government institutions without a subsistence allowance. The proportion of scholarship places to the number of high school graduates has steadily decreased.

Recent reports by major donors (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations Development Program, and others) have described a picture of low qualitative and quantitative internal and external efficiencies. In spite of the low participation rate, an oversupply of underskilled graduates still occurs in some areas and an undersupply in areas of high demand. About 60 percent of students graduate in business, social science, and law and only less than 25 percent in agriculture, education, health, engineering, and the hard sciences. What will be the social consequences of large numbers of unemployed and underemployed graduates, and how will Cambodia be able to compete regionally if the Association of South East Asian Nations' vision of an integrated economic community by 2015 is realized?

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF SYSTEMIC WEAKNESSES

But this mismatch with societal needs is not new. It is almost 15 years since the first private university opened and began a period of rapid, almost unregulated expansion and commercialization of higher education in Cambodia. The number

of students has increased from about 10,000 in 1997 to almost 200,000 now. However, little improvement in relevance has occurred in the 10 years since the regulatory instruments, a law on registration of institutions, and the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia were created to deal with it. Perhaps it was hoped that market forces would automatically improve quality, but so far the competition has mostly resulted in a race to the bottom, as institutions compete by lowering fees and offering discounts, and “free Wi-Fi.”

A lack of regulation has led to a large number of higher education institutions, but many of the so-called universities registered are obviously lacking the technical requirements to be called a university. A handful of institutions could possibly justify the use of the term; and a few of those are steadily gaining credibility as quality institutions. Nevertheless, some others have no faculty holding recognized postgraduate degrees, and yet have gained a license to issue degrees up to the PhD level. Many institutions advertise a wide range of degrees but lack qualified staff to teach them, in spite of regulations defining the requirements for the establishment of higher education institutions having been in force since 2002. The reasons for this situation are most likely related to the highly politicized nature of the sector where politically powerful vested interests outweigh the rational implementation of regulations.

CONSEQUENCES OF INEFFECTIVE REGULATION

Regardless, while the causes are being debated, a situation analogous to the economic crisis is being created. A “bubble” is forming of university graduates with worthless degrees. Intense competition has led to the existence of risky and exotic educational products, where capacity to pay is more important than

academic ability. As a result, many institutions are offering “subprime” degrees: degrees that have little actual value, due to a variety of factors—including, selection of students with low capacity, teaching by unqualified faculty, minimal evaluation, and corruption. Some of their exotic educational products include associate degrees offered to those who failed their 12th grade exams and science courses that have no laboratory components. The degrees obtained are more like symbols of compliance—with the system and membership of a patronage network than of knowledge and skills—and should more correctly be called receipts.

What will happen when graduates holding subprime degrees use them to try to find a job and default? Many students have invested significant sums in worthless degrees and rightfully may be unhappy, when they fail to recoup their investment through employment. Some universities have already collapsed, and widespread unemployment and underemployment among university graduates have already been reported. It remains to be seen when and how their discontent will become evident, but there is no shortage of examples in other countries, where student discontent has led to social unrest. Apparently, little official concern has been provided about this, perhaps since the government pays no unemployment benefits and also since it has a conscription law, created in 2006, which it has never applied but could be used in such an eventuality. One more aspect of the analogy, with the financial crisis, is who finally suffers the consequences—rarely the owners of institutions or the regulators.

CONCLUSION

There is a lack of independent public information about higher education institutions, which could help prospective students make more informed choices and thus provide some pressure for improvements in quality. Many institutions refuse to give information about teaching faculty to prospective students, and even more surprisingly, few students challenge this. Consequently, in the absence of accurate public information about institutions and widespread ignorance about market needs and the meaning of quality education, many students depend on rumors and hearsay to choose courses that are often inappropriate and of low quality.

So, in spite of the fact that education has been named a priority ministry by the Cambodian government, clearly higher education is not; and the reason may be related to another systemic weakness mentioned in the recent reports, referred to earlier—i.e., old-fashioned teaching methodologies that fail to challenge students to think and analyse. Perhaps a government that is increasingly autocratic and sensitive to opposition voices is reluctant to encourage a system that should promote critical thinking and has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

The light at the end of the tunnel is emanating from the growing number of young graduates returning from study abroad (on foreign-funded scholarships), who have experienced more functional systems and different ways of learning. These graduates are less likely to accept old models of management and more likely to use new teaching methodologies. Some are employed by the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, which has managed to evaluate foundation year (first year) courses and is about to begin institutional

evaluations. As these young, highly qualified academics gradually move up through the ranks and gain influence and as the old guard at the top gradually retire, it is hoped that higher education in Cambodia may gradually improve.