

I Pursue Higher Education for Reasons: Exploring the Demand for Higher Education in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at exploring higher education expectations of young students in Cambodia, one of the fastest economic growths in the region. In specific, the linkages of their expectation with social mobility, knowledge and gender stereotypes were explored. From the in-depth-interviews with 32 university students (12 men and 20 women), findings indicated that students have positive expectations in higher education in achieving broader knowledge, better job opportunity which could result in future upward social mobility and better standard of living. Having recognized the significance of higher education, students suggested that timely measures such as scholarship, housing, lower tuition fee etc. should be taken to assist the poor, especially for women. This paper concludes that social mobility is a strong motivation among the children. However, the social mobility should be fairly facilitated and strong encouraged by family, state, community and individuals themselves.

Keywords: *Higher education, Scholarship, subject choice, Labor market demand, Gender stereotypes, Social mobility, Employment.*

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Highlights of this paper

- This study was aimed at exploring higher education expectations of young students in Cambodia, one of the fastest economic growths in the region.
- The findings indicated that students have positive expectations in higher education in achieving broader knowledge, better job opportunity which could result in future upward social mobility and better standard of living.

1. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

This study was set to explore the expectations of youth in higher education in Cambodia, where the higher education enrollments sharply increase over the past two decades alongside 7 percent economic growth each year (The World Bank, 2018). This study also tried to look at those expectations from sociological perspectives including the concept of social mobility (class conflict) and gender stereotypes (feminist perspective) whether they already set their expectations towards the employment opportunity, which helps boost the social mobility or else.

It has been countlessly mentioned in government's reports, policies and by government officials that, government is not only boosting the demands but also have better vision for the next 10 years the long term national development (Amaro, 2018). Various education projects, reforming policy programs and diverse funding types were encouraged and allocated to these specific objectives (Amaro and Touch, 2017; Sen, 2018). These initiatives have brought trusts and doubts whether a soar in higher education enrollment matched the students' actual expectations with government's ones.

This study focuses on the higher education students' views, which I personally think, cannot be ignored in the policy making process. Accordingly, I put forwards some of their useful suggestions in the conclusion part of this paper for policy recommendations and next researchers to further examine.

2. EXPANSION, QUALITY, AND OPPORTUNITY REFORMS: THE DRIVEN DEMANDS

The National Institute of Law, Politics and Economic Science was the first higher education institution was ever established in 1947, 6 years before the peaceful end of French colony over Cambodia (Williams *et al.*, 2016). This means, Cambodian higher education is just roughly 60 years old. This system was severely damaged during the Khmer Rouge Regime after it shocked the world by dismantling the whole education system where some source claimed that "75% of teachers, 96% of higher education students and 67% of primary and secondary school aged pupils were murdered" (Ayres, 1999; Black, 2017).

Although the Khmer rouge was ousted in January 7 1979 (Taylor, 2014) breaking down of the education system has made Cambodia's education quality is questionable in meeting the international standard after 40 years of current government's great efforts (Williams *et al.*, 2016; Black, 2017). At the same time, other scholars were impressed by considerable success as a post war torn country (Sem and Hem, 2016).

To respond to this quality challenge and to meet the demands of the newly established economic system and rapid development process, from 1979 to present, Cambodian government initiated scores of reforms include:

- The first and second stage of reforms from 1980 to 1987; 1987 to 1996 focused on curriculums.
- Third stage in 1996 drawn the ideas and higher education visions from SangKum Reastr Niyum (1954-1967), from the 1980-1987 curriculums, and from other developed countries in the region.
- The fourth stage from 2005-2009 was focused on the curriculum development, that was revised and developed for 2010-2014.
- The latest reform was the vision of 2016-2022 directed to meet the skill demands in the ASEAN region (Sem and Hem, 2016; Hangchoun, 2018).

Thanking to these reforming policies, enrolment in higher education increased sharply, especially from 2005, which was from 0.097% in 1980 to 15.9% in 2015 (TWB, 2018). By 2017, there were 12 out of 100 women, 22 out of 100 men received higher education, 78% of Cambodian women and 88% of men participated in economics (WEF, 2017). To further boost enrolment rates in higher education, the government of Cambodia adopted scholarship policy based on grade, woman, economic backgrounds, and rural areas. There were 24,970 associate students, 182,987 undergraduate students, 19,428 post-graduate students, and 1,175 doctoral students (Council of Ministers of Cambodia, 2017). Thus, the outstanding factors such as reforms, aims of meeting the labour market demands, the improvement of higher education quality, and the scholarship play important roles in expanding the higher education opportunity, quality, and enrollments. Government has praised for this success.

3. RESPONDING TO LABOR MARKET DEMAND

Most recently, Cambodia witnesses the increasing cohort of student enrolments in higher education, which remarkably expanded since last decades (Williams *et al.*, 2016). For instance, by 2017, there were 182,987 students studying at Undergraduate level (CMC, 2017). This figure indicated a rise from 10,000 students in 1990s (CDRI, 2013). However, if looking at other countries, such demands also increase such as in the case of England at a faster pace (Bekhradnia and Beech, 2018); (Richardson, 2018) and the case of Australia (Noonan and Pilher, 2018).

There are few factors which are believed to drive the Cambodia's demand for higher education; the matter of meeting labor market demands in economically and socially transitional post war period, privatization of education system allowed private investors to step in and invest in education (Williams *et al.*, 2016). This Win-Win policy fruitfully helps to expand the university choices for students, improve the education quality/standards, and to disseminate higher education institution, which used to be highly populated in Phnom Penh.

These phenomena presented scores of factors which influence the rapid expansion of higher education demand in line with the 7% economic growth period lasting for two decades, which Cambodia needs skilled workers who can perform the works in demands (TWB, 2018). This means, higher education institution takes up significant roles in producing skilled workers to meet this demand (Little and Arthur, 2010; Yann, 2018).

To a great extent, I personally think, Cambodia needs graduates from all majors to respond to the labor market's urgent demand since previous studies/reports indicated Cambodian students are crowded in the social sciences, arts, and humanity majors, where the economic systems needs more students from STEM majors (Chey and Hang, 2013; Dom and Yi, 2018). Latest reports pointed out that companies across sectors are forced to delay or cancel their services due to a serious shortage of hard skilled workers, National Employment Agency (2016); Voun (2018a). This means that HEI must not produce the human capital for its own sake, but produces capable human capital in response to the growing demand or those skilled workers will be needed less or used less.

4. DESIRING FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES

35% of Cambodians are still living in poverty, in which children and adolescents under the age of 19 constituted 45% of the poor (Voun, 2018b). Studies have pointed out the strong relationship between higher education and social mobility and gender empowerment (Marginson, 2017; Dom and Yi, 2018). Thus, education is not only a weapon to conquer poverty. Furthermore, higher education can be used to challenge gender roles.

It should be highlighted that, Cambodians have been using education to climb vertical social mobility has been a popular mean in both the past and present. However, in the past, Cambodians, especially boys had to enter monkhood to get educated. Later on, they left monkhood and enter the government jobs or become the soldier (Headley, 1990). While in the present day, people can receive education from basic education to higher education

publicly available to all without traditionally becoming a monk. Furthermore, it is seen that education, employment, family motivation, and community factors become an individual's education aspirations for vertical social mobility and challenges to gender stereotypes rather than cultural requirements (Sen, 2017; Say, 2018).

5. METHOD

I used the qualitative method of face-to-face in-depth interviews to explore the details of respondents' expectations in higher education. For instance, I could extensively investigate the connection of higher education opportunity and their social mobility, which semi-structured interviews fits well and allows me to raise open and follow-up questions with higher response rate (Neuman, 2014). The questions such as their family income, parent's occupations and residence were included in the interviews to find the connections of their higher education, expectations and social backgrounds.

The interviews were conducted with 32 respondents (12 men and 20 women). They were recruited based in Phnom Penh from 4 universities, between May and June 2019. The non-probability-convenience technique was used to recruit respondents (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Most respondents are my students, and some I got myself familiarize with them to inform them about the objectives of the study to avoid the concerns over their privacy and other ethical issues. Besides the demographic information of respondents, only 5 questions were asked and followed by unstructured questions to seek for details. Names, address, email address, and phone numbers were not asked or disclosed during the interviews. Each interview took place in the café shop and library and spent 30 minutes. I recorded the interviews with respondents' permission for the purpose of full transcription later. Using three stages of coding namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Neuman, 2014). I analyzed the interviews employing thematic analysis to identify the similar themes centered on the focused topic (Neuman, 2014).

In Table 4.1, the respondents' details were divided in 9 categories; Gender=52 (20 female and 12 male), Age from 19-24 (median age=21.9), residence (12 from Phnom Penh and 20 from Province/rural), occupation of father (11 farmers, 4 teachers, 3 business, 3 ministry, 4 shopkeepers, and 1 each for taxi driver, self-employed journalist and military), mother's occupation (11 farmers, 8 housewives, 8 shopkeepers, 2 in business, 1 in private, 1 teacher), academic year from first to fourth year (median academic year=3.2), major (11 students in Finance, Banking and Business, 7 students in ICT and engineering, 2 in law, 1 in Khmer literature, 1 in medical and two in international relations and studies). There were 10 students came from private universities and 22 came from public universities. The income range started from below \$1553 to above \$1225.

Table-4.1. Respondents' background details.

No.	Gender	Age	Residence	Employment sector of:		Academic year	Faculty	Type of institution	Family income range
				Father	Mother				
1	F	20	Phnom Penh	Farmer	Shopkeeper	2	English	Public	\$ 153 to \$306
2	F	23	Province	Farmer	Farmer	4	ITC	Public	\$153-\$306
3	F	22	Phnom Penh	N/A	Business	3	English	Public	\$1225-
4	F	22	Phnom Penh	Ministry	Housewife	3	International Study	Public	\$307-\$612
5	F	23	Province	Farmer	Housewife	4	Khmer	Public	Below \$153
6	F	24	Province	Military	Shopkeeper	4	English	Public	\$153-\$306
7	M	19	Phnom Penh	Business	Business	2	Business	Public	\$613-\$1224
8	M	20	Phnom Penh	Shopkeeper	Shopkeeper	3	Language	Public	\$613-\$1224
9	M	24	Phnom Penh	Teacher	Private	4	Mathematics	Public	Above-\$1225
10	M	23	Province	Teacher	Farmer	3	International Relations	Public	\$613 - \$1224
11	M	23	Province	Farmer	Farmer	4	Finance	Public	Below \$153
12	M	24	Province	Taxi driver	Shopkeeper	3	Banking	Private	\$153-\$306
13	M	23	Province	Shopkeeper	Shopkeeper	3	Engineering	Public	\$613-\$1224
14	M	23	Province	Business	Housewife	4	Engineering	Public	\$153-\$306
15	M	22	Province	Business	housewife	4	English	Public	\$613-\$1224
16	F	21	Phnom Penh	Tailor	Housewife	4	Law	Private	\$153-\$306
17	M	19	Phnom Penh	Shopkeeper	Shopkeeper	1	Business	Private	\$153-\$306
18	M	22	Phnom Penh	Self-employed	Housewife	4	Law	Private	\$613-\$1224
19	F	23	Province	Shopkeeper	Shopkeeper	4	Business	Private	\$613-\$1224
20	F	20	Province	Teacher	Farmer	2	Banking	Private	\$153-\$306
21	M	24	Phnom Penh	Teacher	Housewife	3	Medical	Private	\$613-\$1224
22	F	20	Province	Farmer	Farmer	2	Finance	Private	Below \$153
23	F	20	Phnom Penh	Ministry	Teacher	3	Banking	Private	\$613-\$1224
24	F	21	Province	Unemployed	Farmer	2	Finance	Public	Below \$153
25	F	21	Province	Farmer	Farmer	2	English	Public	Below \$153
26	F	22	Province	Farmer	Farmer	3	ITC	Public	Below \$153
27	F	21	Province	Farmer	Housewife	3	Mathematics	Public	\$153-\$306
28	F	21	Province	Journalist	Shopkeeper	4	Banking	Private	\$307-\$612
29	F	22	Phnom Penh	Farmer	Farmer	4	ITC	Public	\$153-\$306
30	F	22	Province	Farmer	Farmer	4	ITC	Public	\$153-\$306
31	F	22	Province	Farmer	Farmer	4	ITC	Public	\$307-\$612
32	F	25	Province	Ministry	N/A	4	Finance	Public	\$613-\$1224

6. FINDINGS

6.1. *Desire for Broader Knowledge*

Respondents came from both public and private universities and in both scholarship and non-scholarship program. The average age of respondents is 21.9. The youngest respondent was 19 and the oldest was 25 years of age. From the respondents' perspectives, students viewed higher education as the only mean to widen their knowledge through modern curriculum. The higher education is equally opened for all. In addition to that, improving the capacities and qualifications as a one of the reasons they pursue higher education. Almost all of the respondents highlighted the significance of higher education as a life-long learning process and a life chance that they should pursue. These students casted their belief that whatever the courses they learn at university, these courses are well designed for the need of labor markets and they seem to be confident that their demands would be met accordingly.

Actually, I pursue higher education because I have three reasons — to broaden knowledge since knowledge now is important, to have higher and better qualification for better future job, and to fulfil my dream in achieving higher education.

Other respondents also expressed their commitments in looking for further opportunity to go beyond Undergraduate Education level.

After higher school, skills and knowledge are crucial for me to get a good job. But I won't stop here because I am now preparing myself and looking for oversea education opportunities through scholarship program. I have friends who got scholarship abroad. Their parents looked very proud of their children. I want to make my parents feel the same.

However, respondents admitted that they link the higher education qualifications such as higher degree and oversea degree to higher income, higher status, and higher job satisfactions.

6.2. *Challenging Gender Stereotypes*

From researcher's observations, female students are conscious about their gender stereotypes that enforced upon them by the culture they practice and society they live in. They showed willingness to challenge the gender stereotypes. They determinedly believe in equal capacity that they can do well in education. They also expressed strong desires to be financially independent from their husbands when they get married. These students remarked:

I want to challenge the old Khmer saying that says "girl cannot turn the stove around"¹. If I reach my goal, I can be a role model for other girls, especially girls in my village and community can look up to me. It is my dream to study at university. I strongly believe that every girl should have this dream as they are equally qualified to realize their university education dreams. Success does not depend on gender. I want to be financially independent [especially] after marriage by getting higher education and get a good job. This means I can feed myself. I can help my parents and my siblings with my own money occasionally. His money is not my money, right? she spoke.

Hence, respondents convinced me that gender roles, equality, and financial independence can be the new factors which motivate them to pursue higher education expecting good employment in return.

¹Means: women should just learn how to cook, to keep the house, and to be a good housewife. There are many works she has to finish up in the kitchen. So the outside works left to her husband/men!

6.3. Social Mobility Prospects

Some respondents noted higher education as a crucial point for national development, economic growth and family's social mobility. Hence, some liked using the expression "helping myself, my family and society". In addition to that, both male and female respondents literally linked higher education qualifications to employment and social mobility opportunity. These findings also indicated that some students are facing financial hardship in paying tuition fee and living costs in the capital, but they sanguinely expected their higher education credentials would hand them good jobs in the near future. Some of them said:

To be honest, studying at university is a big financial challenge for me. I have to pay tuition fee, books, rent, utility, travel and others. My parents are farmers so we have small income. Sometimes, they took private loans to pay my tuition fee. But, I cannot do anything now, but to study hard for better life in the future and financially help my parents back. I just started a part time job this week and hope to ease parents' burden.

My dad is ill so he earns nothing, my mother has a small business at home. It is lucky that we can make some income to keep coming, though it is not quite enough...Ah, I don't want to talk about it. But, after finishing the study, I want to have a good job with a good salary. I hope this education give me the best one in the future.

Some respondents suggested that government should have dormitory to students from rural areas, especially to those poor students so that do not have to spend on the rental house. Some respondents even further suggested small allowance to scholarship holders. Some suggested whether the study loans from the government is possible because their family does not have to borrow from private bank with high interest rate.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

7.1. Desire for Knowledge and Employment

The present study has disclosed that the demand for higher education among youth is one of their cherished dreams to expand their knowledge as a global and knowledge citizen. By acquiring it, this knowledge will play a significant role in shaping their future. This means that higher education institution is a place where students can realize their dreams. Jackson (2012) argues, the actualization of American dream lies in the hand of HEIs where HE opportunities are equally accessible.

The desire for broad knowledge is not a singular expectation. It comes in the forms of an employment, income, status and social mobility. These are believed to be driven by a shift of demand for knowledge workers rather than manual workers pushed by the industrial economic system, social requirements, and job market demand. Thus, the roles of higher education institutions as the secondary education is no longer able to respond to these increasing demands (Holzer, 2015). This means that the higher education has to train their students for what industry wants, but with guaranteed quality.

Studies have proved from various parts of the world that those who are university graduates have better job opportunities than those of higher school graduates (OECD, 2019). Some found that "higher education is for the world of work" (Ali and Jalal, 2018) and because of this, strong correlation with their employment opportunity was always highlighted (West, 2000).

In the context of Cambodia, Having achieved an average economic growth 7.7 percent between 1995 and 2018, Cambodia needs skilled labor force to sustain this growth (Thomas, 2019). For instance, the National Employment Agency highlighted the lack of skills among the job seekers and the skills to meet the job market demands (NEA, 2018). From the recruiters' perspectives, Cambodian youth fails to meet the required professional qualifications of the companies. The serious problem is that there are still thousands of vacant posts in each sector (Sen, 2018; Voun, 2018a). The desire for knowledge should have a strong but automatic linkage with employment opportunity. The

desire, however, should be motivated and utilized so that it can fulfil the skill gap in the job market and individual's dreams.

7.2. Challenging Stereotypes

From past few decades, Cambodian society acknowledged the social and economic benefits of girl's education (Stormer, 2000). Yet, female enrolment in higher education is still a struggle as viewed by policy makers (Lynch, 2011). The latest report by World Economic Forum pointed out that there was only 12.2% of Cambodian women enrolled in tertiary education is 12.2% compared to men 14.1% (World Economic Forum, 2018). Although both men and women enrollment rate is almost compatible, Cambodian women in higher education is still a hot topic for debates and many viewed this issue rooted in the Khmer culture and needs serious actions to solve the problem. This means an individual cannot depart from culture influences in every stage of life. Making a decision in education and choice of women are shaped by ideologies and values- religion, family and community values (Dom and Yi, 2018; Tsang and Poun, 2018). To get away from this, means they are challenging the cultural stereotypes.

For instance, in this study, the female respondents are prepared to challenge the culture and move up to the next level where they have choices of education and employment opportunities for their own. A similar study by Tsang and Poun (2018) pointed out the roles of proud parents in dispelling such gender stereotypes. Thus, there is no doubt that the findings highlighted the new perceptions of young female Cambodians on their life course. But the question can be raised, is this a beginning of gender consciousness against socio-cultural oppressions of women?

7.3. Social Mobility

The concept of social mobility long exists in Cambodian society, especially when Cambodians use education an effective mean to achieve social status and mobility. In the past, Cambodian attained the social mobility by entering monkhood to study, later on left the monkhood to become normal person. The former Buddhist monks would have higher chance of study and become public civil servants by their reading, writing, speaking, having skills taught during the monkhood. Some chose to become soldiers (Headley, 1990). Current trend, however, has shifted from temple education to public school monitored by government. Yet, the mean has not drifted away from education. Studies have indicated the intention, especially, of the women who accomplished their social mobility by means of higher education (Sen, 2017).

Similarly, this study pointed the same track that respondents look forward to higher education as an effective remedy to their backward class. Consequently, this pressurizes the education institution to act effectively and respond timely to the demand beyond its traditional curricular but to step into examining the expectations from labor market. This means education institution must be consistent to what individual expect for returns and what labor market require (Hammack, 2016). On the one hand, concerning authority including Ministry of Education, policy makers and government should monitor this process to ensure successful delivery of education to meet those expectations. However, suggestions from young respondents such as scholarship, small allowance, and dormitory "accommodation" should be provided to poor rural Cambodians by the governments or university.

All in all, it is important to note that this study is not aimed to generalize or glorify the outcome of higher education although the findings are consistent with previous studies. The findings of this study reflected the merit of higher education opportunity among younger Cambodian generation youth—going beyond the theory into the real situations in the conceptual context of social mobility. To meet the expectations of those young Cambodians, the education opportunity with quality should be ensured and effectively implemented on the existing policy and

initiating new policy to get best of it. Failure to do so would result in cultivating disbelief and devaluing among the stakeholders.

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