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Cambodia, Overcoming Hardships, Rebuilds its Education System

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It is estimated that there will soon be approximately 25,000 Cambodian students eligible for higher education study. As academic and foreign language skills improve, many of these students will also soon be eligible for study in institutions of higher education overseas.

Cambodia has no restrictions on students who wish to study abroad, providing they have the necessary funds to do so. Since human resource development is one of the highest priorities for Cambodia, it may be anticipated that the Cambodian government in the future will strongly encourage its best qualified students to study abroad.

Various non-governmental organizations are sponsoring students to study overseas, especially in Thailand, France, Canada, Australia and the United States.

A few American universities have also begun to offer scholarships and fellowships for Cambodian students. The recently reopened U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh will grant a limited number of Fulbright travel grants for academic year 1993-94.

The various Cambodian government ministries have established committees to assist their employees in obtaining scholarships for overseas studies.

At the moment, it is difficult for Cambodian students to obtain information about the procedures for applying to overseas universities and col-

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leges, as well as about overseas academic program offerings.

It is also difficult for many graduate students who received their education prior to the Khmer Rouge takeover to document their former academic studies since their credentials were destroyed. Foreign admissions officers will be confronted with incomplete and unfamiliar transcripts, some of which will bear the names of defunct or reorganized institutions of higher education. There will also be many problems in establishing equivalencies of diplomas and determining the various levels of education attained.

The Toll of War

In the 1960s Cambodia had one of the highest literary rates and most pro-

gressive education systems in Southeast Asia. The University of Phnom Penh was a showpiece for visiting foreign education leaders, and thousands of young Cambodians were pursuing university studies abroad, especially in the United States and France.

Less than 20 years later, as a result of U.S. carpet bombing in the 1970s and the Khmer Rouge "agrarian socialist revolution," Cambodia was without an education system.

Along with the two million Cambodians killed (one-fifth of the country's population), were 80 percent of the country's 25,000 teachers and academics, and most of its trained and educated professionals. By 1979, Cambodia was a ruined country, with fewer than 50 doctors and less than 5,000 teachers.

Under the Khmer Rouge regime the economic and social structure of the country was virtually destroyed. During the Khmer Rouge era there was no formal classroom education in Cambodia, and institutions of higher education, public schools and libraries were destroyed or put to other uses such as communal kitchens, dormitories, prisons or storehouses. Books, teaching materials, libraries and laboratories were systematically destroyed.

The re-establishment of an education system was one of the highest priorities of the new govern-



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ment. Between 1979-81, UNICEF and the International Red Cross coordinated a massive international relief effort which provided approximately \$370 million in humanitarian assistance. About 6,000 schools were rebuilt and thousands of teachers were trained. On-the-job training programs were implemented for primary, elementary, and secondary school teachers and administrators.

Since 1979, 21 provincial primary school teacher training centers and seven lower secondary teacher training centers have been established. Upper secondary school teachers, teacher trainers and education administrators are trained at the national *Ecole Normale* (now part of the University of Phnom Penh) and the *Ecole Supérieure des Cadres de Gestion de l'Éducation*. Over the past 14 years, the people of Cambodia have made great progress in rebuilding their country and its educational system. Cambodia now boasts some 55,000 teachers, with thousands more in training, and 13 institutions of higher education.

Structure and Organization of Education

The Cambodian system of education is loosely patterned on the French model. The current system is based on 11 years of instruction: five years of primary schooling (*premier cycle*, classes 1-5), three years of lower secondary school (*premier degré du deuxième cycle*, classes 6-8), and three years of upper secondary schooling (*deuxième degré du deuxième cycle*, classes 9-11).

Although Cambodia has stated its intention to implement universal primary education, attendance at this level is currently not compulsory.

The Ministry of Education sets national education standards, including school curricula, and prescribes textbooks. The provinces then bear financial and administrative responsibility for the education system, including school facilities, instructional materials, equipment and supplies, teachers' salaries and the upkeep of teacher training centers. Indi-

vidual communities in the provinces have assumed responsibility for the construction of education facilities, especially primary school facilities.

Presently, it is estimated that primary school enrollment (ages 6-11) is 90 percent in Phnom Penh and provincial capitals, 70-80 percent in provincial towns, 50-60 percent in rural areas and less than 50 percent in ethnic minority areas.

Only 40-45 percent of students completing primary school continue on to the lower secondary level. While secondary level education has expanded greatly, especially in urban areas, most districts in the country are without upper secondary schools.

The literacy rate in Cambodia is currently estimated at 42 percent.

Postsecondary Education

The Ministry of Education provides oversight through its department of higher and specialized education for all institutions of higher education in Cambodia. However, there is no independent controlling body for institutions of higher education.

The institutions described below are controlled and funded by several different ministries. They were originally established to train undergraduates, who would then be offered employment in their respective ministries. Enrollments were thus governed by a particular ministry's work force needs. This relationship, however, has recently begun to break down because more students than can be employed by the ministries are now enrolling in these institutions.

With the exception of the 21 provincial teacher training centers and the Institute of Agricultural Science, all other institutions of higher education are located in the capital, Phnom Penh. Therefore, a student who wishes to prepare for a professional career other than an elementary or junior secondary school teacher must move to Phnom Penh.

During the Khmer Rouge era Cambodia's institutions of higher educa-

tion suffered the same fate as the public schools. In 1979, the once prestigious University of Phnom Penh, with its graceful modern buildings, lay in ruins—its windows gone, laboratories wrecked and its library gutted. Most of its highly trained faculty had either been killed or fled the country.

- The first institution of higher education to be re-established (by the Ministry of Health) was the Faculty of Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry in 1979 (originally established in 1952 and restructured in 1981-82 to include dentistry). With a teaching staff of approximately 59, the school is currently training about 1,411 students, and is gradually being upgraded with some French assistance. Two different programs are offered: a seven-year medical degree (one year of basic sciences, six years of regular courses and a one-year internship) and a four-year technician's diploma. The language of instruction is French and English for Dentistry.

- In 1980 the *Ecole Centrale des Cadres Sanitaires* (also known as the Central Nurse Training School) was established to train nurses, midwives, laboratory technicians, physiotherapists and pediatric nurses in a three-year program. Current enrollment is 1,794 with a teaching staff of 56.

- Also in 1980, the Ministry of Education established the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* to train secondary school teachers, and the *Ecole Supérieure de Recyclage des Cadres de Planification et de Gestion de l'Éducation* (now known as the *Ecole Supérieure des Cadres de Gestion de l'Éducation*) to train teacher trainers and education administrators. This last institution offers training seminars from three months up to three years in duration. Current enrollment is difficult to determine due to the nature of their academic programs, but is estimated at several hundred. The teaching staff is believed to number slightly less than 100.

- The Institute of Advanced Technology was established in 1981 to train electrical, chemical, mining and civil engineers as well as technicians. The Institute

recently ceased recruiting for technician level programs and is focusing on engineering training and research. A five-year degree program is offered for professionals and a three-year diploma for technicians. Instruction is in Khmer and Russian. (This school was formerly known variously as the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Higher Technology Institute and the *Institut Technique Supérieur de l'Amitié Kampucheo-Sovietique*.) The current enrollment is estimated between 602 and 766 students. The teaching staff is thought to number 112.

● In 1981, the Foreign Language Institute (also known as the *Ecole de Langues*) was established to train language teachers, translators and interpreters. It has now been incorporated into the University of Phnom Penh as its department of foreign languages. However, the department is often still referred to locally as the Foreign Language Institute.

● In 1984 the Institute of Economics (also known as the Economic Sciences Institute) was established with five faculties: agricultural economics, industrial economics, commerce, finance, and economic planning.

The institute currently has approximately 1,200 students and a teaching staff of about 50 as well as several foreign teachers (including an American English teacher funded by the Asia Foundation).

A four-year bachelor's degree program is offered with instruction in French and Khmer. There are plans to organize this institute into two faculties: economic sciences and commerce and management. The Institute also hopes to offer a degree program in international trade to be taught in English.

The Institute of Economics has received assistance from various French sources and a number of non-governmental organizations have provided scholarships for faculty development, including the French *Comité Catholique Contre la Faim et Pour le Développement*, the U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project/USIRP and the State University of New York at Buffalo.

● The Institute of Agriculture Sciences (formerly known as the Chamkar Doung Agricultural Institute) was established in 1966, re-established in 1980 and again in 1985. It has five faculties: agronomy, forestry, fisheries, veterinary science, and mechanics. There are approximately 672 students enrolled with a teaching staff of 26. A four-year bachelor's degree program is offered with instruction in Khmer, French, and some English.

● The *Ecole Secondaire de Pédagogie Maternelle* was established in 1986 to train

ers (mostly English teachers). The great discrepancy in enrollment is due to the large number of students enrolled in preparatory courses (known as Foundation Courses) and the so-called "Ghost Track" students, those students previously enrolled in the Russian program who then switched to the English program in their third and fourth years.

The foreign language department is receiving assistance from the Maryknoll sisters and the Quaker Service Australia/QSA is providing considerable assistance to the university in the area of teacher training. QSA and French groups are also providing salary supplements to University faculty and staff. Instruction is primarily in Khmer with some in English and Russian.

The university is struggling to overcome serious and intractable problems. Students experience major difficulties in obtaining official transcripts from the university due to poor record-keeping resulting from a lack of any clerical staff. The university has received no international assistance to renovate its physical plant, which is in a deplorable state. Most buildings lack sanitary facilities, laboratories are virtually non-existent and the library has only a very limited number of volumes. The dormitories and teachers' housing are dilapidated, and student and faculty morale is low.

● The University of Fine Arts (known also as the *Université des Beaux Arts*) was originally founded in 1965. Its exact date of reopening is unsure. It has five faculties: architecture, archaeology, plastic arts, music and choreography. There are approximately 400 students enrolled. The number of faculty is unknown. Instruction is in Khmer.

● The Faculty of Law was re-established in 1989 under the Ministry of Justice and graduated its first class in 1992. There are currently 426 students enrolled in a five-year academic program, with one year of preparatory studies. The curriculum is based on French models. French is the official language of instruction, although English may be studied as an elective. The number of teachers is unknown.



pre-school teachers. No other information is available.

● In 1988 the University of Phnom Penh reopened as the result of a merger of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* and the *Ecole de Langues*. The university currently has 11 faculties: philosophy, history, psycho-pedagogy, geography, Khmer language and literature, Vietnamese, western languages (English, French, German and Russian), mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. There is a plan to reorganize into two faculties: arts and humanities and sciences, and to adopt the French system of diplomas.

Enrollment is variously estimated between 2,500 and 6,000 students, and the university has approximately 220 faculty members and a number of foreign teach-

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The Role of Funding Organizations

In 1990, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute/CDRI was established in Phnom Penh. CDRI is an independent, non-profit educational organization and offers a variety of programs and activities which seek to enhance Cambodia's institutional and managerial capacity in development, planning and development aid management.

CDRI has as its mission the training of personnel to deal effectively with the influx of international aid organizations and lending institutions that have followed the recent opening of Cambodia to the outside world.

CDRI provides training programs in English language, computing, business and organizational management, banking, economics, project appraisal and investment analysis, rural development and planning. The language of instruction is English.

CDRI also operates an English Language Training Center in cooperation with the Intensive English Language Institute of the State University of New York at Buffalo, where several hundred students have been trained and tested since 1991. Academic programs are usually short-term, non-degree, certificate programs; hundreds have been trained since 1990. There are 12 full-time teaching and administrative staff members, including five expatriates.

CDRI is funded by a variety of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, including the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau/AIDAB, the Swedish International Development Authority/SIDA, the Dutch government, Oxfam-UK and Oxfam-Ireland, *Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité*/CIDSE, Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad/APHEDA and the Cambodian-Canada Development Program.

Ongoing Reorganization

Many of Cambodia's institutions of higher education described above are currently undergoing reorganization of both their curricula and academic programs, as well as their administrations.

It is anticipated that Cambodian institutions of higher education will undertake a rapid expansion of both the number and variety of degree offerings. In addition to a strong demand for the health sciences, management, engineering, and English language, the subjects in demand in the future will include history, archeology and the fine arts as tourism develops into a major industry.

Problems of Reorganization

Despite the huge investment made in re-establishing an education system, most school buildings do not meet modest government standards and do not have safe running water or sanitary facilities. There is a desperate shortage of teaching materials, teaching aids and basic equipment. Due to a lack of teachers and classrooms, most schools in the country operate on a four-hour double shift system. All institutions are grappling with serious problems of over-enrollment and a chronic lack of funds, trained teachers, textbooks, equipment and suitable facilities.

In addition, most institutions have had to provide a "foundation year" or preparatory programs in order to ensure that students wishing to enter degree programs have been properly prepared. Preparatory programs are required by the Ministry of Education to include two hours a week of English language instruction. This is difficult for many schools to implement due to the shortage of expatriate and Khmer English language teachers.

The quality of academic staff in most institutions of higher education is reportedly not very high, but slowly improving. For example, most of the teaching staff at the University of Phnom Penh hold only bachelor's degrees at best, and

many are themselves recent graduates of the university. Many of Cambodia's institutions of higher education have recently sent several of their young faculty members to Australia, Belgium, Canada, France and the United States for graduate studies. When these trained teachers return with upgraded knowledge, teaching and research skills, as well as proficiency in foreign languages, their home institutions will benefit greatly.

The Role of Foreign Language Teaching

Despite Cambodia's policy of "Khmerization," Khmer is not the language of instruction in all institutions of higher education.

Many schools have had successive associations with French, Russian and Vietnamese expatriate teachers, and thus adopted their native languages as the medium of instruction. When the aid donor changed, so too did the language of instruction, as well as the curriculum, textbooks and teaching methodologies.

With the departure of teachers from Vietnam, Russia and other Eastern bloc countries, the Khmer staff have had to assume direct responsibility for teaching. The result has been the reinstitution of the Khmer language as a medium of instruction. Nevertheless, the government of Cambodia recently decreed that French and English are to be "the second foreign languages of the country." All secondary school students are now required to study either French or English from year six to year eleven. However, because of a lack of English language teachers, relatively few secondary school students are currently taking English language classes.

The situation in institutions of higher education is just as difficult. Every institution is trying to offer English, usually by engaging volunteer expatriate English teachers, or by asking non-governmental organizations such as the QSA, the British Council and the Maryknoll sisters, to sponsor English language training programs. Most institutions have developed

their own English language training curricula, which has led to a duplication of effort and little cooperation among schools. There has been such limited training of Khmer English language teachers that when the expatriates leave, the English programs usually collapse.

The English language training programs of Cambodian institutions of higher education suffered a further setback when the United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia/UNTAC recently entered the country and hired many Khmer English language teachers as interpreters and translators.

Despite these difficulties, the teaching of English is flourishing in hundreds of private English language training centers which have sprung up in a district of Phnom Penh known as "Oxford Street." Thousands of young Cambodians, from students and cyclo-drivers to hotel and restaurant staff, are enrolled in after-hours English language training programs.

The Government and the Ministry of Education clearly recognize the importance of developing English, French and Japanese language capabilities to take advantage of opportunities for access to overseas technology and training. At the present time, however, there are few Khmer students able to demonstrate sufficient proficiency in English on the Test of English as a Foreign Language/TOEFL to qualify for study in American institutions of higher education. The Educational Testing Service/ETS of Princeton, New Jersey, has just conditionally approved Phnom Penh as an experimental test site for TOEFL. An American volunteer English teacher at the University of Phnom Penh is now arranging for the first TOEFL to be administered on May 8, 1993. No other standardized tests, such as the Graduate Record Examination/GRE, or the Graduate Management Admission Test/GMAT, are yet available.

As a result of generous assistance from the French government in the area of French language training, many more Cambodian students have been able to obtain scholarships to study in France than in English-speaking countries.

Help Needed from International Community

Despite unimaginable hardships, sacrifices and difficulties, the people of Cambodia have rebuilt their education system in an incredibly short period of time. This may be their greatest achievement and one which has resulted in significant benefit to the social and economic development of the Cambodian nation.

Much has been accomplished, but even more remains to be done. There is a great need for more educational facilities as well as for improved facilities, especially in rural areas, in order to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. There is also an urgent need for instructional materials and supplies, equipment, libraries, and laboratories as well as for trained teachers on all levels of the education system.

Cambodia cannot continue to improve and develop its system of education without substantial assistance from the international community. This assistance is needed by both the pre- and post-secondary education sectors. In the case of Cambodia's fledgling institutions of higher education, which have so long been cut off from foreign sources of technical and professional development, there is a desperate need for short- and long-term training in all academic fields. Cambodian institutions of higher education need professional contacts with their overseas counterparts in every academic field. Volunteer expatriate teachers are sought in every discipline and will be welcomed by intelligent, appreciative and highly motivated Khmer students. Cambodian institutions of higher education would benefit greatly from very small investments in their academic programs on the part of overseas universities. Even one scholarship for a promising young faculty member or a small donation of textbooks and reference materials or laboratory equipment would represent an important contribution to the future development of a Cambodian institution of higher education in particular and the country in general.

Universities in industrialized countries were very generous in helping China upgrade and develop its educational system a decade ago. They supported thousands of Chinese students with scholarships and fellowships and provided many visiting faculty members (known as foreign experts) to teach in Chinese institutions of higher education. They now have a unique opportunity to provide the same generous assistance to their Cambodian counterparts at this critical moment in Cambodia's redevelopment. They should not turn away from this historic opportunity. ■

Author's note:

The information contained in this article is based on a variety of sources. However, the reader should understand that the situation in Cambodia is constantly changing. The sources consulted by the author often provided conflicting information, and government ministries frequently report different data for the same educational institution. Every effort has been made to verify this information, and the author regrets any inadvertent errors or omissions.

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For more information, consult:

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