Cambodian Students' Online Learning Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Vision for Future Measures

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how individuals learn across all subject areas. The spread of the coronavirus has caused disruptions in the educational institutions of several nations. Virtual meetings are currently employed in several online learning tools to replace face-to-face meetings that were formerly used for teaching and learning. The construction of online learning programs has been mandated for all Cambodian schools to provide students with additional alternatives for studying and to aid in their skill development. Those are the most important factors to take into account. All grade levels of students need to deal with a variety of difficulties, such as limited internet access, disruptions while learning at home, a lack of teaching, communication issues, the ability to afford a smartphone, the ability to use a smartphone, technology ignorance, a lack of parental understanding, and school dropouts (see Em, 2021b).

Challenges

The internet is the most important component of online learning. Restricted internet access is the most challenging difficulty for all students in Cambodia, particularly those in rural regions where internet connection is limited, according to a new survey conducted by Em (2021a) and published in the Cambodian Education Forum. It has been advised that Cambodians use the Zoom App, Microsoft Team, Google Meet, Group Messenger, Facebook Group, and Telegram Group and Channel as online learning tools. These online platforms cannot work without the internet. Due to the internet restriction, several problems have arisen, making it more difficult for students to learn (Em, 2021b).

Additionally, as noted in the survey, several students claimed that learning from home creates several difficulties. When students study at home, they might hear a lot of sounds from their surroundings. For instance, they mentioned that a lot of people who spoke extremely loudly upset them when they were studying at home. This conduct caused them to be distracted

from their online activities. Additionally, they claimed that people who were partying and singing karaoke in the villages regularly distracted them from their focus on online courses (Em, 2021a).

The absence of education is another challenging problem. Because several instructors did not teach their classes according to the curriculum, many students expressed their displeasure with them. These students argued that because their lecturers neglected online training once the infection spread, they had learned nothing from their professors. Additionally, the students complained that some of their professors were unfit to teach since they had no duties outside of their jobs (Em, 2021a).

Additionally, several students said that they had trouble communicating. As a result, when studying online, students struggle to listen and communicate with friends and teachers. They said that the opposite was also true: when they talked, their professors did not hear them, and vice versa. They also asserted that the previously described issues hindered their learning and will have unfavorable long-term effects. They further indicated that the effects of their future employment being unsatisfactory will eventually be reflected in the lethargic advancement of their nation (Em, 2021a).

The price of a smartphone and its ability to be recharged are two additional challenging issues. Some students claimed that because of their parents' financial situation and their lack of resources, they were unable to purchase a smartphone. As a result, they were unable to learn online. Other students reported having mobile phones but not having the money to top up their phone credits. They were unable to learn properly as a result. When their phone accounts were active, they could learn with difficulties, but when they were not active, they were not able to learn at all (Em, 2021a).

Another significant problem is being not permitted to use a smartphone. A few female students said that since their parents would not allow them to own a smartphone, they were unable to take online courses. They said that their parents were worried that they would use their phones for activities besides learning, such as flirting or casual conversation. Additionally, their parents claimed that their daughters may come across sexually explicit images online. Those students received no gain from their online study as a result (Em, 2021a).

Inadequate knowledge of technology is a significant issue. Numerous students were

unprepared for online modalities due to the unexpected nature of the COVID-19 outbreak. They were unable to handle online learning as a result. The students said that because they did not know how to use the internet platforms, they had learned nothing from them and that their futures were being completely upended. These students voiced their disappointment with their prospects in their final statement (Em, 2021b).

Another set of students claimed that their issue was due to poor parental communication. They argued that their parents did not understand the value of education, especially online education. They continued by saying that they were not extrinsically motivated and that their parents did not understand the values of the study well. Despite their sincere motivation, they seemed to slow down the online learning process. These students appeared to learn less from online courses as a consequence (Em, 2021b).

Dropping out of school is more of a result of learning than a challenge. Due to many mentioned challenges, several adult students have left school and are looking for suitable work to support their families. This portends poorly for the future growth of the nation. If a nation's human resources are insufficient, it cannot develop. We all fear dropping out since, following an abrupt dropout, students could continue living their lives in the wrong way because they are not qualified to go for a respectable job and might end up associating with a bad role model in society. Social problems would result from that. In a word, dropout is a result of the challenges associated with online education during the pandemic (Em, 2021b).

Opportunities

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented both challenges and opportunities for higher education in Cambodia. While challenges and problems during the pandemic are inevitable, all stakeholders in Cambodian higher education should look on the bright side and use the pandemic to transform and digitize the higher education system. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity not only to deepen education reform but also to strengthen the use of ICT and modern technology in Cambodian education. In this regard, the Cambodian government needs to find a way to capitalize on the positive momentum created by the pandemic toward broader integration of ICT and technology into education, especially higher education. This will not only help improve the standards and quality of higher education but also build the digital literacy Cambodia needs to survive in the digital age and provide the next generation with the knowledge and skills they need to be competitive and successful. It is also

necessary for promotion (Heng & Sol, 2021b).

Currently, another Cambodian author noted the opportunities he has learned from the pandemic as followed:

> *..... I believe that COVID-19 is a significant problem when first seen, but if we look closely at other things that we have never done before it emerged, it will become a unique opportunity. For instance, despite teaching in a government school for over ten years, I had only ever done so in the classroom. However, the harsh impact of COVID-19 has inspired me to try an online class as a different method of instruction. Additionally, I have been looking for a better way to instruct my students and have come up with the novel concept of creating video lessons that I can publish for them. They can learn anytime they want, wherever, and this also has certain advantages for me. In a nutshell, COVID-19 is a difficult issue for education, but it also offers many students and other people new opportunities* (Em, 2022, para. 51).

Concluding Remarks

All things considered, the COVID-19 outbreak has had a devastating impact on every sphere of society, especially online educational institutions. Online learning has caused several issues for students. The Cambodian government must thus act right away to solve these problems. Continuous action is necessary; one action is inadequate.

Two Cambodian authors, in writing a book chapter together, noted that:

> *...to ensure online learning and blended learning are widely adopted in the post-pandemic time in developing societies such as Cambodia, more government support and investment are needed. Educational institutions also need to invest in developing and improving existing online learning platforms as well as expanding the provision of internet access and online library resources. Training and orientation programs about online learning, including lessons on online teaching and learning tools and strategies, need to be offered on a regular basis so that students, teachers, and staff could have the opportunity to advance their knowledge and understanding of the different aspects and nuances of online and blended learning* (Heng & Sol, 2021a, pp. 12-13).

To put it briefly, the integration of computer and ICT subjects into the Cambodian school curriculum at all levels is the most important measure that all concerned-education stakeholders need to consider. However, only the integration is not yet guaranteed effectiveness. Thus, regular evaluation and inspection of how and to what extent the subjects are practiced means a better guarantee of effectiveness. The mentioned measures are useful to solve unforeseen challenges in the future.

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