

BOOK REVIEW

Education in Cambodia - From Year Zero Towards International Standards. By Vincent McNamara and Martin Hayden (Eds) (2022), 314 pages. ISBN: 978-981-16-8212-4. Singapore: Springer Nature.

This critically significant work about Cambodia has a principal focus on education and it adequately fulfils the purpose of the Springer Book Series “Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects” notably being the 64th in that series published since 2002. *Education in Cambodia* includes a comprehensive overview and valuable insights into the provision and development of schooling, formal education, and training in Cambodia since Pol Pot’s Year Zero (1975). The book also usefully examines the macro context often dealing with the organisational framework, policy making, and implementation of issues considered.

To attempt a comprehensive analysis of education in Cambodia in its various forms is a major challenge as the Editors state: “Cambodia is one of South East Asia’s economically poorest, most youthful, least urbanised, and most culturally homogeneous countries.” The book aims to provide an overview of education in Cambodia against a background where minimal scholarly material is available to international readers and researchers. Thus, *Education in Cambodia* is the first book of its kind published. Whatever variability might inevitably be found in a multi-authored work, this book establishes a solid basis for future scholars researching sector-level or specific issues in Cambodian education and training.

The volume is presented in three parts outlined by the Editors: “The first part concerns sector-level issues. The second addresses cross-sectoral and policy-related matters. Finally, the third part focuses on stakeholder inclusion issues.” There are 16 chapters referenced to extant research supporting each author’s analysis. The list of Initialisms and Acronyms has 94 items, vitally important given the complexities of the Cambodian government and associated entities. The Index of four pages is short and might have been more extensive, but sufficient. A welcome input for a volume of 16 separate chapters is the rich profile of the contributors. This helps situate a contributor’s professional and academic background, perspective, and any possible bias discerned. A useful inclusion in this publication would have been a collation of all references from separate chapters. Such an integrated list would benefit both Cambodian and international researchers.

Intertwined with the progressive development of education in Cambodia towards international standards is the distinctive and culturally significant issue of the Khmer language. The Editors note inadequate research about the Khmer script in relation to early learning and how the script’s complexity may inhibit development of basic literacy with implications for subsequent of education and training. The Khmer language has Indic and not Sinitic origins being written since the 7th century using a script originating in South India. By comparison, other nations have modified orthography to apparent educational advantage. For example: Korea, in 1443 devised an alphabet, then opposed by Confucian scholars, allowing all people to become literate and currently has one of the highest educational levels in Asia; and Vietnam, under the influence of French missionary priests, adopted the Roman alphabet dating from 1619.

The script issue is not trivial. *Education in Cambodia* records that the PISA-D survey results for Cambodia show that students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds performed more poorly on reading, science, and mathematics proficiency tests. The inherent disadvantage created by the challenge of Khmer script competency and the opportunity to access quality education interrelates with the issue of equity. This is identified in several chapters and by the Editors who in assessing PISA-D and Ministry of Education Youth and Sports data conclude: “Students from the

least advantaged home backgrounds were also shown to have little likelihood of ever achieving a baseline reading and mathematics proficiency level.”

An overview of education in Cambodia written by the Editors identifies key concerns and themes. Part I: Issues at the Sector Level provides in five chapters of 83 pages the anatomy of education and training in the national system. Each chapter presents a succinct outline and analysis of key issues in different sectors of education and training, namely: Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary, Technical and Vocational, and Higher Education. Part II, focussing on Cross-Sector and Policy Issues, further examines critical aspects of the physiology of education policy, operations, and implementation. Crucial contributions, among the eight chapters of 175 pages, include assessment of the teaching profession, leadership and management in the education system, budget and financing, and three chapters dealing with progress and challenges in higher education. In Part III, Stakeholder Inclusion Issues, two chapters of 34 pages, survey the vitally significant matters of female participation in higher education and multilingual education for ethnic minorities.

Education in Cambodia and its treatment of education and related issues is likely to interest not only specifically scholars of matters Cambodian but also researchers of nations in transition and any society that may have experienced, in part, a trauma such as that of the Khmer Rouge Regime. Excluding the Editors, it is notable that of the 26 contributors, 16 are Cambodian nationals. This is a magnificent tribute to the Editors and one significant expression of social and educational progress in Cambodia. In the late 1990s, a book on higher education in Cambodia found it was not possible to include any national contributors because, at that time, published critical assessments may have become career or possibly life-threatening.

Education in Cambodia with its clearly presented tables, graphs and charts has been meticulously edited; and the layout and sub-section headings facilitate easy reading and subject searching. In the Preface, the Series Editors state that: “All volumes in this series aim to meet the interests and priorities of a diverse audience including researchers, policy makers, and practitioners; tertiary students; teachers at all levels within education systems; and members of the public who are interested in better understanding cutting-edge developments in education and schooling in Asia-Pacific.” *Education in Cambodia - From Year Zero Towards International Standards* is commended to this readership as a unique compilation. It also represents a challenge for further research and publication, especially by Cambodian nationals.

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