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Chapter 8 | Fostering Innovation in Cambodian TVET

Proloeng TOP

Future Scenario

In the last semester of 2028 Pisey, a student in her last year of lower secondary at Bak Tuk High School in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, is scheduled to receive a followup online counseling session with her respected teacher. It is time for Pisey to decide where she will end up for higher secondary school, either general education or Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Without a doubt, Pisey knows where she plans to go in her career path, as she is passionate about robotics, and she has decided to go for TVET school, under the mandate of the Ministry of Labour and Vocational and Training (MLVT).

A year later, Pisey has been selected for a two-year apprenticeship program and has been trained in a huge new Japanese Robot Manufacturing Company located in the Special Economic Zone of Phnom Penh. This success has been largely thanks to the initiative of the Royal Government of Cambodia and their support to engage the private sector in the TVET ecosystem through a publicprivate partnership. The program is a collaboration between the National Polytechnic Institute of Cambodia (NPIA) and the Japanese company. The program requires Pisey to follow two different curricula, one from the school for online classes and one from the company for onsite training. Online training is delivered through the latest TVET e-learning platform, managed by the MLVT, which comprises various interactive learning materials and content. Pisey finds it enjoyable learning online and spends roughly two hours every other day losing herself in the platform. Pisey is also required to attend workshops at NPIA to take in-depth and practical technical training which is facilitated by her professors. The schedule is very flexible for Pisey to attend the workshops. The program helps Pisey to acquire new skills by utilizing knowledge she learned from the e-learning classes. Moreover, Pisey becomes more passionate about the field of robotics as she can apply what she learned in the real world, and she plans to develop her expertise in this area.

Living with Industry 4.0 brought an opportunity for Cambodia to achieve its Industry Development Policy 2015-2025. Private companies in Cambodia became more and more digitized by introducing advanced machines and integrating the internet of things to operate their businesses, especially in processing and manufacturing companies. Pisey is undertaking a feasibility project for Cambodia in robots and automation to assess the possibility of supplying these robots to manufacturing companies in Cambodia as well as to the region. Besides the government investment in TVET institutions, private companies increasingly contribute up-to-date equipment and machines to training providers through a Corporate Social Responsibility program. This has given Pisey access to modern equipment in the Department of Research and Innovation Lab to nurture innovation in robots and automation with the pool of Cambodian talents like her. Pisey's journey does not end here, she receives a chance to visit a robot

manufacturing company and polytechnic institute in Japan incorporated by a partnership between the two institutes, the National Polytechnic Institute of Cambodia, and Tokyo Polytechnic University, with support from their respective governments. With no surprise, Pisey now works at the Japanese Robot Manufacturing Company as a specialist technician in robotics, and one of her favorite tasks is to train new technicians or apprentices in the apprenticeship program between the company and NPIC.

Introduction

The Cambodian government has acknowledged that most of Cambodia's industrial sectors have not experienced the 3rd Industrial Revolution (referring to the deployment of basic automation technologies), which the government sees as an opportunity to leapfrog into the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) by leveraging technology transfer and strengthening the country's physical and digital infrastructure (Ministry of Commerce, 2019). In this regard, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has set a framework to modernize its industrial structure from a labor-intensive model to skills-driven industries to connect with regional and global value chains and foster the competitiveness of the industrial sector through the Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025 (RGC, 2015). A critical factor to the success of the above policy is an explicit skills development programs in the Kingdom. Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can play a significant role in achieving the above-mentioned ambition. TVET has a comparative advantage over general education because TVET assists learners in gaining knowledge, technical skills, and competency to become skilled workers and technicians (RGC, 2017). However, whether the policy can be achieved is doubtful given that the current TVET sector in Cambodia is still in its infancy in terms of governance, institutions, ICT, and digitalization (ADB, 2018a). Unlike general and tertiary education, several factors hinder digitalization in the TVET sector, such as the nature of technical skills training which requires learners to apply the knowledge and skills they have learnt from classes in the real workplace. Digitalization brings both challenges and innovations in the TVET sector, especially in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter will draw a roadmap to highlight key factors and policy responses for Cambodia to obtain the greatest advantage from the digitalization of TVET and to prepare the country's skills development program in response to the future labor market and global trends.

Context Analysis

Cambodian workforce and regional integration

Cambodia has made significant economic improvements from an agrarian society into an industry and service-based economy with an average of 7.7 percent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the past two decades (World Bank, 2020). Between 2010 and 2019, the industrial sector experienced the highest average annual growth at a rate of 11.3%, followed by the service sector at 6.8% and the agriculture sector at 1.7% (Lim et al., 2021). At the same time, employment in the industry and service sectors has gradually increased between 2009 and 2019/20 from 15.9% and 26.5% respectively in 2009 to 26.1% and 38.4% in 2020, while the agriculture sector

has decreased significantly, from 57.6% in 2009 to 35.5% in the same period (NIS, 2020, p. 86). This shift indicates the growing importance of industry in the Kingdom, especially in response to the 4th Industrial Revolution. The national skills development project, Skills for Competitiveness (S4C), has selected some sectors, namely construction, electronics, electricals, and manufacturing for the nation to prioritize to produce a skilled workforce for the Kingdom (ADB, 2019).

Meanwhile, the integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) brings both advantages and drawbacks to Cambodia, especially through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). These close economic ties puts the Kingdom in a challenging position when it comes to labor competitiveness in the region. Given the low productivity of Cambodian workers compared to other ASEAN members (OECD Development Centre, 2017), Cambodia needs to nurture its youth and help them become skilled workers (Khidhir, 2018). In 2017, Cambodia had the highest labor force participation rate in ASEAN at 84.2%, while Lao PDR, its neighbor, has the lowest at 40.8% (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). It is critical to question the level of competency of Cambodian graduates, to anticipate and prepare for the needs of a skilled workforce in the rapid transformation of regional and global trends.

TVET in Cambodia

In the Cambodian Qualifications Framework (CQF), TVET is equivalent to general and tertiary education according to the number of credits students earn from each category of schools (RGC, 2012). The *National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025* was endorsed in 2017 to align with the goals set in the *Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025* as a guide to advance the country's manufacturing industry, a key economic sector for sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The TVET Policy aims to: "improve the livelihood and dignity of people and to enhance Cambodian workforces or human resources with knowledge, competence, skills, working attitudes, professional ethics, high productivity and competitiveness for lifelong employability" (RGC, 2017, p. 4).

Given the TVET ecosystem is in its infancy, skills development remains a challenge in terms of labor force, skills gap, and skills shortage, with several factors hindering the sector (NEA, 2018). First, Cambodia's TVET system remains weak in both hard and soft infrastructure. The number of TVET training providers is limited, with only 38 public and 22 private and NGO training providers registered under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT, 2020). When it comes to the number of learners, it is even more strained. In 2019, the total enrollment in TVET was 85,390 students in all training levels while the enrollment in upper secondary of general education alone was 339,847 students (MoEYS, 2019a). Compared to general education, this figure is low. Furthermore, there is a lot to be improved in terms of capacity of the system's human resources, particularly trainers. The competency of trainers is limited due to the lack of direct industry experience and poor training infrastructure (ADB, 2018a).

Second, the perceived value of TVET is low among Cambodian youth and their parents (Khieng, et al., 2015). TVET has been perceived as the second option nationwide, suitable for non-skilled and disadvantaged groups, compared to general education. Less than 50 percent of students enrolled in TVET are in long term training courses¹ and the majority are disadvantaged youth, especially from the indigenous communities and remote provinces, who take short-term courses at the provincial training centers (MLVT, 2020). Enrollment is hindered by the lack of TVET promotion and outreach, particularly at the community level, which is the responsibility of Directorate General of Technical Vocational Education and Training Board (PTB), and TVET training providers.

Besides the above factors, there is a limited engagement from TVET actors throughout the TVET ecosystem. Though TVET has become an engine in skills development, the whole landscape remains compact, and only a few actors are actively involved in the system development and improvement. The Directorate General of TVET is the institution mandated under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training to oversee the whole system. With respect to development partners, a few leading institutions have actively been contributing to the system through development projects. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has shown tremendous support in strengthening the system and modernizing TVET sector by providing loans to the Cambodian government, co-financed with Agence Francaise de Developpement (AFD), to implement plenty of national projects namely Strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training (STVET), Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Development (TVETSDP) and the current project of Skills for Competitiveness (S4C). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) made a commitment to strengthening the quality of training for the higher diploma in electricity in the TVET institution under MLVT (nation-wide) (JICA, n.d.) and the Swiss-funded Skills Development Programme (SDP) also improves the income and employment opportunities for disadvantaged young people in rural Cambodia in target provinces (Swisscontact, n.d.). When it comes to private sector actors and business associations, they are yet to fully participate in the development of the TVET system where Social Corporate Responsibility (SCR) is a typical means of engagement.

Industry 4.0 and automation in the Cambodian Skills Sector

The 4th Industry Revolution (4IR) or Industry 4.0 and particularly the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence will have significant implications for the world of work and skills development. Most developed countries have responded with good preparation by integrating advanced technology into industry and making ready a skilled workforce through education and training. For Cambodia, the Kingdom interprets Industry 4.0 as an opportunity to leapfrog into

¹ According to Cambodian National Qualification Framework (CQF) there are eight levels of qualifications in TVET namely basic vocational certificate as the entry level (short term TVET training course), vocational certificate 1, vocational certificate 2, vocational certificate 3, higher diploma of technical/business, Bachelor of Technology/engineering/business, Master of Technology/business and doctoral degree.

an advanced economy (Ministry of Commerce, 2019), however, to what extent the government can take up this challenge remains to be seen. According to the Global Industry 4.0 Readiness Index 2016, Cambodia was ranked 115th out of 120 countries on their readiness for 4IR, behind neighboring ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia ranking at 91st, 44th and 41st respectively (ADB, 2021, p. 49). Looking at the current TVET system, Cambodia is not yet ready to respond to the trends of Industry 4.0 in terms of availability of technological equipment in industry, competency of institutions to prepare workers entering the labor market, and digital literacy in the nation. Furthermore, Cambodia must acknowledge the current weaknesses in terms of ICT and the lack of up-to-date amenities available in TVET and develop an effective policy to address them. Properly preparing for human resource development can be one of these strategies, and TVET training will play an essential role to prepare a skilled workforce for the industry demands and to respond to job obsolescence resulting from automation in the industrial sector (ADB, 2021).

The emergence of Industry 4.0 will influence the Cambodian workforce, specifically through the implications of increased automation. Automation will put the Kingdom in a critical situation given the majority of Cambodians are low-skilled and semi-skilled. For instance, due to low labor costs the industrial sector is dominated by textiles and leather where 800,000 employees generated approximately 75% of all export earnings in 2017 (Schmücking, 2020). This reality indicates a skills shortage and skills mismatch in the industrial sector. According to an ADB survey, the national TVET system cannot satisfy the demand of the private sector and companies are forced to train their staff on their own (ADB, 2021). There is also a gap in terms of skills expectation, where training institutions believe 59% of graduates are well-prepared for the entry-level of the labor market while employers only see it between 10%-20% (ADB, 2021, p. 54). Moreover, employers reported that 57% to 77% of new training related to 4IR will need to be delivered as on-the-job training (ADB, 2021).

Policy Recommendations

Cambodia's future labor force will be dominated by ICT-related sectors and digitalization will be present in all forms of businesses, from technical to service-related sectors. The Covid-19 outbreak has the potential to foster innovation in the Cambodian TVET system due to its far-reaching implications on education, work, and health. This section will discuss how Cambodian TVET will look in the next decade and the policies needed to get there.

E-career guidance and counselling

Career guidance and counselling serves as a bridging pathway linking youth to labor market information and employment. In the *Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023* of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS, 2019b), career guidance and counselling will be integrated into the Cambodia education curriculum as one of the main subjects in lower secondary school of general education. This is not limited to general education however, TVET training providers will also benefit from the curriculum, as both ministries, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational

Training and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, will have a joint-initiative to develop an e-platform for career guidance and counselling with the National Employment Agency. The platform allows the three entities to work collaboratively to deliver the service in a way that is more inclusive and accessible to learners throughout the country, especially disadvantaged youth from remote and indigenous communities. Students will either receive counseling directly from their teacher at school, including TVET training providers, or receive online counseling from the Job Center of the National Employment Agency (NEA) with support from their teachers or trainers.

National TVET E-learning

Moving toward Industry 4.0, the national E-learning platform was launched to allow all public TVET institutions to deliver online courses. TVET institutions will register on the national platform to develop training courses and offer flexibility to learners. Some theory-based classes will be delivered online, while other parts are taken by students in their own time and at their own location. Different tools will be used to make the training more interactive and attractive namely Metimeter, Padlet, Animated GIFs, Graphic Organizers, photos, icons, and video. On the other hand, the practical classes will be delivered at the workshop according to their respective schedule. Each of the training sessions will be in module format and at the end of each module, students will be assessed. Trainers will perform as facilitators rather than following a traditional teacher-centered training delivery format. To ensure the effectiveness of E-learning delivery, trainers are trained with digital literacy, E-learning pedagogy and methodology, and content and material development from the Directorate General of TVET, at the national level.

Blended Work Based Learning

All forms of work-based learning (WBL) are widely promoted to fulfill the needs of employers, address skills gaps, and to ensure the quality of training. Students have the opportunity, not only to access training at TVET institutes, but to practice their knowledge and skills at a real workplace. A common form of Work Based Learning is apprenticeship, based on the principles of learningby-earning and learning-by doing. According to the Cambodia Labour Law Article 57, "Any enterprise employing more than sixty workers must have the number of apprentices equal to one-tenth of the number of the workers in service of that enterprise" (RGC, 1997). However, apprenticeship has been traditionally implemented in Cambodia in the art and craft occupations such as goldsmith and silver work (CDRI, 2018). This takes the form of family business or informal apprenticeship where TVET institutions and the authoritative institution, namely the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, are not engaged. In the future, the informal apprenticeship will be integrated into the formal apprenticeship system, where the apprentice training regulation is controlled by the government, and the practice-based training is delivered by a company (master artisans) and a TVET institution (Song and Heng, 2018). The commitment to achieve this will be made upon the endorsement of the Standard Operating Procedures on Apprenticeship in Cambodia. Apprenticeship in companies in Cambodia is well coordinated with TVET institutions to ensure the quality of training and working conditions (UN Cambodia, 2020). In addition, to

leverage the benefits of the technological era, a blended apprenticeship program will be implemented. Given the nature of apprenticeship is to have dual training, theory-based in TVET institutions and practically in the companies, apprentices will take theoretical classes through the national TVET E-learning platform and take the practical class at the companies.

Training curriculum and material digitalization

In response to Industry 4.0, training curriculum in TVET training courses will respond to the needs of the private sector and the labor market. This new curriculum will be developed by the Standard and Curriculum Department and Quality Assurance Department, under the Directorate General of TVET, to align with Cambodia National Qualification Framework. In addition, all training curricula and materials, both for trainers and learners, will be digitalized and stored in a cloud database, administered by the Directorate General of Technical Vocational Education and Training in collaboration with the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. This will address the problem of accessibility as students will only need internet access, which is widely accessible, to access learning materials from the cloud once they register for the training courses in any public TVET institution. In addition to this, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications must work closely with cell and internet companies namely Cellcard/Mobitel, Metfone and Smart to ensure internet access for disadvantaged students in the provinces, who do not have access to reliable internet.

Innovation in TVET

In comparison with general education and tertiary education, research and development (R&D) in the TVET sector is less advantaged and under-resourced in terms of national expenditure within the sector. To foster innovation in the TVET sector, R&D will need to be increased. TVET technical training institutes in the capital city and polytechnic institutes in the cluster regions, namely Regional Polytechnic Institute Techo Sen Battambang (RPITSB), Regional Polytechnic institute Techo Sen Takeo (RPITST), Regional Polytechnic Institute Techo Sen Kampot (RPTISK), Regional Polytechnic Institute Techo Sen Svay Rieng (RPITSSR), and Regional Polytechnic Techo Sen Siem Reap (RPITSSR) will become the engine to nurture TVET innovation in their respective sectors and cascade the knowledge and skills to TVET institutions in their respective regions. More financing from the national level will be allocated into these institutions, not limited to equipping high technological facilities in the lab, but to inject capacity development of human resources in the sector with the support of experts from development partners and knowledge and skills transfer from international exchanges.

To achieve the above ideal scenario, several policies need to be employed. Also, relevant stakeholders need to carefully consider their roles and mission for how to contribute toward the development of the Cambodian TVET ecosystem. Below are proposed policies for the Cambodian government and relevant actors to incorporate in their respective strategies and missions.

Innovation and digitalization in TVET

Research and development must be prioritized to nurture innovation in the TVET sector. Without research and development, Cambodia will not be able to leapfrog and benefit from Industry 4.0. In addition, all forms of digitalization, such as e-learning, e-counseling, blended work-based learning, and apprenticeship to name a few, need to be incorporated simultaneously to ensure that Cambodia is not left behind from global trends in technology. Besides research and development and digitalization, TVET training needs to be customized, from a traditional way of teaching to a blended methodology, where it provides flexibility to both trainers and learners. The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training needs to ensure that national budget allocation is sufficient to effectively implement these updates. The contribution and engagement of the private sector is critical to achieving these changes.

Private engagement in skills development

The Directorate General of TVET must consider the introduction of public private partnerships. Encouraging businesses to contribute and participate in the system is not sufficient, but an explicit joint initiative between the private sector and training providers, with coordination and support from the DGTVET is genuinely essential. Corporate social responsibility remains important, though other forms of private sector involvement should be integrated, especially in the form of private ownership where the company is the driving actor in the training system, such as in an apprenticeship program for example. Private ownership will indicate the commitment from both parties, companies and training institutions. To achieve this requires changes in mindset and ways that private sector and training institutions currently cooperate in training programs, through a tri-party collaboration between training provider, company, and development partner. In the current model, the company is typically passive in the cooperation to receive graduates from training providers, except the acceptance of students placed in an internship at the company during the last 3 or 6 months of their training program. The existing practice is implemented with strong involvement of technical and financial support from development partners, which calls into doubt the sustainability of the cooperation in the long term once the development partners are gone. Going forward, business associations can play a tremendous role in engaging the private sector in the system, namely the Cambodian Federation of Employers and Business Associations. DGTVET needs to work closely with business associations to incentivize the participation from companies to work collaboratively with training institutions, and to deliver up-to-date knowledge and skills, which is the prime support needed from the private sector.

International development partners and funders

International development partners and funders such as the Asian Development Bank, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, International Labour Organization and others have been playing a tremendous role in contributing to TVET development in Cambodia through various means from financial to technical support. Though they remain the backbone in this sector, they should customize their support to move towards a TVET sector driven by Cambodian ownership. One promising program is the Skills Development Fund, initiated by the Asian Development Bank to support the Cambodian government to pilot a government funding scheme to offer training funds to joint-training programs between training providers and companies (ADB, 2018b). This program does not only instill ownership, but it encourages and offers opportunities to the private sector to contribute more to the TVET system through a joint-training program with TVET institutions. In addition, international experts and technical support should continue, but be integrated within the context of Cambodia, and the participation from local experts maximized in any project design that contributes to policy making.

Regional and international cooperation in TVET

Knowledge cascade is crucial for developing countries like Cambodia to get the most benefit in terms of technical and technological transformation from the developed world in any form of bilateral, regional, or international collaboration. The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training should develop a policy to develop more cooperation between Cambodian TVET institutions and other countries, particularly countries with more advanced technology and experience in TVET innovation. At the institutional level, individual institutions, both public and non-state institutions, should promote student exchange and scholarship, in addition to the existing practice of skills contests such as ASEAN Skills Competition among the ASEAN member countries. This will offer students transformative experiences by exposing them to new learning environments and advanced technology. Cambodia can also be prepared to receive international students coming to the Kingdom.

Conclusion

Skills development is essential to Cambodia to build a skilled workforce to fulfill the needs of industry and for the Kingdom to compete with fellow nations of ASEAN. TVET has the potential to outpace general education in preparing a skilled Cambodian workforce in response to Industry 4.0, but Cambodia needs to strengthen the current opportunities in the TVET system. To achieve this, it requires technological advancement and innovation to be emerged in the system including E-career guidance and counselling, National TVET E-Learning, Blended Work Based Learning (formal apprenticeship program), training curricula and materials digitalization. In addition, private engagement in skills development needs to be ensured in the form of public private partnerships to open the door for non-state institutions, business associations and companies to make a holistic and relevant contribution to the system. The Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and TVET training institutions need to promote and establish regional and international cooperation to ensure that advanced technology is transferred through an exchange program of students and technical experts. Finally, the international development partners and funders will remain the key actors in the TVET ecosystem. If these changes can be achieved, the TVET system in Cambodia will be able to equip a skilled workforce to respond to the needs of industry and the

global trend of Industry 4.0 and fulfill the Cambodian government's ambition of transforming the country's workforce from low skilled to skilled and beyond, to nurture innovation in the Kingdom.

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