

Dangers and opportunities related to the COVID-19 pandemic for Higher Education Institutions in Cambodia

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the immediate closure of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) globally, as experts in public health have recommended social distancing to reduce infections and total deaths (Murphy, 2020). It had been suggested that students from developing countries will be more severely affected than others. In these countries, governments find it challenging to assist lecturers to provide remote learning opportunities (Room to Read, 2020). This sudden spread of COVID-19 has had catastrophic impacts that have damaged the function of HEIs via long-term disruptions to educational programs. Closures of HEIs have been implemented to reduce interpersonal contact between students to reduce community transmission of the virus. This has the potential to spread quickly in densely populated university campuses (Weeden & Cornwell, 2020) and has placed greater financial pressure on HEIs at a time when funding is already in decline. Consequently, the integrity and accountability of these institutions will be of increasing importance both during and after the COVID crisis (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020).

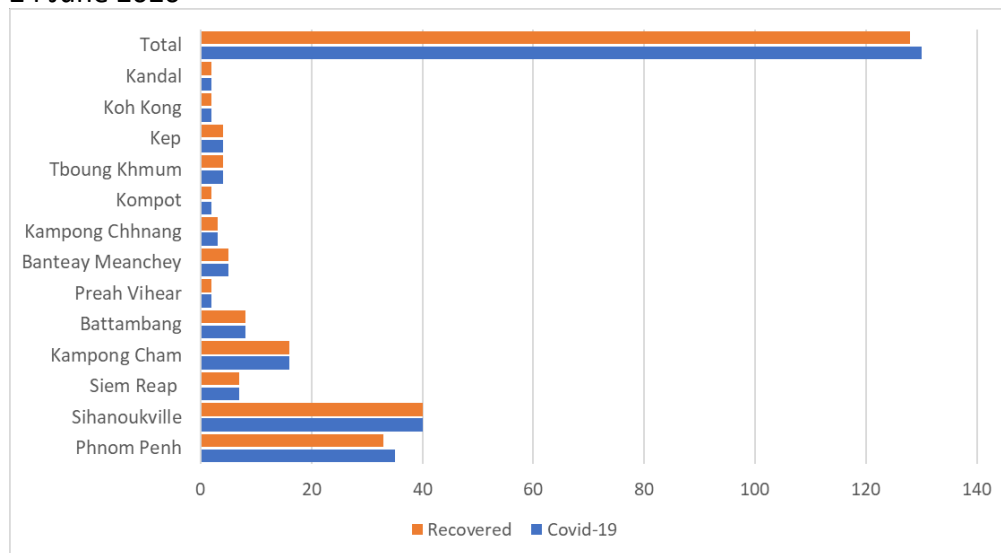
The pandemic started in the Chinese city of Wuhan in Hubei province and was first detected in December 2019 (Huang et al., 2020). According to World Health Organization, there were 8,708,008 cases of the disease and 461,715 deaths to 21 June 2020¹. Cambodia first recorded a case on 27 January in a Chinese national. By the 24 June 2020, 130 cases had been recorded. Most cases were detected in Sihanoukville (30.8%), followed by Phnom Penh (26.9%), and Kampong Cham (12.3%). The World Bank 2020 Cambodia Economic Update suggests that the economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 poses one of the greatest threats to socio-economic development in Cambodia experienced over the past 30 years. The three most affected sectors will be tourism, manufacturing, and construction; which in 2019, prior to the pandemic, contributed more than 70% of economic growth and 39.4% of total paid employment in the country.

The COVID-19 outbreak has attracted significant public interest in Cambodia and is more than a global public health crisis. It has also been a crisis for socio-economic development and the education sector. The pandemic has placed experienced educators in a difficult situation, as they are required to continue their role, while their students are required to stay at home (UNESCO, 2020). The Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) announced a nationwide closure of public and private HEIs in response to the global pandemic on 16 March 2020. Over recent decades, Cambodia has focused on providing educational services in a traditional university

¹ See the detail:https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwrcH3BRAp_EiwAxiDPTWYV_NviDnDvKrRKu2_FEY_etOh2rl_3EY1ITL0kJZ9LsT7e_GYBvaY7xoC72UQ_AvD_BwE.

classroom; however, the spread of COVID-19 has required a rapid transition to distance and online learning.

Figure 1. COVID-19 infections and recoveries in Cambodia, by province, as of 24 June 2020



Source: Ministry of Health²

In Chinese language, the term *crisis* comprises two characters; one representing danger, and the other opportunity³. If COVID-19 is a crisis, online and distance learning is a significant opportunity for Cambodia. The first distance education course in the world was developed by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s, who instructed students using a system of shorthand, mailing texts transcribed on postcards. In turn, he received transcriptions, which he corrected. Student feedback was a crucial element of Pitman's innovative

² See detail <https://covid19-map.cdcmoh.gov.kh/?fbclid=IwAR1bUkORz06mJdd5NVNAXu9XC0136W XodXYnt yHNB uPn63gzXsCRgzNSNQ>.

³Speeches by President Kennedy at United Negro College Fund fundraiser, Indianapolis, Indiana, 12 April 1959, and Valley Forge Country Club, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 29 October 1960.

system and resulted in the introduction of uniform postage rates across England (Tait, 2003). The term online learning was first used in 1995 when the web-based system, WebCT, was developed. This Learning Management System (LMS) later became known as Blackboard and was primarily used to upload text and pdf documents online (Bates, 2014). Today, a broader range of terms including e-learning, blended learning, on-line education are also used (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

In response to the crisis, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) has strategically maneuvered its offerings during the *new normal* by ensuring its core services continue to be provided online. RUPP has quickly adopted distance learning as a way to ensure the students do not miss classes. Never before have information and communication technologies (ICTs) played such a crucial role. However, when the Faculty of Education applied digital and distance learning, while many students were quick to adapt, challenges emerged within two programs offered by the Faculty of Education. Specifically, this included the School Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP) and Teacher Upgrading Program (TUP). Many students in these programs had limited ICT skills. To cope with this situation, the Faculty of Education developed a 3-credit point course entitled *Digital Distance Learning and Teaching Management*. This course aimed to equip learners with digital distance learning and teaching competencies to adapt their teaching learning practices at two levels—at the university, so prospective teachers may continue to learn—and at secondary schools so that teachers may continue to teach.

Due to limited resources, these programs use free open source technologies to ensure greater accessibility. The Google suite of products, Facebook, and Telegram were selected, with trainee teachers expected to use these in their schools. The key modules of the program included (1) creating and managing a digital account; (2) creating and managing real-time meetings; (3) administering a digital classroom; (4) data management for teaching and learning; and (5) distance learning and teaching management systems. As a result of this initiative by the Faculty of Education at RUPP, the MoEYS issued Guidance No. 30, directing all schools to utilize open source software such as the Google Suite for distance teaching and learning.

The course was delivered to 162 principal students within the School Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP) during May 2020; and 768 teachers completing the Teacher Upgrading Program (TUP) during June 2020, across 100 target secondary schools. The course started with the basics of creating a Gmail account and continued to cover aspects such as creating a Google classroom and managing Google drives. Before this training, many studies have no prior knowledge of how to create a Gmail account or how to install apps on a smartphone. Patience and time invested were required for students to practice with trainers and assistants as the course progressed. It was important for the training team to guide them, using tools such as screen sharing.

From this basic starting point, approximately 50% of the trainees were able to demonstrate competency in using Google meet, Google classroom, Google drive, Google slides, and Google forms as part of a teaching and learning platform at each school. However, many trainees with low digital

literacy suffered from making use of these platforms for online and distance learning challenging. The training team will continue to assist them until they are able to successfully implement this initiative. Despite the challenges, a significant benefit has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, via the creation of an ideal environment for students, teachers and school administrators to embrace digital literacy as a means to deliver learning outcomes. While social media and open source ICTs have been available for a long time, their potential benefits have not been taken seriously until now.

The *new normal* has enabled school administrators to quickly implement ICTs for their education programs and finance them in such a way that they are incorporated across the entire system. This can be a cause for alarm among teachers, who learn that if they do not know how to make use of ICTs for education, they will not be able to thrive in the context of modern teaching and learning practices. This has encouraged them to quickly upskill so they may remain relevant and useful. Parents also realize the benefits of ICT for education beyond their use for entertainment and basic communication. However, it is students who need to pay most attention to these changes. Their future studies will greatly benefit from these technologies. In summary, the COVID-19 crisis has been a major wake-up call in Cambodia, in terms of having a clearer vision about the use of ICTs for education.

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