Capacity building of secondary school principals: A case study of the School Leadership Upgrading Program (2019-2020) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)

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✓ ដើម្បីរៀបចំកម្មវិធីសិក្សាវិគ្រឹត្យការលើការលើកកម្ពស់គុណវុឌ្ឍិភាពជា អ្នកដឹកនាំ សម្រាប់នាយកសាលានៅកម្ពុជា មហាវិទ្យាល័យអប់រំនៃ សាកលវិទ្យាល័យភូមិន្ទភ្នំពេញបានបង្កើតកម្មវិធីបណ្តុះបណ្តាលមួយ ប្រកបដោយនវានុវត្តដែលមានសុវចនាករច្បាស់លាស់ ដោយយក ទិន្នន័យដែលបានពីសិក្ខាកាមជានាយកសាលា សមត្ថភាព និង ភារកិច្ចបច្ចុប្បន្នរបស់ពួកគាត់ជាមូលដ្ឋាននៃការចាប់ផ្តើម។

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Key Messages

✓ To design an in-service leadership upgrading curriculum for
Cambodian school principals, the Faculty of Education, at the Royal
University of Phnom Penh developed an innovative training program,
with clear indicators, beginning with principal trainees as individuals
and their existing competencies and responsibilities as starting points.

✓ In school-based management training, autonomy and expertise in
designing and implementing the program, as well as the use of
adaptive learning principles has led to positive changes for the
learning practice of trainees.

✓ The training curriculum should receive continuous input and feedback
in the form of a living program to make it relevant, adaptive,
responsive, and up-to-date.

✓ Continuous and active engagement between trainers and trainees, without fear of mistakes is shown to lead to innovation and should be promoted for in-service training programs of a similar nature.

✓ Connecting to grounded practices from the field is essential in creating knowledge for learning and keeping the training curriculum relevant

Keywords: Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP), Faculty of Education, progressive data driven curriculum, living training program, Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP)

Background

Over the past 20 years, Cambodia has invested much effort and resources into building human resources. According to Hang-Chuon (2017), although the quantity and quality of human resource in the country has improved, the education sector needs better commitment to improving quality. Education reform for quality improvement is outlined in the Education Strategic Plan (2014-2018) focused on school-based management. This is in line with the Rectangular Strategy IV of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGoC) (Hang-Chuon, 2017a). Keng (2009) discusses the insufficient capacity of human resources, with respect to the equity and quality of basic education in Cambodia. This is still true to a large extent. Chet (2009) also highlights how basic education issues play out in higher education.

Recently, linked to significant efforts from the RGoC, student enrolment in basic education has increased significantly. For instance, it improved from 83.8% in 1992 to 98.4% in 2015, for primary school students and from 31.9% in 2009 to 51.5% in 2015 for lower secondary schools (World Bank, 2019). Hang-Chuon (2017) applauds the achievement of an overall student

enrolment of 97.0%, although he notes that student completion at each level remains a concern. The Minister of the MoEYS outlines how a nationwide assessment results for students of Mathematics and Khmer language indicate that around 40% of students assessed in Grade 3 during 2016 and Grade 6 in 2015 performed below standards set in the curriculum.

Noticeable issues for lower secondary education fall into at least four main categories — student performance, teacher performance, principal performance, and community engagement (MoEYS, 2018). Existing studies confirm that students still perform very poorly in reading and simple calculation. It is generally known that Cambodian schools need more relevant curricula, sufficiently trained teachers, and more resources to improve school performance (OECD, n.d.). Soft skills development, including critical thinking, peer learning, small group discussions and plenary consultations are currently not used as learning modes in Cambodia. To do so, would provide an opportunity to take action on promoting thinking skills, creativity and innovation (Chhem, cited in Barrett, 2017).

Similarly, teacher capacity and performance still required a lot of improvement, if students are to realize their full potential in line with regional standards (OECD, n.d.; Barrett, 2017). In 2016, a study conducted by the MoEYS and World Bank found that 70% of schools sampled had inadequate supplies, as well as under-qualified teachers (World Bank, 2019). Teachers were not engaged in regular continuous professional development or in-service training to reskill or upskill, after graduating from a Teacher Education degree (MoEYS 2019). In addition, teachers still follow traditional teaching

approaches, except for those trained in the latest methods for use in New Generation Schools (Donaher, 2020).

Before the capacity of teachers is strengthened via a leadership scheme, collaboration between the community and school needs improvement (MoEYS 2018). Schools in Cambodia still have not yet established an environment in which parents, villagers and local authorities work together to support student learning and the successful functioning of a school (MoEYS 2018). The sense of inclusiveness experienced by students in Cambodia is limited, let alone the engagement of families and the community (MoEYS 2018).

Capacity building for leadership skills among school principals is considered to be an emerging issue in Cambodia. School success is challenging to achieve without effective school leaders. Positive changes in schools are made by *"great leaders"*, who are able to manage issues arising from teachers, students, parents, and other involved stakeholders (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013). When this occurs, significant change can be observed in both teacher (Bredeson & Johansson 2000) and student achievements (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; The Wallace Foundation, 2011). The performance of school leaders, teachers, and students can reflect on the success of a school. Student achievement is the most important criteria to look at when a school assess its success. Both Hallinger & Heck (1996) and Lambersky (2016) agree that school leadership influences student learning. For instance, it is meaningless to have a clean school environment with modern facilities if the learning achievements of students is below average. Thus, a major challenge for school leaders is to consider how to support slow learners to study at the right level.

Although school leaders can never achieve school success alone, they need to lead and collaborate with other relevant stakeholders to reach greater heights. According to Leithwood & Seashore-Louis (2012), educators need to create synergy between parents, teachers, and policy makers; while those in leadership positions need to be well positioned to lead this synergy. Capacity building for school principals is required in terms of pre-service and in-service training to promote more effective leadership and involvement from teachers. This is likely to result in effective school management as part of a proper school development plan (Keng, 2009).

Senior officials at the MoEYS and World Bank in Cambodia agreed to implement the Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP) (World Bank, 2019) in response to these needs A school-based management governance model has been piloted in 100 schools across the country as a result of the program. It is aimed at meeting minimum standards in lower secondary education in specific target areas, effective responses in emergency situations. One component of the project is improving lower secondary education outcomes across three sub-components: (1) strengthening school-based management, (2) upgrading teacher capacity, and (3) improving school facilities (MoEYS, 2017).

In 2018, the Royal University of Phnom Penh was provided with a grant to conduct school-based management training, through a Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP) as a component of the SEIP. After just one-year of operation, the training program has received positive feedback from trainees, the MoEYS, and the World Bank. Under this nation-wide project, 100 target schools have now developed a systematic way of address specific challenges

in meeting nine minimum standards embraced by the project. This policy paper showcases the learning experiences and challenges faced as part of delivering the school principal capacity building program, with respect to curriculum development. By showcasing these learning experiences, it is hoped that future training of similar nature will be conducted more effectively.

Research Methodology

This policy paper presents an analysis of an in-service program developed on the basis of critical reflection (Merzirow 1990, 1998) by the developers and implementers of a Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. It occurred after two years of program implementation, which was sufficient time to make meaning of the experience and learn from it. Merzirow (1990, p. 1) wrote that *"to make 'meaning' means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision-making or action, then making 'meaning' becomes 'learning'"*. Merzirow (1998) defines reflection as looking back on experiences and using reasoning to achieve the best foreseeable consequence of an action. In this paper, an analysis was conducted based on internal evaluations, progress reports, expert discussions, workshops, and meetings among the project team at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the World Bank.

The analysis includes feedback and personal discussion with students and lecturers in the program. The project team also used views and insights from observations made during field visits to schools, where students were

managing or teaching a program. Document analysis of the LUP training manual, LUP progress reports and SEIP progress reports were also conducted. The implementation of the training was critically compared against the original plan. The authors of this policy brief then made conclusions based on what Merzirow (1998) calls *"reasons to achieve the best foreseeable consequences of an action".* By future action, the authors referred to how we would improve on the training outcomes for future cohorts of the LUP program based on the experiences over the first two years of implementation.

Results and Findings

Designing the LUP curriculum for leaders of twenty-first century schools

Based on current school and student needs, the LUP was designed to create leaders of twenty-first century schools in Cambodia. As stated in the LUP curriculum (MoEY, 2018a & RUPP, 2019), the program expects participating school leaders to be able to (1) bring global knowledge to the local context and national reform programs to actual implementation at the school level; (2) generate community ownership in school development and build trust in the school and teachers within communities; (3) be equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to comprehensively lead, manage and implement school-based management to achieve school effectiveness standards; and (4) prepare youth to be the global citizens and human capital in the world of the knowledge economy.

The LUP was designed specifically for trainees who are currently working in school management teams at secondary schools nationwide. The key concept of developing the LUP curriculum was based on the MoEYS School

Principal Standards, *'9 School Standards'* (Figure 1), and the actual situation within Cambodian schools that lead to achievable actions, rather than concepts or theories with a poor contextual fit. As illustrated in Table 1, the LUP includes at least five key competencies, including strategic thinking and innovation, instructional leadership, personal excellence, stakeholder engagement, and managerial leadership (MoEYS, 2017a).

Table 1. Leadership roles in selected school principal standards

School principal standards	Leadership roles
Strategic thinking and innovation	• Establish the strategic direction of the school • Make decisions • Lead change and innovation
Instructional leadership	• Lead curriculum implementation and improvement • Create a learner-centred environment • Supervise and evaluate teachers' performance • Deliver and plan learning outcomes
Personal excellence	• Ensure personal effectiveness • Act on challenges and possibilities • Pursue continuous professional development
Stakeholder engagement	• Promote shared responsibility for school improvement • Manage education alliances and networks • Sustain collaborative relationship with stakeholders
Managerial leadership	• Manage school resources and systems • Manage staff performance • Manage sustainable school programs and projects

Source: Adapted from MoEYS, 2017a and 2018

The co-development of the LUP curriculum by the MoEYS SEIP team, World Bank representatives, and the Faculty of Education at RUPP helped to develop a practical and impactful curriculum. It provides the type of innovative curriculum design that promotes active learning, self-learning by doing, and contextual learning. It is a hybrid learning approach that also uses result-based learning. In the other words, trainees are required to prove what they have learned, both during and immediately after receiving training. Specifically, the program is designed with existing school leaders and their problems are central to the curriculum. As illustrated in Table 2, the curriculum structure comprises three main parts: (1) a professional development workshop series; (2) practice-based courses, and (3) the development of a school improvement project based on prerequisite requirements for the LUP.

Table 2. LUP curriculum structure

No.	Curriculum structure	Number of credits	Term
1	Existing qualifications and work experiences	60	Prerequisite
2	Professional Workshop and Seminar Series	04	1, 2
3	Coursework and Practices	50	1, 2, 3, 4
4	School Improvement Project Report	06	4, 5
Total credits		**120**	

Source: RUPP, 2019

The primary purpose of conducting the LUP professional development workshop series is to exercise positive thinking towards what a better education practices should be in the present amongst trainees. This type of thinking was connected to coursework. It combined theories and practices used at schools to create a unique learner pathway to addressing school

performance issues. These experiences were used for forming new knowledge about practice improvements, which were compiled as part of the development of school improvement projects.

These 50-credit point courses were designed using six thematic areas including (1) school planning, management, and evaluation; (2) curriculum, assessment, learning and teaching, as well as coaching and mentoring; (3) community engagement and student participation; (4) school internal and external supervision; (5) school administration, environment, finance, and human resources; and, (6) ICT in educational management, learning and teaching, and research. To realize the achievement of the curriculum and to ensure that its upgrade is adaptive, the processes illustrated in Figure 2 was integrated into the blueprint of the training. As can be seen, each course is 45 hours long. However, intensive face-to-face meetings are conducted for 15 hours at the beginning of each course. During this period, theories and concepts for each subject are provided to learners. Each lecturer is an expert working in the field, aligned with the subject.

Figure 2. Training Process in Coursework

Source: RUPP, 2019

The school improvement project report is part of the requirements for the principal trainees graduating from the program. The school improvement project is linked to the coursework in the program and is used to reflect upon how they had learned to successfully solve school problems. The LUP uses the

Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE model) of the school improvement (RUPP, 2019). Trainees started with a specific problem at their school and propose actions to be implemented with relevant stakeholders. After the implementation of the project, they examine how worked and what may be required in terms of further action. The trainees then produce a school case study as part of their school improvement report. The design of the LUP curriculum is based on a residency model. The trainees go through a number of stages: (1) working at a school, (2) being interested to learn new knowledge to improve their work, (3) applying new knowledge at the school, (4) re-learning new knowledge through contextualized practice, and (5) improving their school to meet all nine standards.

These processes happen in a cycle across the course work and practice component. Learners need to develop a personalized school improvement plan based on a variety of influencing factors and conditions. The LUP curriculum is based on the real needs of students, teachers, principals, the MoEYS, and the Royal Government of Cambodia. It is part of an intention to reform practices towards harmonization and sustainable development. Similar to professional business concepts, RUPP as an education service provider prioritizes the learners needs to produce better learning outcomes. After, the LUP curriculum had been developed, the LUP Curriculum Committee allowed some room for adapting the curriculum, as a living document as the training progressed.

Implementing the LUP curriculum with flexibility

The RUPP Faculty of Education is authorized to lead and manage the LUP independently, under the immediate supervision of RUPP management and

representatives of the MoEYS. It is geared towards outcomes-based adaptive learning. The curriculum is flexible in terms of the operation of the school-based management training. Beyond the management and coordination team at RUPP, resource people supported the LUP in different roles across three parts of the curriculum (see Figure 3).

First, LUP professional development workshops were conducted on various topics such as global trends in education, Cambodian education programs in the Rectangular Strategy IV, education sector reforms, school-based management concepts and practices, school leadership in the 21st century, and community school autonomy and accountability. The guest lecturers for this workshop series included the Minister of the MoEYS, Secretary of State, Deputy Director General of Directorate General of Policy and Planning, Director of the General Education Department, the Rector of RUPP, and the World Bank senior education specialist and Principals, who had demonstrated innovation and creativity in their educational leadership. After the lectures, a self-reflection process linking the practice of plan development was carried out to answer the questions *"Where our schools were?"; "Where our schools are?"; "Where we want our school to be"*; and *"How to get there".*

By this approach, the program could be viewed as authentic school-based management. The teaching and learning is highly adaptive with respect to each school. These weekend sessions were led and facilitated by a practitioner of school-based management and the LUP team, under the supervision of the Dean of the Faculty of Education at RUPP.

Second, the coursework was delivered using a blended or hybrid learning approach that combined theories, concepts and practices together.

In each course, the initial 15 hours comprised lectures about theories, concepts, and cases led by lecturer team. This team included experts from the SEIP and the relevant departments of MoEYS such as the General Education Department, Quality Assurance Department, Teacher Training Department, and Finance Department. It also included lecturers with direct experiences working in education from RUPP. A mentoring team continuously supported learning tasks for a further 30 hours. They were drawn from experienced educational practitioners from the MoEYS, SEIP, RUPP, civil society, and the private sector. As mentors, they worked in a team to assist trainees at schools in each province, using distance learning through a telegram group. Their main role was to ensure mentees had identified a specific school problem and attempted the implementation of a solution that solved the problem. In this sense, trainees could learn to use practically apply theory.

Figure 3. Alignment between the LUP curriculum, implementation and learning outcomes
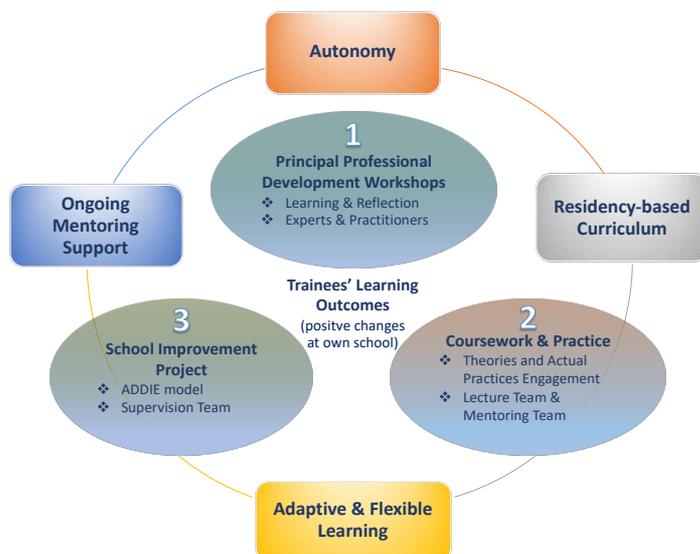
The LUP allowed room for both mentors and trainees to communicate their completed learning tasks within the timeframe set. The course delivery in the LUP is flexible based on the current needs of the trainees. Adaptive learning, or simply put, *'teach at the learner's pace'* was also used as a strategy to promote practice-based self-learning using the available resources at each school. Trainees from different schools could work on different issues set within the criteria. Trainees were asked to work on problems they had encountered. The program linked a broad content framework with problem-based content. The school improvement project report was expected to be completed by October 2020. The trainees worked with their supervisors in a provincial grouping by distance learning through telephone calls, telegram messages, as well as face-to-face sessions at RUPP. In practice, supervisors and mentors were the same people. The trainees worked in teams, but separately supported the school for a particular province. That was different from how the program was planned. We learned that as mentors worked on school-based management practices with the trainees, they learned a lot about the school of each trainee and became competent enough to support the school improvement project. For next LUP cohort, this may be re-considered to ensure the supervision of each school improvement project is more adaptive, responsive, and practice-based, resulting from lessons learned from this cohort.

All in all, RUPP as the LUP training service provider played a crucial role in building the capacity of LUP trainees to prove their learning achievements, through work completed at each school. The training program did not end with training activities; but revealed an intention and commitment to reach

another level at the outset. It identified the intended impact of the training program as results. As long as autonomous spaces for implementing the program were provided; adaptive and flexible learning was maintained. The school-based management training enabled trainees to learn more from both the program model and training content.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

It is worth noting that only having a well-designed curriculum does not guarantee the success of a training program. Both curriculum design and implementation must be aligned flexibly towards learning outcomes. The paper provides two key findings. First, the curriculum design emphasized key concepts, content, and a delivery approach, in line with school principal standards; Cambodian school standards; and practical cases of school leadership. Existing competencies and the current needs of trainees were included in the curriculum design. Second, the residency-based curriculum that promotes adaptive and flexible learning in the training program, led to trainees being more motivated to learn. Plenty of room for learner autonomy was allowed, and opportunities for trial and error were provided by the governing body. This is important if innovative practices are to be in identified and excel.

A robust training program should occur as a result of these factors. This type of program should possess the following characteristics. First, the program should start with learners in mind. Whatever they know and whatever their challenges are, should be central to driving the structure of the content. This data, sourced from all concerned stakeholders, should continue

to be collected as the program evolves. This approach is called a *progressive data-driven curriculum* or a *living training program*. Second, the means for connecting the existing state to desired learning outcomes must be established. To achieve this, a transparent effort to collaborate with all concerned parties must be established. With knowledge of the characteristics and existing situation of learners, learning to change attitudes should come first. All relevant parties need to work in a team to help learners think positively, feel hopeful, and be open-minded.

Acknowledgement

Brief Biography

SOK Soth is the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and a Program Director of Teacher Upgrading Program (TUP) and School Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP). Soth graduated from the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) in 2000 before obtaining his MA in

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MAM Socheath is the Head of the Lifelong Learning Department at the Faculty of Education at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). He is a Program Coordinator for the School Leadership Upgrading Program (LUP). Socheath obtained his Ph.D. in Development Education from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand in 2016 after earning a Bachelor of Education in TEFL in 2007 and MA in Educational Research and Evaluation in 2011. His research interests include educational policy and leadership, educational evaluation, teaching methodologies, adult learning, and teacher education.

KEO Sarath is the National Management and Technical Advisor for the Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP) for the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. He has previously worked as an Education Specialist for Save the Children and is considered to be a founder of school-based management in Cambodia.

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