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Briefing Note

Parliamentary Role in Education Improvement and Vocational Training Development for the Future Workforce: A Case of Cambodia and Best Practices from ASEAN

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Summary

This briefing note examines Cambodia's challenges in education and vocational training development, emphasizing the parliamentary role in addressing workforce readiness gaps and drawing lessons from ASEAN best practices.

Cambodia's economy is growing, with a labour force of 9.23 million (47.6% women) in 2023. However, persistent skills mismatches, under-resourced systems, and theoretical (non-practical) curricula hinder youth employability. While the government prioritizes education reforms and TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training), implementation gaps persist.

Progress and Gaps:

- Reforms by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) and Ministry of Education (MoEYS) aim to align education with labor needs. However, only 6.6% of workers hold college degrees, and 0.4% have vocational certificates.
- Chronic underfunding limits infrastructure, teacher capacity, and industry collaboration in TVET. Over 80% of teachers lack bachelor's degrees, and school management is often ineffective.
- Weak enforcement of policies (e.g., TVET Policy 2017–2025), fragmented governance, and limited parliamentary oversight further stall progress.

ASEAN Best Practices:

- **Vietnam:** Thu Duc College of Technology integrates internships with industry-aligned curricula, achieving 90% graduate employment within a year.
- **Singapore:** Rigorous teacher recruitment (top third of academic cohorts) and continuous professional development ensure high-quality education outcomes.

Recommendations for Parliament:

1. Enforce teacher professionalization policies and equitable education standards, particularly in rural areas.
2. Prioritize investments in infrastructure, TVET modernization, and skilled instructors.
3. Strengthen monitoring of policy implementation and inter-ministerial coordination.
4. Partner with other ASEAN nations to adopt best practices in workforce development and public-private partnerships.
5. Ensure marginalized groups access affordable education and vocational training.

By addressing these priorities, Cambodia's Parliament can bridge skills gaps, enhance workforce competitiveness, and align education systems with the demands of a knowledge-driven economy.

1. Introduction

Cambodia's economy is progressing, with a growing young workforce. In 2023, the labour force numbered around 9.23 million people, with women accounting for 47.6% [1]. However, Cambodia's education and vocational training systems remain predominantly theoretical instead of practical, resulting in significant skills gaps that leave young people vulnerable in the job market[2]. The country's human resource capacity continues to fall short of the standards needed for a knowledge- and innovation-driven economy. Persistent limitations in public institutional efficiency, despite substantial investments, exacerbate this issue [3]. In response, the government has prioritized job creation, upskilling through formal education and TVET, labour market awareness campaigns, and safer working environments [3]. The Cambodian parliament holds a pivotal responsibility in legislating, recommending policies, and overseeing government initiatives to address workforce challenges, reducing gaps between policy intentions and practical implementation [4].

2. Progress in Educational and Vocational Training Development in Cambodia

Over the past decade, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) has pursued comprehensive reforms to its TVET policies and development plans. Concurrently, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) initiated reforms focused on ensuring inclusive, equitable, quality education and promoting lifelong learning, alongside strengthening institutional management [5,6]. The MLVT also adopted the National TVET Policy 2017–2025 and National Employment Policy 2015–2025 to improve access to productive employment and education [5,7]. Yet, gaps remain, according to the 2019 Labour Force Survey, while 40.8% of workers completed secondary education, only 6.6% held a college degree and a mere 0.4% had a vocational certificate[8]. These figures highlight the urgent need for effective implementation and monitoring of existing national strategies.

3. National Policy Gaps and Impacts on Educational and Vocational Training in Vulnerable Communities

3.1. Inadequate Funding and Resources

Although Cambodia has steadily increased its public education budget over the past decade, the level of funding remains insufficient to meet even the basic operational needs of many educational institutions, particularly those in remote and under-resourced areas[6]. Insufficient funds impact the availability of essential teaching and learning materials, school infrastructure, and teacher salaries, which directly affect the quality of education delivery. The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system faces similar challenges, with chronic underinvestment limiting its capacity to modernise curricula, upgrade equipment, and expand training opportunities[9]. Moreover, only a handful of schools achieve the criteria of “model institutions,” and even those struggle to maintain consistently high outcomes. Collaboration between TVET institutions and private industry is further constrained by limited resources,

outdated training facilities, a shortage of skilled trainers, and weak engagement mechanisms with employers, hindering the alignment of skills development with labour market demands[8] .

3.2. Limited Teacher Capacity and Inefficient School-level Management

A persistent shortage of qualified teachers continues to undermine the quality of education in Cambodia, particularly in secondary and technical education. It is estimated that over 80% of teachers in the country lack a bachelor's degree, which significantly limits their ability to teach specialized subjects at the upper-secondary level[10]. Many educators also lack the pedagogical skills and subject-specific expertise required to meet the evolving demands of modern curricula. Beyond teaching capacity, socioeconomic barriers such as child labour, household responsibilities, and poverty-related constraints further contribute to low enrolment and high dropout rates, especially in rural and underprivileged communities[11]. In addition, school management positions are often assigned based on seniority and years of teaching service rather than demonstrated leadership or administrative competencies. This practice restricts the ability of school leaders to implement evidence-based management, strategic resource allocation, and effective stakeholder engagement, ultimately hampering institutional governance and long-term school improvement efforts[12].

3.3. Limited Enforcement of Legal Frameworks and Policies

Despite the introduction of several national frameworks, including the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy 2017–2025, Cambodia continues to face significant challenges in policy enforcement and implementation. One of the critical obstacles is the absence of detailed operational guidelines and regulatory mechanisms to translate policy objectives into actionable, measurable outcomes at institutional and community levels[8]. This results in fragmented implementation across different provinces and education providers, with little consistency in quality standards or monitoring practices. Moreover, Cambodia lacks a comprehensive national assessment system to regularly evaluate student learning outcomes, making it difficult to track progress or address disparities in education quality[13]. The disconnect between general education and TVET pathways further limits students' ability to transition smoothly between academic and vocational tracks. Additionally, the higher education sector remains constrained by outdated and reactive regulatory frameworks, impeding efforts to modernise curricula, improve institutional autonomy, and foster innovation within universities and colleges[12].

3.4. Institutional Constraints

Institutional autonomy in Cambodia's higher education sector remains significantly constrained, with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT) retaining centralised authority over core functions such as staffing,

financial management, and academic affairs[11]. This centralised governance structure limits universities and vocational institutions from making independent decisions that reflect local needs, labour market demands, or innovative academic programming. Additionally, inter-ministerial collaboration on education and skills development policy remains limited, with few established mechanisms for cross-sectoral coordination or joint strategic planning. As a result, fragmented responsibilities and inconsistent implementation practices continue to hinder progress in building an integrated, responsive education system. Further compounding these challenges is the limited role of parliamentary commissions in the legislative process. Although legally empowered to draft, debate, and review legislation, commissions typically function as advisory bodies, with minimal direct involvement in drafting or oversight of education laws and policies. This restricts parliamentary influence over key reforms and limits accountability in policy execution[4] .

4. ASEAN Best Practices

Case Study: Vietnam

Vietnam's Thu Duc College of Technology (TDC) presents a noteworthy example of effective public-private collaboration in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Operated under the Ministry of Education and Training, TDC has pioneered a model that strategically integrates classroom-based learning with practical, industry-based internships. The curriculum is closely aligned with the operational needs of various sectors, including engineering, tourism, and services, ensuring students acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills relevant to the labour market. The results have been impressive: over 50% of TDC graduates secure employment within three months of completing their studies, with employment rates surpassing 90% within one year[14]. This success highlights the value of embedding structured workplace learning into vocational programmes, enhancing graduate employability and reducing the skills mismatch often found in emerging economies. TDC's experience offers a valuable reference point for Cambodia as it seeks to modernise its TVET system and strengthen partnerships with industry stakeholders.

Case Study: Singapore

Singapore's education system is internationally recognised for its consistently high performance, largely attributed to its deliberate emphasis on teacher quality. Central to this strategy is the National Institute of Education (NIE), in collaboration with the Academy of Singaporean Teachers, which jointly oversee a rigorous, multi-stage process for teacher recruitment, selection, and professional development[15]. The recruitment framework begins with a careful review of applicants' academic and professional credentials, followed by aptitude assessments, panel interviews, and comprehensive evaluations by both the Ministry of Education (MOE) and NIE. Only the most capable candidates, typically drawn from the top third of academic cohorts, are

admitted into the teaching profession. Upon selection, teachers undergo specialised pre-service training aligned with their subject specialisations and are continuously supported through professional learning communities and structured career development pathways. This comprehensive, merit-based system ensures that Singapore maintains a highly skilled, motivated, and accountable teaching workforce, providing a strong foundation for its sustained educational excellence[14].

5. Implications for the Cambodian Parliament

Drawing from Cambodia's progress, identified policy gaps, and ASEAN best practices, the Parliament can enhance its legislative, oversight, and advisory functions by:

- Enacting regulations to professionalise the recruitment and training of qualified teachers and education managers.
- Drafting policies to safeguard education standards, particularly in rural and underprivileged communities.
- Advocating for greater investment in school infrastructure, TVET training facilities, and qualified teaching staff.
- Facilitating ASEAN partnerships to exchange best practices and enhance workforce development.
- Developing public education initiatives to narrow academic and skills gaps.
- Ensuring affordable, equitable access to education and skills training for disadvantaged groups.

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