

# **The Challenges of Higher Education for Rural Students in Urban Universities in Cambodia**

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## **Abstract**

Higher education institutions are in a position to build a strong transitional bridge for students. Public and private universities in rural and urban areas have been established. The number of universities in rural areas is increasing, but rural students still tend to study in urban areas. Rural students believe that urban universities will provide a better quality of education for them. Urban universities provide both opportunities and challenges for rural students. The purpose of this study is to determine the challenges that rural students face when enrolling at urban universities in Cambodia. We conducted a qualitative collective case study and analyzed the perceptions of rural students. A categorical analysis and open coding of the data collected in the study resulted in five emerging themes: poor academic performance, overcoming language barriers, financial constraints, adjusting to an urban lifestyle, difficulty in making friends and living alone.

## **I. Introduction**

### **1. Background of the study**

Education plays the most important role in societal development. “Education is one of the basic needs for human development and to escape from poverty” (Sivakumar & Sarvalingam, 2010, p. 20). It is necessary for national development and a prosperous society. According to Rahman, & Uddin (2009), education is the responsibility of the government and should be managed through national resources. Education provides opportunities for self-fulfillment; it can provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore in his or her own way (Barskay, 1998). It can provide specialized skills they may need to prepare for a job or career. As for students, they need to have good skills and be challenged with their studying; additionally, students also need to be actively engaged with the

curriculum. The learning environment also has a major role to play in learning outcomes, and can help determine their academic performance.

Human capital, the knowledge, skill and resourcefulness of people, is critical to development and to the growth of the economies of developing countries. As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education. According to the World Bank, the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its accessibility to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness (World Bank, 2002).

A quality education background is very important for students because it portrays their status and their abilities. Research has indicated that the availability of resources makes a difference in students' educational outcomes (Williams, 1996). The barrier that students from rural areas face to obtain higher education is the most important problem for our government to consider because some families don't have the ability to support their child through the higher education process, which means many rural students cannot obtain higher education in urban areas.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Cambodian higher education sector has undergone dramatic changes since 1997 when the charging of fees to generate income was first permitted. (O'Brien, 2004). For the last two decades the number of national and private higher education institutions has increased gradually; however, most of them are located in the capital city (Phnom Penh). Presently, there are 91 Cambodian higher education institutions, comprised of 34 public and 57 private universities, in 19 provinces, but primarily in Phnom Penh (Rany, 2013).

Rural areas are often poor and lack important services, employment opportunities, and leisure activities that cities have. Rural students are at risk for low motivation and lack of academic success (D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merchant & Zurita, 1996; Lichter, Roscigno & Condrón, 2003; National Research Council, 1993). Students' background also impacts their performance, and we can see that many of the students living in rural areas have low academic achievement when compared with the students living in urban areas. Urban universities can be very exciting and can offer the chance to experience student life in special ways. (Bookin-Weiner). Rural students may face a number of roadblocks when it comes to accessing and succeeding

in higher education, but colleges and universities can make small adjustments that would help them overcome these challenges (Susan Elkins, 2014).

### **3. Research questions**

1. What are the challenges that rural students face when enrolling at urban universities in Cambodia?
2. Despite a number of national and private higher education institutions being established in provincial centers in Cambodia, why do students choose to continue their higher education in an urban city like Phnom Penh?

### **4. Research Objectives**

This research paper aims to identify the challenges of rural or provincial students who move to study in the city for their higher education. In addition, another purpose of this research is to find the ways they overcome these challenges. Moreover, we also seek to understand the different perspectives of rural students in their shift to studying at urban universities. After this research, students can compare the differences of studying at provincial and city schools and universities.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **1. The barriers rural students face when enrolling to urban universities**

Some recent educational research has examined several barriers rural students face when enrolling in an urban college. According to a research study conducted by Susan Elkin in 2014, many rural students are academically, socially, and culturally underprepared to initially handle college life at urban universities (Douglas A. Guiffrida, 2008). The research also mentioned that rural students often have limited resources including insufficient high school level courses, lack of technology and others tools needed to help them be ready for college. Additionally, their families may have had little time or resources for academic, social and cultural activities to help address their preparedness. Other research indicated that rural students often face some additional socio-cultural challenges compared to urban students when moving into urban universities (Zuckerbrod, 2007).

The research conducted by Maltzan in 2006, indicated that one of the challenges for rural students who attend large universities in urban cities is adjusting to the increased size of their classrooms and campuses as well as the different lecture and teaching style compared to their rural high school.

Rural students often face limited resources including poverty and financial constraints that create barriers for continuing their higher education. (Elkin, 2014). “If one wants a decent education in Cambodia, they must study in Phnom Penh, the country’s capital and only true city. Tuition in Phnom Penh’s public and private universities ranges from about \$300 to \$600 a year for a four-year bachelor’s program. If one also needs a place to stay, a tired room on the city’s outskirts would cost an additional \$50 a month. Eighty percent of Cambodians live in the countryside (Cambodia has one of the highest rural-to-urban population ratios in the world), and with a meager GDP per capita of \$946, university educations would be completely out of reach for Cambodia’s rural majority – that is, if Buddhist monasteries weren’t lending a helping hand” (Otis, 2013).

Recent educational research has examined rural and urban differences in their academic achievement. Many educators, researchers, legislators and the general public believe that students from rural schools mostly receive an education that is inferior compared to students that live in urban areas. Students’ background also impact their performance, and we can see that many of students living in rural areas have low academic achievement when compared with the students living in urban areas. There are many factors that cause this performance gap between students in rural and urban areas. Students in urban schools get many benefits compared to students in rural schools. The National Education Association said that the lowest performing youth are in public rural schools (Brown & Swanson, 2001).

## **2. The reasons rural students choose to continue their higher education at urban universities**

Research has established four categories that facilitate analysis of higher education problems found in rural areas in developing countries including, severe resource constraints, internal inefficiencies, external inefficiencies and social inequality (Oliver, 2004).

Despite a number of national and private universities being established in provincial centers, students still believe that the quality of education in the provinces is limited (Va Sonyka & Seyhak Parinha, 2015).

In summary, there are different perspectives of individual researchers on the barriers and challenges faced by rural students in continuing their higher education in urban cities. There is not a lot of research in Cambodia conducted on this topic, which is why the literature reviews have been derived from developed countries such as, The United States, The United

Kingdom and Australia, and some from developing countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia. The previous research indicated some reasons why rural students choose to continue their higher education in urban cities rather than in their home provinces. Moreover, the previous research is mostly conducted in developed countries, with only a few studies from developing countries. Missing from these studies are the perceptions of rural students about their experience in urban universities, especially, from rural students in Cambodia.

### **III. Research Methodology**

#### **1. Research design**

For this project, we used a research tool called Semi-Structured Interview to design our research. We aimed to ask rural students about their perspectives toward the differences in studying at provincial schools and city schools. Moreover, we sought to understand the challenges that they have faced during their studies at urban universities. We included open questions asking about their expectations toward urban universities, as well as how they have improved themselves after moving to study in the city. Some of our interview questions related to their perspectives on why most of provincial students still shift their studies to urban universities, while many private and national universities have been established in provincial centers. Furthermore, additional questions were asked, based on the answers of each participant. In short, most of the questions focus on collecting qualitative data about the experiences and perspectives of each participant in the differences of studying at provincial and urban universities, and the challenges they have faced during their studies.

#### **2. Data collection approach and sample size**

We conducted the interview with ten provincial students who are continuing their higher education in Phnom Penh. The questions were asked in both English and Khmer because some of the participants reported a limited understanding of English. We focused on this area of population because our topic is “The Challenges to Higher Education for Rural Students in Urban Universities in Cambodia,” so provincial students are the best source of data for our research.

#### **3. Sampling and data analysis method**

We used content analysis to analyze the data. We categorized the data from each participant into common themes and patterns. After reviewing and

categorizing, we made a conclusive analysis based on the themes and patterns we deduced from the data.

#### **IV. Findings and Data Analysis**

In our interview questions, we divided into three main sections. First, the respondents were asked about the challenges they have faced during their time at the urban university. The second is about their personal improvements or developments after moving to study in the city. Lastly, we focused on the perspectives of each respondent regarding the large amount of rural students moving to the city to pursue higher education. After conducting the interviews and categorizing the data into the common themes or patterns, we compiled our findings for review in the following section. Based on the answers of each respondent, we found some common challenges that they faced during their study in the city.

##### **1. Financial constraints**

Surprisingly, we noticed that all of our respondents faced financial constraints. In moving from the province to study in the city, all of the respondents stated that they have to spend a significant amount of money on their school fees, food, accommodations, school supplies, as well as their daily expenses. Financial constraint is the main barrier that rural students face when they relocate to the city for university. All the respondents mentioned that the cities are more expensive than the provinces. The budget provided by their family cannot support their daily expenses. Most respondents reported that they rent a room with their friends or move in with their relatives to decrease their spending. Additionally, our respondents mentioned that typically rural families have a lower socioeconomic status than those in urban cities and that's why financial constraints are one of the main challenges during rural students' transition to study in the city. As one of our respondents revealed,

*“I come from the poor family so I cannot select the big room for renting because of its high price. And it is not comfortable and safe enough. In that place has many rooms but has only one bathroom inside to share with all the room. The equipment for study is in the high price. I don't have much amount of money to buy the course books so I need to borrow my friend's books to copy.”*

## **2. Poor academic performance**

Also, most of our respondents raised the issue of their poor performance when they first started college. Basically, the provincial students found the academic curriculum difficult. One of our respondents said that, “When I first started my university, I don't understand how college student learn. And I think all the students face the same problem as mine.”

The first thing that we noticed is that nine out of ten respondents faced this problem. Thus, according to the respondents, most provincial students are not familiar with the academic curriculum of university, which leads to their poor academic performance. They mostly link this to their experience in high school. They mentioned that high school is the foundation for college. They have a weak foundation provided by their provincial high schools, which is why it is difficult for them to start college. One of our respondents revealed that,

*“It is tough that students find themselves studying at the rural school. Students could not reach the school since they might live far away from school. In addition, some students have to spend their times to work for family although they should have been sent to school. Furthermore, students might not be able to retrieve deserved education all sources such as lecturers, laboratory, and other study-supported materials.”*

## **3. Overcoming language barriers**

Respondents mainly linked their challenge with language to the experience of studying in the provincial center. The common theme on this issue is that there is a small amount of schools both private and national schools. As a result, it is difficult for them to find a school to study a second language like English. Similar to the first challenge, seven out of ten respondents reported difficulty in overcoming the language barrier in their higher education, especially English. They mentioned that the course books, documents and other information are written in English. It is difficult for them to understand because they have a low understanding of the English language. Based on the respondent's answers, rural or provincial students face problems using the English language in an academic setting. One of the respondents stated that, “My English language is still limited, comparing to the urban students. They seem to have a good knowledge of English.”

#### **4. Adjusting to an urban lifestyle**

The school and home life, traffic, and leisure activities are all aspects of urban living that differ significantly. Normally, the way urban people live is very different from those living in rural or provincial areas. Life in the province is very simple and that is reflected in the way of living, dressing, and eating. While the life in city is not simple, but rather very complex. Six of the respondents said that it is difficult adjusting to the urban lifestyle. They mentioned about the busy traffic of the city. They stated that the city's traffic seemed to be very busy all the time, unlike in the rural or provincial centers. Additionally, they compared the routes of the city to blood vessels, meaning that there are so many routes in the city and they don't clearly know how to navigate them. One of our respondents said that, "When I first came to the city, I didn't even remember the way from my house to school. I've got lost many times."

#### **5. The difficulty of living alone**

Six of our interviewees, stated that living alone affects their both their physical and emotional well-being, including health issues, safety and loneliness. They have to live far away from their family and be on their own, which is a new experience for them. Six of our respondents revealed that moving to live alone in the city has been the most difficult thing for them. In addition to moving away from their families and siblings, they have to cook for themselves and take care of their home all on their own. This combination of emotion also leads to feeling homesick. One of our participants mentioned that, "It is difficult for me in moving to live alone in the city where I don't know anyone. Moreover, I have to do everything on my own by not depending on my parents like the time I live with them at the province."

#### **6. The difficulty of making friends**

Some of our respondents found it difficult to make friends, when they first came to the city. Four out of ten of our respondents expressed that they feel like an outsider when they began university. They started to feel uncomfortable. Most of the respondents responded to this question by explaining that the city contains many kinds of people and when they first met new people, they couldn't tell who is good or bad or who they should make friends with.

After asking about the challenges our respondents faced during their transition to an urban university, we also asked them about how they



overcame all these challenges. In this section, the respondents came up with similar answers. The common solutions that we categorized are as follows. First, they have to study hard and pay more attention in class in order to improve their academic performance. In overcoming the language barriers, especially, English, all the respondents stated they studied English part time, in addition to their classes, in order to improve their language skills. For the financial constraints, mostly the respondents said that it is not easy to overcome this challenge. Seven of our respondents mentioned that they have to save money and not spend on the unimportant items. Moreover, half of our respondents revealed that they are working a part time job in order to help support themselves. After a while of living in the city, all of our respondents stated that they get used to the urban lifestyle. Consequently, to overcome adjusting to an urban lifestyle and the difficulty of living alone and making friends, are not very difficult tasks, they just takes time.

In another section of our findings, we found out that despite the number of national and private higher education institutions being established in Cambodian provincial centers, students still choose to continue their higher education in Phnom Penh. By conducting a semi-structured interview with ten rural students who are studying in the city of Phnom Penh, we obtained some common perspectives regarding this issue.

### **7. The existing number of higher education institutions**

Unexpectedly, all of our respondents stated that the existing number of higher education institutions in the provincial and rural centers is still limited and don't offer the majors that they wish to study. The respondents noted a lack of skilled majors such as architecture, doctoral degrees, international relations and so on. One of our respondents revealed that, "The number of university is still limited. For instance, in my province there are only 3 or 4 universities existed. And those universities still cannot provide the acceptable majors that students wished."

On top of that, six out of ten of our respondents emphasized the lack of school facilities. They mainly focus on the lack of information sources such as libraries and computer facilities. By comparing with urban universities, they mentioned that, most urban universities are equipped with the high technology and modern school facilities that allow students easy access to learning tools.

Additionally, seven of our respondents mentioned the low quality of teachers in rural and provincial schools, which is much different from urban schools. In urban universities, the number of the high quality teachers is greater than the provincial university. They stated that the high quality teachers don't want to work at provincial universities. One of our respondents mentioned that, "I used to hear one of my teacher said that the provincial school provided him a lower salary than the city school, that's why he decided to move to work at the city."

### **8. The capability of the students**

Notably, all of our recipients expressed that they have improved a lot after shifting their study to the city. They are able to explore something new. They all agreed that shifting to study at the city they helped them to obtain self-autonomy. They mostly compared the urban city as a new world for them. One of our respondents said that, "Moving to studying to the city, I seem to explore the new world that contains many modern things, high technology, and competition."

Actually, they all agreed that the city is a very complex and competitive place. They have changed themselves a lot in adapting to this new place. Furthermore, seven of our respondents expressed that they've joined in many volunteer opportunities that they have helped develop themselves a lot in terms of both soft and hard skills.

### **9. Job opportunities**

Remarkably, all of our respondents stated that the city provides more job opportunities in terms of both paid and volunteer jobs. The market demand of jobs in the city is greater than in the provinces. By moving to the city, provincial students can enjoy a larger amount of job opportunities. Five of our respondents who work part time jobs also expressed their preference in terms of the large amount of jobs available in the city.

## **V. Discussion**

The research question we addressed concerned the perceptions of rural students about the reasons why they decided to continue their study in urban areas. All the participants in this study reported that rural students continue to study in city because of the low quality of education in rural areas. And they strongly believe that quality of universities is better in urban areas than in rural ones. Furthermore, they carry that urban areas can provide them with

more job opportunities. They can have many choices to choose the job that they like.

The finding of our study conclude that the reasons rural students still attend universities in urban areas was similar finding to other studies, proving that despite a number of public and private universities being established in provincial centers, students still move to urban areas to study because they believe that the quality of education in provinces is limited and jobs are mostly located in city (Va Sonyka & Seyhak Parinha, 2008). Therefore, according to The Phnom Penh Post, “The educational institutes in provinces are not yet international standard, they are low quality, that’s why the number of students coming from provinces to study in Phnom Penh is increasing,” (Mom Knthear & Chrann Chamroeun, 2008). Additionally, other research also proves that ‘Perhaps the most major advantage of attending school in the city is the opportunities it can provide’ (Anamaria Lopez, 2016).

## **VI. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to identify the barriers to higher education for rural students in urban universities in Cambodia. This qualitative collective case study analyzed the perception of ten rural students. Respondents participated in semi-structured interviews. A categorical aggregation analysis and open coding of data collected from the study resulted in six factors: financial constraints, poor academic performance, overcoming language barriers, adjusting to an urban lifestyle, the difficulty of living alone, and the difficulty of making friends.

The overall findings of the study indicated that rural students need additional support in addressing their poor academic performance by improving their academic abilities in higher education. In addition, they need assistance in overcoming language barriers. Rural students also face financial problems in they city because the cost of tuition and high cost of living is much different than what they’ve experienced in rural areas. Clearly the city lifestyle is much different from rural life, so students need support to help them adjust to the urban environment. Furthermore, it is not easy for rural students to make friends at first, which is compounded by the difficulties they face from living alone for the first time in their lives. In rural areas students tend to live with their families and many relatives, but when move to the city they are forced to do everything by themselves. According to our findings, rural

students see benefits to this challenge because after they face these difficulties they gain advantages from the lessons they've learned and skills they've acquired. They become independent and learn to make their own decisions, which they would not have done had they studied in a rural area. Additionally, rural universities should improve the quality and diversity of their offerings including additional majors, libraries and other support facilities.

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