

## BRIEF REPORTS

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# The Impact of Education on the Lives of Young Persons with Disabilities after University Graduation in Cambodia

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *In 2009, the University Scheme Programme, managed by Cambodia Trust, was initiated with the objective of giving young persons with disabilities access to higher education in order to increase their employment prospects. Of the 40 young persons with disability who received scholarships through this programme, 15 have graduated from university. This study aimed to explore the possible impact of education on this target group, their families and immediate community (defined as people in the neighbourhood and village), and the broader community of potential employers.*

**Methods:** *Data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with 14 participants (9 of them female) from the first cohort of graduates from the universities in Cambodia.*

**Results:** *The study found that education had a very positive, empowering impact on the lives of the graduates due to changes in their self-perceptions and perceptions by family members, neighbours, and colleagues. However, their educational accomplishments had less impact within the broader community, as some participants continued to experience discrimination when seeking employment.*

**Conclusion:** *Although education seemed to positively impact the young persons with disabilities in this sample, within the broader community there remained discrimination related to finding employment.*

**Limitations:** *The small non-representative sample size limits generalisation from this study.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability Article 24 notes that, *“States shall recognise the rights of persons with disability to education, with a view to realising this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity and an inclusive education system at all levels; and, that States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life-long learning”* (UNCRPD, 2006). However, according to the World Report on Disability (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011), *“persons with disability are the poorest of the poor, as this group experiences more adverse socio-economic and social exclusion than persons without disabilities, including fewer opportunities to access education and employment”*.

In Cambodia, as in many countries, persons with disabilities are stigmatised. The majority of the population is Buddhist, so people believe disability is related to karma. As a result, persons with disabilities tend to be excluded and denied access to education. Also, the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime and the decades-long civil war resulted in few people with disabilities being able to go to school. Although Article 27 in the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disability Law (Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation -MoSVY, 2009) states that persons with disabilities have the right to access education at all levels, enforcement of the Cambodian law is limited. Very little research has been conducted on access to higher education for young persons with disabilities in Cambodia.

On July 3rd, 2014, the Royal Government of Cambodia launched the National Disability Strategy Plan 2014-2018. The strategic plan aims to provide social protection, education, vocational training, employment, job placement and other services to persons with disabilities and consists of 10 objectives, of which objective 5 aims to *“ensure persons with disabilities have equal access to quality education and vocational training services”*(Robertson & Sovuthy, 2014). At the launch, the Prime Minister laid emphasis on the enforcement of a quota for the recruitment of persons with disability as civil servants. However, it appears that persons with disability still face discrimination, even for teaching posts, as an observation was made that *“many people with disability cannot stand for long periods of time and therefore, are not fit to teach, so if (we) put 2% into the Ministry of Education, it could kill the Ministry of Education”*(Robertson & Sovuthy, 2014).

In 2009, the Cambodia Trust initiated the University Scheme Programme, funded by the Nippon Foundation, which aimed at providing scholarships for young persons with disability who had passed the grade 12 national examination and had a strong commitment to study at university but lacked financial support. So far, 40 students have been offered scholarships and the first cohort of 15 students have graduated with degrees in law, information technology (IT)/ computer sciences, accounting, rural development, nursing, agriculture, finance and banking, and English literature (Kheng, 2014).

## **Objectives**

Using qualitative research methods, this study aimed to explore the impact of education on the lives of this first cohort of graduates. Key research questions were:

1. To what extent has receiving an education and graduating from university affected their economic status? Are they currently employed? What, if any, barriers did they face in seeking employment?
2. To what extent has receiving an education and graduating from university affected their social status within their family and the larger community? To what extent do they perceive that attitudes towards them have changed? How can these changes in attitudes be attributed to their new educational status?
3. To what extent has receiving an education and graduating from university affected their own personal development? Have they experienced an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of becoming educated? Has their present situation made a difference in terms of their involvement in advocacy efforts to improve their own lives and the lives of other individuals with disabilities?

For this research, education was defined very broadly to include not only professional knowledge and qualifications, but also the broader educational experience of meeting new people, classmates and teachers, as well as life in a big city for participants from the provinces.

## METHODS

### Sampling

The study sample consisted of the first batch of 15 graduates who received scholarships from the University Scheme Programme in 2009 and who graduated in 2013. All 15 of them were contacted, but 1 declined to be interviewed. Of the 14 participants, 5 resided in Phnom Penh and 9 in the provinces, Prey Veng and Svay Rieng, of Cambodia.

### Procedures

Participants in Phnom Penh were interviewed face to face, while those in the provinces were interviewed over the phone. All participants gave verbal or written consent. The key research questions were used as a guideline for the interview. Follow-up probes were used to gain more detailed information as required. Interviews ranged between 45 - 70 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and then translated into English by the researcher and a Cambodian colleague.

The limitations of the interview included:

- 1) As most of the graduates work from Monday through Friday, the interviews generally took place on Sunday and/or in the evening after office hours. This meant that the researcher had to be flexible in terms of the participants' availability.
- 2) As more than half of the participants stayed in the districts, and were not easily accessible over the internet or by mail, phone interviews were conducted; hence, consent was verbal and recorded at the time of interview. These phone interviews were sometimes interrupted and unclear, and took longer than expected, which also meant that it was not possible to interview family members, neighbours, and employers.

### Data Entry and Analysis

For analysis, each interview was read sentence by sentence to identify codes and categories that were listed on the right-side margin. These categories were then compiled into broad themes and sub-themes relating to the research question to explain the impact of education on the lives of the study participants.

## RESULTS

The study found that education had a very positive, empowering impact on the lives of the graduates due to changes in their self-perceptions and, from their point of view, on the perceptions of others within their immediate neighbourhood, village and university communities. However, within the broader community, their educational accomplishments had less impact as some participants continued to experience discrimination when seeking employment.

### **Empowering Impact: Changes in Self-perception**

Irrespective of the subject they had majored in, participants stated that education had significantly increased their confidence in their own knowledge and skills. Some of them talked about leading their group and helping or teaching other group members while still at university. This included providing training relating to vegetable planting, animal husbandry and repairing computers. As one participant said:

*“Some classmates thought I could not lead 109 students as class monitor. Even other lecturers in different departments thought that (because) it was difficult for me to go up and down steps, I could not be a class monitor. I am slow (when walking), but I tried to show my ability (as class monitor). Then they accepted my ability.”*

Most participants said that during their years at the university they learned how people interact and live in society, and how to deal with conflict. Their educational experiences helped them change their ways of thinking and living. For instance, a 24-year-old male graduate in banking and finance stated that before he came to the university, “it was like being a frog in a well”, where he had only interacted with his family and the community in which he lived. At the university however, he had opportunities to meet students and other people, and to go abroad.

### **Empowering Impact: Changes in Perception by Others**

The participants also spoke about changes in others’ perceptions about them. They thought that people in their neighbourhood had become friendly and were now willing to listen to persons with disabilities. For example, one of the participants reported that,

*“When I talk (now), they listen to me and provide opportunities for me to talk... Before, even when I talked no one listened to me. They thought that I am a person with disability, I cannot do anything.”*

Another participant said,

*“Before (when) they saw me, they did not talk to me and walked away from me. They are now so friendly to me and they respect me.”*

Perhaps, more significantly, the people in the village were even willing to ask for advice. For example, a law graduate said,

*“When I went to visit my family in my province, people came to visit and seek advice from me. (They) asked for advice on land dispute.”*

When participants acquired a job, the attitudes of people in the community also changed and they began to see persons with disability as role models for their community. One participant shared that,

*“My neighbours praise me. They say, their own children did not attend school and here I am a person with disability, I have studied and graduated with a bachelor’s (degree).”*

Another participant, a teacher, said children now look at her as a role model,

*“At school where I teach, there was one student with disability, now he is at secondary school, he looked at me as an example. Before, there were no teachers with disability. Now he sees me and he recognises (that) a person with disability can be a teacher, and (thinks that) maybe even he can become a teacher.”*

### **Limited Impact of Education**

At the time of the study, 11 (78.6%) of the 14 participants were employed. However, they stated that they experienced discrimination and many challenges in getting a job. For example, one participant said,

*“They said ‘what poor legs!’ Then I replied, ‘I don’t work with my legs but my hands,’ and they burst out laughing.”*

Further, none of the jobs was in the field in which the participants were graduates. As one participant said,

*“I studied accounting, but I work now as an office clerk.”*

The participants felt they had been forced to compromise and take on these temporary jobs in the hope that they would eventually get jobs that they were trained for.

## DISCUSSION

The participants' increased self-confidence and improved social status within their communities suggests that education has an impact in changing self-perceptions of persons with disabilities, and the perceptions of others in the communities where they live. However, education has less impact on changing attitudes and perceptions within the larger community. Even though they were qualified, the participants had difficulty getting employment in their respective fields because employers appear to be hesitant about employing persons with disabilities.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible that societal attitudes will gradually change as more persons with disability continue to pursue higher education and get jobs. This will increase their visibility and provide more opportunities to participate in society and engage further in self-advocacy. However, enforcing and allocating increased funding towards the implementation of the Disability Law, particularly with reference to the employment quota for persons with disabilities, should also facilitate a change in employment practices. In addition, policy-makers and civil society can collaborate with social media and the press to highlight and promote the accomplishments of university graduates with disabilities, and raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities in general.

Further research can include interviews with family, community members and faculty to corroborate the changes in their attitudes, and with employers to identify the support they would like to receive to facilitate the increased employment of persons with disabilities.

### Limitation

As the study was conducted over a very short period of time, it was not possible to interview family members, neighbourhood communities, and employers of the graduates with disabilities. Studies conducted in the future could attempt to corroborate the information provided by the preliminary findings.

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