Policies and Technologies in ODL: Issues and Implementation (Country Report, Cambodia)

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As you are aware that the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is in the early stages of using information communication technology (ICT) to broaden access and improve the quality of education. We anticipate that ICT will become an increasing part of distance learning technology in education, especially for expanding higher education opportunities.

I am pleased to report that the Ministry has recently completed a new five year Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2006/2010. In this phase of our reform program, expanding higher education will play a growing role. At the same time, the ESP clearly sets out how information technology will act as a cross-cutting catalyst to help implement new programs in higher education and teacher training.

In this context, the Ministry's policy on higher education is to enable a growing public/private partnership through strengthening our existing public universities and encouraging selective private provision. We see expanding high quality university studies as a key factor for improving Cambodia's regional and global competitiveness.

First of all, I would like to highlight how distance learning can improve the relevance of higher education programs for the changing workforce needs in a modernizing economy. In smaller countries like Cambodia, it may not be possible to offer a full range of specialized higher education degrees in very specialized academic areas such as bio-technology. I see a growing scope for using distance learning programs from other countries, with appropriate accreditation, to fill any specialist gaps.

A related opportunity is to use distance learning to enrich existing higher education programs. For example, there may be special areas in management, economics and finance where particular countries or institutions do not have the specialist staff to teach these areas. The Ministry sees real opportunities to use internet-based programs to overcome these constraints and allow students to have greater flexibility in their range of studies.

A second opportunity is to use Distance Learning Technology to provide more equitable access to higher education opportunities. At present in Cambodia, as in other countries in the region, much of higher education is concentrated in the major cities. Currently we have 56 higher institutions (21 run by the state and 35 run by private sectors). This means there is limited opportunity for potential higher education students in the rural areas. The Ministry anticipates that in the coming years, individual universities will set up outreach centers in the provinces. This would provide access to introductory university studies and reduce the time and costs for students completing their programs in Phnom Penh.

A third opportunity is to use ICT for providing distance learning programs to upgrade academic staff at various levels. In Cambodia, an immediate priority is to expand

distance learning for secondary school teachers through ICT sensitization programs in the regional and provincial teachers colleges. For teacher training institutions, we have 18 Provincial Teacher Training Colleges (PTTCs) for primary school teachers and 6 Regional Teacher Training Colleges (RTTCs) for secondary school teachers. Once again, ICT can be used to enrich the teacher education curriculum through accessing the internet for special studies.

An associated use of distance learning is to upgrade the expertise and qualifications of senior Ministry technical staff and university professors. Already many of the Ministry's staff are enrolling and completing Masters level degrees in our universities. We anticipate that many of these staff will seize the opportunity to study for PhDs through distance learning programs with overseas universities. The same strategy will be applied to upgrade university teachers in priority areas for Cambodia.

Apart from studying for higher degrees, Cambodia recognizes that university teaching staffs need to keep up to date with new ideas. As part of this kind of distance learning, there is great potential in using ICT to set up regional support networks of higher education staff who can share ideas through the internet and through exchange of academic papers. Cambodia intends to play its full part as these regional higher education networks evolve.

In addition in Cambodia, we see a number of opportunities for stimulating public/private partnerships using ICT for distance learning in higher education. One approach could be to set up an institutional twinning system with various private sector companies and higher education institutions.

Under such a program, an individual private business could link up with one of the higher education institutes to work out ways of supporting each other. The institution would benefit from the firms expertise and resources. This twinning could also help provide firms with a supply of well-trained graduates. This kind of twining could be expanded to links between Cambodian and other regional higher education institutions.

I would like to outline the expected infra-structure developments in Cambodia needed to support more distance learning in higher education. Through the National Information Communications Technology Development Authority (NiDA), Office of the Council of the Ministers, Cambodia is in the final stages of completing the UNICODE system for Khmer language. This is an important step to ensure that ICT teaching and learning materials can be provided in Khmer language at international standards. The most important direction is to include computer literacy in the curriculum of every secondary school, faculty and university throughout the country.

The Government also recognizes that it needs to strengthen its partnership with the private sector in developing ICT infra-structure in the provincial towns and rural districts. There is strong potential in using the growing network of internet cafes and ICT centers in the provincial towns. These centers can increasingly be used by potential higher education students to pursue their studies in cyber space.

In more remote rural areas, it will be difficult to access higher education since few towns and villages have internet services. In these cases, there is an opportunity to increasingly use wireless devices, such as hand-held

devices to access study materials and send in assignments to professors. In Cambodia, there is a need to build up the necessary ICT platforms and software to use such devices for ICT learning.

In conclusion, I would therefore like to take this opportunity at this International Seminar on *Policies and Technologies in ODL: Issues and Implementation"* to inform that the Ministry wishes to reaffirm its commitment to broadening and deepening its range of partnerships for Distance Learning and ICT. This international seminar provides a timely opportunity for sharing experiences and strengthening such partnerships in the region. I believe that with creativity and innovative ideas, we can set up a strong and rich distance learning network between our educational institutions.