

# Human Capital Project

2011 July trip report<sup>1</sup>

There were two trips planned for 2011, one in July to check on the current HCP graduate (Nhim Chamnan) and do some preparation work for future research, and the “official” one in September/October for the annual payment and student intake.

The July trip only included John Humphreys and was for two weeks – from Sunday 17 July 2011 until Monday 1 August 2011. The trip included stops at Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampot and Sihanoukville.

## Battambang (BB)

Unfortunately, Chan Sam An (official HCP rep at UME-BB) was not in Battambang when I visited. Also, Raya Nhoung (who had helped with the 2010 intake) has moved to China to do his postgraduate study.

Instead, I met briefly with other University staff (including VP Chum Lay), reviewed the HCP files kept by UME-BB, spoke briefly with HCP graduate Nhim Chamnan, and caught up with HCP board-member Phann Sophon.

The main goal for this trip was to check on the progress of the only HCP graduate – and it was pleasing to discover that she is happy in the same job and fully up-to-date with her payments. After nine months, the Cambodian bank account is exactly as it should be at \$270.

I had hoped to meet up with Puthearithy and Chim Saroum, as they are expected to graduate this year, but unfortunately this wasn't possible. In a worrying piece of correspondence after the trip was over, Chan Sam An indicated that he was having trouble contacting these two students.

## Kampong Cham (KC)

The visit to KC was only for one night, and involved a meeting with UME-KC manager Srun Sarak and part-owner Mao Dung, and a visit to the University library. Earlier in the year HCP coordinated a donation of 230 economics textbooks from the University of Queensland (School of Economics) to UME-KC and on this trip I visited the “UQ section” of their library. I also spoke briefly with Sarak about how to register the HCP with the Cambodian government.

Sarak explained that one of the HCP students (Sea Sok Kong) from the 2010 intake ended up going to another university on scholarship instead of coming to UME. She had wanted to go to both Universities, but her parents insist that she only do one degree at a time. In later discussions with Muon Veasna (in Phnom Penh) it was agreed that the fees for this student should be held over to cover another student from the 2011 intake, since she never actually started at UME.

## Phnom Penh

HCP board member Willem Paling put me in touch with Lay Sopagna, who is the deputy director of research at the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) – which regulates Universities in Cambodia. We had a meeting on 22 July 2011 (3:20pm) at the Council of Ministers.

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I spoke with Sopagna about the potential problem of over-education and low standards in some areas, and he said that the bureaucracy shares those concerns. In particular he noted that there had been lots of PhDs recently awarded by Cambodian universities and these were increasingly seen as worthless. He also pointed out that Cambodia had 102 Universities (this counted different campuses of the same University separately).

Sopagna pointed out that the government did not have much in the way of reliable statistics about Cambodian higher education, and he suggested that I could look at the Cambodian Department of Statistics, the Pannasatra University (private), or the Royal University of Economics & Law (public). I explained that I wanted to study the returns on Cambodian higher education, and he stressed that he would be happy to work with me.

After I explained HCP to Sopagna, he raised the potential problem with graduates having multiple jobs, and being paid in per-diems, which may be hard to track.

After the meeting I was introduced to some other (more senior) public servants, who suggested I read papers by the ADB and World Bank on Cambodian education. One of these papers was later forwarded to me by Sopagna. It was also pointed out that a Cambodian had done an Australian PhD on Cambodian Universities – the title was “Designing a Quality Management System for a Cambodian University” by Chhang Rath.

#### Travel costs & other activities

At the time of this trip there was a special STA flight deal that offered return flights to many destinations (including Phnom Penh) for \$640. Travel in Cambodia was done by cheap traveler bus (US\$5 – US\$10 per trip) and by moto-taxi (~US\$1 per trip inside the towns).

The total cost of the trip would have been about \$1500, none of which was financed from HCP donors. All donations go directly to the cost of student tuition.

The most notable non-work related parts of the trip included a boat trip out from Sihanoukville to Koh Rong to do some scuba diving (fairly good, but not as good as Thailand), and a trip to the town of Kampot (pretty & relaxed). While in Kampot, there was an incident where a tourist boat capsized, leaving dozens of tourists (and their bags) in the water near their sunken boat. I swam out to try and help, but only managed to save a few bags. The tourists blamed the Cambodian low safety-standards, but I heard later that the Cambodian news reports blamed the tourists for not knowing how to sit calmly on a boat.

I also played another half game of soccer for a Cambodia team managed by Muon Veasna.