Cultivating Cambodian Minds

Some people say you can't teach creativity. But you can encourage it, and Cambodia's universities have done a poor job of inspiring their students to think outside of textbooks and exams to create something unusual or innovative, whether it is art, architecture, science experiments or computer programs.

If you look back at the Kingdom's history, there is no shortage of examples of creative Cambodians. Beginning with the country's famed temples, which were inspired by architecture from other countries but are still distinctly Cambodian, the art, music and architecture created by the Khmer people was the envy of Southeast Asian civilizations for centuries. But Cambodia was sent back to year zero – as historian Francois Ponchaud put it – in 1975, and Cambodian innovation has been lacking ever since.

Now that Cambodia is re-emerging as a legitimate economic and cultural presence on the world stage, there is an immediate demand for people to innovate advancements in technology, education, industry, medicine and everything else necessary for a modern society. Yet, according to the experts we spoke with, Cambodia's universities are not implementing the programs or opening the doors to let students' creativity shine.

"It is crucial that youth learn to use their creativity to develop new things," said Kheam Hong, a lecturer in computer programming at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. "When this happens society will be updated as they begin to develop new things."

However, with few exceptions students are rewarded for their ability to memorize and recite information, but little attention is given to their ability to be innovative and come up with new ideas.

As a 23 year-old self-taught computer program designer, Hor Seanghong told Lift that youth have the talent to create new things like games, software and books. However, they aren't given the chance to be involved in these sorts of projects since schools don't foster this type of thinking or support students who are already looking ahead.

Khe Longsean, a 21 year-old student of information technology at University of Cambodia, said that he is yearning to be part of a team working on new programs designed specifically for Cambodians, but that his school has no outlet for students to be involved in these types of pioneering projects.

"I would love to be involved as much as possible if I could join programs allowing me create new things related to what I am studying," he said, "it would be beneficial to me, as well as the development of IT sector."

This sentiment is shared by Kheam Hong. "School is the main resource fostering students' creativity," he said. However, he added that since innovation is a difficult concept for some students to grasp, professors need to facilitate this thinking. "Lecturers or people who studied abroad should share their experience with Khmer youth so that they will understand what it means to be creative and build up the capacity to invent new things."

Lay Vichet, a 21 year-old senior at RUPP, is an ideal example of what Kheam Hong is talking about. After learning the fundamentals of software programming in class, he began to work with friends to create a client server system to be used in the Kingdom's hospitals.

In an interview with Lift he said: "The client server system will manage patients' medical records and control data, allowing faster operations at hospitals, such as filling medical subscriptions." Ultimately, the new software "will save time, money, and equipment being used by the hospital".

"If a school holds exhibitions or competitions for students to design new software … students will be encouraged to participate in inventing new things and they will put more effort into creativity," Lay Vichet said while talking about the IT sector. This approach can be carried over to all fields of study in the Kingdom.

Since 2002, Norton University has organized exhibitions every other year for students to show off their new ideas and inventions. Ung Vannthoeun, the school's vice rector, said that each school and community should initiate similar programs to encourage creativity and confidence, no matter how big or small the ideas might be.

Chim Manavy, executive director of Open Institute, said that youth during the last decade have become more creative, but it is oftentimes limited condition due to many universities' lack of materials needed for encouraging innovation.

She added that parents also have an important role in encouraging their children's creativity before, during and after university. "[Parents] should motivate their children to be more

creative in designing clothes or other things to give their children greater confidence," she said, adding that politicians should also help out.

"If the government invests more in education and it continues to improve, Cambodia will have enough material for students to engage in creating new inventions and show off their creativity to society."