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Enhancing Inclusive Education for Visually Impaired Students in Higher Education: A Case Study of Challenges in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges faced by blind students in accessing higher education in Cambodia and proposes solutions rooted in principles of social justice and equity. Drawing on John Rawls' theory of justice, which emphasizes fairness and equal opportunities, the study investigates barriers related to the availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational resources. Through case studies and analysis of the Cambodian educational landscape, the paper highlights the urgent need for institutional support and inclusivity within universities. By aligning educational policies and practices with Rawls' principles, the paper advocates for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. Ultimately, the paper aims to contribute to the advancement of inclusive education in Cambodia and ensure equal access to higher education for all students, irrespective of disability.

Keywords: Blind students, Cambodia, disability, higher education, theory of justice.

Introduction

In today's educational landscape, inclusive education stands as a critical goal, driven by the transformative impact of the digital era on educational

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institutions and practices. Within Cambodia's higher education realm, there's a pressing need for inclusivity, echoing international calls such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2019), which stresses achieving inclusive, equitable, quality education by 2030 (Ravet & Mtika, 2021). Despite these efforts, blind students in Cambodia encounter significant hurdles in accessing higher education. Private universities often overlook their needs, and lecturers lack adequate training in teaching methods for disabled students, particularly those with visual impairments (Nimol, 2022). Cambodia harbors a considerable population with visual impairments, facing barriers to education and employment. The Khmer Sight Foundation reports that over 180,000 Cambodians are visually impaired, with thousands experiencing avoidable blindness annually, many stemming from treatable conditions like cataracts (Mackie, 2023). According to the spokesman of the Ministry of Education, Ros Soveacha mentioned that there are 43 students with disabilities studying for bachelor's degrees, and 13 of them are women. In 2021, eight students with disabilities graduated (Nimol, 2022). While the Education Ministry provides support and accommodations, including financial aid and post-graduation employment assistance, challenges persist. The core issue lies in the profound difficulties blind students encounter in accessing higher education, exacerbated by the absence of tailored universities, limited research on their needs, and societal marginalization. The dearth of comprehensive research, policies, and inclusive practices further marginalizes disabled communities, rendering them among the most marginalized groups in Cambodia. Hence, there's an urgent need for a thorough investigation into the landscape and challenges faced by blind students, particularly in Phnom Penh.

Therefore, this paper will explore the following question: What are the primary barriers that blind students encounter when attempting to access higher education in Cambodia? To answer this question, the paper will leverage John Rawls' theory of justice (Rawls, 1971), which underscores fairness and equal opportunities. Accordingly, we will delve deeply into the hurdles visually impaired students encounter in accessing

higher education in Cambodia, highlighting the need for availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational resources. This paper argues that addressing these three elements is vital for ensuring equitable access to education for blind students. The paper will also examine how the principles of fairness and equal opportunities, as outlined in John Rawls' theory of justice, can be applied to address the barriers faced by blind students in accessing higher education in Cambodia. The first part of this paper will explore the theory of justice in fairness from the John Rawls and Cambodia context of fairness. The second part will discuss availability, accessibility, and adaptability by highlighting barriers of the blind students with case studies and universities that uphold the principles of fairness and equality advocated by Rawls. The final part will conclude with remarks.

Unpacking fairness

The concept of fairness, as articulated by John Rawls in his seminal work "A Theory of Justice," underscores the fundamental principle of justice being fair and equitable for all individuals (Rawls, 1971). He suggests that fairness means treating everyone equally, regardless of their personal situation. Rawls uses the analogy of a curtain to explain that we should imagine a scenario where we don't know anything about ourselves or others. From this perspective, we should create rules that would be fair for everyone, regardless of who they are or what their life is like.

So, how it is related and consider to be part of his idea of fairness is crucial for blind students in assessing in higher education. It means ensuring that every student, even those who are blind, have the same chances and opportunities for education. Rawls' theory emphasizes the importance of giving everyone a fair shot at succeeding, regardless of their differences. It's about building a world where everyone is included and has an equal chance to thrive. Rawls suggests that fairness entails imagining ourselves behind a hypothetical veil of ignorance, where our own circumstances are unknown, and creating rules that would be just for everyone, irrespective of their background or characteristics.

In Cambodian beliefs and Buddhism, fairness means doing good deeds and treating others kindly, knowing that our actions have

consequences (Chhon, 2017). It's about being honest, respectful, and fair to everyone, regardless of who they are. For blind students, this means making sure they have the same opportunities as everyone else to learn and succeed. It involves providing them with the support they need to access education and opportunities, just like anyone else. Fairness in Cambodian beliefs teaches us to be compassionate and inclusive, ensuring that everyone, including blind students, is treated with dignity and given a fair chance to thrive.

Fairness is often associated with principles of karma and dharma, which emphasize moral conduct, righteousness, and the law of cause and effect in Cambodian beliefs (Chhon, 2017). Similarly, John Rawls' theory of justice highlights fairness and equal opportunities. Rawls suggests that when determining principles of justice, people should imagine themselves behind a hypothetical veil of ignorance (Jark, 2023), where they don't know anything about their own circumstances. From this standpoint, they would choose principles that are fair for everyone, regardless of their situation.

Applied to blind students in Cambodia, both Cambodian beliefs and Rawls' theory emphasize the importance of ensuring equal opportunities and access to education. Fairness, in this context, means providing blind students with the support they need to excel academically, regardless of their disability. It entails creating inclusive environments where blind students are given the same opportunities as their peers to succeed. By aligning with principles of karma, dharma, and Rawls' theory of justice, Cambodian society can strive to establish a fairer and more equitable educational system that benefits all students, including those with visual impairments.

Challenges of the Blind Students with the Case Studies

In this section, we delve into the availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational resources, shedding light on the challenges faced by blind students through the following case studies. By examining the hurdles encountered by blind students in Cambodian universities, we explore how the availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational resources impact their educational journey. Through the experiences of Try Ratany

and insights from Mey Ponlok and So Siem Sokhim, we uncover the obstacles that hinder blind students' access to higher education. These challenges underscore the urgent need for institutional support and inclusivity within Cambodian universities to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of disability status.

During her university journey, Try Ratany grappled with numerous obstacles as a blind student (Sarom, 2022), particularly concerning the availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational materials. Limited access to course materials in formats like Braille or audio recordings hindered her engagement with the curriculum, while reliance on visual aids in classrooms posed significant barriers to her learning (Sarom, 2022). Despite some accommodations like specialized software, the lack of flexibility in teaching methods and financial constraints further compounded her challenges. Ratany's resilience allowed her to overcome these hurdles and complete her degree, underscoring the critical need to address barriers facing students with disabilities in accessing higher education.

Mey Ponlok, another blind student, vividly illustrates the difficulties in accessing learning materials at his university (Nimol, 2022). The absence of braille resources and specialized support services hampers his academic progress, leading to concerns about his future employment prospects. Similarly, So Siem Sokhim echoes Ponlok's struggles, highlighting the inadequacies of technology in facilitating effective learning and expressing apprehensions about job opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Nimol, 2022).

While the Ministry of Education endeavors to support students with disabilities, institutional support and inclusivity within Cambodian universities remain lacking (Ek, 2023). Without adequate accommodations and resources, students like Ponlok and Sokhim continue to face significant barriers in accessing higher education. These challenges necessitate collaborative efforts between government agencies, educational institutions, and advocacy organizations to ensure equal access to education for all individuals, regardless of disability status.

Additionally, the issues of resource availability, accessibility, and adaptability exacerbate the difficulties faced by students with disabilities in Cambodian universities (Nimol, 2022). Limited access to essential learning materials, inadequate infrastructure, and the lack of inclusive teaching practices further hinder blind students' academic success, perpetuating inequality in educational opportunities. Addressing these systemic barriers requires comprehensive reforms in university policies, infrastructure development, faculty training, and curriculum design to create a more inclusive learning environment. Prioritizing accessibility and adaptability in educational practices can empower all students, including those with disabilities, to thrive academically and contribute meaningfully to society.

Adhere to Rawls' Principles of Fairness and Equality for Blind Students

As stated above, the experiences of blind students reveal systemic inequalities within the educational system, where barriers such as limited access to resources and inadequate infrastructure hinder their ability to pursue higher education on equal footing with their sighted peers. Thus, this part is going to explore how Rawls' principles of justice and fairness can be applied to address these challenges, advocating for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for all students, including those with disabilities.

In the realm of higher education in Cambodia, the principles of justice and fairness, as articulated by John Rawls, shed light on the challenges faced by blind students. Rawls' theory posits that justice entails ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their circumstances (Sari, 2020). In the context of John Rawls' theory of justice and fairness, the challenges faced by blind students in accessing higher education in Cambodia underscore fundamental inequalities within the educational system. Rawls posits that justice entails creating a society where individuals have equal opportunities to pursue their interests and aspirations, regardless of their inherent characteristics or circumstances (Guyer, 2018). The barriers encountered by blind students, such as limited access to educational resources, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of

inclusive teaching practices, violate the principles of fairness and equality espoused by Rawls. These students are effectively disadvantaged due to factors beyond their control, such as their disability, socioeconomic background, and institutional shortcomings. Moreover, Rawls emphasizes the importance of a fair distribution of social goods and resources to ensure that everyone can participate fully in society. However, the unequal access to education experienced by blind students represents a failure to uphold this principle, as they are denied the same opportunities for intellectual development and social integration as their sighted peers. In Rawls' conception of justice as fairness, addressing systemic inequalities requires restructuring social institutions and policies to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable members of society (Dang, 2015). In the case of blind students in Cambodia, this entails implementing inclusive educational practices, investing in accessible infrastructure, and providing adequate support services to ensure equitable access to higher education. By aligning educational policies and practices with Rawls' principles of justice and fairness, Cambodia can create a more inclusive and equitable educational system that empowers all individuals to fulfill their potential and contribute to the advancement of society.

In Cambodia, addressing the challenges faced by blind students in accessing higher education requires a multifaceted approach rooted in principles of social justice and equity. While progress has been made, significant barriers persist, including limited accessibility to resources and infrastructure. To remedy this, investment in accessible infrastructure and technology is crucial. Educational facilities must be physically accessible, and educators need training on inclusive practices to create supportive learning environments. Strengthening policy frameworks and legislation to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities is essential. Government agencies must enforce inclusive education policies and ensure compliance with accessibility standards. Collaboration among stakeholders is key, with government agencies, educational institutions, civil society organizations, disability rights advocates, and community members working together to identify barriers and implement inclusive policies. Raising awareness about

the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities is also critical, fostering a culture of acceptance and support. Ultimately, achieving social justice in education requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. By investing in accessibility, providing teacher training, strengthening policy frameworks, fostering collaboration, and raising awareness, Cambodia can create a more inclusive and equitable educational system where all students, including those with disabilities, have equal opportunities to learn and succeed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the challenges confronting blind students in accessing higher education in Cambodia requires a multifaceted approach centered on social justice and equity in education. Despite some progress, significant barriers persist, including limited availability, accessibility, and adaptability of educational resources, which not only hinder blind students' academic advancement but also perpetuate broader societal inequalities. To effectively tackle these issues, recommendations include improving accessibility through investments in infrastructure and support services, enhancing teacher training on inclusive practices, strengthening policy frameworks to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and raising awareness about the challenges faced by blind students. By implementing these measures, Cambodia can advance towards achieving social justice in education and ensuring equal access to quality educational opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of disability, thus fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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