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A Model for Community College in Cambodia: Opportunities, Challenges, and Impact on the Relationship with ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are extremely important for education in Cambodia. As a result, the community should be more careful and alert to possibilities, difficulties, and their implications for the relationship with ASEAN. This research aims to investigate all elements and topics of the Model for Community College that have an impact on the interactions with ASEAN. We conducted interviews with ten people from various statuses, including teachers, principals, students, policymakers or leaders, and businesspeople/stakeholders. The study included 50 participants from Cambodia's cities and regions, and it used a qualitative technique and convenience sampling. The research findings reveal that stakeholders agree on the potential of Community Colleges in Cambodia to alleviate the education gap and contribute to economic growth. The strategy blends practical skills with academic knowledge to improve graduates' ability to find and potential for future study. The data stresses the role of education in encouraging economic growth, social fairness, poverty reduction, and regional collaboration.

Keywords: *Accessibility, Implementation Strategies, Sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok by five founding members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Over time, other Southeast Asian nations joined, with Brunei Darussalam joining in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. ASEAN's primary aims are to boost economic growth, social progress, and cultural development within the region, and to maintain peace and stability through adherence to justice and the rule of law. The ASEAN Vision 2020 outlines a unified, outward-looking Southeast Asia living peacefully, stably, and prosperously. This vision is being pursued through three pillars: the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Heng, 2017).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on August 8, 1967, in Bangkok by its five original members: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, and Laos and Myanmar in 1997, completing the current ten-member group. Guided by the motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community," ASEAN has created the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The AEC is built upon four pillars: a unified market and production base, a competitive economic region, equitable economic development, and integration with the global economy (Holloway et al., 2015).

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has significantly impacted the economies of its ten member states, particularly higher education. With the AEC's plans for increased cooperation and global engagement in 2025, it's crucial for higher education institutions to analyze the AEC's post-2015 effects. This analysis should focus on key opportunities, challenges, and implications to develop a more strategic roadmap for future AEC involvement. As HE is critical to the advancement of AEC, officials at the region's more than 7,000 universities (Peak et al., 2018) must have a thorough awareness of its implications in order to strategically manage their institutions to success.

Despite the significant increase in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and improvements in educational infrastructure, the quality of education in the country remains a concern. According to Education Congress: The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2021-2022 and Goals for the Academic Year 2021-2023 (2023), Cambodia's education system is plagued by numerous challenges. These include a shortage of qualified teachers, limited research opportunities and resources, overcrowded classrooms, and low enrollment in science programs. Additionally, higher education institutions are concentrated in Phnom Penh, leaving students in rural areas with limited access to quality education (Rana & Ardichvili, 2014).

A key obstacle is building skills and capacity, and developing human capital is crucial for economic growth. In the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), higher education has a greater positive impact on the regional economy compared to primary and secondary education. This is because the AEC needs advanced skills to successfully integrate into the global economy (Papademetriou et al., 2015).

In order to improve human development, it is important to focus on worker mobility. This means that workers should be able to move freely between jobs and regions in order to meet the needs of the labor market. However, there are a number of obstacles that prevent this from happening. Policies at many levels can make it difficult for workers to move, and this can have a negative impact on both individuals and the economy as a whole. In order to address this issue, it is important to have regional and national support for occupational mobility. This can include things like job training programs, relocation assistance, and portable benefits. By making it easier for workers to move, we can help to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. Te et al. (2018) researched the impact of health-related MRAs on medical practitioner mobilization and discovered that health workers' mobility and implementation of any health-related MRA should be improved. This must be backed up by greater political commitments and higher-level trade and immigration policies.

This research explores the viability of creating a community college system in Cambodia. It will examine the potential benefits and obstacles involved in such a project, and analyze how its implementation might affect Cambodia's standing within ASEAN.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges are a vital part of the higher education system. They offer training in diverse fields, preparing students for careers in areas like healthcare, public safety, IT, business, and manufacturing. Beyond career training, they also serve as a stepping stone for students aiming to transfer to four-year institutions and offer dual enrollment programs for high schoolers. Community colleges also provide GED preparation and English language instruction. Finally, they partner with local businesses to train and upskill workers in response to regional industry needs (An Introduction to Community Colleges and Their Students, 2021).

According to Tien Minh (2015), "The ASEAN Economic Community, or MEA, is an ASIA organization made up of ten Southeast Asian nations. The purpose of developing the AEC is to transform the region into a single market and manufacturing base with a significant competitive advantage, resulting in a stable and successful area beginning in 2015. ASEAN comprises 10 members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Furthermore, Silalahi (2017) asserted that "AEC" refers for

the ASEAN Economic Community. ASEAN is an age of free trade for regional economic integration in Southeast Asia.” Due to a shortage of human resources, not all ASEAN nations are prepared to face AEC. The absence of skills differs across the region. Some nations lack technological abilities, while others lack linguistic skills, like as proficiency in English, the AEC's primary language. This may be addressed by revising curricula that are adaptable to each nation's demands in order to tackle AEC.

Talent development is a top priority in ASEAN as it's seen as crucial for economic growth. Skill development policies are evolving to focus on demand-driven training, involving all relevant ministries and institutions. Many ASEAN nations have reformed their Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems, often creating independent agencies to oversee them. This has led to the development of standards for various sectors, including technology, healthcare, business, and especially computer-related skills. ASEAN itself has been instrumental in harmonizing skills standards across the region, with positive results seen in areas like hospitality and traditional trades (National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025).

Cambodia's National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy for 2017-2025 aims to develop a more skilled workforce and boost economic growth as the country progresses towards lower-middle-income status. The policy prioritizes improving the quality of TVET programs, encouraging public-private partnerships, and strengthening how the TVET system is managed. It also takes into account Cambodia's social and economic situation and involves a wide range of institutions and organizations (National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025).

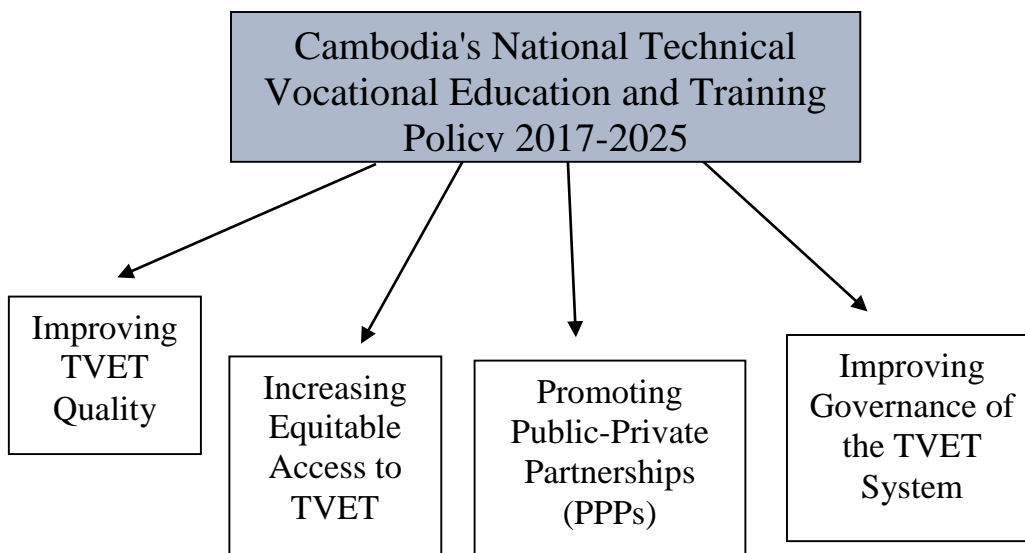


Figure 1. Cambodia's National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025

Source: National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017–2025 (2017)

Cambodia's TVET system, emphasizing major programs such as the Cambodian National Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance Mechanisms. It highlights the significance of teacher quality, career possibilities for TVET graduates, and the National Employment Agency's role in determining skill requirements. The document also asks for frequent reviews and new development techniques to ensure Cambodian TVET's competitiveness in a globalized world.

The study analyzes the problems of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) teacher education in Southeast Asia, focusing on a lack of industrial experience, gender imbalance, industry connection, and standardization concerns. It recommends measures for improving TVET teacher education, such as incorporating industry experience, encouraging more women, establishing links between institutions and companies, and building standardized frameworks for quality and mobility (Paryono, 2015).

Heng (2017) has investigated Cambodia's problems and prospects as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the ASEAN Economic Community. Human resource development, education-employment mismatch, concerns with higher education and legal framework, infrastructure development, insufficient awareness, and foreign policy improvement are all challenges. Opportunities include joining the ASEAN Free Trade Area, improving relations with ASEAN dialogue partners, restoring foreign policy, and integrating into the AEC.

Sa-ngiamwibool & Wisaeng (2021) investigated the influence of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on higher education (HE) and its potential to boost the region's worldwide reputation. It sees potential in the services industry and internal collaboration, but hurdles in gaining access to digital education. They have proposed measures to promote digital infrastructure and creative educational methodologies, as well as a plan for strategic management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used interpretative Thematic Analysis (TA) to investigate the prospects, constraints, and effect of a community college model in Cambodia, particularly its link with ASEAN. The study employs in-depth interviews and focus groups to get insight into the viewpoints of important players including as students, teachers, administrators, community people, and representatives from relevant ASEAN organizations. The TA technique assists in comprehending the varied experiences of the model's stakeholders, allowing for a more in-depth knowledge of its ability to contribute to human capital development, meet local needs, create regional collaboration, and change Cambodia's role within ASEAN (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

This study used a qualitative research approach using convenience sampling. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. Notes and recordings were taken. Data was analyzed using a thematic approach. According to Creswell (2017) and Willig & Rogers (2017), researchers can choose volunteers who are more knowledgeable about the study's issue and eager to offer useful information. The researchers chose individuals based on a targeted sampling strategy and inclusion criteria. This study gathered feedback from teachers, principles, students, policy makers/leaders, business persons/stakeholders in Phnom Penh and Provinces of Cambodia, including both potential and obstacles.

To guarantee rigor and validity, the interview questions were developed with professional advice from BELTEI International University and rigorously analyzed by a group of research experts. A pilot study with 20 participants from public and private institutions offered useful feedback for future improvements (Malmqvist et al., 2019). The pilot research results were not included, but they improved our technique and trust in data collecting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The survey respondents predominantly consisted of males (60.5%) aged between 31 and 50 years old (78.5%). A large majority (74%) were located in Phnom Penh, with the remaining 26% residing in other provinces. The respondents represented a diverse range of roles, including teachers (30%), principals (10%), students (20%), policy makers/leaders (20%), and business persons/stakeholders (20%). In terms of education, the majority held a Bachelor's Degree (65%), while a smaller portion had a high school education or below (10%). This demographic profile suggests a focus on a relatively mature, urban-based, and professionally diverse group with a strong representation from the education sector.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Categories	Valid Percentage
Gender	
Female	39.5
Male	60.5
Age	
Below 30	21
From 31-50	78.5
Above 50	0.5
Workplace	
Phnom Penh	74
Other provinces	26
Employer Type	
Teachers	30
Principles	10
Students	20
Policy Makers/Leaders	20

Business Persons/Stakeholders	20
Education Status	
Bachelor's Degree	65
High school and below	10
Master's degree	20
PhD degree	0.5

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

The data analysis reveals four themes: scope and focus, duration and structure, target audience and accessibility, advantages and disadvantages, impact of improved education, and implementation of Community Colleges. It emphasizes the importance of education, workforce skills, economic growth, and sustainability.

Table 2. TVET Scheme and a New Community College Model

Theme 1	Theme Description
Scope and Focus	This theme explores the breadth of skills and knowledge offered by each model.
Duration and Structure	This theme examines the length and organization of the educational programs.
Target Audience and Accessibility	This theme considers who each model serves and how accessible it is to different populations.
Advantages and Disadvantages	This theme outlines the benefits and drawbacks of each model.

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Table 3. Community College Model on ASEAN Integration

Theme 2	Theme Description
Human Capital Development and Economic Growth	This theme examines how improved education contributes to a more skilled workforce and drives economic development.
Strengthening ASEAN Integration	This theme explores how improved education enhances Cambodia's role and relationships within ASEAN.

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Table 4. Community College Model on Strategic Implementation

Theme 3	Theme Description
Access and Equity	This theme focuses on how Community Colleges can improve educational access for underserved populations.
Relevance and Quality	This theme addresses the need for education that meets local needs and maintains high standards.

Implementation Strategies	This theme outlines practical steps for establishing and managing Community Colleges.
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Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Table 5. Community College Model on Sustainability

Theme 4	Theme Description
Sustainability	This theme focuses on the long-term viability of the Community College model.

Source: Processed Data by Researchers

Interviews indicate differences between TVET and the proposed Community College Model. TVET concentrates on specialized occupational skills, preparing people for quick employment, although some participants are concerned about the reduced social standing and limited career growth chances. The Community College Model provides a greater range of educational opportunities, which may lead to further education or more diverse employment prospects. Both strategies strike a balance between specialized skill training and broader education options.

RQ1: What are the differences between the TVET scheme and a new Community College Model and what are the advantages and disadvantages of both?

From data analysis, researchers have interviewed the target participants and most of them have answered as below:

Teachers

"TVET's focus is fairly specialized. We educate pupils the exact skills required for a given job."

"It's great for direct employment, but sometimes I worry about their long-term adaptability."

"The curriculum can feel rigid, and there's less room for exploring broader academic concepts."

"A Community College model excites me because it allows for a more holistic approach."

"We can equip students with both practical skills and a broader base of knowledge."

"This broadens their perspectives and better prepares them for the ever-changing employment environment. Furthermore, the possibility of academic transfer to a university provides a significant benefit for dedicated pupils."

Principles

"TVET programs are beneficial in meeting immediate workforce needs. We see a lot of kids going straight to jobs after graduation, which is a success."

"Funding can be an issue, and keeping equipment updated to industry standards is a constant challenge."

"Also, sometimes parents see TVET as a 'second choice' compared to academic pathways."

"Community Colleges can be a game-changer for our community."

"They offer a flexible and accessible pathway for students to gain valuable skills and potentially pursue higher education."

"I see it as a chance to increase the overall education level in our region and stimulate economic development. The key will be forging strong ties with local businesses to ensure curricular relevance."

Students

"I picked TVET because I wanted to find a career right after school. I learnt practical skills that I use every day at work."

"It was also less expensive than universities. However, I sometimes feel as if my possibilities are limited compared to people who attended university."

"I enjoy the idea of community college because it expands my options. I can study a trade while still having the possibility to attend university later."

"It seems like a fair combination of practical skills and academic instruction. Furthermore, it's closer to home and less expensive, making it less of a strain on my family."

Policy Makers/Leaders

"TVET is essential for addressing our skills gap and driving economic growth in key sectors."

"We need to strengthen TVET programs by investing in teacher training, modernizing equipment, and improving industry linkages."

"We also need to address the perception that TVET is inferior to academic education."

"Community Colleges are a crucial investment in human capital development. They can give more accessible and relevant education to a larger population, particularly in rural locations. This would not only help our economy but also promote social fairness."

"We need to develop a comprehensive strategy for implementing Community Colleges, including funding mechanisms, curriculum development, and quality assurance frameworks."

Business Persons/Stakeholders

"TVET graduates often come to us with the specific skills we need, which reduces our training costs."

"We value the hands-on approach of TVET programs. However, we occasionally discover that TVET graduates lack broad problem-solving skills and the ability to adapt to fast changing technologies."

"We view community colleges as a key source of talent. Community College graduates are well-suited for our workforce since they combine practical skills with academic knowledge."

"We are excited to collaborate with community colleges to build curriculum that suits our industry's demands and give students with internship opportunities. This ensures that we have a pipeline of skilled staff in the future."

Cambodia's community college model can boost economic growth and development by providing access to relevant skills training, enhancing employability, and attracting investment. This, in turn, can strengthen Cambodia's ASEAN position, promoting regional trade and collaboration.

RQ2: How can improved education opportunities in the provinces impact on economic growth and development in Cambodia and strengthen its relationship with ASEAN?

From data analysis, researchers have interviewed the target participants and most of them have answered as below:

Teachers

"As a teacher in a rural province, I see firsthand the immense potential of our students."

"Improved schooling, in particular focusing on practical skills and critical thinking, would allow them to contribute meaningfully to our local economy."

"If our students are knowledgeable, they can start small businesses, improve agricultural practices, and participate in the growing tourism area."

"A better education system would help bridge the gap between rural and urban areas, reducing migration and strengthening our communities."

"From an ASEAN viewpoint, if all Cambodian provinces have a strong education structure, we can produce a workforce that can compete with other countries in the region."

"Our students will be enabled to collaborate and communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds, fostering stronger interpersonal connections and comprehension within ASEAN."

Principals

"From a leadership standpoint, I believe that improved education in the provinces is the foundation of Cambodia's future."

"Investing in teacher training, providing adequate resources, and developing appropriate curricula are crucial steps."

"When our schools are well-equipped and our teachers are well-trained, we can produce graduates who are not only skilled but also innovative and adaptable."

"This will attract investment to our province, create jobs, and improve our infrastructure."

"A strong education system also promotes social cohesion and reduces poverty, resulting in overall development."

"Within ASEAN, if every province have quality education, we can create a level playing field where our students can compete and partner with other children from other ASEAN nations, promoting regional integration and economic partnership."

Students

"As a student in a rural province, I dream of having the same advantages as students in Phnom Penh."

"Improved education would mean access to better schools, qualified teachers, and modern technology."

"I want acquire skills that will help me get a good job and contribute to my community."

"If we have better education in the provinces, we won't have to leave our homes to find work in the city."

"We can build our own communities and make them great. Cambodia could thrive within ASEAN if it has a good education system in every province."

"We can learn in other countries and share our own knowledge and culture, strengthening our ties and building a better future together."

Policy Makers/Leaders

"From a policy standpoint, investing in provincial education is a strategic priority. It is vital for long-term economic growth, social development, and regional integration."

"We need to develop policies that ensure equitable access to quality education for all children, regardless of where they live."This calls for a multifaceted approach that includes greater money, enhanced infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum creation, and community engagement."

"By strengthening education in the provinces, we can create a skilled workforce that will drive economic diversification and attract foreign investment."

"It will enhance Cambodia's competitiveness within ASEAN, allowing us to participate more effectively in regional trade, investment, and cooperation. A well-educated population is essential for building a strong and prosperous Cambodia within the ASEAN community."

Business Persons/Stakeholders

"As a business proprietor, I recognize the critical importance of a skilled workforce."

"Improved education in the provinces will provide us with a pool of competent staff members who are ready to contribute to our businesses."

"When local people have the right skills, we are more likely to invest in the provinces, creating jobs and stimulating economic growth."

"A good system of learning also fosters innovation and entrepreneurship, leading to new business opportunities."

"From an ASEAN standpoint, if Cambodia invests in education across all provinces, we can create a workforce that is competitive regionally."

"This is going to attract foreign investment not only to Cambodia but also to the region as a whole."

"It will also promote regional trade and economic integration, benefiting businesses throughout ASEAN."

The study's participants agree that community colleges can close the educational gap in Cambodian provinces by providing accessible, regionally relevant education. Participants underlined the need of curriculum adapted to local industry demands, flexible program delivery, strong collaborations with local firms, and extensive teacher training programs focusing on practical skills and community engagement.

RQ3: How can the model of Community College help to address the education gap in the provinces in Cambodia and how can it be implemented?

From data analysis, researchers have interviewed the target participants and most of them have answered as below:

Teachers

"Participation colleges can bridge the divide by offering relevant training aligned with local job markets."

"Many of my pupils are unable to afford college in Phnom Penh."

"A local community college would give them practical skills and a chance to improve their lives without leaving their families."

"We need practical support."

"Training for teachers for how to deliver vocational and technical lessons is essential."

"The program of study ought to stay flexible, allowing us to adapt to the specific needs of our community."

"Partnerships with regional enterprises would also be invaluable, providing real-world experience for students."

Principals

"Community schools are a cost-effective way to boost education levels in rural areas."

"They can provide a second chance for students who dropped out or failed to obtain quality schooling."

"By offering different programs, they can cater to different learning styles and abilities, increasing overall educational attainment."

"Successful adoption requires strong leadership and community involvement."

"We need clear guidelines and support from the Ministry of Education, alongside the autonomy to manage our own resources and tailor programs to our community's needs."

"Collaboration with local authorities and businesses is crucial to ensure trainees are employable."

Students

"I want to work in farming, but I don't have the skills.."

"A university nearby would let me learn modern farming techniques without leaving my family."

"It's too expensive to go into university in the city."

"This would give me a real opportunity to get a good job and contribute to my community."

"The lessons need to be relevant to what jobs are actually available here."

"They should also be affordable, with scholarships and financial aid for students from disadvantaged families."

"Flexible schedules are important too, so I can help my family with farming during busy seasons."

Policy Makers/Leaders

"Community colleges are a key strategy for decentralizing education and promoting equitable development."

"They empower provinces by creating a skilled workforce, attracting investment, and reducing poverty."

"This strengthens national unity and reduces the urban-rural divide."

"We need a national framework for community college development, including accreditation standards, funding mechanisms, and quality assurance processes."

"Ministerial collaboration is vital. We also need to work with local communities to ensure that institutions satisfy their special requirements."

"Long-term sustainability is critical, so we must invest in teacher training, infrastructure, and ongoing program development."

Business Persons/Stakeholders

"We struggle to find skilled workers in our province."

"A neighborhood college would be a great asset, providing us with a pipeline for suitable employees."

"This would help our local economy and make our businesses more competitive."

"We're willing to partner with community colleges by providing internships, job shadowing, and even helping to develop curriculum that meets our industry's needs."

"We could offer scholarships and sponsorships to motivate students to seek related careers."

"This is a win-win - you get the qualified workers we need, and local people get good jobs."

CONCLUSION

The data analysis demonstrates a high consensus among teachers, principals, students, politicians, and business stakeholders about Community Colleges' capacity to close the education gap in Cambodian provinces while also contributing to economic growth and ASEAN integration. While TVET programs are renowned for their capacity to provide specialized work skills and facilitate rapid employment, they are also believed to be limited in long-term flexibility and broader academic chances. The Community College model is viewed as a helpful supplement, providing a more comprehensive approach that blends practical skills with academic knowledge, enhancing graduates' employability and possibilities for future study.

RECOMMENDATION

The National Framework for Community College Development seeks to establish a comprehensive system that prioritizes access for rural and

underprivileged people. It will require defined accreditation requirements, financing methods, and quality assurance procedures. The curriculum will be developed in partnership with local businesses and industries to provide flexibility and responsiveness to job market requirements. Teacher training and assistance will be enhanced, and public-private collaborations will be encouraged. Accessibility will be addressed, including scholarships, financial aid, and flexible learning options. Community involvement and ownership will be encouraged, and appropriate infrastructure and technology will be given. Cambodia can successfully use the Community College model to close the education gap in its provinces, boost economic growth, and improve its standing in ASEAN. This will help ensure a more equal and prosperous future for all Cambodians.

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