

Collaboration in the Cambodian TVET sector: Why does it matter?

Abstract

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has promoted collaboration between TVET institutions and the private sector for better skills provision. However, there is still scepticism about collaboration between both parties. This article employs qualitative data to investigate different forms and degrees of collaboration between training providers and companies. It also examines the challenges within collaboration. The findings reveal various forms of collaboration between training providers and companies. Most collaborations involve student internships, job announcement dissemination, curriculum development, consultative meetings, and workplace visits. In contrast, some forms like apprenticeship, industrial skills training, and research and development are rare or absent. Although beneficial to training providers and companies, most collaborations are conducted irregularly and ad hoc. Simply put, the collaborations are generally small-scale and at low intensity. Such collaborations cannot be built, strengthened, or intensified due to a lack of funding and resources, limited capacity of institutions and instructors, lack of trust in the quality of TVET programs, limited integration of collaborations, limited enforcement of legal frameworks and policies in supporting collaboration, and lack of mutual benefits of collaborations. Therefore, improving these challenges can help training providers collaborate closely with private companies.

Keywords: Collaboration, skills provision, training providers, private sector, TVET

1 Introduction

Workforce skills development is always at the forefront of the Cambodian government's development agenda (RGC 2017; 2019). Thus, the Cambodian government has embarked on several significant policies (e.g., the Skills Development Roadmap 2023-2035, the TVET Policy 2017-2025, the TVET Law (in draft), and the Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025) to address skills development issues. Despite the efforts above, a skills mismatch is still a primary concern for both the government and the private sector (NEA 2018; Veung 2021; Veung & Ven 2021). Other perennial factors, including outdated training facilities and content, limited funding, inadequate industry involvement, and TVET's image, also hinder Cambodia's skills development (Chea et al. 2020; RGC 2017). One of the solutions to these challenges is to improve collaboration between and among different stakeholders in TVET (RGC 2017). To begin with, therefore, there is need for more efforts from diverse stakeholders, including government bodies, development partners, employers, and other social actors, in building and strengthening collaboration in the Cambodian skills development sector (Lenssen & Trzmiel 2020; Song & Chea 2021).

While it is evident that collaboration is vital for meeting the diverse needs of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and industry sectors (Alias & Hassan 2013), there is still a lack of effective collaboration among stakeholders in the TVET sector, particularly the collaboration between TVET institutions and the private sector in Cambodia (MoLVT 2023; RGC 2017). Therefore, to close the skills gap and bridge the supply-demand mismatch in the Cambodian TVET sector, the promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and resource mobilization for skills development has been emphasized in the recent Skills Development Roadmap 2023–2035, the TVET Law draft and the current TVET Policy 2017–2025. However, there is still scepticism about the right nature of collaboration between key stakeholders in TVET and the challenges therein.

Research on collaboration between key stakeholders is thus significant for improving collaboration in the Cambodian TVET context. To contribute to the scarce literature on collaboration in Cambodian TVET, this study focuses on collaboration at the inter-organizational level. Specifically, this study examines forms, degrees, and challenges in collaborations between training providers and companies in Cambodian TVET. The study attempts to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do training providers and companies collaborate?
2. To what extent do they collaborate?
3. What are the challenges in building and sustaining their collaborations?

The article is structured as follows. The following section briefly describes an overview of collaboration in the Cambodian TVET sector, followed by a brief review of collaboration theory and collaboration in education and training in general. This section ends with the conceptual framework of the study. Next, the methodology section discusses the study's research, data collection, and data analysis approaches. Then, the section on findings presents different forms, analysis of the degree, and challenges of collaboration in TVET, followed by the discussion of the key findings. Finally, the article ends with implications of the research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Overview of collaboration in the Cambodian TVET context

As shown in Figure 1 below, the Cambodia Qualifications Framework (CQF) outlines eight levels of TVET qualifications, starting with vocational certificates (level 1) and progressing to doctoral degrees in technology or business education (level 8) (National Training Board 2012). The first four levels are equivalent to secondary education, while the last four are post-secondary TVET. Grade 9 graduates can enroll for upper secondary education or TVET, while grade 12 graduates can enroll for post-secondary TVET or universities.

Age	Grade	Stream	General Education	TVET	Higher Education	Non-Formal Education
		Governance	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; other relevant Ministries	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; other relevant ministries
26		CQF Level 8		Doctoral degree	Doctoral degree	
25						
24						
23						
22		CQF Level 7		Master's degree (technology/business)	Master's degree	
21						
20		CQF Level 6		Bachelor's degree (technology/business)	Bachelor's degree	
19						
18	CQF Level 5		Higher diploma (technology/business)	Associate degree		
17	Grade 12	CQF Level 4	Upper Secondary Education	TVET Certificate 3		
16	Grade 11	CQF Level 3		TVET Certificate 2		
15	Grade 10	CQF Level 2		TVET Certificate 1		
14	Grade 9	CQF Level 1	Lower Secondary Education	Vocational Certificates		
13	Grade 8					
12	Grade 7					
11	Grade 6					
10	Grade 5	Primary Education				
9	Grade 4					
8	Grade 3					
7	Grade 2					
6	Grade 1					
5	High Step	Preschool Education				
4	Medium Step					
3	Low Step					

Note: CQF = Cambodian Qualifications Framework

Figure 1: Cambodia's national education and training system (Source: SEAMEO 2017: 37; ADB 2016: 3)

TVET programs are perceived as low-status among high schoolers and parents, with low enrollments compared to higher education (MoEYS 2019; MoLVT 2020). Additionally, TVET is less attractive due to its low quality and relevance to the labor market and limited study subjects, contributing to the scarcity of trained workers (Veung & Ven 2021).

Within the Cambodian education and training system, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) oversees general education, non-formal education, and higher education, while the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) supervises TVET. The overlap between line ministries makes the quality of education and training challenging (Un & Sok 2018).

Cambodia's TVET Policy 2017–2025 promotes public-private partnerships and resource mobilization to address skills development challenges (RGC 2017). In 2018, four Sector Skills Councils were established to advise the government and training providers on market trends, design training programs, and improve industry linkages (ADB 2019). Government efforts, such as the TVET Policy 2017–2025, the Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025, the Skills Development Fund, and the Law on Investment, have improved collaboration between training providers and the private sector. However, the magnitude of these

collaborations remains in question, requiring further research to understand their impact. Moreover, public and private training providers must strengthen collaborations with local, regional, and global manufacturers and employers to ensure that graduates meet labor market needs (NEA 2018; Veung & Ven 2021). Thus, exploring the forms, degrees and challenges of collaboration in the Cambodian TVET sector becomes crucial.

2.2 Collaboration theory

Collaboration is increasingly important in addressing economic and social development issues. It involves inter-organizational relationships, such as strategic alliances, partnerships, coalitions, joint ventures, franchises, and network organizations (Ring & Van De Ven 1994), to achieve shared goals that no single organization can achieve independently (Gajda 2004; Gray 1989; Trist 1977; Wood 1991; Wood & Gray 1991). Collaboration entails shared interests, common purposes, rules, and pooled resources (Kezar 2005).

Collaboration is crucial for organizations to achieve a shared vision and success (Gajda 2004). It enhances inter-organizational ties, ensures wider actor involvement, provides viable solutions, and simplifies the implementation of shared goals (Wondirad et al. 2020).

Collaborating with stakeholders allows them to pool scarce resources and reduce duplication, enabling shared visions (Gajda 2004). Motivations for collaboration include access to new technologies, markets, economies, and complementary skills (Ring & Van De Ven 1994). Other benefits include effectiveness, efficiency, resources, capacity, legitimacy, and social development for stakeholders (Lawson 2004).

Collaboration is a crucial solution for addressing multifaceted social issues, but its definition is complex and often confused (Gajda 2004; Morris & Miller-Stevens 2016). It involves parties exploring differences and finding solutions beyond their vision, requiring institutional or organizational development (Gray 1989). Collaboration can be a strategy for mobilizing innovative solutions to complex social problems (Sørensen & Torfing 2011). However, ensuring equal benefit sharing is challenging due to the different perspectives of stakeholders. According to Huxham (1996), building stakeholder trust and ensuring transparency and mutual benefits are crucial for successful collaboration.

The collaboration process often entails specific steps or levels of intensity, ranging from basic to advanced or from entirely fragmented to fully connected: consultation, participation, cooperation, and collaboration (Keast et al. 2007; O'leary & Vij 2012; Selden et al. 2006; UNESCO IIEP 2019). Ansell (2019) defined cooperation, coordination and collaboration differently in terms of intensity. Cooperation involves low-intensity relationships with complete autonomy, while coordination requires formalized processes and risk exposure. Coordination aligns agendas without shared goals, while collaboration requires significant investment in relationships to achieve shared goals (Ansell 2019).

2.3 Collaboration in education and training

The literature on collaboration in education and training includes models like the triple helix, quadruple helix, and quintuple helix, emphasizing stakeholder roles in achieving shared goals (MacGregor & Carleton 2012). The Triple Helix, developed by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff, focuses on interactions between academia, industry, and governments to digitalize regional economies through innovation initiatives (Bolgova et al. 2020). Examples include French higher education, where institutions, corporations, and local governments collaborate to distribute graduates across the nation, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US, which develops academic programs and builds graduates' professionalism through a framework of education, research, and innovation (Bolgova et al. 2020).

As part of collaboration, employer engagement is significant for vocational education, facilitating learners' successful school-to-work transitions (Bajracharya & Paudel 2021; Shrestha 2022). For example, apprenticeship programs in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and South Korea are good examples of solid employer involvement. Employers working closely with TVET institutions are the key to successful apprenticeship programs (James Relly & Laczik 2022). These apprenticeship programs benefit schools, students, and companies by enabling practical skills in the workplace while allowing them to acquire theoretical training at school (Frimousse & Peretti 2020; Veung & Ven 2021).

The industry plays a key role in making graduates' skills relevant to industry-specific needs (Badenhorst & Radile 2018; Bagale 2018; Siddiky & Uh 2020). Collaboration between training providers and employers can be achieved through five key areas: curriculum and learning material development, instructor training, practical workplace training, training facility and equipment improvement, and employment opportunities (Raihan 2014). As mentioned before, collaboration involves a complex process of consultation, participation, cooperation, and collaboration (Keast et al. 2007; O'leary & Vij 2012; Selden et al. 2006; UNESCO IIEP 2019), requiring a high level of trust and adequate time while also running the risk of a potential loss of autonomy while investing in a shared goal (Ansell 2019). According to Alias and Hassan (2013), achieving successful collaboration would require the right environment, supportive organizational structure, and individuals prepared to undertake new responsibilities, as these factors are crucial for future collaborative undertakings. However, in developing countries like Cambodia, collaboration between training providers and employers remains challenging and requires more effort from multiple stakeholders (Lenssen & Trzmiel 2020; Song & Chea 2021). Keeping the above discussion in mind, this study focuses on the collaboration between training providers and companies in the Cambodian TVET context, highlighting the lack of research and efforts to enhance collaborations in Cambodia's skills development.

2.4 Conceptual framework

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, the study developed a conceptual framework to examine the different forms, degrees, and challenges in collaboration between training providers and companies. In the figure, training providers and companies are shown as key collaborators at the heart of the process. They collaborate in various ways (e.g., knowledge and skills transfer, curriculum development and update, internship and apprenticeship programs, and so forth), but at different levels of intensity (from less to full collaboration). As the figure suggests, addressing skills development challenges may be possible closer to full collaboration intensity. The figure also illustrates the role of government bodies in working with industry associations to develop and implement supportive policies and mechanisms for collaboration. In turn, industry associations can advocate for companies and employers to collaborate with training providers. Government bodies and industry associations can thus work together to pave the way for successful collaborations in TVET.

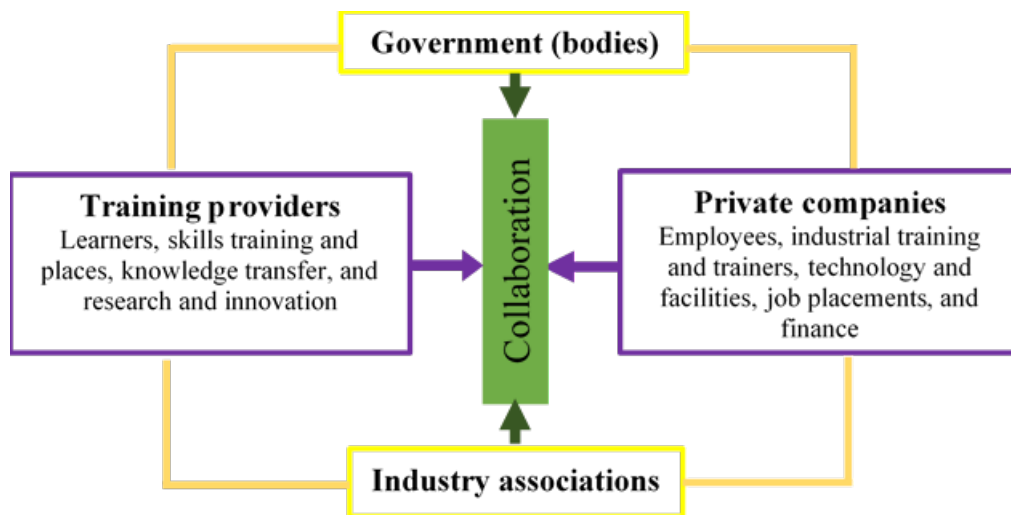


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the study on collaborations in TVET (Source: author)

3 Methodology

The article employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interview data to examine collaborations between training providers and companies in TVET. (The r4d programme's “Skills for Industry” project is a part of a bigger research project led by the Zürich University of Teacher Education and conducted in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, South Africa, and Vietnam, to identify and better understand the critical factors that help or hinder the contribution of vocational skills development to inclusive industrial growth and transformation in low- and middle-income countries. In Cambodia, this project focuses on three main sectors – garment, electrical and electronic assembly, and food processing.) The research comprehensively examined TVET stakeholders’ perceptions, practices, and

experiences concerning collaboration (Creswell 2009; Dawson 2007; Lunenburg & Irby 2008; Yin 2018).

In Phase 1 of the research, interviews were conducted with 36 firms between October and December 2019 to provide insight into manufacturing employers' perspectives on collaborations with training providers. In Phase 2, interviews were conducted with representatives from nine government bodies (GB), 20 training providers (TP), four industry associations (IA), and three labor unions (LU). The interview participants were observed to be “thoughtful, informative, articulate, and experienced” (Gay et al. 2009, 135).

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was done to analyze interview data (Gläser & Laudel 2019; Gläser-Zikuda et al. 2020; Mayring 2004). QCA is an approach that allows researchers to analyze and interpret meanings and patterns derived from rich textual data. This approach helped the author to explore insights into collaborations, partnerships, relationships, and industry linkages between training providers and employers. The author thus formulated initial coding and themes, collected relevant data into a content analysis matrix, and reviewed the exported data to refine patterns and themes.

4 Findings

This section presents the study's findings built upon the insights from the respondents in the Cambodian TVET sector. The findings cover different aspects of collaborations – forms, degrees and challenges – between training providers and companies.

4.1 Forms of collaboration in TVET

The following describes different forms of collaboration between training providers and private companies. The motivations behind collaboration are also included to highlight why training providers collaborate with companies.

4.1.1 Involvement in curriculum development

It is evident that curriculum development requires private sector involvement, particularly that of firms, to ensure relevant training outcomes and that industrial needs are being met. The interview data highlights that most training providers often invited the private sector to participate in curriculum design, gathering information on skills needs and requirements from companies: “Our approach is no other than requesting firms within our network to help us. If they told us what they needed and the school did not have sufficient resources to answer those needs effectively...” (TP06). (This is an interviewee ID for this study. For this study, interviews with training providers, government bodies, industry associations, and labor unions were conducted. Therefore, interviewee codes starting with TP, GB, IA, and LU refer to training providers, government bodies, industry association, and labor unions, respectively. For example, “TP06” means a respondent from a training provider (TVET institution), while “GB22” is a respondent from a government body. Furthermore, one interview with a

representative from a human resource department (hr) and another with a person from production (pro) within one company were conducted. Moreover, the company codes starting with CE, CF and CG refer to E&E, garment and food processing, respectively. For example, “CE4771 pro” means a respondent from a production department from an E&E company, while “CGBC830 hr” is a human resources respondent from a garment company.)

As discussed above, the research literature suggests that training providers should involve the private sector in school meetings and workshops to update curricula in responding to labor market demand. A few company representatives reported assigning mid- or high-level staff to attend conferences/seminars by TVET institutions or ministries.

“...there is involvement or participation from the private sector, relevant stakeholders or other public institutions, so every three months, we have a meeting on, for example, revising some part of the curriculum.” (TP19)

“Normally, when the company receives any invitation from school or the ministry, they [company] would inform us the production [team] to assign someone from the mid- or high-level employees to join.” (CE4771 pro)

Like training providers, all government bodies agreed that private sector collaborations benefit TVET institutions. According to the representative from the government body of GB21, the private sector’s involvement significantly influences skills provision, making a high level of engagement essential for the desired quality of skills training programs.

“There’s no success without the involvement of the stakeholders from industrial sectors. Therefore, there are a lot of influential factors on teaching because we need documents to teach, and for now, we have the industry advisory council and sector expert councils in five different sectors.” (GB21)

In summary, all training providers and government bodies agreed that private sector involvement in curriculum development is of vital importance. It was noted the same time, however, that few company respondents expressed their commitment to ensure the same.

4.1.2 Provision of internships and employment

In most training providers’ programs, students were required to intern at a particular company or worksite as part of their graduation requirements. They were sometimes required to write a thesis or report. These internships were done during their year-2 study for a higher diploma course, year-4 study for a 4-year business bachelor’s program and year-5 study for a 5-year engineering bachelor’s program. Students needed to find internship opportunities by themselves or through instructors’ networks or schools, as pointed out by TP10 below.

“It (internship) accounts for one semester. The internship takes place in the second semester in C1 or associate’s degree, or C2 and C3. We give scores for internships. We do not allow them to take exams if they do not complete their internship.” (TP10)

The data collected based on interviews with company respondents indicate that some companies also accepted students for internships, but on a small scale. In such cases, the students could learn and/or experience workplace reality or the world of work to gain hands-

on skills and knowledge during their internship. Many training providers and government bodies regarded student internships as part of the collaboration process, while students also had the opportunity to learn from the workplace.

“Secondly, we also went to the construction site, where we inspected the water and electrical system in the building. We also inspect generators when we go to the factory... We have an internship in the second semester.” (TP10)

Furthermore, students could gain job opportunities through internships at a workplace, as pointed out by TP19 and CF10395. Employers could also use this opportunity to observe the quality of skills training and students' performance. Training providers could also receive job information or opportunities from employers directly based on such instances and disseminate it to instructors and students. Well-known training providers with good collaborations with firms could then be prioritized during recruitment of graduates.

“When interns do their internship, I can observe them. After their internship is finished, I can ask them to work for us.” (CF10395 hr)

“Staff from private companies also come to our school and announce job information requesting students to apply for jobs at their companies.” (TP19)

These findings suggest that collaboration with the private sector for internships could be a job gateway for student interns, as expressed by all training providers and government bodies. However, not many companies are ready or in a position to host a considerable number of interns.

4.1.3 Workplace visits and study tours

Training providers also conducted study visits to various workplaces, allowing students and instructors to see and/or gain real-life and hands-on experience on a particular topic at the workplace. Usually, such activities occurred over a very short period. This suggests that these activities are sporadic, and require more regularity with specific learning objectives.

“...we work closely since our students conduct internship and study visits at their companies every year except for the last two years, we did not send students to them, and the companies themselves may not receive our students.” (TP07)

4.1.4 Provision of industrial skills and knowledge sharing

As emphasized in previous studies, industry-relevant or company-specific training is usually in high demand. Thus, collaboration focused on this aspect is ultimately important for training providers and firms in terms of upgrading and transfer of skills and knowledge. As some training providers reported, there are companies which offer students and instructors training on various topics, including technical training, and they also introduce or promote new product types and technologies developed by themselves during such trainings.

“Denso Company has been training us for the past six years in the industry... It also includes contracts on some occasions which stated that the school allocated its

technicians to fulfil the work in that industry... They requested that our professors train their technicians and explain to them about steel and oil.” (TP15)

A few company representatives indicated that their companies were involved in skills training programs offered by training providers. According to some government bodies, private companies could access work-based skills training programs partially funded by the Skills Development Fund (SDF) and cost-shared by training providers and companies. These training programs were seen as benefitting both training providers and employers.

“For example, the technicians need to go and train outside to improve their skills at NPIC. We work with NPIC... Yes, it is also for the engineers. We send them to ITC.” (CE4771 hr)

“I would like to emphasise that SDF is for co-funding between a company and a school. If the company needs upskilling their employees, they can work with a school to develop a curriculum for any specific training program, and how much fund they need more from SDF...” (GB26)

4.1.5 Improvement in training facilities and equipment

Training facilities, equipment, tools, and materials are crucial for theoretical and practical training. The findings indicate that training providers could receive funding or donated equipment from companies with whom they developed relationships. Such facilities and equipment were much appreciated as most training providers find it hard to buy or use public funding for such training equipment. However, only a few training providers mentioned such benefits.

“That is a particular lab inclusively for Ford cars. We also have another lab for other equipment, such as computers, financed by a Chinese firm. We have a lab that EC and Takasaki jointly financed for the cooling system.” (TP06)

Government representatives and training providers agreed that collaborations with firms could provide advanced facilities and technologies for students and instructors in schools. The following quote highlights the importance of the collaborative efforts between training providers and companies in improving training facilities and equipment.

“...they provide any necessary materials for teaching too. As we can see, an example of Ford company, they provide cars for students to study as we lack many of these materials to teach students...” (GB23)

4.1.6 Joint research and development

Research and development activities are one of the main functions of training providers; the private sector also needs to contribute to and, in turn, benefit from such activities via collaboration. As the respondent from the training provider TP15 pointed out below, their cooperation should not be limited to skills training programs but also extend to development of projects between training providers and private companies. However, only a few training providers reported joint research and development activities with the private sector. This

suggests that research and development function of most training providers is still tiny, requiring more technical and financial resources.

“They want to expand the cooperation. We also want that, and we are looking into it. We also have projects, development projects, not training ones.” (TP15)

4.2 Analysis of the degree of collaboration in TVET

One of the most common forms of collaboration was the internship that most students needed to do; here, the role of training providers was described as helping with official documents when requested. There were no special arrangements between training providers and employers in most cases and no guarantee of accepting a certain number of students for internships and/or job offerings. Furthermore, only a few training providers claimed that their students or graduates had been prioritized by their partner companies.

“Students from year 3 to year 4 have many opportunities to practice in factories and companies. They need to intern around 2 to 3 months before the final exam. After completing practising in the laboratory and workshop in school, they need to practice in factories and companies directly.” (TP20)

Some companies accepted only a small number of students as interns. Whether companies take interns or not may depend on the need felt to do so by the companies. Thus, most companies did not have regular internship programs with schools; in other words, they accepted interns on an ad hoc basis. Training providers often came in to facilitate student internships after student interns were confirmed by employers. Therefore, internships may not result from school-industry collaborations directly.

“Recently, we have had interns from IU (International University). It is related to food technology and chemical engineering. For technical engineering, we had interns from TP19 and Takeo Training School. Other schools are TP03 and TP20.” (CFE45EE hr)

When companies accepted students for internships, they wanted to observe or receive feedback from the interns they hosted so that they could improve the quality of the internship program. It seemed that there was a disconnect between training providers and employers regarding the feedback on student internships, as evidenced by IA31’s respondent.

“... I couldn’t find a better solution on how to keep track of the result from the workplace... At least, they [interns] try to get the employers who let them work in their places and get the interview, then verify the training content is good enough or matches what they need. Then, we know what we can change the content of the training.” (IA31)

Training providers engaged with companies through consultative meetings, workshops, surveys, and internships. However, these collaborations were less concrete and more ad hoc, with fewer regular meetings and limited private sector input. This resulted in skills training programs not fully addressing employers’ skills needs.

“Our collaboration happens occasionally, without any clear commitment in the form of consortium. Sometimes, we approach them [companies] when we need their [companies] cooperation and request their [companies] support. This type of

collaboration depends on the private sector's commitment because we don't have any official form of collaboration. That's not effective..." (TP14)

As pointed out by some training providers, their involvement with the private sector was also limited as they could not invite private companies to participate in their curriculum design. The private sector's involvement with training providers was limited to engagement during meetings, workshops, or internships. Most company representatives reported, at the same time, that they had rarely or never participated in any workshops or had been involved in any curriculum development.

"The Company has never participated in that, and the company has not been informed or received the invitation." (CEB043 hr)

Some training providers (TP09, TP19 and TP20) reported a sector skills council (SSC) consisting of representatives from the private sector, while many other TVET institutions did not. However, the scope of an SSC's work was reported as being inadequate and limited to priority sectors. Most industry associations agreed that collaboration between training providers and employers is limited. Industry association IA32 argued in this regard that training providers and the private sector should regularly meet and reflect on skills training programs.

"...we need to gather inputs from the private sector as well as the members of the sector skills council in the electrical engineering field to revise or update the program to meet the changing demand and context of development." (TP19)

"From my experience, I can say it's minimal when it comes to close (collaboration). Because they [training providers]'re not close [to private companies], most graduates get jobs by themselves. ...the training providers and the technicians from the industry must sit together..." (IA32)

Collaborations between training providers and companies appear to be based more on instructors' networks and informal communication with companies rather than formal agreements. In other words, instructors or graduates build relationships with companies before any collaborations are formalized through written documents or agreements. Representatives of government bodies corroborated this, acknowledging that most training providers had no concrete agreements or arrangements with the private sector when collaborating with them.

"We do have some collaboration, but not a lot. However, some of the lecturers have connections with private companies. They could use that connection and allow our students to intern there. We have MOUs with food processing enterprises or private companies..." (TP08)

"In general, most of them do not have MOUs. The reason is that they did not have close collaboration in the past... Without MOUs, they have difficulty collaborating. In some cases, when MOUs are not clearly written, the implementation is also ineffective. Hence, it requires a commitment to implement MOUs." (GB26)

Even when training providers formalized arrangements with private companies, such official agreements were not implemented effectively or regularly, according to the government body

GB26. Moreover, it is challenging to reach a formal agreement on specific aspects of collaborations in an environment where most employers did not value collaborations with training providers, as expressed by one training provider (TP09) below.

“It is not effective. I feel like the private sector has not yet thought of society as its priority... If the school sends skilled labor for them, they are happy to take it. But if the school invites them to share their opinion...as they think it wastes time.” (TP09)

Notably, most training providers rarely reported collaborations in research and development activities, while no company respondents mentioned research and development or funding for research and development activities. Many TVET institutions did not have any such facilities or equipment for research and development. Thus, overall collaborations in such areas were scarce or shallow.

“It’s because we don’t have any budget for conducting research. We can try to research if we have a budget or package for this research. Moreover, our instructors are also busy teaching... Second, our instructors have limited capacity...” (TP10)

4.3 Challenges and problems in collaboration

The section below describes the challenges and problems most training providers face in forming relationships and strengthening their collaborations with employers. Based on particular factors, some training providers might face more challenges than others.

4.3.1 Lack of funding and resources

Interview data show that most training providers faced funding and resource constraints when building or expanding their collaborations with companies. Since collaborations required significant expenditure, this lack of funding limited their capacity and sometimes worsened existing collaborations. Thus, according to the training provider respondent (TP09), lack of funding and resources hindered training providers’ ability to engage with private companies effectively.

“Funding also affects stakeholder involvement in curriculum development/update... the school does not have any budget to involve the private sector...” (TP09)

4.3.2 Limited capacity of TVET institutions and instructors

As pointed out by several training provider respondents, most of them lacked modern facilities, equipment, and tools comparable to what is being used in firms. Some training providers reported that they often struggled to meet industry expectations due to this limitation. According to GB24, institutional factors influenced collaborations with companies.

“For implementation, this work is not yet automatic, which means that for schools that have the community or management team that takes care of schools, they would have to collaborate with other companies to get the technicians to work and teach their students...” (GB24)

As some training providers reported, TVET instructors might lack experience, skills, and knowledge of current industrial technology, making their teaching less relevant to industrial skills needs. Most training providers also described finding industrial experts as challenging.

“Experts in this engineering field prefer freelance jobs, which makes it difficult for us to recruit instructors for our program.” (TP01)

4.3.3 Lack of trust in TVET programs

Lack of trust in TVET programs could further hinder private companies’ involvement in collaborations. Industry-specific training programs were in high demand while employers struggled to recruit a competent workforce for mid- and high-level positions, making companies rely heavily on in-house skills training and internal promotion.

“...we cannot find outside operators with the skills required for our factory production... We did not recruit but internally promoted the supervisor, while the engineer was recruited from outside. We did not recruit any team leaders from outside.” (CE1BD4F hr)

Most respondents agreed that the current skills provision system is limited in quality and relevance, as a result of which companies opt for foreign experts or outsourcing training. This perception of the TVET programs being of low quality and limited relevance can, in turn, make employers distrust graduates’ skills and qualifications, as indicated by IA32 below.

“We have to make sure that the training that we provide, the learning and development that we provide, would result in something positive, which enhances the skills and ultimately helps the companies’ productivity in terms of their production.” (IA32)

It is also possible that TVET programs are not responsive to the industrial skills needs of a specific sector, for example, the garment and textile sector, as the respondent from IA30 pointed out. According to LU35, collaboration has to be accompanied by trust between collaborators. However, building that trust is time-consuming and challenging.

“In the garment industry? The TVET is not doing a lot for the garment industry, but TVET is doing a lot for other industries...” (IA30)

“Building trust takes a lot, so the private sector or companies should discuss this with the government first...” (LU35)

4.3.4 Limited integration of collaborations into implementation

All training providers had an industrial liaison unit (ILU) to collaborate with the private sector. However, interview data showed that their commitment was commonly limited to collecting and disseminating information on student internships, job announcements and study visits.

“Generally, we have the industrial liaison unit that helps students find job opportunities or internships. Staff from private companies also come to our school and announce job information requesting students to apply for jobs at their companies.” (TP19)

ILUs struggled with limited staff, arranging time for teaching and collaboration tasks, and lacking prioritization, leading to low commitment and inadequate activities on the whole. This could hinder long-term interaction with the private sector while demotivating instructors from doing collaboration work.

“Each institute lacks instructors. Nowadays, our instructors teach students and also work as office staff. It’s a lot of work. We need to do this; otherwise, we don’t have anyone work for the offices.” (TP10)

4.3.5 Limited enforcement of legal frameworks and policies in collaboration

Most training providers and government representatives acknowledged that legal frameworks and national skills development strategies helped promote collaborations in the Cambodian TVET sector. Still, implementation challenges arose, requiring clear government direction and support.

“However, it would be more effective if such mechanism is governed by the state level, for example, by having a regulation to strengthen further collaboration between two entities.” (TP18)

Most training providers lacked financial support and clear guidance from the government. It must be emphasized that responsible government bodies are crucial in facilitating collaborations between training providers and the private sector. According to GB22, some employers lacked interest in collaborating directly with TVET schools. A few labor union representatives also emphasized the vital role of the government in supporting collaborations.

“For our TVET schools, they have their collaboration partners, including well-known companies in Cambodia. However, some companies still never participate or support, yet they complain a lot.” (GB22)

4.3.6 Lack of mutual benefits of collaborations between training providers and companies

As the interview data pointed out, employers often lacked trust in TVET programs and could not fully understand the benefits of collaboration. It is possible that for profit-oriented organizations returns on investment have to be prioritized. Consequently, most employers hesitated to collaborate with training providers as they did not see the explicit benefits of such collaborations.

“For one aspect, if we think of mutual benefits, we can help each other. The agreement is just a piece of paper and I don’t give much value to MOU and other agreements... But relationships resulting from a deep understanding between the school and companies are necessary.” (TP07)

It is therefore essential to explain the benefits of collaboration explicitly to all concerned parties as highlighted by IA32 below:

“...there are also factors around that would tell us whether the skillsets that we provide have good quality because we will see the result in the company performance when we

send these trainees or those graduates from the training program; that is the measure...” (IA32)

5 Discussion

The findings show that training providers collaborated with the private sector in various ways: student internships, job announcements, curriculum development, consultative meetings, and study visits. However, most providers were not engaged in collaborations involving advanced industrial skills training, apprenticeships, or research and development activities with the private sector. All collaboration forms, particularly engagement in enhanced curriculum development and employment, were highly valued by training providers, who perceived them as valuable input for making their skills provision relevant and responsive to industrial needs, which was in line with previous studies that have stressed the importance of collaborations between organizations or stakeholders in achieving their common or shared goal (Bagale 2018; Gray 1989; Raihan 2014; Siddiky & Uh 2020). The findings also indicate that government efforts were being made to promote public-private partnerships in TVET to ensure that skills provision was relevant and responsive to industry and private sector needs (MoLVT 2023; RGC 2017).

Although most training providers reported collaborating with the private sector, most of their collaborative activities with employers were limited to student internships, job opportunities, curriculum development, and consultative meetings/workshops. These activities were sporadic and less formalized, potentially hindering sustainable and healthy inter-organizational relationships. While collaborations were prevalent in TVET, their magnitude remained questionable, although some respondents did point to a positive change in this regard. According to Ansell (2019), such collaborations may be deemed a low-intensity form of inter-organizational relationships in which both parties maintain complete autonomy. Collaborations could transition from fragmented to fully connected status, or vice-versa, depending on the context (Keast et al. 2007; O’leary & Vij 2012; Selden et al. 2006).

The lack of close collaborations between training providers and companies has been the result of several factors, such as the limited capacity of institutions and instructors, distrust in TVET programs, limited integration of collaboration, little enforcement of supportive legal frameworks and policies, and a lack of mutual benefits. According to Keast, Brown, and Mandell (2007), to sustain collaborations, it is crucial to identify the degree of formalization, the presence of co-decision making, the kinds of goals emphasized, the number of resources shared, and other primary actors involved in the process.

6 Conclusion and implications

Cambodia’s TVET Policy 2017-2025 and Skills Development Roadmap 2023-2035 help promote collaborations between TVET institutions and the private sector to link skills provision to industrial skills needs and bridge the gap between skills provision and labor

market demand. These collaborations aim to mobilize scarce resources and bind the responsibilities of all key stakeholders in TVET.

The present study identified the following recommendations.

- Close collaboration needs full integration and implementation with clear direction and action plans in different aspects like internships, curriculum development, consultative meetings, workplace visits, industrial skills training, and research and development.
- TVET institutions need to strengthen their institutional and instructor capacity and improve training facilities and equipment to meet industry standards.
- Mutual benefits between stakeholders should be discussed, identified and ensured, and it should be understood that building trust is crucial for successful relationships.
- Enforcing supportive frameworks and policies through both technical and financial aspects is necessary, while developing a coordinating mechanism for collaboration and a monitoring and evaluating system.

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