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Maharishi Vedic University in Cambodia: A Study of Three Mature-Age Graduates

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Abstract

This study forms part of a 25-year research program begun by these authors in 1993 at Maharishi Vedic University (MVU) in Cambodia. Prior research includes eight published studies and two monographs on: the history of higher education and teacher education in Cambodia documenting areas such as curricula, enrolments, government expenditures, social and cultural contexts, and educational futures; learning and student attitudes; impacts of Vedic Science-based education on non-verbal intelligence and personality, including depression and anxiety; an assessment of the social and economic contributions of MVU compared to baseline national and regional data from Thailand, Vietnam and Lao PDR; and the reduction of socio-political violence and increased social coherence in Cambodia between 1990 and 2008.

The present study, using standard case study techniques, investigates the lives of three former undergraduate management students of MVU and provides qualitative evidence of personal and professional experiences before, during and after studying at the university to test the proposition that participation in a curriculum of Vedic Science-based education in Cambodia is associated with long-term salutary benefit in the lives of students. Results indicate that as a result of studying at MVU, all three graduates, despite harsh and difficult upbringings in rural Cambodia, significantly increased their self-sufficiency, confidence, and health and healthy lifestyles, reduced stress, and enhanced their creativity, moral reasoning, and intelligence. This study contributes to an understanding of the general reconstruction of higher education in Cambodia since the early 1990s.

Introduction

During the 30-year period between the 1960s and early 1990s, little or no reliable research was conducted

or published on pedagogy or educational outcomes in the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia. This situation was largely due to primary and secondary schooling, higher

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education, and teacher education being significantly disrupted by internal political strife, civil war, and regional conflict leading eventually to social carnage under the Khmer Rouge (KR) until January 1979. The 1980s through to the October 1991 Paris Peace Accords and first free election in May 1993 were thus largely dedicated to the reconstruction of educational infrastructure and the re-design of credible curricula and the training of new teachers. It was during this period that teachers and students were enticed back to primary and secondary education, but higher education and teacher education lagged and were not materially developed until the 1990s. This lamentable history has been previously outlined by these authors (Fergusson, Le Masson, & Bonshek, 1995; Fergusson & Le Masson, 1997) and others (e.g., Ayers, 2000; Kallio & Westerlund, 2016; King, 2018), and the role of international organisations in this broader educational initiative, which was carried out by the State of Cambodia (SOC) in the 1990s, has been explored by Duggan (1997).

As a part of the SOC's educational reconstruction effort, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of the Royal Government of Cambodia, Maharishi Vedic University in the Netherlands, a non-government organization in Australia, and educators from France and India, the first two authors of this study launched Maharishi Vedic University (MVU) in January 1993. Maharishi Vedic University was founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and its curriculum was designed to complement standard modern academic disciplines with the principles and practices of his Vedic Science drawn from the ancient knowledge of consciousness, healthcare and education.

The relationship and complementary nature of modern science-based education and Maharishi Vedic Science-based education have been the subject of previous discourse (e.g., Maharishi European Research University, 1979; Maharishi Vedic University, 1985, 2005), and MVU has been examined in two previous accounts which address the history of higher education in Cambodia from 1953 to the present and provide a comprehensive description of the motivations, origins, developmental arc, and curricula of MVU (Fergusson & Bonshek, 2013, 2017).

Centered initially on a purpose-built campus in Kamchay Mear village, Prey Veng province (Khmer for 'long forest'; see Figure 1 for the location of MVU), about 125 km east of Phnom Penh (all regional college and university campuses were levelled in the 1970 Tet

Offensive bombing), but expanding later to include branch campuses in neighbouring Prey Veng city and Kampong Cham city, MVU sought to provide higher education degrees in management, agriculture, architecture and medicine and was the first MoEYS-accredited regional university outside Phnom Penh to begin operations since the 1960s (Fergusson & Bonshek, 2017). Elements of Vedic Science-based curriculum in Cambodia included standard academic disciplines and skills training according to an agreed internationally recognized but tailored program for students drawn from diverse educational backgrounds, such as from refugee camps on the Thai border, along with the study of Maharishi's Science of Creative Intelligence (SCI, an interdisciplinary program of fundamental principles or laws of nature found in humankind and nature).

Included also was the study of Sanskrit and the Vedic Literature and their relation to Khmer culture, Maharishi Ayur-Veda (an internationally recognised system of healthcare deemed important in the context of then Cambodian collective health and well-being [Maharishi Vedic University, 1986, 1987]), practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program, a verified program incorporated into the curriculum to encourage the self-development, self-esteem, and health of students (Maharishi Vedic University, 2008; Nystul & Garde, 1977; Orme-Johnson, 1995; Rasmussen, 2002), and other Vedic pedagogical components, including a 'block system' of program organisation. Many of these educational features have been discussed in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Maharishi International University, 1977, 1981) and were supported by MoEYS as a holistic curriculum for the full development of students, particularly given the unsettled backgrounds of many university-age students at that time.

However, teaching at MVU was not without its challenges, a comprehensive explanation of which can be found in Fergusson and Bonshek (2017, pp. 195-197). These included communication difficulties of teaching in multiple languages (at the time MVU was established, French was the *lingua franca* of Cambodia although English would displace it during the 1990s), re-establishing the importance and centrality of Khmer culture in the curriculum of higher education, developing a working understanding the basic principles of Maharishi Vedic Science and SCI, and the establishment of sound governance and codes of practice. One of the primary challenges faced during the early years of MVU related to the removal of corrupt practices from higher

education and the paying of bribes in exchange for passing grades.

In parallel to the first cohort of 550+ undergraduate students beginning a preparatory curriculum in 1993, the authors also initiated an empirical research program on student, educational, and social outcomes of which the present study forms an integral part. Beginning with initial testing, observation and data collection during the early stages of MVU, the authors conducted a large-scale study of learning and student attitudes to Transcendental Meditation (Fergusson, Bonshek, & Boudigues, 1994) and two controlled, quasi-experimental studies on the impact of Vedic Science-based education on non-verbal intelligence (Fergusson, Bonshek, & Le Masson, 1995) and on personality, specifically the investigation of anxiety, depression, self-confidence, and mental and physical health (Fergusson, Bonshek, & Boudigues, 1995) when compared to educational outcomes at the Institute of Economic Science (IES, now the National University of Management) and the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

More recent Social Impact Assessment (SIA) research has considered the social and economic contributions of MVU over a 15-year period (i.e., 1993-2008) compared to baseline national and regional data from Thailand, Vietnam and Lao PDR for the period 1980-2016 (Fergusson, 2016a, 2016b) based on Maharishi's proposition that group practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program has a sociological effect of coherence and harmony, as evidenced elsewhere in other contexts (e.g., Maharishi Vedic University, 2005). Longitudinal explanatory mixed methods research using time series analysis and content news analysis of 18 years of monthly internal conflict and socio-political violence data has revealed that practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program at MVU was associated with a 96% decline in violence over a 15-year period when compared to a three-year baseline period (Fergusson & Cavanaugh, 2019). A controlled mixed methods quasi-experiment on the impact of the Transcendental Meditation program on health-related quality-of-life indicators in faculty and staff at University of Management and Economics (UME) and controls at Cambodian University of Specialties (CUS) in Kampong Cham and Chea Sim University of Kamchay Mear (CSUK) is currently being conducted to supplement and extend this 25-year research effort.

While much of this research program has centred on student outcomes while attending MVU, one aspect

of the history of the university not so far included in the published literature is the long-term impact of MVU on personal and professional life. In order to document this dimension of MVU's history, the present study asks the following descriptive question: what do graduates report about their personal and professional experiences before, during and after their enrolment in Maharishi Vedic University?

Method

It is generally accepted that case study research is a worthwhile way to test whether a scientific theory or construct, and their supporting models, 'work' in a specific real-world setting (e.g., Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). The present study thus sought to test whether Maharishi's proposition that Vedic Science-based education in Cambodia would result in a general, lifelong benefit for students is supported by real-world case evidence from MVU. The foundational theory, subsequent models, and supporting research findings associated with Vedic Science-based education, which have been developed since the 1970s to support such a claim, can be found in several sources by Maharishi (e.g., 1994, 1995a), but also include the research of Dillbeck and Dillbeck (1987, 1997), Jones (1989), and others. The 'before, during and after' study device has been used by Juliet Corbin (2009, p. 44), one of the founders of second-generation grounded theory, in her research on Vietnam War veterans.

Three graduates, out of a pool of approximately 4,000 MVU alumni, were asked to participate in this study. Graduates who participated in the study, including their birthplaces relative to the location of MVU as shown in Figure 1, were: Hun Monivann (male; age = 46; born in Kampong Speu province; enrolled in MVU 1993-1997; now lives in Siem Reap; married with three children; profession = company director); Phon Pheuy (female; age = 44; born in Battambang province; enrolled in MVU 1993-1997; now lives in Phnom Penh; married with three children; profession = teacher of Transcendental Meditation); and Huy Sambo (male; age = 36; born in Takéo province; enrolled in MVU 2002-2006; now lives in Phnom Penh; married with two children; profession = director of foreign language school and social welfare volunteer organisation).

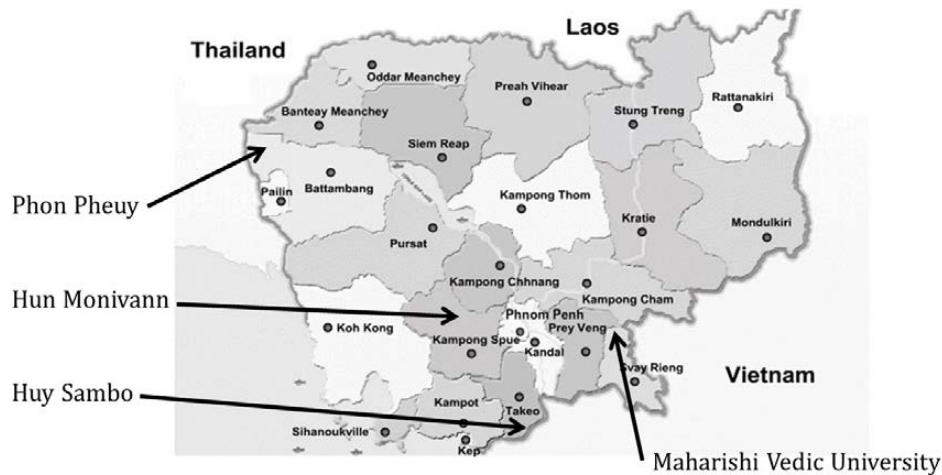


Figure 1: Location of Maharishi Vedic University and birthplaces of study participants.

Data for each case study was obtained by semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted with participants in Phnom Penh using qualitative interview techniques described by Yin (2016, pp. 141-148). A participant information sheet and consent form were distributed and signed by participants prior to the interview, and a series of 50 written questions (initially developed by the researchers and subsequently vetted for relevance by participants), related to their 'before, during and after enrolment in MVU' periods, were distributed to each participant for consideration and preparation prior to the research commencing. The general demographic information obtained from the three graduates can be summarised in Table 1. Ethics clearance from the research standards approval committee of Maharishi Vedic Research Institute was obtained.

Seventeen questions related to the participant's life before MVU, covering the years from birth to enrolment in MVU, included: where and when were you born; describe your early childhood (years 1-5); what did your parents do and where were they from; when did you go to primary school; describe your primary school education, including what you were taught, who taught you, how many years of schooling; how would you describe your physical health prior to attending MVU; how would you describe your mental health prior to attending MVU; and how would you describe your diet during this period of your life?

Eighteen questions related to the participant's life while attending MVU included: how did you hear about MVU; what were your first thoughts about MVU; what were your personal circumstances while attending MVU

Table 1: Demographic information of three MVU graduates.

Graduate	Background	Primary and Secondary Education	Maharishi Vedic University Degree and Benefits	Career
Hun Monivann	Born 1971, Kampong Speu	Four years primary, four years secondary, and three years high school; studied French and English	B.A. in Management (with specialization in accounting); acted as a translator; greater confidence, self-sufficiency, and belief in myself	Company director and Board Chairman, banking and finance; teacher of Transcendental Meditation
Phon Pheuy	Born 1973, Battambang	Four years primary, four years secondary, and three years high school; studied French	B.A. in Management; improved self-esteem, confidence, and ability to concentrate	Teacher of Transcendental Meditation; entrepreneur; micro-finance
Huy Sambo	Born 1982, Takeo	(Approximately) four years primary, four years secondary, and three years high school; studied French	B.A. in Management (with specialization in accounting); greater care for others and the environment	Educator, business owner, and company director; community benefactor

(what were your parents and other family doing during these years, did you go home regularly during vacations, how did you get to your home province, etc.); what did you study at MVU; did you work while studying at MVU; how would you describe your physical health while attending MVU; how would you describe your mental health while attending MVU; how would you describe your diet during this period of your life; describe your practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program at MVU; and did the practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program at MVU help in any of the following aspects of your life (please briefly describe each relevant aspect): self-esteem, depression, confidence, ability to concentrate, learning ability, mental health, physical health, anxiety, and other you wish to report? The last of these questions sought to align with, and provide longitudinal data to supplement, earlier research findings (i.e., Fergusson, Bonshek, & Boudigues, 1994, a; 1995, b).

Fifteen questions related to the participant's life after graduating from MVU through to the present day included: when did you graduate from MVU; what did you do immediately after graduating from MVU; what was the most important knowledge you learned as a result of attending MVU; what was the most important skill you acquired as a result of attending MVU; how would you describe your physical health since graduating from MVU; how would you describe your mental health since graduating from MVU; describe your current employment work status; how would you describe your lifestyle; and how would you describe your quality of life now? In several cases, participants wanted to deviate from and add to the content of questions and direction taken by the interview, although in each case, each of the 50 questions was addressed to some degree.

One-on-one interviews were conducted in Phnom Penh by the first and second authors on December 8th (Monivann, 2017) and December 13th (Pheuy, 2017). Each interview lasted approximately two and a half hours. Participants had prepared their answers (some in writing), but each interview was conducted orally in English and recorded digitally; extensive fieldnotes were also taken. Answers to each of the 50 questions were identified, although for the purposes of brevity only those responses which the researchers believe best capture the life story of each participant vis-à-vis the various periods of life have been reported. Square brackets [-] have been used to insert relevant author's notes and observations, often based on tangential comments made by the study

participant when required to add context or clarify meaning.

Maharishi Vedic University Graduates

Graduate #1: Hun Monivann

A. Life experiences from early childhood to high school graduation. Monivann was born in 1971 [because "the house in which records were kept was burnt down" during the KR period, his mother does not know the exact date of his birth only that Monivann was born around March in the Year of the Pig] in Chamkar Lourn village, Udong district in Kampong Speu [Khmer for 'starfruit harbour'] province in the south-central part of Cambodia, 40 km northwest of Phnom Penh. Kampong Speu [one of 25 provinces in Cambodia] covers an area of about 7,000 km² and in 1971 had a population of approximately 350,000, most of them rice farmers. [Monivann stated that throughout his life he decided to list his birthdate as January 22nd, 1973 to sound younger than he actually was, a practice that, according to Monivann, "most Cambodian people did to avoid military conscription" at the age of 18 during the war in the 1980s.]

When Monivann was three years old, Kampong Speu fell to the KR and his family was evacuated to an area 25 km closer to Phnom Penh, where he was separated from his father and subsequently lived from 1975 to 1979 alternately with his mother [who had been sent to a farm planting rice] and an aunt. During this period, Monivann would "fish with elder people" to support his family [supplemented by rice sent from his mother], while his sister was "sent to a 'school' to make fertilizer". One of Monivann's abiding memories of this time was communally eating 'porridge' with 50-100 people who had collectively been allocated about 1.0 kg of rice per meal, and described himself as "very hungry", "very weak" and "sick" [with headaches] during this time, "sometimes having to eat tree roots and wild fruit collected in the jungle in order to survive". Monivann was assigned by the KR regime to feed a cow for more than a year before being liberated in 1979.

After 1979, the family moved back to Udong district, where Monivann lived with his mother [a farmer who never attended school], his older sister and younger brother, and an aunt, beginning primary school at age eight by "volunteering to go to school [by himself] without any instruction from my family". [The family learnt in 1979 that Monivann's father, a primary school teacher who had taught in a school in Udong district, had

been killed during the KR period.]

The government-run school Monivann attended had for the first few years no roof, chairs or tables, and had been used as a refugee camp immediately after the district's liberation from the KR. Monivann was so committed to learning that during school holidays he persuaded his mother to pay for extra classes in mathematics; however, in a "poor situation, [my] family cannot afford to buy a small radio, so I like listening to my aunt's radio, particularly on international news". He was inspired during this time by hearing about summits of the international Communist Party which were being conducted every year [Monivann remembered] in Moscow, Warsaw and Berlin with French or English interviews. This allowed him to learn about the wider world, thereby "inspiring me to travel and gain knowledge of other places in the world".

As a consequence, Monivann found a local teacher to teach him French and English in a private class, but "good teacher of such language was not found, as most of the intellectual people were killed during the KR [period]". Even when he found a teacher for French or English, most classes he attended were "closed after a few months due to no students, while those students have no clear goal of how to use or practice the language as environment surrounding no one can speak or use it". Even though Monivann could not "finish the first book...I could read both English and French before moving to high school". At public school, he worked hard and liked to spend his time reading the "world map, globe and books which described the countries around the world". Monivann characterised himself during these years as a boy with "a Big dream of the World" [his emphasis].

At the time, Cambodia had a 4+4+3 system, meaning four years of primary, four of secondary, and three of high school. Monivann thus completed secondary school in 1986 and sat a high school entrance exam in Kampong Speu city. Despite Monivann's enthusiasm and commitment, the exam was not merit based, and to pass it he remembered his mother was required to "pay about \$60 in gold to government officials", one of whom had been a friend of her husband and was, fortunately, sympathetic to the family's plight. As a consequence, Monivann moved from his home in Chamkar Lourn and attended high school in Kampong Speu city, about 60 km from his home, living with his mother's neighbour who was working in a national bank at Kampong Speu; at the time, he was being supported "with food parcels sent by my mother". In high school, the only languages

"I could study were Russian or Vietnamese" [he chose Vietnamese]; Monivann also continued to learn French privately during this period, as "English was not taught anywhere in the city". Upon high school graduation in 1989, Monivann applied for undergraduate positions at IES and Faculty of Law and Economic Science but was not accepted for admittance to either; "during that time, the country was still at war and each school could only accept 150 students a year, most of whom were from high ranking or rich families. No private schools existed".

To fulfil his dream of international travel, Monivann joined the military in late 1989 [stationed near the capital of Phnom Penh but hoping to travel farther afield to other Soviet-bloc countries] and sought out English language tuition, which was more prevalent in Phnom Penh at that time. Based in the city, Monivann had chance to continue his private English classes twice a day, however his dreams of travel were thwarted when the Berlin Wall fell on November 9th, 1989 and all Cambodian military personnel abroad were ordered home. Nevertheless, during the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) period in 1992, Monivann was "seconded by the military to serve as a volunteer translator, first to the Ghanese military [speaking English] and then to the Tunisian military [speaking French]". During his military service, he also spent time assisting his mother with "grocery trading" in his hometown. After three years in the military as a political assistant, in late 1992 Monivann heard via a military friend that a new university, MVU, was being established, and he applied for admission in November that year. Monivann remembered that because "I got information about MVU very late from my friend, my application was submitted one day before the deadline of submission".

B. Experience of MVU. After entering the preparatory class of January 1993 and translating for one of MVU's Ayurvedic doctors from India, Dr K. Prakash, Monivann subsequently enrolled in the undergraduate management degree and was one of 35 students who participated in the Transcendental Meditation Teacher Training Course (TTC) in late 1994, successfully completing the course with 17 others. During 1995, Monivann was also one of six students selected to do paid research work [at \$5/day] on a European Union social and economic research project in nearby Neak Leoung, Prey Veng province. During that time, Monivann built a good relationship with European Union staff and

raised funds to “support basketball matches at MVU”. By 1996, after four years of study [i.e., 1 preparatory + 3 management], Monivann was declared the top out of 350 management students and began, along with 115 students, a one-year specialization in accounting. “By my nature, I do not like accounting”, but he chose this subject rather than the other management specialization, marketing, because during his vacation in the 3rd year he went to Phnom Penh and saw an advertisement in the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper that international accounting firm, KPMG, was recruiting graduated students for two-year postings in Malaysia, “in the hope that I could fulfil my dream of travelling”.

Despite wishing to join KPMG, during his last year at MVU, Monivann was also one of the five students who filled a paid internship [at about \$100/month] with accounting firm Ernst & Young in Phnom Penh and subsequently was one of three interns offered a permanent position with that company on graduation in August 1997, at which time “I was sent to Ho Chi Minh city for two-weeks of International Accounting Standard and audit training”. Monivann reported that as a result of studying at MVU he had “fulfilled his 10-year dream of flying in an airplane and travelling abroad”.

Monivann also reported that during his time at MVU he found the practice of Transcendental Meditation resulted in greater confidence and “feeling strong”, but poor health from a young age resulted in routine bouts of typhoid fever, a condition which was not resolved until he graduated and could afford better treatment; Monivann thinks “this typhoid might relate to poor quality of food and drinks”. Monivann also associated his competitive nature in studying and learning, and his improved memory, confidence and concentration, to his regular practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program, a program which he emphasized “was strictly voluntary”. During MVU, Monivann reported a sense of greater “self-sufficiency”, what he called “belief in our self”, and an enhanced ability to “read others” as a result of living closely with other students “in solidarity”. Unlike at other universities, Monivann observed that MVU students became “very close and created life-long friendships”.

C. Personal and professional experience since graduating from MVU. Monivann stated that the entire first graduating class of MVU in 1997 was offered a job by the SOC government. He maintained MVU students were highly sought after because the government recognized that students who studied at Cambodia’s

then only rural university were highly self-sufficient, self-motivated, and could “think for themselves”. Indeed, Monivann was offered a job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on graduation but decided to accept the position offered by Ernst & Young, “where I was paid \$250/month in 1997, \$300/month in 1998, and \$440/month by 1999”, advancing to the position of senior audit manager by the third year.

After three years at Ernst & Young, Monivann decided that the solitary nature of auditing was “not his ideal position” and, as a result, looked further afield for professional development. He was thus recruited to join the financial management team of Artisans D’Angkor in Siem Reap, a non-government organisation (NGO) dedicated to reviving ancient Cambodian arts and crafts while improving the lives of people in rural areas; Monivann started at Artisans D’Angkor (AA) on the significantly higher salary of \$700/month in 2000. Three years later, AA became a public company during which he was promoted to Finance Director and a member of the Board of Directors of the company. In 2004, after identifying and resolving a series of not insubstantial “financial and governance irregularities” at Artisans D’Angkor, Monivann became Vice President of the Siem Reap Chamber of Commerce and, since 2006 has served as an independent company director of Sathapana Limited (SPN), a leading MFI in Cambodia, as well as chairman of its Audit Committee.

Three years later, in 2009 Monivann was also elected chairman of the Board of SPN, along with other directors from the U.S. and Netherlands. After serving as chairman of the Board for four years, all SPN’s shares were taken by a single Japanese investor in 2013. In 2016, SPN was transformed into a commercial bank called Sathapana Bank Plc (SPNB), where he is still serving as independent director and chairman of SPNB’s Audit Committee. Monivann is also currently working as chairman with about 120 ex-MVU graduates to form an equity investment fund called MVU Investment Plc (MVUI) to support the long-term business interests and initiatives, particularly of start-up businesses, of MVU alumni throughout the country. Among his many accomplishments, Monivann also proudly listed his membership of the Australian Institute of Company Director (AICD), and his positions as head of the Audit Committee of Sihanouk Ville Port Authority (PAS), a publicly listed company and Cambodia’s biggest sea port, Chairman of Mega Leasing Plc, a financial leasing company with Japanese ownership, Chairman of Aplus

Consulting Co. Ltd, a leading HR company in Cambodia, Vice Chairman of CIC Investment Plc, a Cambodian “investor club”, and Vice President of Siem Reap Oddar Meanchey Chamber of Commerce (SROCC). Besides these positions, he also runs a real estate business with other partners.

Monivann feels that he has fulfilled his lifelong dream of travelling abroad and being associated with foreign countries and cultures. Indeed, he has travelled to more than 20 countries on five continents and works with business partners and clients from many different countries. Monivann reported that the most important knowledge he gained during his years at MVU was “becoming fluent in English for business, the up-to-date curriculum, knowledge from experienced professors if compared to most schools in Cambodia, the MVU study environment, school disciplines and exposure to new cultures [such as ancient Khmer culture and the Vedic culture of India], and an “ability to communicate and how to work with other people”. The most important skill he acquired was “how to manage a business”, but Monivann also pointed out the reason MVU graduates have been so highly sought after by the international business community is because of their “self-motivation and self-discipline”, a trait he also developed as a result of looking after himself while studying at a rural university.

Graduate #2: Phon Pheuy

A. Life experiences from early childhood to high school graduation. Pheuy was born 1973 in Bangraing village, Omal district, Battambang [Khmer for ‘loss of stick’] province about 200 km from the Thai border in western Cambodia. Battambang covers an area of 11,702 km² and in 1973 had a population of approximately 500,000, most of them rice farmers. Pheuy reported her parents were poor farmers, with her mother entirely unschooled and her father having only attended a pagoda primary school [after his father died when he was ten years of age, Pheuy’s father was taken in by monks]. Her father, as a result of this benefaction, became a Buddhist monk, a role he served until he was 18 years of age; according to people who knew him in the village, Pheuy’s father was highly regarded as a “trustworthy and honorable man”.

Pheuy remembers during the KR period in 1978, that her family [parents, three siblings, and grandparents] was required to keep moving as a group from place-to-place throughout the district, often in extreme poverty

and distress. For example, Pheuy recalls during this time collecting grass for sale in order to purchase enough rice to keep the family alive. She also remembers how hard her parents worked in the fields without machinery [she still “pities them”], how they manually collected logs for many years to sell as firewood, how they collected mangoes and other natural resources to feed themselves, and how this harsh life fostered a “sense of duty to be disciplined and to plan for the future”. During this phase of her life, Pheuy nevertheless says she learned to love nature and to appreciate her surroundings, and she identifies this phase as the source of her own “resourcefulness”.

After the KR period, Pheuy began primary school in 1980 in her home village. Her day would begin at 0500 to do chores at home and then be ready to start school at 0700. However, as she was also hungry throughout this time, she had to be resourceful, often taking risks to eat. To solve the problem, often starting at 0300, Pheuy collected fish, frogs, tamarind fruit, and mangoes to sell in the market by 0600 each day and then be at school by 0700 [this necessity manifested in Pheuy’s later proclivity to work in the retail sector]. At primary school for four years (ages 6-9), she studied mostly mathematics and Khmer literature. At nine years of age, she started three years of secondary school in the same village [ages 10-12] and was class leader responsible for organizing the “flag ceremony at the start of each day” and for managing “a garden in front of the classroom”.

Pheuy recounted that during this time she kept “doing her business” of buying [or finding a “natural resource”, according to the season] and selling found produce in the market. Accordingly, she adopted a philosophy of “we cannot survive without business; we cannot sleep without money; if we don’t have money we don’t eat”. During this period, Pheuy stated that she developed “flexibility”, observed the need to be creative through business, and developed and maintained value, trust, relationships, respect for each other, commitment, and an ability to “earn by selling”. In secondary school, Pheuy studied physics, mathematics, Khmer history, biology, and anatomy, and greatly respected her teachers; they were “young and stylish”, and she modeled herself on them. As part of this effort was her desire to build relationships and to learn from these young teachers. Pheuy stated this was the “main point” she took from secondary school and was one of the most important things her father had taught her: “relationships are the foundation of life and business”, he had said to her, and

“if you do good, good will come to you” [Pheuy related this to the Vedic principle of *Karma* in which it is said every action has an equal and opposite reaction].

Pheuy sat her high school exam and thereafter from 1987 to 1992 attended high school in Battambang, about 7 km away from her home village. She found it difficult being away from home because she knew the “natural resources” of her home but not those in Battambang. In the first three months of high school she lived with a friend’s family, but it was hard because she had to rise at 0300-0400 to do chores before walking over rough terrain to school. As a result, she wrote to her parents and asked them if they could find her another place to stay, and after about a year she found lodgings with relatives closer to the high school; Pheuy also learned French at this time. Part of the problem she faced during high school related to residual elements of the KR in the Battambang area, particularly a problem when she and her female friends rode home after private evening English classes. Pheuy recounted how she and her friends would often be harassed and “annoyed” by male soldiers. Thus, travel over harsh terrain and harassment from “street men” detracted Pheuy from her studies and “ability to earn some money in the market”.

Pheuy also recalled how many men tried to marry her via arranged marriage when she was 15 or 16 years of age. However, she also made it clear that she was not interested in men at this time and she considered her studies were more important. Pheuy reported that her parents were “very proud of her ability to study” and completely trusted her to make the right decision about men [even to the point of trusting her on one occasion to do the right thing when a male suitor stayed in her parent’s house, as was the custom during arranged marriage negotiations according to Khmer tradition]. But Pheuy noted that, possibly because of their own “low level of education”, her parents “did not push me to study more or to get better grades”.

Nevertheless, after subsequently telling Pheuy they would support her to study further [after her older brother expressed a disinterest in further schooling], in 1992 her parents took her to Phnom Penh to secure admission to RUPP, a position for which she was subsequently accepted. The problem was she needed a place to stay in Phnom Penh. As the only option open to her, Pheuy stayed with a family member close to the RUPP campus. Despite this, due to the high cost of living in Phnom Penh, she was forced to sell duck eggs in the market. Moreover, as part of the agreement to lodge her,

Pheuy was required to serve meals to all the family members, wash their clothes, cook their meals, and clean the toilet, in order to afford to stay. In addition, the room she occupied was small, and the family stayed up late into the night with the TV on making it impossible to study.

Fortunately, a friend of Pheuy’s saw an advertisement for MVU on television, which also said “MVU was offering scholarships for girls” [authors’ note: in January 1993, only 5% of students who applied to attend MVU were female]. The only drawbacks were that Pheuy had no idea where Prey Veng was, nor did she know how to get there. Nevertheless, after completing the application form, Pheuy was accepted to MVU in late November 1992.

B. Experience of MVU. Pheuy was driven on a motorbike to Kampchay Mear by a relative around January 7th, 1993, arriving late at night. The 125 km journey took about six or seven hours and involved crossing the Mekong River by ferry at Neak Leoung. For security reasons, it had been agreed that a relative would wait in Kamchay Mear while Pheuy determined whether she wanted to stay in this unfamiliar and remote place given she didn’t know anyone. However, the next morning the relative left without notice, and thus Pheuy had no way of returning home.

Pheuy had arrived one week after classes begun, and so she was unclear where to go, what to do, where she was going to live, etc.; she felt lost, but told herself “calm down; you are brave, and you have a goal you want to achieve”. Thus, she sought out one of the foreign teachers [i.e., Gildas Le Masson] and asked him what she should do the next day; they were “so inspiring and so happy about seeing me, they could see that I was enthusiastic about learning, and said ‘first you should learn Transcendental Meditation’, and that’s what I did my first day at MVU”. After that, Pheuy decided she should have nothing but positive thoughts about MVU, and it will work out; “I remembered what my father said: ‘if you do good, you will get good’, so I decided to encourage myself. I said to myself ‘my vision is not to end, but my vision is to graduate with improved English’”.

Pheuy studied management after the 1993 preparatory year. However, in her second year, Pheuy received “a letter from her brother that her father was seriously sick and could no longer send any money or rice, and that she should come home and abandon her studies. I cried automatically; my dream is not finished yet; I did not want to go home. I told the faculty, and they

said: ‘wait one week and we will try to find a sponsor’; they gave me hope”. Within one week, Pheuy had received support from three sponsors in Australia of \$10/month for a total of \$30/month, and “I was very happy. Within one month, I got three more sponsors from Australia for a total of \$60/month. I was very proud that my efforts at MVU got rewarded, and at that time I decided to do my best to make the sponsors proud of me”. In the summer of 1994, like Monivann, Pheuy completed the TTC and was subsequently elected a leader of the women students and was asked, upon graduation, if she would continue on and be a student supervisor for first-year students, including teaching principles of management and marketing, and elementary teaching of Transcendental Meditation. Pheuy’s mental and physical health were “good” throughout her time at MVU because “I enjoyed my studies”.

The most important things she learnt at MVU included the recognition that teaching was a “very responsible position”, and that building positive relations with everyone, presenting oneself as a professional, and being clean and well-presented, are critical for success. Pheuy reported that her practice of Transcendental Meditation in the first year was “good but not well understood”. However, after doing TTC she understood more [“maybe 50% understanding”] about Maharishi’s SCI and Vedic Science, but now she has practiced and reflected on the knowledge for many years she understands it “much better and it has been very beneficial”. The Transcendental Meditation-Sidhi program in particular was “a lot of fun” and “natural”, and she experienced that it was better practiced in a group. Pheuy also reported that her self-esteem, confidence, and ability to concentrate all increased during her MVU years. Her ability to “reflect, have better communications, respect myself, and to enjoy good mental and physical health while at MVU also grew. Anxiety in the first year was not related to study but sometimes to male students who do not do Transcendental Meditation and caused trouble”.

Self-reflection, self-awareness, social work and being a volunteer were important to Pheuy’s success, which she summarized in this way: “I reflect always, at all times. I am aware of people around me. If I do this activity, how do others feel? If my voice, my activity, will hurt them, then I think whether I should do it. Open, respect, self-awareness; this is me. I am not rich, but I am 100% successful because what I have not many other people have. I do a lot of social work, volunteering.

I never expect anything from others. What I do, I do without expecting anything back; I never expect a result from others. Whatever I do, I am happy to do it. If we wait for someone else to do it, then we will wait a long time. Business and development together; balance”. Pheuy went on to explain that, in her view, “if you value society then you have to contribute to it and volunteer. This is social contribution. If you sit and complain, then this is not a social contribution; this is just complaining. So I am happy, and I sleep well. I don’t go against the Law; I follow Natural Law [as in Vedic Science, Natural Law is understood in Khmer culture to be *Dharma* or that which upholds righteousness, as discussed below]. Don’t wait for someone else to change you; change yourself. We do what we do for society, not for oneself. I learnt this from foreigners at MVU”.

C. Personal and professional experience since graduating from MVU. In 1997-2001 Pheuy worked at MVU as a management and Transcendental Meditation teacher, and then in 2000-2001 she worked in marketing at the office in Phnom Penh of the Australian Aid for Cambodia Fund (AACF), an NGO associated with supporting and financing MVU. After working at AACF until 2000, between 2000 and 2007, Pheuy worked as a trainer and facilitator in Phnom Penh for a company called VBNK, a Cambodian-led development organization and, from 2007-2011, she joined the training department of Amret Microfinance Institution, which is a local Cambodian bank; “I learnt a lot from these two companies”.

Between 2011-2015, with a partner, Pheuy owned and operated a micro finance institution (MFI), and since then has operated a retail outlet and has mostly taught Transcendental Meditation to executives, school children and teachers, and orphans [including Somaly Mom Foundation, dedicated to the eradication of slavery and the empowerment of survivors]; most recently, she formed part of the research team investigating health and well-being of faculty and staff at UME participating in the Transcendental Meditation program.

According to Pheuy, the most important skill acquired at MVU was communications and relationships: “I feel like I learnt day-by-day, some modeling, observing, and the good thing I got but the bad thing I did not take on”. She also reported learning “how to observe who as good and who was not so good. I am the one who uses heart and mouth together”. Physical and psychological health were good through those years and she was happy and satisfied. “I am very fortunate; I have a lovely husband, a gentle man who supports me, trusts me.

Whatever I am doing is good. He lets me leave the family to teach.”

Graduate #3: Huy Sambo

A. Life experiences from early childhood to high school graduation. Sambo, one of five children, was born in Takéo [Khmer for ‘crystal grandfather’] province, about 80 km south of Phnom Penh in rural Cambodia near the Vietnam border. Takéo, bordering Kampot to the west, Kampong Speu to the northwest, Kandal to the northeast, and Vietnam to the south, covers an area of 3,563 km² and in the early 1980s had a population of approximately 750,000, most of them farmers.

Sambo reported that he was born in 1982, but his recorded birth was 1984 because, like many people at that time in Cambodia, “my mother had never been to school and didn’t know when I was born and didn’t have a birth certificate; my birth was recorded [i.e., assigned] later by my school. But the way I know it was 1982 is because I was born in the Year of the Dog”. During the KR years, Sambo’s father and mother were put to work on a farm cooperative, but after 1979, because he had been to primary school, his father was put to work in the local taxation department as a tax officer while his mother worked on a farm.

Sambo’s early years growing up with four sisters were during the period immediately after the removal of the KR, and he remembers “times were quite tough” and “there was violence in the country”. “I also remember there were a lot of rockets [i.e., unexploded ordnance] lying around the house, and we used to play with them; we did not know [the danger]”. After 1980, “our family economic was just re-established, and we were given some farmland plots, on which we were able to grow our own rice”. Sambo started the first year of primary school “quite late, and I remember I was not really smart. Sometimes I would go to kindergarten, sometimes I would go to first grade, sometimes I would go to second grade, and then I would go back to kindergarten. But I don’t know why I kept going back and forth”. [As an aside, Sambo attributed his later business acumen to these early years of “having to do anything to survive”.]

After the age of five, Sambo did not go to school regularly because “I had to work on the farm with my mother almost every day, and I also had to go fishing to get some fish”. However, Sambo also recounted that his family’s “economic situation” improved during this period “compared to as many others” because his

family farm grew from 1 ha to 7 ha all the way up to 20 ha. When he did attend school, Sambo went to Prey Top primary school for kindergarten to grade 3 and then Takéo primary school for grades 4 and 5. As Sambo did not attend primary school continuously, it was hard for him to reconstruct his years in school, but he attended secondary school in approximately in 1995-1998 and high school in 1999-2002. In both secondary and high school, he studied Khmer culture and literature, mathematics, physics, geography, history, chemistry, and French through to year 12 at Chea Sim High School. At around 12-13 years of age, Sambo also remembers driving a small tractor on the farm, but because he was so small “I could not start it myself; I had an adult start the tractor at 4.00 o’clock in the morning and would have to keep it running until 5.00 o’clock in the evening”. However, as everyone in neighboring farms used a buffalo for ploughing, he considered himself well off, particularly as “food was given free every day” in exchange for work.

Sambo also recalled how, during both secondary and high school, the family farm had an adapted sawmill machine for processing rice, and a truck for transporting rice to market, which he would drive. “I went from the tractor to the truck and drove it from the rice field to the processing machine and from the processing machine to wholesale [markets] in Phnom Penh or Kampong Speu or Sihanoukville. That was fun. I drove the truck, but I did not have a license; lots of people did that in the rural areas”. Sambo suggested it was this type of experience that prepared him for business success later in life.

It was the respect that he gained from others who saw him run the business during these years when he was 13-18 that developed his confidence, even though the process was “painful” because he did not attend school regularly. He pointed out as well that while he had been to school and could read and write, his mother, who was illiterate, was extremely good at calculations and she would “run beside me” in operating the business. Sambo concluded that it was the combination of schooling and real-world work which effectively trained him for success in business, something that he again experienced at MVU.

He recounted, however, that his health was poor in his early years of childhood: “I got sick a lot”. When “I was young, I was scared because I got injected almost every day [possibly for a lung infection] by a doctor, but I used to tell him I needed to go to the bathroom and then I’d run away”. Sambo also commented that he had been “skinny from birth and found it difficult to gain weight”, but in high school his weight increased from 20 kg to 50

kg, and remained at that level through adulthood; since then “I have maintained good health and not had a tablet in 30 years”. Thus, when he was 18 he had the choice of either staying on in the family business [Sambo said that at the time he had “quite a good income”] or attending university, and his parents “were happy either way and supported both options but had a condition for me: ‘fail the [entrance] exam, then we want you to continue in the business’, but luckily I passed the exam”. It was his mathematics teacher in high school who told him about MVU and the scholarships it granted to needy students.

Of his adolescence, Sambo stated that he was “born with an entrepreneurial spirit. I don’t like to go gambling or hang out with friends a lot. After going to school, I just went to business. I observed the other children, and wondered why, when earning money is difficult, they were wasting their parents’ money. I feel pity for their parents. I never got jealous of them for having nice motorbikes; I just had a simple phone and a normal motorbike, just enough to do business. From my painful experience of doing business with adults, I created my perception, my inspiration, of continuing in higher education and because I reflected on my hard life in agriculture I thought about working in an office in the city”. [Sambo noted that his four sisters have all finished university and now participate in various business ventures.]

B. Experience of MVU. Sambo started his degree at MVU in 2002. Asked whether the remoteness was difficult, he stated “I found the campus and facilities, although basic, similar to those I had grown up with in Takéo. The remoteness of the university was of no real concern to me”. He reported that for three months of the year (June-August) “during the wet season, most students went to Phnom Penh to study short courses in computers, but I did not go; instead I returned to Takéo and exported rice to Vietnam [a long, one-day roundtrip in my truck from his farm] in order to earn enough money for the next academic year”.

To compensate for missing computer courses, Sambo reported that “I worked in the AACF office and created an IT [information technology] lab for computer maintenance on campus with a team of volunteers and was able to learn basic computing, fixing computers and how to set up a network and back-up system, including how to install anti-virus and other software, and we taught other students as well”. Sambo was also the leader of accounting specialization students, he supported the student association, and volunteered to work in the AACF

office to provide orientation to the new volunteers.

Sambo studied management and then accounting at MVU. During his time at MVU, Sambo played volleyball, football, and basketball, and participated in group Yoga asanas each morning and reciting Sanskrit verses in the afternoons. He also reported that his diet improved at MVU: “I got better food because one, the university is far away from cities and two, the food was fresh, and farmers still used traditional farming and organic methods [in the Kamchay Mear area]”. Perhaps the most important thing that Sambo learnt while at MVU was first of all the Transcendental Meditation technique and then the TM-Sidhi program, which he said “changed my concept about many things”. For example, he reported that before MVU he tended to “think only of myself”; but at MVU “I began to think about others”. He found Maharishi’s teaching on “Natural Law and the role of consciousness particularly inspiring”. While he found Maharishi’s SCI “hard to understand at the start, over time I began to understand its impact”.

[Sambo spoke about his ‘discovery’ of Natural Law and its relation to physical existence while studying at MVU. ‘Natural Law’, referred to in Vedic language as *Dharma* (धर्म) or “that which upholds the universe” and *Purushottama* (पुरुषोत्तम) or “absolute ruler of the ever-expanding universe” (Maharishi, 1995b, p. 30 and p. 36), is understood to be the “home of all the laws of nature” responsible for physical manifestation, as well as the single source of unbounded intelligence and order in nature and in humans (Maharishi, 1995b, p. 116); Natural Law is therefore considered the most fundamental level of life. In Maharishi Vedic Science, ‘consciousness’, a related concept, describing the ‘home of Natural Law’. Consciousness is the non-physical source of all the dynamism, energy and organizing power that exists in the universe, and is therefore: “that one element in nature on the ground of which the infinite variety of creation is continuously emerging, growing, and dissolving. The whole field of change emerges from this field of non-change, from this self-referral, immortal state of consciousness. The interaction of the different intellectually conceived components of this unified, self-referral state of consciousness is that all-powerful activity at the most elementary level of nature. That activity is responsible for the innumerable varieties of life in the world, the innumerable streams of intelligence in creation” (Maharishi, 1986, pp. 25-26).]

Sambo went on to liken Natural Law to the Khmer concept of *Monasika*, which he defined as “care for

others and the environment, alertness, and responsibility” and which he said had “deep meaning” for Cambodians. And because the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program was only available at MVU, he felt he had been taught something which was good for not only his self-development through which he could “do less and accomplish more”, but also helped him be “supportive of others, to feel at MVU like everyone was part of a family, to create intimacy”. Sambo further explained that MVU and its students had a “great impact on society; it encouraged students to do something big for society, to be sustainable”.

Throughout his time at MVU, Sambo personally experienced increased self-confidence, “due to doing Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhis. Because I was more relaxed, my concentration improved so much, and I was less distracted. I enjoyed everything; everything was creative, supportive. Everything I wanted to achieve, I could achieve. I had lots of friends and teachers from around the world”. Sambo went on to explain that he grew in an ability to “relate to many people; I associated well with everyone”. Moreover, his health was “good; I got no colds. Transcendental Meditation reduced stress and I had no worries”.

C. Personal and professional experience since graduating from MVU. After MVU, Sambo “wanted to create ten businesses”. The businesses he envisaged—including agriculture, education, technology, coaching and training, wholesale organics, supply chain management, consumer well-being, and other areas—had one thing in common: they have a “positive impact on society; I want to create sustainable futures”. As a result, Sambo and his wife Rasmey, who is also an MVU graduate from the same 2006 graduating class, among their many ventures, own and operate Conversations with Foreigners (CWF), part of a group of socially responsible companies called Volunteers in Cambodia (VIC), which is located near the famous Toul Tom Pong Market [also known as the ‘Russian Market’].

Sambo then laid out his business strategy and operations. First, VIC raises funds for rural development; its focus is to fund “environmental protection, renewable energy, and develop the livelihood of rural people in food security, food safety, organic and non-genetically modified food, and water and sanitation”. Parallel to this, “we want to develop eco-tourism, training, and sustainable rubber plantations, in order to help rural people support their parents”. One of the things Sambo highlighted was the recent development and deployment

of an algae-based bio-fertiliser and the introduction of Transcendental Meditation to 1,000 poor families in Takéo. Sambo is also exploring the importation of *Maharishi Ayurveda* herbal preparations from India to “improve the health of Cambodians”.

Sambo reported that he practices the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program, including Yoga asanas, with Rasmey every day, and finds it “reduces stress when it comes in from people and different expectations”. One of the most important skills Sambo reported that he gained while studying at MVU was “an ability to change a negative into a positive; this is a special skill”. As a result, Sambo said his quality of life was “wonderful. I’m not rich and not poor, but life is wonderful”.

Discussion and Conclusion

Demir, Haynes, Orthel-Clark, and Ozen (2017) highlight the potential impact of volunteer bias in qualitative research and discuss how it can limit (or even disallow) generalization and undermine the validity of results, particularly when ‘friendship’ factors into the research design. In this setting, volunteer bias may have occurred if the three participants responded differently to how other graduates in the general population of MVU graduates would have responded to the same 50 questions.

However, in this study we have not sought to inferentially generalize findings to the wider MVU graduate population; our only goal here is to ask what graduates report about their personal and professional experiences before, during and after their enrolment in MVU in order to test Maharishi’s proposition that study at MVU would improve the whole student (referred to as a test of analytic generalization as opposed to inferential generalization [Yin, 2018, pp. 37-38]), and in that sense the data presented have answered this question. Moreover, other attempts to control bias, including a lack of incentives or inducements, and the opportunity for pre-interview reflection, may have limited the potential impact of bias on validity.

The upbringing and backgrounds of Monivann, Pheuy, and Sambo vary significantly, although each faced significant hardships in their early lives, irrespective of their provincial or familial circumstances. We also note that Monivann and Pheuy were born during the Lon Nol years of the Vietnam War and regional conflict, and thus their early lives were sometimes marked by borderline starvation and always by social dislocation. This was the

period prior to which Cambodia had been carpet-bombed by B-52s during Operation Menu between 1969 and 1970 and subsequently by Operation Freedom Deal until 1973, the records of which were secretly destroyed by Lieutenant-General Alvin C. Gillem, commander of the 3rd Air Division stationed on Guam. Shawcross (1979, p. 396) described the conditions of Cambodia during the early- to mid-1970s as the “inferno” from which the KR was born. Sambo’s early life, while not without difficulties, was in the post-KR reconstruction period and his childhood was thus more stable, but his comments that “times were quite tough” and “there was violence in the country” are telling, and his recollection of playing with unexploded ordnance frightening.

Similarly, each student followed different professional paths, with Monivann pursuing a career in finance, Pheuy staying on at MVU as a teacher of Transcendental Meditation and subsequently moving into marketing and training, and Sambo following a path of entrepreneurship. From these observations it is also clear that these early life experiences compelled each of the graduates to follow paths of social responsibility, volunteering, helping others less fortunate, and doing everything possible to create a better future for themselves, their families, and their country, goals they share in common. Given the primary aims of MVU related to human development (specifically in fostering self-sufficiency, confidence, health and healthy lifestyles, reduced stress, and enhanced creativity, moral reasoning, and intelligence, all of which are products of practice of the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi program) and the promotion of sustainable social values and economic development, it is reasonable to conclude that MVU played a significant role in student development as the graduating students in this study display high moral character, determination and perseverance, and a creative drive to impact the future of Cambodia’s well-being.

The three case studies recorded by this paper obviously do not represent the experiences, learnings, or insights of all 4,000 MVU graduates. They do, however, serve two useful purposes. First, the stories told by Monivann, Pheuy, and Sambo are indicative of post-secondary education student life in Cambodia during the 1990s and 2000s, and provide a window on to these graduates’ lives—their dedication to learning, development, and self-sufficiency, and their experience and definition of success. Second, the case studies of Monivann, Pheuy, and Sambo add to our overall understanding of the role

of MVU in human development and educational reconstruction in Cambodia from 1993 to 2008. Therefore, this research contributes to the story of MVU and its place in the reconstruction of higher education in Cambodia, a country which was the poorest of 153 countries in the world when MVU began operations in 1993.

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