



Australia Awards

Tum Sisopheareth

Assisting Cambodia's Young Readers



Mrs Tum Sisopheareth, is a Provincial Manager for “Room to Read” an international NGO working on improving reading habits in Cambodia, and a part-time lecturer at the Regional Teacher Training Centre (Kampong Cham).

Mrs Tum’s experiences and commitment to her role shows how effectively Australia Awards alumni can contribute to Cambodian development, whether they are located in Phnom Penh, or in a province.

After completing her Master of Education Leadership and Management at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, Mrs Tum returned to the province in which she was born, to use her new skills and experience to contribute to educating not only the children in the province, but also the trainee teachers.

“I was born in a small village called Sokang in Kang Meas district, along the Mekong River”, Sisopheareth said. “My father was a teacher, and my mother was uneducated, but my father taught her how to read.

“My father died when I was very young so I cannot remember him very well, but my mother obviously learned from him the importance of education, so she ensured that all five of her daughters went to school”.

Sisopheareth and her sisters made a pledge with their mother: they would work alongside her in their rice-fields, sesame and tobacco gardens, and their mother would ensure they got an education.

Her local community valued education and had built a primary school themselves, where Sisopheareth spent the first few years sitting on a plank of wood between two bricks. Her love of literature mathematics in her early years soon expanded to include a strong interest in science.

“When I was 12, and in lower secondary school, I had to do the farming every morning with my mother and sisters. That was when I definitely decided that I did not want to be a farmer in later life.”

In high school as a fourteen-year-old, she lived with her aunt and uncle 30 kilometres from her home, and only saw her mother and sisters once each month. At 17, she completed high school – a major achievement as she was the only girl from the village to graduate from high school.

A big decision had to be made then, as her mother was encouraging Sisopheareth to

become a primary school teacher, like her father. And although keen to study medicine or agriculture, these courses were not a viable option for her, because of their high cost.

Sisopheareth excelled in French while at high school, but realised that there would be more opportunities for her in the future if she could read and speak English, so she started learning and improving her English skills – on the street, as she obviously had a good “ear” for languages.

Her goal was to save up enough money to buy a motorbike, and the small amount she made from giving locals English lessons allowed her to do just that.

After studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) from which she graduated in 1997 (in Chemistry), she worked for a French NGO involved in community water and sanitation issues, with a lot of travel involved during difficult times in Cambodia.

Sisopheareth was experiencing a conflict herself between her mother’s wish for her to be a primary teacher and her own desire to follow a different career path.

Nevertheless, she completed a one-year teacher education program at the National Institute for Education (NIE), including a practicum – but was still not convinced that she was destined to be a high school teacher.

After finishing her teaching studies, she was appointed as a high school teacher to the Kampong Cham province in 1998, and was being prepared for an arranged marriage.

“I agreed to the marriage, as he is a good man, but I said that I would never stop learning, whether married or not!”





She put this philosophy into practice and, as well as tutoring students in Chemistry and English, continued along on her own learning path.

"I met a lecturer from a teacher training institution in Phnom Pen and decided then that tertiary education was my career path", she said. "I then spent two years completing my teacher training course, followed by a year of on-the-job training including her overseas training."

Sisopheareth then began lecturing at the Regional Teacher Training College (RTTC) in Kampong Cham province between 2000 and 2006. In addition, with the little spare time she had available, she completed a US-funded English language program at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) – in 2001 and 2002.

During that time, Sisopheareth knew that she wanted to broaden her knowledge and began applying for scholarships. She applied for an Australia Awards (then an Australian Development Scholarship) three years running, and was successful finally on her third attempt.

"It took a while – but I definitely learned a lot from failure", Sisopheareth added.

Sisopheareth and her husband and son spent 2006 and 2008 in Adelaide gaining not only academic knowledge, but also life knowledge.

"It was fascinating seeing and leaning in a new culture", she said. "I struggled a lot at the start because of the high expectations placed on Australian university students for self-directed study."

Sisopheareth was impressed with the support - educational and emotional - she was given while studying for her Master's Degree. She lists improved communication, critical analysis,

increased confidence as just a few of the skills she gained while in Australia. She uses daily the critical thinking skills she gained from her Australia Award, and is even more convinced that learning is a life-long process,

"But for those first few months in Australia I really struggled to learn how to do research properly and how to write up the results of my research."

Nevertheless, she still found time to do community work in Adelaide – helping with reading at her son's school.

On returning to Cambodia with her Master's Degree, Sisopheareth began working as the Provincial Coordinator for "Room to Read", and continued lecturing at Universities and Regional Teacher Training College.

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The international program has a vision for a world in which all children can pursue a quality education, reach their full potential and contribute to their community and to the world. To achieve this vision, Room to Read focuses on literacy and gender equality in education.

Through international and national networks, the program works in collaboration with communities and local governments across Asia and Africa to develop literacy skills and a habit of reading among primary school children, and support girls to complete secondary school with the life skills they will need to succeed in school and beyond.

Country Manager for Room to Read, Mr Kann Kall said he selected Mrs Tum Sisopheareth for the provincial coordinator role four years ago despite her very limited experience in leadership and Management at her fresh graduation.

“But because of her confidence and demonstrating that she was willing to learn, I could see her potential to grow”, Mr Kann said.

“The project volume in her province has nearly tripled during her four years as coordinator; staff numbers have increased from three or four then, to nine people now; and this is because of her work and her management of the projects in the province.

In both her role as provincial coordinator, and in considering her Australia Awards experience, Sisopheareth emphasizes the importance of mentoring.

“The Australia Awards program need to ensure that potential applicants and alumni are mentored”, she said. “But it still has to come back to the inner-self... and knowing the importance of networking and learning on the job,” she said.

“A lot of my own students come up to me and ask me questions, and I always tell them that they need to identify their *vision* first. I had my own ten-year goal for 1998-2008, and I made sure I achieved it.”

And while the Australia Awards program has provided Sisopheareth with both professional and personal growth, she cautions the Australian Aid about the challenges that Cambodians face in applying for an award.

“The Pre-departure Training program is quite demanding; it creates tremendous pressures on students as they are constantly worried about the potential to lose face if they fail.”

However, Sisopheareth believes the many advantages of an Australia Award outweigh the disadvantages.

“Everything I learned at Flinders University has an impact on the way I work now. I apply what I learned in Australia every day here in Cambodia”, she said.

Sisopheareth is keen to undertake further studies in community development, to help with both of her current jobs,

“Leadership never ends... strategic development is a major aspect of my current role and I use the skills I gained in Australia to make the most of deciding on strategic approaches.”

“All the same, I want to become an even better leader.”

Mr Kann has seen the leadership qualities in Sisopheareth during the time he has worked with her.

“She is a great role model; the staff she works with are learning from her, and are prepared to speak up, ask questions and challenge”, Mr Kall said.

Sisopheareth also stays in touch with students from Australia and other countries she met while in Adelaide, and is a member of Flinders University Alumni, Cambodian Australian Network of Students (CANS), and Australian Association Alumni of Cambodia (AAA-C). She has involved in briefing Australia Awards departing awardees and sharing experience and successful tips to potential candidates through Australia Awards information session in her province.

Sisopheareth offers the Australian Aid some advice to improve the Australia Awards program in her country: “There has to be better opportunities for provincial candidates and to help them qualify by providing better English language training”, she said.

“There also needs to be better information distributed about the Australia Awards program, but most importantly of all, we need to find better ways to motivate potential applicants who can make a difference to Cambodia’s development.”

Her supervisor, Mr Kall, has similar advice for the Australian Aid:

“Create a platform where recently returned alumni share their stories with students to inspire them and show them that they *can do*.” he said. “And provide Australia Award scholars with practical experience. When they come back they are *academics*, but they also need the practical experience.

