>> Professor Sue Trinidad: Okay, welcome everyone. I am Sue Trinidad, the director for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. We're very pleased to have Alex, Professor Alex Jun here for two days visiting our centre. And we were just talking about his TED talk. As a TED speaker, we're very honoured to have him here. So I knew him quite well, having come across his TED talk. And then managed to meet Joe (Slavens). So all of the circle was complete and now it's been wonderful to have the two of them here today. Now Alex is the author of From Here to the University: Access, Mobility and Resistance among Urban Latino Youth. But before I go much further, I just forgot my very first bit, which was I needed to pay our respects to the Indigenous members of our community by acknowledging the traditional Nyungar custodians of this land that we meet here today on. And that's elders past and present.

Now, Alex is the author of From Here to University: Access, Mobility, and Resilience Among Urban Latino Youth. Alex, thank you very much, because you have quite a broad set of experiences here, having worked in a number of universities, and in particular we're very interested in what you've got to say about your work in Cambodia as you've conducted research on issues surrounding higher education globalisation in the Pacific rim. And you've also been teaching courses on diversity and social justice in higher education. And so we're going to have a chance here to hear about the qualitative study which utilised ethnographic and narrative enquiry approaches, and explored the lives of a dozen Cambodian students and their educational life experiences. And looking at their journeys from an orphanage to college, which we've been talking about today in some of the issues that our disadvantaged youth have and so there's a lot of comparisons that we can make. And we are looking forward to future research with Alex and his team. So I'm going to hand over to you now. Welcome and thank you very much for this opportunity.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Thank you. Thank you very much. It is a privilege to be here. And I love being associated with the centre. Thank you for the invitation. And I'm going to launch into some of the work I've been doing in Cambodia. It was probably 15 years ago. My dissertation that I turned into a book was a study of first-generation low income Latino students in downtown Los Angeles in a high-poverty, high-crime gang infestation, and how did these students get their way through the streets of LA and into high school and then into college and then to graduate? So that was a book that I worked on. And I always wanted to go back to that whole model, but look at it from a different perspective. And that's what led to this study in Cambodia. So it really is an extension of the work that I did previously on disenfranchised youth. It's just more of a comparative international look at this particular population. And so it's an honour for me to be here. And I'd love to share with you as much as I can share, not just my perspective, I want to share the student perspective with you. So here's a story of someone I knew named Samat, who is 20 years old now. Samat says this. "I grew up in Mondulkiri." - It's a province in Cambodia. – “Where my family were farmers. There were times when we had many difficult times finding food. So I remember days when all we ate were pickled chilli peppers. We survived by eating snakes, crabs, frogs, grasshoppers, crickets and anything we could catch. One day I was around five years old and my mum decided that she would move to the capital city Phnom Penh to look for a job so that she could prepare for a better future for my family. When I moved to the city, my life changed in many ways. My mum had married again." - His father died. - "Unfortunately her new husband was really abusive to me almost every day. He got drunk and he would beat me." I'll pause here and just say that Samat was then left alone. His mum and dad wanted to be together so they sort of just left him. And so he was in this area in Phnom Penh, trash dumps where a lot of disenfranchised students and children sort of live. "And in that context I

met someone from Cambodia's Future," - which is what I'm calling this organisation - "And I started a new life in the orphanage." Samat goes on to talk about his journey of what it's like to live going from picking up trash and chasing around other children and playing to being housed and fed and ultimately educated by this organisation. It's a nongovernment organisation that works in Cambodia. A lot of NGOs in Cambodia. What I'd like to do today is talk a little bit about the organisation, talk about the students as well and their journeys and talk about their resilience. And then offer some recommendations for us as we think about what it means to partner with other organisations.

For those of you who have interest in this area on equity and access and mobility in higher education, for the most disenfranchised of students. There's a lot of things for us to consider, and so this was a programme that I thought was interesting. When I first got to Cambodia and met different organisations, this particular organisation seemed to have a lot of the elements to it. But I'd love to discuss it with you all, and then certainly leave enough time for questions.

Okay, so talk about a framework for college access; understand how education institutions can collaborate with NGOs; and then finally some thoughts on future policy for this organisation. Because no organisation is perfect. I think we learnt what to do and what not to do. So I'll try to be balanced and fair in my assessment here. For those of you not familiar with the kingdom of Cambodia, a couple things to consider in Southeast Asia. Bordered by Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The official language and the ethnicity is the same. Khmer is the pronunciation I think. Because of 90 plus years of trans-colonisation they've taken a Francophied version of Khmer, just Khmer is how the French decided to pronounce Khmer. But it is Khmer for both the language and the people. So it's about 90% Khmer and a real mix of Vietnamese and Chinese. So there's some multiracial, biracial groups, but everyone identifies mostly as Khmer.

Probably most famous with Cambodia would be the mid-'70's. Pol Pot thought that he would do what Mao Tse-Tung in China in the cultural revolution took ten years to do, Pol Pot wanted to do in one year, was to change society into a social society. So from '75-79, which was not too long ago for most of us, right,? He was part of Khmer Rouge, was his organisation. Genocide of nearly 2 million people were killed. Primarily the intelligentsia, the teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, et cetera. Anyone who wore glasses were killed. He is famous for saying, "I'd rather have 10 innocent people die than one guilty person go free." And this is part of the reason for the genocide if you will for his own people. And Cambodia interestingly enough is one of those countries because maybe they didn't have the war in Vietnam for example where a lot of other countries were involved. Cambodia was sort of left on the side, an under-recognised and in many ways undervalued, country. So from '74-79 there were these atrocities that happened. In the wake of all that had happened, what was left, right? The educational system was eradicated, essentially. What is famous, if you've ever been to Cambodia, Phnom Penh, they have a high school that was used as a torture chamber, to interrogate, to kill their prisoners. The killing fields is probably another famous landmark in Cambodia. But the entire system shut down. No education. No universities. And so how do you recover from that? Who teaches the classes in the 80s? They had to borrow, they had to bring faculty from Thailand and Vietnam and other countries. Expatriates who left Cambodia to go to France and Australia, some repatriated and came back to teach. But you know, it was in shambles. And they had to come up with a system. What system were they going to use?

So this is an ongoing issue right now. Low literacy rates, widespread poverty, government corruption. It's this sense of survival, collectivistically speaking. Ongoing sense of survival.

Along with government corruption, ongoing challenges with reliable public services. Sex trafficking has been in the news a lot in Cambodia. Human trafficking in general. Not just women, but young children and now men into different industries, fishing industries, et cetera.

Ultimately, the conversation for me from an educational perspective in talking about equity is this population of disenfranchised youth. And the statistics are not always reliable. I have heard that 50% of the population is under the age of 30. What was noticeable in the time that I lived in Cambodia, there were very few people over 60. And you can understand historically why that would happen. That very few people are in the older, sunset ages of their lives in Cambodia.

So ongoing challenges. Access and attendance. High school dropout rates are really high. Low student enrolment and of course low rates of college participation. It's hard for someone like myself who's a professor of higher education, who cares very much about access and equity and sees higher education as the natural platform for not just for the public good, but for your own life, to see the low rates of college participation. Low rates of high school participation for that matter, and we're talking about the city in Phnom Penh. If you go to the countryside in the provinces, it's much worse. So it's an ongoing challenge that they have here. Part of my research was with a team. And then I moved my family to Cambodia and we lived there for three years. So my research design was ethnographic in its nature. Sort of prolonged engagement, extended period of time in the country – I spent my first year in the country learning Khmer. And in fact, my children were involved in the school system, the very school that my participants went to school. So there's an interesting overlap in terms of prolonged engagement with participants in an observation. For those of you familiar with ethnographic methods, I think that's a very important element of research design.

Also employed some grounded theory approaches. So coming up with conceptualisations and theoretical frameworks of how to understand based on the findings. But ultimately it was a study of narratives. It was their own stories, their own journeys from the past to current, future. Trying to get an understanding of what their hopes and dreams were. And ultimately what their experiences were so that we can draw from their own experiences to understand how we can set policy.

I love this quote. It's Clandinin and Connolly who are narrative scholars. "A collaboration between researcher and participants over time in a place or series of places in social interaction." It's that social interaction that I thought was really important, that I was living among the participants and building trust. I think that's an important element in this research design.

Ultimately what we ended up with in all of our individual interviews, there were 35 students who were participants from high school and college. Primary focus for me was on this subset of five. I had a colleague of mine, a doctoral student at the time, Jacob Gross, wrote his dissertation on another population of students. So this was an ongoing multi-research project that we were engaged in. The 35 students were primary, but we had secondary and tertiary interviews that included administrators, teachers, counsellors and then these group homes, ultimately boys homes and girls homes. And they had people overseeing these homes. And so interviewing them, a critical element of their journey. Fairly standard approaches with our design, participant observation. A lot of document analysis and prolonged engagement as I mentioned earlier.

Here's an overall view of the structure of Cambodia's future. NGO, that has been there -- probably in the early 2000's was when the organisation started. And what happened was

one gentleman was in the country, and this is fairly common I think. What happens is his heart was broken. He saw these students and these children everywhere, just displaced. And he thought, "I've got to do something." So he adopted this group of children. He just took them in, he and his wife. And he had four or five children of his own. And he brought them in and probably about 30 or 40 of them initially. And housed them, clothed them, fed them. And then ultimately he started with this homeschooling which he was doing with his own children. And it just became unmanageable, so he got with some other organisations and said, "What can we do?" They started doing a co-op, homeschooling kind of approach. Eventually it turned into what we are calling Agape, a Greek word for love. Agape International School. Primarily it was intended as an orphan school for most of these students. And he sent his own children to this school. But that's how it emerged. Agape International Academy. And now it's a fully accredited, WASC accredited international school in Phnom Penh.

So you know, my children went there. Other ex-pats would go there. It's 50-50, ex-pats and then Cambodian nationals, which is an interesting mix I think. And of course ultimately the school's purpose was for these disenfranchised youth, the orphans. They wore uniforms, as is fairly common in the private international schools. So you could tell who was who, which I think was an important distinction to sort of have -- they had the super-rich and then they had the disenfranchised. It was a nice mix I thought. And then of course the expatriates all mixed in together.

House of Peace and House of Strength are the homes that I've named for the boys homes and the girls homes, the orphanages essentially. And then you had the local administration. So Cambodia's Future sort of was a funding arm. It's based in the United States, the organisation itself, the central administration. Two others that I have in yellow here that are important to note is the feeder schools. It's pretty popular in Cambodia. If you can start a private preschool, right, or a kindergarten, it's a revenue generator. There are so many children that they started several preschools and that became a funding arm to help support the school.

I'm going to talk about tuition here in a minute. Ultimately the goal for these students was not only housing, feeding and clothing them, but educating them. If they graduate high school, this organisation said, "We will find a way to get you to college and we'll pay for it." So they had this very, very important element of college scholarships to get this students through college. The caveat was, and the vision for the institution was to have these students graduate from college, return to their own country and then become leaders, future leaders of their country. So very bold plans. And I'll give you some numbers here in just a second.

So Cambodia's Future was organised around these two, the boys homes and girls homes. One particular family, that I'm calling Gardias, the founders of the organisation had this vision in mind. And eventually as is common I think as the organisation grew, the organisation actually asked this family, the Gardias, to leave. And there was some conflict I think internally. But the founders of the organisation are no longer part of it. Which on one level I think is important to note, right, that it's not based on charismatic leadership alone. There's something valuable about the saga that is left behind in the organisation and the culture. But the institution continued to survive and I think that's an important element. That it's not based on one person's desire or dream. Again, no matter how charismatic the person might be, I think it's important to know that the institution has to have belief in the system. And that's one thing that I noted here. But very structured. They were intentional about having high standards with the students. And I think that was an important note. When you look at, when we talk about equity students or we talk about disenfranchised youth - I talk

about this in my research with students of colour - that it's funny that the first thing you noticed is you can't feel sorry for somebody that you haven't met yet. Right? I mean that's a problem. If your first instinct is to feel sorry for someone, then you haven't met them, right? Somehow you lower your standards. There's a difference between compassion and pity. And I think these are some of the things I was learning in interacting with these students, is they can tell the difference between compassion and pity. Part of that was, did you have high standards for me? Did you demand of me what you would demand of your own children? Right, and that was an important element to this, that it wasn't simply, "Well, we'll give you a pass." They had this thing that they started early because students hadn't been in school for many years. They had catch up school. So it was very intense early on. They wanted to get to grade level, but they may have been two, three, four grade years before. Right, so you had to get them caught up. And that took tremendous amount of rigour and expectations on there.

In addition, they had daily tours. A lot of students did not speak Khmer very well. And so they had Khmer lessons but also ESL. Part of the challenge, and I'm going to talk about this later, is the organisation, as I said, is an American-based, US-based NGO. And I could appreciate that their perspective was very US-centric. So they were thinking, "Universities. Where would we send them? Where would you go if you're from America? An American university." So that was part of the goal. And most of the conversations in the schools certainly were all in English. I'll talk more about that in a second.

Okay, so I talked about academic rigour and high expectations, right? The goal that they set them to, for these orphans, was you're going to graduate from college and you're going to get these great jobs and you're going to come back and serve your country. I don't underestimate the significance of that, right? Possible sells, right? Having high expectations of yourself and having others expect this of you I think is very, very important. I think about that in the context of privileged students in the United States. Third- and fourth-generation college, parents are well-to-do professionals, et cetera. College is the natural next step. In fact, we're even talking about grad school. In my circles, with my professional colleagues, we're not talking about college graduation. We're talking about what med school, what law school are you going to go to? Right, what PhD programme? Is it going to be in humanities? Is it going to be in science? Right? The level of expectation is already higher, right? And yet when we talk about certain populations we think, "We don't even get to college. We don't even graduate high school." Right? There's something very interesting, very subtle about that lowering your expectations for some, but holding what we would call normal standards for others. So I knew that was an important note.

Currently where we are right now, we have 35 students who are part of this original cohort. 10 have graduate from college, various universities, US, Thailand, India for example. 15 still currently enrolled. And five students are still at the secondary level. So if you're good at math, you realise, what about the other five students? I think the reality of this is no matter how much they tried to implement this, some students just stopped, dropped out, didn't finish at various stages. And so I think that's an important reality that not every student -- it's not this panacea that's going to cure all of the social ills, even with this population of students that they worked very, very closely with. The numbers aren't very large. 35 students. As I shared earlier, a few of the challenges that we had in Cambodia, right, with thousands of students, tens of thousands of secondary age students who don't have access to good education. This is a very small number. I'll talk a little bit about that some more.

Of the 10 students who have graduated, 10 have come back. That's controversial as well in one sense, because is there any way to guarantee that these students come back to

Cambodia? Well part of the challenge is if you went as an international student which they would be if they went to the United States or Thailand, you have to go back. I mean you have a visa for a certain set period of time and they have to return to their home countries.

We'll talk a little bit about high expectations. This is from Soka. "They wanted us to want to compete academically. Mr. Gardia pushed us hard and he taught us that anything is possible." The example I gave earlier is what do you want to become? Do you want to be a doctor, a nurse, a teacher? Right? And in their circles, most of the students in their communities with their backgrounds were either going to be trafficked or they would have menial jobs or just beg on the street. So you can't underestimate the significance of having this statement of you want to be a social worker, a teacher, some sort of professional degree. And then a little more, Soka talks about rules and expectations. "Such as study before play were widely understood amongst the kids. And that was well established in terms of high expectations, which is great."

Okay, a little bit more about Agape. As I mentioned earlier, pre-K through 12. About 500 students were enrolled, and about 123 of them hold Cambodian citizenship. This is probably the high school level. And lots of nationalities represented. Tuition by Cambodian standards, expensive. $3,000 US dollars annually for tuition. Not so bad probably for the United States, Australia, that doesn't sound like a lot of money for a private education. But they had a revenue of $145,000 from not just the K-12 but as I mentioned earlier these revenue streams of the pre-K and the kindergarten which is interesting.

They were very intentional, not just providing free tuition for the Cambodian orphans. But then you know, if you start to understand the students who started coming to the school, their parents were tuk-tuk drivers. Or you know, they had one of those mule carts. They had parents, those were the parents, but they were just as disenfranchised economically. So the school started to change and they started to not just bring in disenfranchised youth and orphans, they had low income youth, right? So it's nice to see this organisation sort of change in that regard.

I mentioned earlier full tuition for college. And part of the caveat was they had to return to living in Cambodia. I talked about the school. So the organisation had lots of benefits and a lot that we could learn from in terms of how you can implement a school. But let me talk about one challenge. And this is an interesting one for me because I love the organisation, I love the work that they're doing. But this idea of heritage, language and culture that was lost. I mentioned to you earlier that I spent my first year there of my three learning the language. And by the time I got to the students and I was trying to converse with them, I had to get IRB approval, Institutional Review Board approval to work with human subjects. And by the time I was able to work with them I realised that in many respects my Khmer was just as good as theirs. And it's interesting now because they are 100% Cambodian citizens, Khmer. But their language fluency in their own language in their own home country was lost. Part of that was because there were learning ESL. The other part was their school was all in English. And third, the people who were in the House of Strength and the House of Peace were all westerners, North Americans. That could be problematic for some, right?

So this idea of cultural integrity that I've written on before in a previous context, as I mentioned earlier, learning from Latino youth in the United States. This idea of enforcing a certain language in a culture. Samat had this to say. "So they forced us to speak English, but we still speak Khmer to ourselves. But when we saw them coming we stopped, pretend like nothing happened. Hey, what's up? Then we'd start speaking the language. It was tough at first. Like we were not happy at all. Like why can't we speak Khmer? That's our language." It's a version of hegemony, post-colonial. It's this ongoing challenge of maintaining cultural

integrity. And the challenge I think is this idea of divorcing oneself from your culture and your language for the sake of education. And I think that's a challenge. And this extends beyond Cambodia. And this is an issue that we're struggling with in the United States with students of colour. Maybe an issue here as well with equity students. And so that may be a good point for us to have a discussion. But it's certainly something we should consider.

I'm going to wrap up here and talk about some implications for what it means for other organisations that want to start something like this. And this organisation that I'm introducing to you all is pretty well established in Cambodia. So many NGO's come into Cambodia today and they want to do the same thing. And my policy recommendation is please talk to organisations that have gone through what you've gone through. Don't work in isolation. Don’t work in a vacuum. Try to work with other organisations that have done this. And one of the big benefits obviously is financial. It's a reality, if you're first generation college, if you're low income, or in this case completely disenfranchised, if you're an orphan and you have no funding, it's a financial reality. But it's not just the money. It's housing, it's travel. It's everything associated with things that people with money don't think about. So there's the financial reality that has to be built in. Community is another important element, that people would be committed. Now I'm not a psychologist, but I have colleagues who I have talked about this with. This idea of having a population of students that are disenfranchised and lost their parents, they're going through grief, they're going through guilt. They're always bereaving this. And then they have a new population of mentors who love them, who want to be there with them until their time is up. And then they leave. And these students are then left with a lot of emotional issues to say, "Well I don't want to trust anybody." So there's a whole other set of literature that I'd love to go down. But either you react by saying, "I'm going to love anyone I see, I'm going to be close to them," it's sort of an attachment disorder. Or, "I will never trust an adult again. Right?

So these are some of the things that they were going through, that these students were going through because they needed a sense of community. So I think it's this idea of long-term commitment or another way of looking is being very clear that it's not about you. And that's a challenge with volunteerism or some of the social work that goes on in Cambodia, especially with westerners and folks from developed countries from the global north. That's an ongoing challenge.

Ultimately I think maintaining this shared vision. What is the end goal, right? And knowing that housing students and clothing them and educating them has to have an end goal. And I appreciated this organisation in that they said, "We want you to come back to your country and to serve your country." The other side of this was you can't really serve in your own country if you don't speak the language. You look like us but you're no longer like us. You're really white kids trapped in a Cambodian's body really. And their mentality, their thinking was much more westernised. That works with this population of students, with people who understood them, but had they not been to the United States they would be seen as Cambodians, right, who spoke English pretty well. But they weren't necessarily Americans. That’s another talk for another time. We can talk about that.

But that's part of the challenge. The shared vision for understanding how do you maintain cultural integrity? How do you maintain heritage, language and culture and not have that be divorced with high expectations? That's a subtle difference I think for Cambodia, that we assume that if you're going to be well educated and articulate and all that, that you're somehow less Cambodian, right? And so that's an important element I really wanted to focus on.

I'm in the process of finishing a book right now with Jacob Gross who I mentioned earlier. And we're compiling all of our resources and trying to put this together to tell a story and talk about implications for practice.

Okay, final recommendations as we move forward. Recognising this organisational saga, right? What I mean by that is it's not one person centred. And it cannot be driven by one charismatic leader. The entire organisation needs to buy into it. It has to be bigger than any one person's vision. I mentioned cultural integrity. I'd love to talk about that more. And ultimately though, any one programme or even 100 of these programmes doesn't get to the systemic change. You still have to work with the government. You still have to work on significant systemic changes within a structure or an organisation. Otherwise I'm afraid that there will always be this very interesting relationship with host country and NGOs that… it's always a benefit. I mean, if you're going to use your money and your resources and your people to help, great. Keep doing it. Hopefully it will last forever.

David Brinkley wrote a book called Cambodia's Curse, which I think was really interesting. It came out in 2011, 2012 I think. Talking about how Cambodia has become an NGO factory in essence. And controversial in that some of the things he said are not very popular. But he addresses this very issue of how do you get the systemic change? How do you work within the institution and the government and the people that are in place? That's why we're always doing add on programmes. In many respects you know, some of the things I've been talking about today are the symptoms of a larger problem. And we're still addressing just the symptoms and not the deeper underlying issues. So in one sense, on my more cynical days I said we're just building better band-aids. We're just trying to study how to build a better band-aid. But we never get to the deeper underlying systemic issues.

So I'm going to stop here and give us a chance to ask questions and have any reactions to the lecture. I'm going to sit down.

>> Professor Sue Trinidad: I'm sure there will be plenty of questions.

>> Audience member: Does the Cambodian government have some kind of registration programme or registration process for organisations involved in education?

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yes. They do. They have -- when I was doing my research, a couple of the projects I was doing for higher education, because I'm looking at privatised higher education and how it's like the Wild West. New universities popped up everywhere. And the Ministry of Education and Youth Sports had an organisation. And the Higher Education Commission had an organisation. There were about seven different agencies that if you want to follow the proper protocol, there were seven agencies that you had to get permission from. They didn't have computer records, so it was a challenge that information wasn't centralised. And you know, I think you get a lot done by paying fees, you know, up front. And those are some of the problems. But those are on my more cynical days. I think this is why people just start things on their, right? Help getting information. In fairness, the government absolutely cares about their citizens. And what they didn't want was organisations coming in, in this case, and having students lose their cultural identity and lose the language.

>> Audience member: I was just wondering, is there anything in that registration process about cultural maintenance?

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah, that's a harder issue I think. Because this would actually be true in the school that I'm talking about. A lot of rich Cambodian businessmen would send their children to this school because it's international and it's in English. And there's some sort of soft power that comes with the language, and everybody wants to go to an international school and be fluent in English because it had more opportunities. Even with both sets of parents, et cetera, and having a lot of money, these students, their English did better than their Khmer. And so at what level then does the government get involved? Do they shut down all international schools? Is it going to be enforced to have bilingual education, right? That would be an interesting approach. California, where I'm from, has struggled with that, with Spanish-English and Mandarin-English and Korean-English. Canada may have something to say about that, about bilingual education. Yeah, so welcome to the club, Cambodia. This is an ongoing struggle and there's no easy solution.

>> Audience member: I'm interested in the ten that came back? Were they more employable? Do you know what happened to them? Because they had been trained in a system different from the Cambodian system.

>> Professor Alex Jun: That's right.

>> Audience member: They come back with an international education, but do they fit?

>> Professor Alex Jun: I think everyone took a little bite of humble pie. The organisation realised that coming back to your home country and being a leader of the country doesn't happen when you're 23.

>> Audience member: Yeah.

>> Professor Alex Jun: So maybe in a few more years. It's going to take a while. But if that was engrained in their heads, which was a good thing, they come back at 23 and what are they making? $500 a month, right? Which is what they were going to pay a Cambodia which is probably a little bit more than they would pay, just another Cambodian who doesn't speak English. But they're thinking, "Wait a second, the NGO's are spending $2,000 for some of these folks." So that was a challenge. So they're not getting the best jobs coming right out, but at 23, who really does? I mean this is a challenge, right? So multiple realities that they had to struggle with.

The bigger question was, initially we said, "Study whatever you want," right? Well, I don't know how much money you make being an English or a humanities major at an undergrad. So this is a challenge. And then the students would want to do something that was service oriented. Nursing, social work, not the most high-paying jobs in Cambodia, certainly not in

the United States. Maybe here, I don't know. But those are other challenges. So were they employable? Yes. They can get jobs. And they had the networks that were in place. That was the other nice thing. There were surrogate parents if you will to say, "I know somebody who knows somebody who can get you a job." It's going to pay $500-600 US. Not too bad if you're in Cambodia. But not what they would necessarily want. And so there's that level of expectation I think that they need to work on. The organisation did change in that regard. They said, "If you're going to go to the United States, here are majors that you need to consider." And that gets complicated too. And that was interesting because well gosh, I have lots of nieces and nephews who have arguments with their parents about what they can major in. So that was normal. I mean at the end of the day, some organisations are saying, "You can't tell them what to major in just because you're paying for it." I'm like, "Well, I know a lot of parents who are having that conversation with their kids." "I'm paying for your tuition, so here's what you're going to study." And we do the same kind of conversations interventions with families that we would do here. Like, "Well, let's find a balance."

>> Audience member: Yeah. Did they look into -- sorry, I have another question. Did they look into the cost of sending a few students overseas, versus having lots of students locally trained?

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah.

>> Audience member: Because I wonder about the benefits of that and being locally trained and going to a system where they are going to be trained to work in?

>> Professor Alex Jun: The organisation has evolved and changed and I think they're in a better place now. Initially again, if you're all from North America and all from the United States, you think the best education is from the United States. It turns out there's a lot of South Koreans who live and do business in Cambodia, and if you ask them what colleges they'd say, "Oh, you should go to South Korea." So that's pretty normal, right? But in fact, there is some discussion about, is there a benefit to sending them all the way to the United States for university? It costs a lot more, first of all. So that's why they started moving to Thailand and maybe Malaysia. And you know the globalisation of higher ed is fascinating. If it's in English and the instruction is in English, why not send them to these institutions? It was an oversight for the organisation, because they didn't know of any institutions in Southeast Asia. And not knowing and then hearing about it, not valuing it was a challenge.

Let's, you know, narrow it down and say, "Well why not just stay in Cambodia like you're suggesting, right?" Part of the challenge even in Cambodia is you can go to a really good school, which this school had become, a very good private international school. But because it was an international school the students were not eligible to take the national examination. They have a national examination system in Cambodia. You have to pass that. Again, part of the problem is there's ways to pass it with a fee. And so a lot of students can do that. But if you want to take the up and up and be ethical, we're not going to do that. Well they were by nature of having graduated from a nonregistered school ineligible to take the examination.

>> Audience member: Yeah.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah. And then exacerbated by the fact that they couldn't speak Khmer well enough to take the national examination. So again, these are things they need to work on and try to resolve. My two cents on this is, if they were able to do catch up school in elementary to get them at grade level, you could do something similar post-baccalaureate with language and culture. I mean certainly with language, that they would be able to learn the language. And it's not like they couldn't speak it. They just weren't as fluent as they could be when you're 22 years old and have only lived in Cambodia. So thank you for your question. Please ask more.

[ Laughter ]

>> Audience member: Alex, is there any movement towards employing locals in that international school for the sake of the language and the culture, rather than simply bringing in internationals to do the heavy lifting, so to speak?

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah, that's a good question. It actually broadens the discussion to what makes the school successful? And at a certain point it's revenue generating and they want to keep the numbers. And so what sells? Again, this could be another topic for another time, is the soft power of having internationals at the school. So having Americans. They didn't have as many Australians. Primarily it was North Americans, Canadians, who were teaching at the schools. And that was big selling point. I have heard this while I was in Cambodia, that nobody wants to go to Filipinos to learn English in Cambodia. And they speak a lot of English in the Philippines. Nobody wants to go to the Philippines, because they didn't want the Filipino accents. They wanted real English. It's funny for me to say that in Australia because real English means American English to us, right? Who is the Queen? Yes.

That's our challenge I think, is to say, "Well, if you were to employ locals, first of all you absolutely would have this dual language." And I think it is beneficial for international students from North America to be at these schools and learn Khmer in the schools. One of my disappointments I think is my children lived there and they didn't learn the language as well as they could have. It was one class that they took a semester, as opposed to sort of having it a dual language immersion.

>> Audience member: I think in Australia there are experiments in dual language immersion. I think there are schools, primary schools in Victoria, where the kids are getting a half day a week in Mandarin and a half day a week in English and the kids are coming out 100% bilingual.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yep.

>> Audience member: And so it's kind of happening around the place. It's not something happening in WA, yet, that I'm aware of.

>> Professor Alex Jun: And they are experimenting now with having Khmer not just in the classroom but mandating sort of extra classes after school, before school and making it required. I think that's the right direction that they need to go, especially if you're working with Cambodian students.

>> Audience member: I have a question. In regards to the ten students who graduated from college and came back, have they even indicated a desire to return to the country that they did their college in? I mean, there are similar systems in Malaysia and Singapore where the government sponsors their students to go to Australia to study. And a lot of them want to defect to Australia and not return to Singapore or Malaysia.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yes. Oh absolutely. There was a lot of tension to be honest, because they love the United States. They love their experience and all their friends and they made their new networks and to pick up and leave and go back to Cambodia... Partially I think this is another discussion of identity. It was a challenge for them because it was objectifying really. And when they had to go give these talks for the scholarships, right, people wanted to hear their stories, right? My challenge as I talk about this research, am I also objectifying them when they tell me their stories over and again? But their identity is not simply that they are orphans, right? That's everybody else's reality upon them, that they're disenfranchised youth. They don't necessarily see themselves that way. Especially when they're in the United States, you know, when it's a little bit more egalitarian and they didn't have to tell everyone that they came from this background. They were just Cambodian international students. And with their networks and et cetera, they wanted to stay.

The reality for them is they had a student visa and they needed to come back. So if they wanted to go back they would have to do it on their own. They had no real networks. That was a reality for some of the students they realised. "I want to go back, but I realise a difference between me and my American friend who has the blue passport. He or she can go back and forth all they want. I have to go back to Cambodia." If they decided to stay, and one student did -- one student got married and wanted to stay in the United States. And it was hard for the organisation, because they wanted this person to come back. Eventually she did. They got married and they came back to Cambodia because they both wanted to live there. But she came back as a US citizen, which is interesting.

Oh, there are some heartbreaking stories in there with one student who fell in love with another student from India, also an international student. They both had to go back to their home countries. I mean, that was heartbreaking. How do you reconcile some of that? So not unlike a lot of international students. I would imagine the same thing can be true. So those are ongoing challenges for international students. We've got a guy running for President of the United States who really wants to get rid of everybody.

[ Laughter ]

>> Professor Alex Jun: And some who are legally residents! We just look at you. That's what the problem is. Yeah, it's an ongoing challenge.

>> Audience member: I'm interested to hear about your perspective as a parent, having your children. Because presumably they came from a comfortable lifestyle in the US to Cambodia, which is very different.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yes.

>> Audience member: And then went to school with the Khmer children.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yes.

>> Audience member: So what was that like for them? And how did your wife and yourself reconcile, like, the three years that you were there? And then what did you have to do, if anything, to bring them to US standard when you went home again? Would you..?

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah. Well I could talk about privilege. It's a deeper level. We were talking about that earlier, weren't we, Sue? This idea of privilege that is just embodied first of all by choice. And I want to say every single person that I worked with was from the United States, as much as they may have felt called to a certain place, had the privilege of choice of going there. And as much as they were paid very little to teach there, these North Americans, and they could make a lot more anywhere else. But you talk to people in Cambodia and you say, "Yeah, I don't have a lot of money." And their response is, "How did you get here?" You say, "I bought a plane ticket." "How much did that cost?" "Oh, I don't know, $1,200 US." "How in the world did you get $1,200?" And it's a round trip ticket! So that's three year's wages. So this is thething that you realise very quickly that I tried to show my own children to say we are coming from an incredible place of privilege. So that's the first level.

And then the subjectification to say, "Oh Cambodians are all orphans? Or they're all poor." And everywhere we went there were children begging in the streets. And so they said, "Those are Cambodians and they're all poor." And so to disassociate that. And it was pretty easy because there were very, very rich Cambodians. There's somebody who was driving a Range Rover, $60,000-100,000 Range Rover. I couldn't afford that. They learnt very quickly, oh, not all Cambodians are poor. If they're rich, they're filthy rich. They could own us. Yeah, what was missing was the middle class. And so trying to get them to understand that there's got to be -- for them to sort of hold onto two realities, which I think was really helpful.

I will say that when we went back to the United States they were behind academically. The school, you know, it was a good school, but we live in an area with a good school district that is very competitive. And so they were behind initially. Two of them caught up. One likes being behind, so that’s fun.

[Laughter]

>> Professor Alex Jun: We're working on him, for some motivation. Yeah, that was a challenge I think. Again, we went in, my wife and I went in -- she's a pharmacy professor, a licenced pharmacist. So she did a lot of medical work there. And she obviously has a different lens. She says, "You know, it's nice that you're doing all this stuff in education. But healthcare, we just want them healthy." There are diseases that Cambodian citizens are struggling with that we don't have in the United States anymore because we have preventative medicine. So it's a different perspective. But thanks for asking that question, because I think we still come back and we're right back into the rat race of living in North America. We forget very quickly.

>> Audience member: Yeah, thanks.

>> Audience member: I was just going to say there are obviously negative consequences to it. What is the alternative? Like, what else can you do if you don't do this?

>> Professor Alex Jun: That's right. You're talking about the schools that are established?

>> Audience member: Yeah.

>> Professor Alex Jun: Yeah. I agree. I think the biggest, and this is a very subtle difference I think, is organisations that come in and think, "I'm going to do work in spite of the existing system," right? Or work against the system. Exacerbates the problem. And so there has to be this level of partnership to think -- and this is what's going on with the anti-human trafficking organisations, NGOs that go in. Not just Cambodia, but other countries. You're not working with the government. And dangerous assumptions and objectifying, you know -- leadership to say all of this government is corrupt, and that's just not true. You have to work within the system. And you know I like to say this because I'm here in Australia. To tell you you're driving on the wrong side of the road says something about my assumptions of normativity, right? To say, "Oh, why is this like this? Why is Cambodia this way, this way, that way?" It's not right or wrong. It's different from what your experiences are. Find the middle ground. And this is why I love the work and hopefully the future that we can collaborate with the centre, is we both care about the same thing but we come at it from different perspectives and we have a lot of our own cultural lenses and baggage if you will of the way we view the world. And we just assign right and wrong to it, and there isn't. So it's being able to hold onto what -- F. Scott Fitzgerald is famous for saying the test of the first-rate mind is to hold onto two seemingly contradictory thoughts at the same time and still be able to function. Right? Like collectively that's what we need to figure out in a place like Cambodia.

>> Audience member: Thank you.

>> Professor Sue Trinidad: One more? Any other questions?

>> Professor Alex Jun: I wanted to, I would be remiss if I didn't introduce my colleague here, Joe Slavens who now lives in Perth. But we have worked together on research and we're pursuing some different research that will keep us hopefully here in Perth and in Australia. But Joe is finishing his PhD right now. We're working together. And we're doing other research, but it's stuff on equity and diversity, which is not necessarily connected to this. But it's also tied together. So it's a privilege again to be here. Thank you so much for coming, the gift of your time to come here and listen to this and interact again. So thank you. Thank you again for the invitation, it’s been great.

>> Professor Sue Trinidad: You're very welcome. Could you join me in thanking Alex?

[ Applause ]