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Promoting higher education reforms in Cambodia: Challenges and the way forward

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Abstract

Higher education is essential for any nation. Countries that recognize the significance of higher education focus on improving the quality of their higher education. This article focuses on the role of universities in promoting reforms in higher education in Cambodia and how the universities have failed to play this critical role. It highlights how Cambodian universities have been unable to contribute to meaningful reforms in the higher education sector. It also discusses vital challenges to higher education development, such as inadequate access to higher education, politicization and commercialization of the sub-sector, and insufficient professional development for university teachers. The article concludes with recommendations on how Cambodian universities can contribute to accelerating reforms to improve higher education in Cambodia.

Keywords: Higher education; Cambodian universities; challenges; reforms; Cambodia

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Introduction

Universities are the ultimate mark of higher education and their quality in any country. Countries whose universities are lowly ranked due to poor quality of education are not competitive or attractive to people seeking to further their higher education (Fomba et al., 2022). Therefore, universities and their management are responsible for continually enabling reforms to improve the quality of education offered. Reforms in the higher education system seek to address the challenges that keep emerging on a regular basis. This ensures the system flows smoothly for effective education delivery to students. However, public universities are generally accused of neglecting the challenges and letting them ruin their institutions or the entire system in the country (Bunry & Walker, 2022). This happens when the institutions fail to address the main challenges, and the effects are felt by the students, teachers, and the entire education sector. Universities are at the ground level to identify what sections of higher education need to be changed. In the case of Cambodia, the failure of the universities to promote reforms in higher education results in a weak education system and less qualified graduates (Hayden, 2019).

This article discusses the challenges to promoting reforms in Cambodian higher education. It begins by providing some information about the development of higher education in Cambodia before elaborating on the challenges to promoting higher education reforms. The article concludes with recommendations on what Cambodian universities can do to develop and implement reforms that will benefit all stakeholders within the sector.

The development of Cambodian higher education

The higher education sector in Cambodia is gradually picking up from the destruction of the education system following the civil war and genocidal regime in the 1970s (Ayres, 2000). Much of the rebuilding in the education sector came from foreign donors and focused on improving access to and quality of basic education. This meant that some students who performed exemplarily in secondary education would have an opportunity to pursue their education overseas, while others ended up pursuing an education of limited quality in Cambodia (Madhur, 2014).

Since the late 1990s, the Cambodian government has taken initiatives to develop higher education. The ruined and destroyed higher education institutions (HEIs) were rebuilt and began admitting students since then (Ayres, 2000). The Royal University of Phnom Penh was the most equipped and largest in Cambodia before the civil war. The rebuilding process came after the 1990 Jomtien Conference, which aimed to enhance education for all (Buchert, 1995). After rebuilding HEIs, the Cambodian government focused its efforts on equipping them with the necessary resources and required personnel. This included employing and empowering individuals who would promote higher education to greater heights (Dy, 2015).

Until 2006, higher education in Cambodia was not included in the priority strategic plans of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). Since then, higher education has been considered significantly important when formulating goals for the sub-sector (Un et al., 2018). There have been four Educational Strategic Plans ([ESP], 2006–2010, ESP 2009–2013, ESP 2014–2018, and ESP 2019–2023) developed by MoEYS. MoEYS also sought to ensure that the education reforms in Cambodia respond to regionalization and globalization. The improvement of higher education was also sought to align with the labor market demand as well as the immediate and long-term need for the country's economic growth. The changes have seen approximately 20-27% of the educational budget being allocated for technical assistance, which includes continuing professional development for teachers (Un & Sok, 2018). For example, the budgetary allocation for the education sector increased from US$343 million in 2014 to US$848 million in 2018 and US$915 million in 2019 (Heng, 2020).

In the academic year 2020-2021, there were 198,674 students (98,535 were female), enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in 130 HEIs across the country (MoEYS, 2022). Among the graduates of undergraduate programs in 2020-2021, 42% majored in Business (Accounting, Economics, Banking, Finance, and Management), while 73% of master's program students and 88% of PhD students were enrolled in social science majors (MoEYS, 2022). Despite the growth in student enrollment in Cambodian HEIs, there is an ongoing debate about how teaching quality can be promoted. There is also a growing concern and discussion about the need to encourage research among Cambodian academics and graduate students, as well as the need to establish

institutional research orientation and policies (Heng, 2021; Heng & Sol, 2021; Sam et al., 2012; Un et al., 2018).

Despite the progress, MoEYS believes that there are areas in the higher education sector that still need to be improved. The 2022 Education Congress outlines the aims to strengthen seven fundamental areas that will promote and develop higher education in Cambodia. First, MoEYS aims to improve human resources in research, technology, data management, and finance (MoEYS, 2022). Second, it aims to continue implementing action plans that were held, cancelled, and postponed. Third, it seeks to recruit students to fulfill the target plans. Fourth, it will improve the infrastructure of the internet connection and access, including those in the provincial areas. Fifth, it aims to offer sufficient scholarships to both teachers and students. Sixth, it will promote research activities within HEIs. Finally, MoEYS will strengthen the implementation mechanism of quality assurance in higher education.

Challenges to promote higher education reforms in Cambodia

Many Cambodian HEIs did not live up to the expectations due to the failures that rose as soon as the institutions were rebuilt. Challenges started emerging from all corners of the higher education sub-sector. There are challenges in access, equity, quality, relevance, funding, and administrative management (Kitamura, 2016).

Limited access to higher education

Access to higher education includes location and affordability of education. Most universities are located in the cities and provincial towns, limiting access to students in rural areas. For example, there are 35 HEIs in Phnom Penh alone, whereas the remaining 95 are based in big provincial towns, painting the unfair distribution of HEIs in urban areas (MoEYS, 2021). It is also expensive for the average citizen to afford higher education in urban areas in Cambodia. Access and affordability of higher education have been an issue affecting the sub-sector in Cambodia. The existing universities have a moral obligation to ensure that every qualified learner has access to higher education (Ilie & Rose, 2018).

Weak mechanisms to enhance higher education quality

Many universities in Cambodia still need to advocate for the accreditation of courses being offered to ensure that they are certified by professional bodies. Many students enter the higher education system with high hopes of joining their dream careers. However, these dreams may be shattered when they realize that their courses are not accredited. Accreditation of programs is a formal confirmation that a program is nationally recognized to meet the quality assurance requirements. Accredited programs meet the needs of the established industry and provide the appropriate competency outcomes and a satisfactory basis for assessment. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) was established to develop the minimum standards for the higher education system and enhance the higher education quality across the country. Recently, ACC had two major achievements regarding the adoption of the ACC Roadmap and Strategic Plan 2020-2030 and the Guidelines for Assessors on Institutional Accreditation (Pen, 2020). The Roadmap and Strategic Plan 2020-2030 adds greater value to the Higher Education Vision 2030 as it requires ACC to develop a strategic plan to improve the professional skills of ACC staff members and assessors to ensure that the quality assurance processes applied to HEIs are consistent with regional and international standards (Phnom Penh Post, 2022).

However, the quality of higher education remains a major concern to the general public (Ford, 2003; Nhem, 2022). The public is particularly concerned that many universities have only focused on the surface knowledge of the students using traditional examinations instead of focusing on quality education, effective curricula, adequate facilities, and academic research (Sam et al., 2012). The failure to employ quality assessment methods leaves many universities to continue to provide low-quality education, not competitive in the national, regional, and global markets.

Problems with the commercialization of higher education

Many Cambodian universities have been accused of participating in politics, resulting in the commercialization of higher education (Sok & Bunry, 2021). In the late 1990s, MoEYS undertook higher education reforms, leading to the rise of privatization of the sector (Brehm & Silova, 2014). Privatization enabled public universities to charge tuition fees while allowing the operation of private

universities (Sam & Dahles, 2015). As a result, several foreign-based religious groups, private investors, and international non-governmental organizations were established to compete for student enrollment (Duggan, 1997). This privatization of the sector was the beginning of a dark era for higher education in Cambodia since it got into a rapid, largely unregulated expansion phase (Duggan, 1997; Un & Sok, 2018, 2022). This has led to the failure of many universities to champion reforms that would enhance sanity in Cambodian higher education.

The privatization of higher education has seen extreme disparities between public and private universities. Currently, there are only 48 public HEIs against soaring 82 private HEIs in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2022). The public universities partnered with influential persons to cause an increase in private universities that would earn more money (Sam & Dahles, 2015). The increase in the number of private universities has opened wider doors for public university teachers to take extra roles in private universities to increase their earnings (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). To establish effective standards for good governance at universities, MoEYS collaborates with the World Bank to enhance the operational autonomy of HEIs and limit government interference in institutional practices and procedures (Brehm, 2019). However, the government has infiltrated HEIs by influencing the nomination of rectors and board members often awarded for political inclination. The lack of autonomy has made it difficult for HEIs' management to lobby for more support from the government.

Limited professional development in HEIs

Professional development has become a challenge caused by inadequate funding and the government's reluctance to invest. As a result, research activities are almost absent from Cambodian universities, and continuous professional development is insufficient and less effective (Doeur, 2022b; Ford, 2006; Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). As research has shown that Cambodian academics have different conceptions of research, with some considering their teaching preparation activities as research (Heng et al., 2022), it is imperative to provide them with professional development opportunities so that they can improve their research knowledge and skills.

In addition, universities have failed to ensure that the government puts equal emphasis on the development of educational institutions, students, and teachers. University teachers are likely to continue teaching the same content if the curriculum changes without providing them with sufficient training on how to adapt to such changes (Chowdry, 2009). Universities also have an obligation to ensure that their teachers are adequately trained to enhance their skills, knowledge, and expertise. However, only 8.74% of higher education staff in Cambodia hold PhD degrees (MoEYS, 2022). This shows a lack of commitment to improving the current knowledge of university teachers. Universities are also complicit in failing to promote reforms to see more teachers acquire doctorate degrees (UNESCO, 2014).

Overall, the main challenges that affect Cambodian higher education are inadequate accessibility, limited quality recognition, commercialization of higher education, and limited professional development for university teachers. These problems have been holding back many universities from undertaking proper reforms that can raise the standard of higher education in Cambodia.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article has shown that Cambodian universities have failed to promote reforms in the higher education sector that was previously neglected, as the emphasis was on the basic education sector. Access to higher education remains a major concern affecting the sector's development. Many universities are set up in urban centers limiting access to those in rural areas. The affordability of higher education is also a challenge for many students to access higher education. These concerns can be addressed if universities make efforts to have more funding for subsidizing tuition fees and creating more satellite campuses in provincial areas. Curriculum development and accreditation are also key challenges in Cambodian higher education. Finally, inadequate professional development opportunities and limited research activities remain an issue in Cambodian higher education due to the inadequate funding given to universities.

To enhance reforms in Cambodian higher education, the following suggestions are in order. First, universities should lobby the government to increase

budgetary allocation for higher education which would subsidize the tuition fees for the students. For example, the government has currently provided scholarships that cover about 15% of all enrolments and account for nearly 10% of the annual student intake at each public HEI (Mak et al., 2019). The scholarships include a tuition fee waiver and a living allowance. However, the increase in the budget for higher education can help more students to be able to access and afford higher education. Another solution for university reforms is to set up satellite campuses in provincial areas to increase access to students in those areas. Increasing access to higher education will benefit individual universities and students as a whole.

Second, the Cambodian government should pay more attention to higher education. Having more budgetary allocation for HEIs will enable different reforms to take place. The current program targets vulnerable students such as the marginalized and disadvantaged. However, an all-inclusive program will resolve this issue. This can be achieved by subsidizing tuition fees which will help to increase enrolment in Cambodian higher education. Increased financing will also ensure that the research capacity of Cambodian universities is improved for better academic outcomes. If this is done well, Cambodian universities will no longer struggle to facilitate continuous professional development for their teachers (Doeur, 2022a), resulting in an improvement in academic output (Heng & Sol, 2021). Moreover, since the commercialization of higher education has been established to be an obstacle to higher education reforms, it is recommended that the Education Ministry should have an audit task force to periodically assess how institutions have been using their funds. This practice will curb the unethical utilization of public funds.

Third, HEIs have the role of ensuring equal access to higher education for all qualified students. However, this fails to happen when nearly all HEIs are based in the capital or are too expensive to afford. It means that students in rural areas or of low socioeconomic status face challenges in accessing higher education, unlike their peers in urban areas or from wealthy families. Therefore, HEIs should consider allocating a separate budget package for students from financially disadvantaged families and/or rural areas, regardless of their academic achievements, to ensure that they have access to higher education. By supporting these students, HEIs can contribute to Cambodia's economic and

human resource development as well as bring the national competitive advantage to a higher level, not leaving it behind other countries in the region.

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