

Review Article

Skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education: Major causes and possible solutions

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Abstract

Higher education in Cambodia has made noteworthy strides in recent years. However, as the country experiences rapidly evolving economic needs and technological advancements, the mismatch between the skills graduates possess and those demanded by the job market remains a focal point of discussion. This article aims to discuss the issue of skills mismatches in higher education in Cambodia. It provides an understanding of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education and delves into the major causes of this pressing issue, including limited public investment in higher education, limited involvement of concerned stakeholders, limited use of up-to-date curricula and teaching methods, limited English proficiency, lack of career guidance for students, and a low level of research engagement among Cambodian academics. The article offers solutions to address this pressing issue by emphasizing potential measures, such as providing sufficient orientation to students on the selection of majors in higher education, enhancing government-

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 January 2023

Revised 10 February 2023

Accepted 26 July 2023

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university-industry linkages, establishing a clear roadmap for improving higher education quality, modernizing curricula and teaching methods, encouraging learner autonomy and a culture of lifelong learning, promoting diversity and inclusion in higher education, enhancing the circulation of information about the job market and industrial needs, and improving the quality and research capacity of faculty members. The article argues that addressing skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education requires a genuine reform and concerted efforts from all concerned stakeholders. It concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Skills mismatches; Cambodian higher education; causes; solutions; Cambodia

Introduction

Cambodia's higher education sector has made significant progress in recent years, with an increasing number of students enrolling in universities and other types of higher education institutions across the country (Heng, 2023b). Despite the progress, a persistent issue in Cambodian higher education is the mismatch between the skills and knowledge acquired by graduates and the demands of the job market (Heng & Sol, 2022; Peou, 2017). This mismatch can result in a situation where graduates are either unemployed or employed in jobs that do not fully utilize their potential. This not only affects the individual graduates but also has wider implications for Cambodia's economic growth and development.

The issue of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education is neither new nor left unaddressed. A number of researchers have attempted to provide an understanding of the issue (see, e.g., Chuon, 2023; Heng & Sol, 2022; Kitamura, 2016; Madhur, 2014; Peou, 2017; Williams et al., 2014). Notably, Madhur (2014), Peou (2017), and Heng and Sol (2022) have discussed various issues concerning skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education. The Cambodian government and concerned stakeholders have also made efforts to address this critical issue. For example, the government has implemented higher education improvement projects to improve the quality of teaching and learning, enhance

the research capacity of universities and academic staff, and improve higher education governance (Heng, 2020; Heng & Sol, 2021).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the issue of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education. For example, Heng and Sol (2022) highlighted several key issues concerning skills mismatches, including shortages in management and soft skills, a dominant trend of Cambodian students opting for social science-related majors, and the questionable quality of Cambodian higher education. Similar issues were also discussed by Ek and Muth (2022), arguing that skills mismatches were caused by the “weak relevance of the curriculum” (p. 5) and the limited competence of Cambodian academics in teaching and research. Chuon (2023) also discussed three crucial factors that contribute to skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education, including a lack of comprehensive orientation to skills selection for higher education, weak management and coordination at the implementation level, and fragmented coordination at the system level.

Despite the growing scholarly attention toward the phenomenon of skills mismatches in higher education in Cambodia, it remains a pressing issue that needs attention from policymakers, researchers, and concerned higher education stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia and higher education institutions (HEIs). In light of this, the present article aims to revisit the major causes of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education and offer suggestions on potential measures and solutions that can be considered to address this crucial issue.

Understanding skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education

There are two main issues in relation to skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education. One is the issue of the quality of graduates; the other is the low enrollment in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors (Heng & Sol, 2022; Kao, 2020). In its Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, MoEYS (2019) highlighted improvements in access to STEM education, the establishment of several new STEM-focused HEIs, and initiatives to promote higher education research and governance. However, it acknowledged several challenges facing Cambodian higher education. One key challenge that

requires attention is skills mismatches as “the quality of graduate students does not fully meet the needs of the job market and society” (MoEYS, 2019, p. 13).

Previous research has shown that skills gaps or mismatches among graduates are a major issue in higher education in Cambodia (Madhur, 2014; Peou, 2017; World Bank, 2012). Most students are enrolled in the field of social sciences such as business, accounting, finance and banking, and English language, while a low but increasing student population pursues their higher education in STEM majors. Madhur (2014), for example, noted that Cambodia faced a shortage of skilled human resources needed for the labor market. The main reasons for the skills gaps included “low enrollment rates, high dropout rates and low completion rates at various levels of education,” as well as the doubtful quality of the Cambodian education system (p. iv).

Likewise, Peou (2017) found that it was common for Cambodian students to study for two degrees at the same time to enhance their employment prospects. This phenomenon suggested two major problems in Cambodian higher education: (a) doubtful quality of education and (b) reproduction of educational inequality. This means that while many students felt compelled to study two complementary degrees to improve their career prospects, those from low-income families could study only one degree and ended up with fewer skills and educational qualifications to compete in the job market. Peou (2017) also found that students’ selection of a university major was largely driven by practicality (e.g., more employment prospects), desirability (e.g., a desirable career), and convenience (e.g., scholarship opportunities). He called for more efforts, including policies and programs, to improve the quality of education and promote enrollment in skills demanded by the labor market.

Heng and Sol (2022) also discussed the issue of skills mismatches. Drawing on previous research, they argued that skills mismatches are one of the key challenges facing Cambodian higher education. They noted that this issue has also been acknowledged by MoEYS and relevant development partners such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. For example, as mentioned earlier, MoEYS (2019) stated in the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 that Cambodian university graduates did not fully meet the demands of the changing job market.

Major causes of skills mismatches

Limited investment in higher education

As a developing country, Cambodia has limited resources and funding for its education system. Although government expenditure on education, including higher education, has increased over the years from 1.5% in 2010 to 3.1% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022), higher education investment remains limited. Mak et al. (2019a) noted that “Cambodia is one of the countries in the region that invests the least in its higher education,” which could not trigger any considerable impact on its quality (p. viii). They added that in the case of large public HEIs in the capital city, funding from the government for higher education covered merely 10-20% of their annual expenditure. The percentage share might be much higher for smaller provincial HEIs. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that all public HEIs in Cambodia heavily depend on tuition fees to sustain their operations (Mak et al., 2019a). Be that as it may, it is patently evident that the Cambodian government has not invested enough resources in its higher education, leading to a shortage of funding for HEIs to improve their facilities, programs, research and development, and teacher training. This insufficient investment from the government has placed HEIs in a challenging position to elevate the quality of education provided to students.

Limited stakeholder engagement

The lack of engagement between HEIs and industry players is another major cause of skills mismatches in Cambodia. Sam and Dahles (2017) have identified a lack of stakeholder involvement in Cambodian higher education, as they tend to operate independently. Although considerable efforts have been made by MoEYS to encourage university-industry linkages within the framework of the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) (Heng & Heng, 2023), the industry engagement with HEIs and vice versa remains deficient. This shortfall in stakeholder engagement may have resulted in HEIs not having access to information on the latest industry trends, which in turn affects their ability to provide relevant education and training to students.

Limited use of up-to-date curricula and teaching methods

Many HEIs in Cambodia still employ outdated curricula and teaching methods that may not be aligned with the demands of the job market. For example, it is not uncommon to see one university adopt a textbook or course syllabus used or developed by another more well-established university for its own students. This repetitive and derivative practice has created a cycle in which there is no creativity or customized academic resources tailored to the specific learning needs of students. As a result, this tends to lead to graduates acquiring skills and knowledge that are no longer relevant to the job market demands, causing a substantial skills mismatch with the job market demands. Ek and Muth (2022) have argued that many HEIs in Cambodia “are conventional, providing traditional face-to-face delivery and are more of a teacher-centered style” (p. 5). As a result, many graduates tend to find themselves struggling in the workplace due to the limited relevance of what they have learned and what they need to effectively perform in the workplace.

Limited English proficiency

Cambodia is a predominantly non-English speaking country, and a significant number of students may not have the language skills required for certain job roles, leading to a skills mismatch as well. Although there is no sustainable research investigating the correlation between skills mismatches and the English proficiency of graduates, available research evidence has suggested that the limited proficiency in English or other foreign languages may have been a contributing factor to skills mismatches. Ngel (2022) has, for instance, argued that English proficiency provides a multitude of educational opportunities for Cambodian students. However, based on research by Em and Nun (2022) and our observation of the results of the Grade 12 national examination in recent years, a substantial proportion of candidates failed their English subject, suggesting that their English proficiency was limited. This deficiency in English knowledge does have consequences on their higher education journey as they have to grapple with the lack of English skills to excel academically. Moreover, it can be argued that when their English skills are limited, they will also find themselves struggling in the workplace, particularly when they need to deal with expatriate or English-speaking colleagues. This

struggle may not only impact their individual performance but also contribute to a broader skills mismatch within the workforce.

Limited career guidance for students

Another prevalent issue contributing to skills mismatches among graduates may stem from a lack of robust career guidance for students. Although empirical research in this domain is scant, our experience has suggested that there are limited opportunities for students to get career advice while they are completing their degrees. The dearth of career guidance and counseling provided to students has resulted in them not knowing how to better prepare themselves for the job market. This problem is related to the weak ties between universities and industries, alongside the limited opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience by participating in internship programs offered by the industries. As Heng (2022) found, many Cambodian youth and students did not have sufficient knowledge about research because they did not have the opportunity to develop themselves through research training opportunities and other forms of research support or guidance. This situation could be the same for the case of career guidance provided to students.

Limited research engagement among Cambodian academics

Research has shown that Cambodian academics have limited engagement in research. Due to the precarious environment that does not encourage them to engage in research, they tend to predominantly devote their time and energy to teaching and, for some academics, consultancy research (Heng et al., 2022, 2023). Ros et al. (2020) have found that Cambodian academics mainly function as knowledge transmitters rather than knowledge producers. Given their limited research engagement, their roles become confined to teaching that tends to be based on their experience, not research findings. As a result, the knowledge that they impart to their students may not be up-to-date or keep up with the current stock of knowledge, resulting in students' accumulation of knowledge and skills that may not adequately prepare them for the changing job market. Heng's (2022) research on Cambodian youth and the knowledge sector has also revealed that many Cambodian university students or youth do not have sufficient opportunities to receive research training and gain practical research experience; as a result, their knowledge, especially knowledge about

research, is limited. Thus, it can be argued that when academic staff are not actively involved in research, they would not be able to effectively prepare their students for the future job market that increasingly demands complex skills like research.

Possible solutions to skills mismatches

To address the skills mismatches, attention needs to be paid to several issues. First and foremost, high school students should be provided with an adequate orientation about higher education majors so that they can make an informed decision when selecting which major to pursue in university. In this sense, STEM-related school events need to be hosted regularly to expose students to STEM subjects to foster their interest in them. A recent study by Kao and Shimizu (2019) showed that Cambodian students' interest in science and mathematics during high school played a vital role in their decision to choose science and engineering majors in higher education. They suggested holding science fairs or STEM exhibitions in high schools across the country to boost students' interest in STEM subjects. In addition, more scholarship opportunities for STEM majors or targeted skills should be offered and supported (Peou, 2017). This can be done through close collaboration and coordination between MoEYS and universities. For example, MoEYS should provide sufficient support to universities that offer STEM degrees and encourage other specialized universities to focus on STEM education and research.

Second, it is important to improve government-university-industry linkages. The triple helix model, or a quadruple helix involving development partners, as suggested by Sam and Dahles (2017), needs to be promoted. In this sense, HEIs should form partnerships with the private sector to better understand the evolving skill sets and knowledge that are in demand. This can help ensure that the curriculum and training programs offered by universities and colleges are aligned with the needs of the job market. When the university-industry linkages are enhanced, students will be more likely to pursue majors that precisely mirror the industry needs, helping to bridge the skills mismatches among university graduates. Moreover, strong government-university-industry linkages can make more funding available for joint research projects and workforce development, as well as enhancement of infrastructure and technology transfer, which can offer reciprocal benefits to all involved parties.

Third, to improve the quality of education and graduates, it is crucial to develop and implement what Dy (2015) called a roadmap for enhancing higher education quality and relevance. It is also essential to define the rights and responsibilities of academic and administrative staff as well as improve the link between secondary and higher education (Dy, 2015). The roadmap should also include the critical task of developing English proficiency among high school graduates and undergraduate students in their early years so that they can explore materials and conduct research in English for their university studies, given the scarcity of learning resources in the Khmer language. Providing continuing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff also needs to be a priority. Furthermore, greater efforts and new policy solutions are needed to address the shortage of academic staff with PhDs. This can be achieved through recruitment, promotion, and retention policies that are attractive to PhD holders. The success of these policies is, however, dependent upon the level of remuneration and salary structure that can permit a middle-class lifestyle (Altbach, 2009).

Fourth, another important step in mitigating skills mismatches in Cambodia's higher education sector is to modernize the curriculum and teaching methods. This can be done by incorporating the latest industry trends and technologies into the curriculum and teaching methods, which will ensure that graduates acquire the skills and knowledge needed for the demand of the job market. Recently, MoEYS has introduced the Research Creativity and Innovation Fund to support the publication of textbooks in the Khmer language (see MoEYS, 2023b). This is a welcoming initiative; however, mechanisms are needed to ensure the book quality and avoid unintended repercussions resulting from low-quality textbooks.

Fifth, it is crucial to promote learner autonomy and a culture of lifelong learning. Autonomous learning is a critical factor in promoting the development of students' knowledge and skills. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic or the post-pandemic world, the ability to independently engage in self-directed or autonomous learning has become indispensable for learning success. Thus, it is important to motivate Cambodian university students to develop into autonomous learners who know how to study effectively and successfully. It is also important to encourage a culture of lifelong learning among university students so that they can continue to develop themselves

after graduation from university. Life-long learning can also help individuals to stay up-to-date with the latest developments in their fields and acquire new skills as needed. This can be achieved through programs or initiatives that provide access to training, workshops, and/or online courses.

Sixth, attention should be paid to promoting diversity and inclusivity in Cambodian higher education to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to access higher education. This can be achieved through the provision of more scholarships, financial assistance, and other forms of support targeted at less privileged students or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. MoEYS has done a great deal in supporting less privileged students to pursue higher education through scholarship schemes (Mak et al., 2019b; MoEYS, 2023a); however, more efforts and involvement from other stakeholders, particularly the private sector, are needed to improve Cambodian students' access to higher education.

Seventh, it is crucial to improve the dissemination of useful information about the job market and industrial needs. In this sense, it is critical to enhance access to accurate and up-to-date information about the demands of the job market. Such information is vitally important for students to prepare themselves for post-graduation. This can be done through various means, one of which is to establish or promote partnerships between HEIs and industry players and other relevant stakeholders such as the government or non-government organizations (NGOs). Effective provision of information about what the job market needs will provide guidance for university students to better prepare themselves for employment or life after graduation.

Finally, to address the skills mismatches, there is a need to improve the quality of academic staff, enabling them to deliver their lessons and impart their knowledge more effectively. To this end, opportunities for continuing professional development need to be enhanced. Moreover, there needs to be a well-defined policy or mechanism to encourage Cambodian academics to engage in research in order to develop their expertise in their specific areas and ensure that they can effectively help their students when it comes to research and publication. As the world is embracing the knowledge-based economy, Cambodia cannot afford to continue to lag behind its counterparts; thus, the country needs to build a strong foundation for achieving its aspirations to

become a knowledge-based economy (Heng, 2023a). In this context, research and quality higher education are essential pillars of Cambodia's vision for a knowledge society.

Conclusion

This article has provided a brief background to the issue concerning skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education. It has also discussed major courses of skills mismatches that included limited investment in higher education, limited stakeholder involvement in the sector, the limited use of up-to-date curricula and teaching methods, limited English proficiency among students, lack of career guidance for students, and limited research engagement among academic staff. The article has provided possible solutions to these challenges, focusing on providing high school students with sufficient orientation on major choices in higher education, fostering robust government-university-industry linkages, establishing a clear roadmap for improving higher education quality, modernizing the curriculum and teaching methods, encouraging learner autonomy and a culture of lifelong learning, promoting diversity and inclusion in higher education, enhancing the dissemination of information about the job market and industrial needs, and improving the quality and research capacity of faculty members.

In light of challenges and possible solutions, this article argues that to address the issue of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education, a lot of effort, time, and commitment are needed. It is impossible to overcome this critical issue overnight as it requires collective efforts as well as close collaboration and involvement from all concerned stakeholders. In addition, a genuine reform to the sector is needed to introduce change and development that may pave the way for the transformation of higher education in the country.

As Heng (2023a) has noted, Cambodia aspires to become a knowledge-based society. To realize this vision, the country needs to focus on improving its higher education system. We concur with Heng's (2023a) suggestions which include investing in higher education, providing capacity development for academic staff, and offering internship opportunities for students, among others. Moreover, we argue that to address skills mismatches, there is a strong need to improve the curriculum and assessment practices in Cambodian higher

education. In particular, research experience in the form of research conduct and/or research publication need to be integrated into the curriculum as a core requirement for graduation, especially at the postgraduate level. In so doing, students will graduate with advanced knowledge and skills in research that will enable them to function in the workplace effectively.

As this is a review article, suggestions for future research are important. Therefore, future researchers should examine how the skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education can be tackled effectively and quickly. Research that explores how to enhance stakeholder collaboration and involvement in Cambodian higher education is also of significance. It is also crucial to investigate the perspectives of university students, academics, and/or academic leaders about the issue of skills mismatches to understand their attitudes toward the issue and gather insights from them on how to better address this critical problem to make a difference to the Cambodian higher education sector and improve human capital in Cambodia.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Conflict of interest

None.

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