

Review Article

Promoting higher education quality in Cambodia: Challenges and recommendations

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Abstract

Higher education in Cambodia has experienced positive and impressive progress over the last few decades. However, more efforts are needed to bring about further positive changes and new developments to the sector. This article aims to discuss key challenges facing higher education in Cambodia in relation to the need to promote its quality. The article brings to the fore six major challenges, including limited resources and infrastructure, political influence, weak institutional and sectoral governance, consequences of higher education privatization, low academic salaries, and limited opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD). The article also provides a set of recommendations to address these challenges, focusing on introducing a mechanism to improve resources and infrastructure, keeping political

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interference to a minimum, improving institutional and sectoral governance, bifurcating universities into research-intensive and teaching-intensive universities, introducing an improvement or reform to incentive and salary systems, and promoting CPD engagement among Cambodian university teachers. The article concludes with an argument for a reform of the Cambodian higher education sector to bring it to a higher stage of development.

Keywords: Higher education; quality; challenges; recommendations; reform; Cambodia

Introduction

Higher education plays a vital role in determining the quality and availability of a labor force needed to drive socioeconomic growth (Heng, 2023a). Low-quality higher education would lead to (over)reliance on an imported workforce or local low-skilled workers, as low-quality university graduates tend to be unable to meet the needs of the changing labor market. This situation requires relevant stakeholders, particularly the government, to find ways to ensure that university graduates are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to meaningfully contribute to national development.

In the context of the global knowledge-based economy, the role of higher education could not be more essential. According to Heng (2022, 2023a), given the global trend toward building a knowledge-based society and developing world-class universities, the role of universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) has received considerable attention, particularly in terms of producing, distributing, and using knowledge to drive development and innovation. Heng (2023a) added that “universities are the key engine of knowledge production and dissemination” (p. 5), and their roles are central to the development of a knowledge-based society.

In Cambodia, higher education has made positive and impressive progress despite the many challenges facing the sector (Heng, 2023b; Heng & Sol, 2022). The Cambodian government has made considerable efforts to improve both hard and soft infrastructure as well as increase budgetary allocation for higher education (Corrado et al., 2019). For example, the government, through the

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), has introduced a number of higher education and research policies to provide guidance on how to improve the sector (Heng, 2023b). In addition to policy formulation and implementation, there have been major higher education projects introduced to improve the sector. For instance, MoEYS has implemented two key higher education improvement projects, namely the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) and the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP). HEQCIP was a five-year project implemented between 2010 and 2015, but was extended to 2017, while HEIP is being implemented and will be completed in 2024 (Heng, 2023b).

Many researchers have argued for the role of higher education, particularly universities, in contributing to national development and innovation. Delanty (2001), for example, stated that universities play a central role in the global transition to modernity that began in Europe and America before spreading to the rest of the world. Altbach (2013) similarly noted that universities, especially research-oriented ones, are the catalyst for the development of a knowledge-based society. Heng and Sol (2022), writing about Cambodia, contended that education is key to transforming Cambodia, one of the world's least developed countries, into an advanced economy in the long run. Overall, education is the backbone of a country's economic development (Sen & Ros, 2013), as it plays a fundamental role in helping developing countries "to develop into a knowledge economy and catch up with their developed counterparts" (Heng, 2023a, p. 4).

Since the late 1990s, higher education in Cambodia has experienced dramatic transformation, following the introduction of the privatization of higher education—a phenomenon that saw the rise of private HEIs and fee-paying degree programs in public HEIs (Un & Sok, 2018). For instance, in 1997, there were only nine HEIs. This number rose to 62 in 2009 and 130 in 2022 (Heng et al., 2023). The number of student enrollment has also considerably increased, from around 10,000 in the 1990s (Un & Sok, 2018) to almost 200,000 in the academic year 2020-2021 (MoEYS, 2022). At present, there are a total of 130 HEIs in Cambodia, 82 (63%) of which are private HEIs, and around 60% of all HEIs are under the supervision of the Education Ministry. The rest are supervised by 15 other ministries and state institutions (MoEYS, 2022).

Despite the increase in the number of HEIs and student enrollment, the issue of higher education quality remains a major concern, thereby deserving both academic and policy attention. This review article aims to provide a summary of key challenges and offer recommendations concerning the need to promote higher education quality in Cambodia. The article also aims to add to the existing body of work on higher education in Cambodia, particularly recent work such as Heng (2023b), Sen (2022), Un and Sok (2022), and Un (2023). To achieve these aims, the article begins by defining the term 'quality of higher education.' It then discusses key challenges to improving higher education quality in Cambodia. The article concludes with recommendations for enhancing the quality of Cambodian higher education.

Defining the quality of higher education

Schindler et al. (2015) argued that there are two strategies to define the quality of HEIs, including mission-driven and stakeholder-driven quality, as there is no single unified definition. Traditional definitions treated quality as mission-driven. For instance, Green (1994) noted that a high-quality institution is one that clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals that it has set itself.

Conversely, others see the quality of HEIs as stakeholder-driven and argue that all stakeholders also have to be included in the discussion to ensure that different perspectives and needs are incorporated (Cullen et al., 2003). Key stakeholders include academicians, employers or industries, students, and communities (Nabaho et al., 2017; Schindler et al., 2015). Curriculum, learning environment, social support systems, and the availability of facilities also define the quality of HEIs; meanwhile, educators tend to see the quality of HEIs in terms of the quality of teaching since they have a direct impact on the learning outcomes of students (Cheng, 2011). Thus, as Nhem (2022) argued, elements of quality education could include various elements, such as teachers and teaching methods, educational content, management, preconditions for students, and funding and organization.

In general, effective or high-quality HEIs rely on several key factors; that is, there is strong and effective leadership; teachers and students are held to high standards; the learning environment is conducive to learning; there is a strong

academic focus and an emphasis on fundamental skills; and there are deliberate efforts made to extend the learning period (Akareem & Hossain, 2012).

Key challenges to improving the quality of Cambodian higher education

Limited resources and infrastructure

Since 1993, the Cambodian government has embarked on improving public services, including public higher education (Sen, 2019). MoEYS has put in efforts to ensure that HEIs are well-built to accommodate the rapid increase in student enrollment in the past decades (Ros et al., 2020). For instance, the number of students enrolled in higher education has steadily increased over the years, reaching 201,900 in the 2020-21 academic year (MoEYS, 2022). As higher education depends heavily on available infrastructure, both hard and soft, the inadequacy of resources and infrastructure can make it difficult for students to acquire quality education.

It is worth noting that Cambodian HEIs have been left out in terms of resources and infrastructure allocation for years (Sol, 2021). For instance, many Cambodian HEIs have insufficient library resources, making it hard for students to conduct their studies outside of the classroom (Dem, 2017). In addition, libraries are generally not well-equipped with good internet connection that can help students to access online reading materials such as electronic books or journal articles. Excellent internet services would ensure that students can brainstorm and exchange ideas with their peers taking similar courses locally or at overseas universities (Ros & Sol, 2021). MoEYS and relevant stakeholders have somehow failed to ensure that Cambodian students can effectively compete with other students from globally recognized universities (Chet et al., 2022). As a result, Cambodian higher education is ranked low in the regional and global arenas (Heng, 2020; Ros & Sol, 2021).

Dy and Ogunniran (2019) noted that most Cambodian HEIs did not have modern laboratories. The lack of well-functioning laboratories means that students will not have first-hand experience learning the technical bits in the classroom. Besides laboratories, there are inadequate research resources and facilities in many universities in Cambodia (Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b), although this situation has improved in recent years thanks to the implementation of

HEIP (see Heng & Heng, 2023). Many university leaders also appear to be more concerned with revenue rather than improving the capacity for research and development of their university and faculty staff. Despite some progress, there has also been negligence in terms of the provision of resources and infrastructure to Cambodian public universities due mainly to the limited stakeholder involvement in the sector (Sam & Dahles, 2017).

The influence of politics

Leadership is a key indicator of the quality of output from any organization. Proper leadership helps the organization strategize improvement plans and address weak areas. However, the appointment of senior management of some Cambodian HEIs is usually made through political affiliation rather than merit (Dahles, 2017). It is extremely difficult for a rector to run a university without a successful academic background or necessary higher education (Un & Sok, 2018). Yet, due to political influence, rectors are sometimes chosen with a lack of consideration of their qualifications, especially in educational leadership and management (Dahles, 2017). The political environment in Cambodia has a winner-take-all scenery and patron-client relations, which allows the winners to award their loyal friends with leadership positions, such as appointment to lead a university (Peterson, 2015). This has made it difficult to structure Cambodian HEIs with the right leadership or introduce higher education reform to address the sector's challenges.

The impact of weak institutional and sectoral governance

In addition to political influence, there is an issue of weak institutional and sectoral governance. Higher education management in Cambodia is fragmented and complicated since the 130 HEIs are being supervised by 16 different ministries and state institutions (Mak et al., 2019, MoEYS, 2022). It was pointed out that limited institutional and sectoral capacity has posed a challenge to effective institutional and sectoral governance in Cambodian higher education (Mak et al., 2019). In addition, academic staff and university leaders are also bound to be burdened with bureaucratic work and hectic schedules (Mak et al., 2019; Sam & Dahles, 2017). It is worth noting that HEIs in Cambodia are made up of individuals including the rector/director supported by vice-rectors/deputy directors (Un & Sok, 2018), and the

institutional management power is placed upon a few high-ranking leaders or politicians (Brehm, 2019). The lack of transparency and accountability as well as limited involvement from the academic staff in terms of decision-making processes are also the fundamental factor constraining the institutional development of Cambodian HEIs (Mak et al., 2019). In leadership, a leader's behavior can dramatically impact the behavior of others. A good leader can persuade people to help the organization achieve its goals, and it is generally known that poor institutional leadership is a primary cause of low employees' morale, which in turn affects the overall productivity and performance of the organization (Noor et al., 2019). Moreover, as Un and Sok (2018) argued, the absence of a unified academic board is also a contributing factor to this issue. Without academic board involvement in higher education management, there is a void that needs to be filled to ensure the quality of higher education in the country. What is worse, HEIs also tend to be skeptical of the importance of this management body, indicating a lack of trust among them (Un & Sok, 2018).

The consequence of higher education privatization

The commercialization and privatization of higher education is another factor causing the problem. The phenomenon of higher education privatization has resulted in university teachers focusing on working in such institutions to earn extra income. No doubt, the more teaching teachers do, the less time they have to prepare their lessons in order to provide good quality teaching (see Heng et al., 2022b). This problem is coupled with the fact that private investors are allowed to do business out of running HEIs, which has in the long run strained the development of the sector. Brehm (2021) argued that education privatization tended to favor students from wealthy families over those from humble backgrounds despite their potential. Thus, while there is greater access to higher education, enabled by higher education privatization, there are issues that need to be addressed, including the low quality of higher education resulting from the rapid expansion of the sector (Heng et al., 2023).

The impact of low academic salaries and wages

Teachers' motivation is extremely crucial in ensuring the provision and delivery of quality education. A good source of motivation is salaries; however, one hard truth in the context of Cambodia is that teachers remain underpaid. Heng et al.

(2022b) noted that Cambodian university lecturers were paid around US\$300 per month for teaching up to 12 hours per week. If they taught part-time, they were paid anywhere between US\$6 and US\$20 per hour (see also Chhaing & Phon, 2022). Heng et al. added that low academic salaries had forced many university teachers to find alternative sources of income by teaching at multiple universities at the same time, and those with good research skills opted for consultancy research, not academic research, whenever they had time. This phenomenon has resulted in a low quality of teaching, which has in turn contributed to the limited quality of higher education provision in Cambodia.

Limited opportunities for continuing professional development

Any teachers need continuing professional development (CPD) in order to stay updated with the subject matters, knowledge, and teaching skills required for effective teaching. CPD may include attending regular training, advancing technological skills in teaching, and conducting research, among other activities. However, the lack of regular training available for university teachers prevents them from updating or improving their knowledge and teaching skills (Doeur, 2022; Doeur & Heng, 2023). Even during the outbreak of COVID-19, many Cambodian HEIs could not provide their teachers with sufficient training on technological skills and online teaching methods despite the fact that they were forced to use technological tools and applications to offer education during the pandemic (Doeur, 2021; Heng & Doeur, 2022; Heng & Sol, 2021). In terms of CPD via research, many Cambodian university teachers were not adequately supported to engage in research, as the research facilities, resources, and incentives were scarce or non-existent (Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, the lack of CPD opportunities, including training on technological skills and research, does play a role in impeding the development of the quality of Cambodian higher education.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations that can be considered to improve the quality of higher education in Cambodia. While acknowledging the efforts made by concerned stakeholders, particularly MoEYS, we strongly believe that more actions need to be taken and new projects or initiatives should be introduced and implemented. Key recommendations are as follows:

First, MoEYS should be at the forefront in availing and improving the infrastructure and resources that will promote higher education quality research development (Heng, 2023a). The Education Ministry has the power to ensure that all universities under its supervision need to have the necessary infrastructure and resources to offer quality education. This includes modern and spacious laboratories, enough classrooms, well-resourced libraries, and fast and reliable internet connection (Leng, 2016). This improvement will help to equip students with the practical skills needed for the job market. It will also enhance the competitiveness of Cambodian students in regional and international arenas.

Second, MoEYS also needs to assist HEIs in findings measures to ensure that politics does not interfere too much with the leadership and management of universities. Recruitment of academic leaders should be transparent and open to all qualified candidates. Appointments for a leadership position should also follow specific criteria to ensure that university or academic leaders are not appointed as awarded for political loyalty. This practice will ensure that qualified candidates are highly motivated to lead their institutions, which can in turn improve the overall quality of higher education in the country (Hoeun et al., 2021).

Third, the top-down management approach and complexity of bureaucracy that are part of the weak institutional and sectoral governance should be called into question. All HEIs should seek to expand their own institutional resources through stakeholder collaboration instead of waiting for the government's funding to create opportunities for improving their quality. MoEYS should also work with other ministries to ensure that higher education governance in Cambodia is not too fragmented to enhance the sector's quality and development. Moving toward a knowledge-based society, academic leaders at the top management level should be held accountable for their lack of effective performance and awarded for bringing success to their institutions. It is also important to address the issues of accountability and transparency in the decision-making process. An internal mechanism should, therefore, be established to supervise this process (Mak et al., 2019).

Fourth, it is important to consider bifurcating universities in Cambodia into research-oriented and teaching-oriented universities (Heng, 2021). Although some Cambodian universities claim that they are research-intensive universities, their research performance may show otherwise. In this regard, MoEYS or any high-level body needs to establish an evaluation framework or mechanism to categorize Cambodian universities or HEIs into different groups. University categorization or bifurcation is crucial to promote institutional capacity building and competition in the sector, particularly among universities that aim to be the country's leading institutions.

Fifth, there is a dire need to address the issue concerning low academic salaries or wages. Although this is a sensitive and difficult issue to overcome, given the current state of socioeconomic development of Cambodia, it is vital that concerned stakeholders, especially MoEYS, begin to take this issue seriously. MoEYS can consider remunerating Cambodian academics who have recently attained professorial titles and who remain active in contributing to their field via excellence in leadership, teaching, and/or research by providing them with incentives in the form of monthly salaries or bonuses. This practice will contribute to easing the financial burden that many Cambodian academics face while encouraging them to try to excel in their respective fields of expertise. Thus, there is a need to introduce reform to the incentive system and salary structure in Cambodian higher education (Heng, 2021).

Finally, it is important to promote CPD among Cambodian university teachers in order to enhance their teaching and research knowledge and skills. As Deour and Heng (2023) noted, there are many challenges to the effective provision of CPD in the Cambodian higher education context; however, there are possible solutions to it. Deour and Heng also argued that a clear plan for CPD and flexibility for university teachers to attend CPD sessions should be in place. In addition, CPD engagement should be linked with career development; that is, those who are committed to professional development should be given "opportunities to move up in their career ladder or teaching rates/wages" (Deour & Heng, 2023, p. 3). It was also argued that the planning process for CPD should involve different stakeholders so that their needs and challenges are considered (Deour & Heng, 2023).

Conclusion

This article has discussed key challenges to improving higher education quality in Cambodia. It has also offered recommendations for addressing the challenges. The major challenges discussed include the lack of resources and infrastructure to support effective teaching and learning; the influence of politics on the sector, particularly in terms of appointing university leadership; the impact of weak institutional and sectoral governance; the consequence of higher education privatization; the impact of low academic salaries; and the limited CPD opportunities for university teachers. The recommendations center on addressing these challenges, such as creating a mechanism to improve resources and infrastructure in higher education, ensuring political interference is kept to a minimum, enhancing institutional and sectoral governance, categorizing universities into research-intensive and teaching-intensive universities, introducing reform or improvement to academic salaries or incentive systems, and promoting CPD among university teachers.

In light of the challenges and recommendations, this article suggests that relevant stakeholders in Cambodian higher education, particularly policymakers and decision-makers at both national and institutional levels, need to introduce more higher education projects or initiatives that can bring about greater positive changes to the higher education sector to move it beyond the status quo. Cambodian higher education has rapidly expanded in the last few decades; however, the sector remains fraught with challenges and issues that continue to impede its desirable and sustainable development. While recent efforts to improve the higher education sector should be applauded, there is room for improvement and reform. As Heng (2021, 2023b) argued, there is a need for higher education reform to introduce new developments to the sector. This article concurs with this statement and argues that higher education in Cambodia needs to undergo restructuring or reform in terms of the governance model, incentive systems, salary structure, academic appointments, and university categorization.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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