

Short Article

University and graduate issues in Cambodian higher education

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Abstract

The extent to which higher education plays a role in determining students' professional success remains a largely controversial topic. Despite tremendous efforts from all stakeholders, problems continue to prevail in higher education in many countries, requiring thoughtful and remedial acts so that students can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed for the job market. This article examines some factors posing issues to higher education institutions and graduates in Cambodia. Key issues include limited quality of higher education, skills mismatches leading to work-life conflict at the workplace, the weak relevance of the curriculum, university lecturers' limited teaching competence and availability for student support, and their limited involvement in research and publication activities. The article concludes with brief suggestions to improve the quality of higher education in Cambodia and ensure that students are ready and competent to enter the workforce that matches their qualifications.

Keywords: Higher education; skills mismatches; work-life conflict; university and graduate issues; Cambodia

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Introduction

Cambodia's higher education system was entirely ruined by prolonged civil wars and a genocidal regime, particularly in the 1970s. According to Dahles (2017), foreign bilateral assistance poured into Cambodia, particularly in the field of education in the 1990s and early 2000s. Donor countries offered promises to improve access to and quality of basic education after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, which was later followed by the United Nations-led general elections in 1993. Various reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in the mid-1990s unleashed not only private higher education institutions (HEIs) but also overseas stakeholders to compete in the arena, which in turn put the higher education sector in Cambodia into a phase of rapid and largely unregulated expansion (Dahles, 2017). As of August 2022, there are 130 HEIs in Cambodia, of which 82 are private. While these HEIs are under the supervision of 16 different ministries and institutions, MoEYS is in charge of 82 HEIs, with 198,363 students (98,535 females) enrolled in the school year 2020-2021 (MoEYS, 2022). Notwithstanding such an impressive number of HEIs, Cambodia's gross higher education enrollment accounted for only 15% of the overall educational enrollment in 2019, making it one of the lowest among the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (World Bank, 2022). According to Dem (2017), Cambodian HEIs, both public and private, are suffering from chronic problems such as neglect of quality, heavy focus on profits, and curriculum trivialization. Another problem is a lack of incentives for academic staff to push their professional advancement and dedication, making graduates suffer the pain of job dissatisfaction, work-life conflict, and poor employment remuneration.

Within this context, the present article aims to briefly discuss some key factors that are posing issues to Cambodian higher education and graduates. The article concludes with brief suggestions to improve the quality of higher education in Cambodia and ensure Cambodian university students graduate with the necessary knowledge and skills for the job market.

Higher education of limited quality

While HEIs in Cambodia are blossoming at an increasingly rapid rate,

particularly in the capital city, there are issues with poor functionality, ineffective quality control, and inadequate funding, which put the quality of Cambodian higher education in stagnation (Dahles, 2017). Most HEIs in Cambodia are still highly profit-oriented. For example, some Cambodian universities are said to be certificate shops where students can buy one without really working hard for the degree (Dem, 2017). Furthermore, while countries in ASEAN, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, have been developing and competing tremendously to achieve world-class status, Cambodia is seemingly uninfluenced by this global trend (Ros & Sol, 2021). It can also be observed that rules and regulations in some Cambodian universities are not strictly enforced, making it possible for students to cheat by copying the work of others and still get an easy pass. In addition, some universities have low admission requirements, accepting students regardless of their academic records (Dem, 2017; Ros & Sol, 2021). Worst yet, Cambodian higher education is seen as lacking academic and non-academic support services (Im, 2020). The sector is financed at only 0.05 percent of Cambodia's gross domestic product, robbing it away from seeking desirable growth and improvement (Im, 2020). Other contributing factors to the limited quality of Cambodian higher education include limited infrastructure and resources and poor leadership among university leaders (Dem, 2017).

From skills mismatches to work-life conflict

Many students are involved in risks and uncertainties in deciding what to study at university for the course of their life because such investment in academic qualifications is costly and has a direct impact on their future employment and life (Peou, 2017). Cambodia's labor force participation rate, the highest in Southeast Asia, stood at 82.7% of the working population aged 16-64 (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). However, Hoekstra (2019) argued that many young people in Cambodia found it hard to get occupations for which they were qualified. For instance, as Hoekstra noted, a 27-year-old man with a banking and finance degree was frustrated by a lack of employment opportunities. He hoped to work in a bank or a micro-finance institution. Instead, he was employed at a petrol station as a pump attendant and worked himself up to become the manager of the station. Only about 30% of his former classmates managed to get jobs matching their qualifications and skills (Hoekstra, 2019). The mismatches between skills and jobs mean that higher

education and training in Cambodia are not providing the skills needed in the labor market or that the skills of individuals do not correspond to the jobs available in the market (Heng & Sol, 2022; ILO, 2020).

Another issue is the limited number of students enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics majors. As MoEYS (2022) reported, in the school year 2020-2021, student enrollments in science majors accounted for only 5%, information technology 10%, engineering 8%, agriculture 3%, and health 5%, whereas enrollments in social science majors such as business, law, foreign languages, and tourism made up 69% of the total number of bachelor's degree students. Consequently, when jobs are available in a particular field, recruiting organizations tend to lift the qualification of the application by requiring applicants to have job experience, leaving some fresh graduates with fewer opportunities to get a job. At the same time, some are forced to work in a job incompatible with their skills and expectations (Matthews, 2015).

Work-life conflict is a popular concept, reflecting academic and public concerns about the growing tension between work, family, and other aspects of life (Shevchuk et al., 2019). It is argued that skills mismatches would lead to increased work-life conflict because of the psychological stress of being either under or over-skilled for the current job (Shevchuk et al., 2019). Moreover, not only do skills mismatches have a negative influence on work-life well-being, but they also contribute to job dissatisfaction (Shevchuk et al., 2019). When people's jobs match their needs, preferences, and abilities, they are likely to be relatively happy and satisfied with their work and lives. Their workplaces also tend to function smoothly and effectively. Conversely, workers, their families, employers, and society will likely face various difficulties when there is a significant mismatch or lack of fit in the workplace (Kalleberg, 2007).

In the Cambodian context, the relationship between mismatched jobs and work-life conflict has not been studied intensely and widely. However, mismatched jobs still play a vital role in bringing dissatisfaction to workers. According to a survey by Sam (2020), the presence of these mismatches raises questions about their effects on individual working outcomes in the labor market, such as job dissatisfaction. Also, graduates working in a matched job tend to be much more satisfied than those in a mismatched job (Sam, 2020). The survey also found that the graduates were forced into mismatched jobs because

they could not find a suitable job matching their skills and qualifications (Sam, 2020). As a result, the graduates could not fully utilize their skills and abilities in those types of jobs that were more typical or less challenging, thereby making them achieve fewer results.

Weak relevance of the curriculum

Study programs must keep up with the changing times. They need to be responsive to what is currently relevant in the workplace if they are to produce potential graduates (Lee & Janna, 2017). However, local corporations tend to look for certain aptitudes that are not corresponding with what is in the university curriculum. Soft skills such as innovation/creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving are Cambodia's most commonly mentioned skill shortfalls (Matthews, 2015). With very few exceptions, all types of HEIs in Cambodia are conventional, providing traditional face-to-face delivery and are more of a teacher-centered style (Heng & Hang, 2017). Moreover, students are generally taught about theories with little or no discussion or debate in the class (Phy, 2006). As a result, graduates tend to struggle in the face of workplace challenges that require them to translate theories into real practice.

Limited competence and availability among Cambodian lecturers

University lecturers have to be well qualified in their subject matters, without which they would not be able to deliver knowledge and skills effectively to their students. However, not many Cambodian lecturers hold doctoral degrees compared to those in other countries in the region. For example, Malaysia had 23,000 PhDs in 2016, Vietnam had 24,000 PhDs in 2017, while Cambodia had only 1,437 (8.74%) PhD holders among 16,438 lecturers at the higher education level (see Saigonner, 2017; MoEYS, 2022; Wong, 2022). This shortcoming suggests that lecturers in Cambodia are limited in terms of their knowledge and skills to teach and conduct research.

Phy (2016) argued that the management system of Cambodian higher education remains weak due to the lack of resources, funding, and implementation. Most lecturers teach their students using their methods without genuine motivation and commitment to teaching. They would mainly teach the theories without meaningful discussion or debate (Phy, 2006).

Moreover, students' learning quality tends to be affected by their lecturers' time availability for them. In fact, university lecturers need to offer their students adequate time during which students can come and consult them about their academic issues. However, as many lecturers have a second job and have no office hours, they tend to have very limited time for their students. They are busy teaching many classes at different institutions to earn additional income (see Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b; Vann, 2012).

Limited academic research and publication

Research plays an indispensable role in advancing knowledge, stimulating innovation, and driving socioeconomic development; therefore, it is crucial for a developing country like Cambodia (Heng, 2021). According to Chet (2009), Cambodia's higher education research is in need of development. Heng (2021) also argued that lecturers in Cambodia are more inclined toward focusing on part-time jobs and increasing their incomes rather than being involved in research activities (see also Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b). Most Cambodian academics are often referred to as knowledge consumers rather than knowledge producers (Ros et al., 2020). They were not active in research, as evidenced by Eam (2015), who found that about 65% of 444 Cambodian academics surveyed did not conduct any research at all. This lack of research involvement in Cambodian higher education is the result of many challenges, such as a shortage of full-time lecturers and lecturers with doctorates, particularly in private HEIs, inadequate investment in research, and limited knowledge and experience in research and academic publication (see Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b; Heng & Sol, 2021).

Conclusion

Higher education plays a significant role in bridging students to the career path they wish to pursue and equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform effectively in the workplace. However, in Cambodia, the limited quality and the ineffectiveness of HEIs have constrained graduates' potential, leading to many issues such as skills mismatches, work-life conflict, and job dissatisfaction. Therefore, more concerted efforts and involvement from all relevant stakeholders are needed to equip students with the right skills and prepare them for the fast-growing labor market demand. Moreover, the

Cambodian government needs to enforce and strengthen education policies to hold HEIs accountable for the quality of their education provision. Lecturers should be incentivized with better pay so that they do not have to seek part-time jobs or teach extra classes to afford a decent life. At the same time, academic research and publication among Cambodian lecturers should be encouraged and supported so that they can be more efficient and experienced in their own areas of expertise. In addition, in light of the limited relevance of the higher education curriculum, HEIs and the private sector are suggested to work hand in hand to gather all information to make an informed decision about what to include in their study programs.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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