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Original Article

Integrating business and liberal arts within a Cambodian higher education institution: Insights from action research

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Abstract

This study applied a framework previously established in a Cambodian secondary education institution using an action research methodology to develop and deliver an online and face-to-face course in a Cambodian public university during and after COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. The course sought to integrate business and liberal arts through enquiry-based learning to help learners explore the history and development of business through various art movements and social lenses. Findings from focus groups in this action research study suggest that integrated business-liberal arts education can be effective in creating holistic learning but requires Cambodian educators to consider the teaching context and scaffold the learning, particularly for critical thinking and research. Recommendations are made to strengthen the future delivery of this course and other courses delivered in Cambodian higher education.

Keywords: Higher education institution; enquiry-based learning; online learning; liberal arts; business education; Cambodia

Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shaped many aspects of university education within the developing world. This is particularly evident in Cambodia, a developing nation in Southeast Asia that has rebuilt its higher education sector since it was decimated by war from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s (Heng et al., 2023). Despite the progressive restoration of higher education institutions (HEIs), challenges remain in creating an academic environment and delivering quality education (Long et al., 2021), particularly in business management schools (ASEAN Post, 2020) and in the few and often nascent liberal arts programmes. This study designed, delivered, and

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assessed the outcomes of an undergraduate course in a Cambodian university (coded as University) that integrated business and liberal arts using a teaching development and delivery framework previously developed in a Cambodian secondary education institution across two iterations of the course (Polley, 2021). The study provides insights into how liberal arts can complement business studies and help support the development of critical thinking and research skills in undergraduate studies in similar courses in the University (a public university) and other Cambodian universities. The study more broadly contributes to the literature on the convergence of language acquisition, business, and liberal arts education in higher education and strategies to improve tertiary course design.

Literature review

Characteristics and challenges in Cambodian higher education

Despite positive progress against significant challenges, there remain many obstacles for Cambodian HEIs and their students (Heng & Sol, 2023). Cambodian higher education is characterised by its relatively small size compared to ASEAN neighbours (Sok & Bunry, 2021), a notable number of private universities (Williams et al., 2016), students studying simultaneously in multiple institutions (Heng et al., 2023; Peou, 2017), and limited self-directed learning (Heng, 2014). The result has been an influx of graduates into the Cambodian economy (Sok & Bunry, 2021), particularly in business disciplines (Chet et al., 2022a). However, this influx is accompanied by significant quality gaps due to the prevalence of poor-quality qualifications (Ford, 2013). The challenge to provide both a breadth of education and sufficient disciplinary depth requires educators to consider more integrative and interdisciplinary approaches (Williams et al., 2016) that are aligned with the long-term development needs of Cambodia (Chet et al., 2022a).

Unfortunately, Cambodian educators also face limitations that restrict their ability to deliver quality education (Doeur, 2022; Leng et al., 2021). Many educators, particularly domestically educated lecturers without international experience (Leng et al., 2021), apply teacher-centred learning practices with a focus on lecturing discipline content, show little awareness or application of enquiry-based or problem-based learning (Leng et al., 2021), and lack professional development (Doeur & Heng, 2023). Furthermore, low teaching salaries (Ford, 2013) mean many educators have other employment, so they are not 'research active' (Chhaing, 2022; Chhaing & Phon, 2022). Despite efforts like the Foundation Year Program to introduce discussion-based learning to support language development, improve engagement, and increase critical thinking and problem-solving (Leng et al., 2021; Sok, 2021), these initiatives remain poorly understood (Leng et al., 2021). These factors point to a need for a business

programme that integrates higher-order thinking skills with a foundational breadth that allows for broader and ongoing learning in a format that exemplifies 'best-practice' for other Cambodian educators.

Integrating business and liberal arts in Cambodian HEIs

Many HEIs outside of Cambodia have integrated business and liberal arts in their programmes, courses, units, or modules (Magro et al., 2022). The term 'liberal arts' is ambiguous as there is no definitive list of disciplines or subjects within a liberal arts qualification, and HEIs differentiate their qualifications by offering various combinations of disciplines drawn from natural and social sciences, arts, and humanities (Jung et al., 2016). In preparing the present study, the primary author drew inspiration from his involvement in a Bachelor of Applied Arts and Applied Management programme that integrated liberal arts, specifically philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and media studies with business in Aotearoa-New Zealand (McCurdy, 2015). Advocates have argued that liberal arts programmes promote the development of soft skills (Paris, 2007), something lacking in Cambodian university graduates (Yann, 2018), but is noticeably higher among graduates from private universities that incorporate liberal arts education (Leng et al., 2021). Liberal arts education has also been recognised by universities (Koba, 2013; Paris, 2007; Phillips & Hall, 2016) and the industry for developing graduates who excel in areas such as intercultural effectiveness, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, well-being, and leadership (Seifert et al., 2008), to name just a few attributes (Pasquerella, 2019). Like other international HEIs, the University recognised the potential benefits that such a programme could bring to Cambodian students.

Despite these potential benefits, there remain few Cambodian HEIs that integrate liberal arts and business. One notable university to offer such a programme is CamEd Business School, a specialist university focused on accounting and finance with a first-year undergraduate programme that includes courses in leadership, history, political science, and psychology (CamEd Business School, 2023). Another university is the American University of Phnom Penh which also offers a selection of introductory courses in humanities, arts and culture, ethics, world history, psychology, sociology, and geography for first-year undergraduates (American University of Phnom Penh, 2019). While both offer some liberal arts courses, these prestigious, private universities are smaller, more specialised, and have significantly higher fees than the University and other competing universities in Cambodia.

Research methodology

Research design

This study applied an action research methodology as it is best aligned with the course analysis and review process. Action research is characterised by being iterative, data-driven, and collaborative, with a focus on problem-solving, and organisational change (Mertler, 2014). It follows a cycle of planning, action, and review (Carr & Kemmis, 2006). Action research is also characterised by systematically engaging and collaborating with learners before, during, and after the course development and delivery to include their feedback and insights (Goold et al., 2006). Using this process, evidence was collected from Cambodian student volunteers aged between 19 and 23, studying in four classes at a Cambodian public university. These students participated in three focus groups over a period of 12 months in two course iterations. The classes and the composition of the focus groups are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Class composition*

	Class A	**Class B**	**Class C**	**Class D**
Total number of students	31	31	29	20
Male students	12	10	12	5
Female students	19	21	17	15
Number of lecturers	1	1	1	2
Course iteration	1	1	1	2
Course duration	15 weeks	15 weeks	15 weeks	12 weeks

Research context

The University is a reputable public institution located in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Despite an influx of new HEIs in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian tertiary sector remains one of the most underdeveloped in Asia, with less than 15% of secondary students progressing to tertiary education (World Bank, 2018a). Furthermore, as only 24.2% of the Cambodian population live in urban settlements (World Bank, 2018b), many students must relocate to Phnom Penh for face-to-face tertiary education. The travel and social restrictions imposed during COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 created an opportunity to pilot an online course that could reduce barriers to learning for many Cambodians and increase the reach of tertiary education within rural Cambodia.

While business programmes are popular in many Cambodian HEIs, there are mixed results on the quality of this education. Research by the SICA Network (2018) discovered significant deficiencies in quality assurance within Cambodian HEIs, and

the Global Talent Competitiveness Index (Lanvin & Evans, 2018) ranked the quality of Cambodian management schools at 112 out of 119 nations. Contributing reasons include the relatively low government investment in tertiary education, few full-time equivalent researchers, and few scientific and technical journal articles (Heng & Sol, 2023; Lanvin & Evans, 2018). In this sense, applied research that designs, develops, and tests teaching and learning strategies within business schools can contribute to improving the quality of education provided by Cambodian HEIs.

Teaching framework

This study drew from earlier and concurrent experiences teaching Cambodian secondary students which were formalised in a teaching framework that sought to encourage holistic learning and 'constructive alignment' (Polley, 2021). The teaching framework consists of seven categories, including learning context, pedagogy course design, learning design, learning and assessment preparation, teaching and learning, and analysis and review. Table 2 summarises the categories and elements of this framework that were applied in the design and development of this study.

Table 2. *Teaching framework*

Category	**Elements**	**Questions guiding learning design**
Learning context	Vision, values and context	What are the unique characteristics of learners, the institute and the environment? What will be achieved through learning?
	Graduate profile	What are the desired graduate characteristics? What 'common thread' links the institute programmes/units/courses?
Pedagogy	Teaching and learning philosophy	What is the personal teaching philosophy of the educator? Of the institute? Of the culture?
	Institute/curriculum philosophy	What are the best approaches to teaching this curriculum or discipline? How does the institute approach teaching and learning?
Course design	Learning outcomes	What are the holistic, higher-order learning outcomes? How will learning create these outcomes through teaching?
	Essential questions and topics	What are the key topics? What overarching (or essential) questions drive each topic?
Learning design	Teaching tools and activities	What technology platforms will support the learning? What tools and activities will support these lessons?
	Assessment design	What assessments will learners work towards?

Learning and assessment preparation	Lessons	How do we design each lesson to create transformational learning?
	Assessment measures	How do we measure learning in or through each lesson?
Teaching and learning	Lesson delivery	How do we best deliver this lesson?
	Marking	How well did learners demonstrate learning in the assessment(s)?
Analysis and review	Student survey analysis	What do learners report is positive? What needs improvement or requires further consideration?
	Moderation	How do our assessments, grades, and outcomes meet industry and academic expectations?

The following sub-sections analyse each category and how these were considered within the course design and their relevance in this study.

Learning context

The University offered various undergraduate and postgraduate business qualifications centred on international business, entrepreneurship, and management. Courses were taught in English by international and local professors with a preference towards experiential and action-oriented learning. There was no guiding institute or faculty-level graduate profile, but pre-course student interviews indicated that learners expected their degree to explore the history and cultural diversity of international business to prepare them for future leadership roles in Cambodian businesses. Content and learning approaches were adapted as learner expectations became clearer throughout the course.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an important factor in this study as it led to Cambodian institutions transitioning to online learning and negatively impacted learning achievement (Chea et al., 2022b; Vojvoda & Meas, 2022). This shaped the learning context as the first course iteration was delivered online and the second iteration was delivered with both online and face-to-face instruction. As COVID-19 disrupted the University's delivery schedule, the second course iteration was also shortened from a 15 to a 12-week duration.

Pedagogy

The pedagogy (i.e., methods and practices of teaching and learning) sought to integrate liberal arts and business by exploring the history and development of business since the Reformation through the Renaissance to Postmodern art movements. Linking historic events to art movements allowed learners to anchor key

business events, ideas, and principles to a period and understand the social context. As the pedagogy evolved and more learner feedback was collected, topics were changed to emphasise business concepts like accounting, banking, companies, stock and bond markets, and insurance, to name a few.

The course was designed around enquiry-based (or inquiry-based) learning, as it allowed learners to shape their own learning journey. Enquiry-based research is a student-centred pedagogy that encourages learners to craft and answer research questions (Dostál, 2015; inquirED, 2020) and choose perspectives aligned with their backgrounds, circumstances, or beliefs. Banchi and Bell (2008) defined four levels of enquiry-based learning, including Confirmation Inquiry (research with a given question, procedure, and solution), Structured Inquiry (research with a given question and procedure), Guided Inquiry (research with a given question), and Open Inquiry (independent research). Guided Inquiry (level three of the four) could best describe how learners were provided with a guiding research question and encouraged to undertake independent research. Learners presented research findings through weekly presentations, class discussions, and debates – an approach that encouraged them to co-construct meaning. This approach reflected our beliefs that effective learning is socially constructed within collaborative, inclusive, and discussive relationships between learners and in the facilitator-learner relationship.

Course design

Each module in the course followed an art movement and was developed around social 'lenses' based on liberal arts disciplines (Jung et al., 2016). These lenses included philosophy, social movements and structures, history, science and technology, economics, and religion/theology. Research questions were based on each lens and assigned to groups of learners who would share their findings with the class through weekly presentations. Each lens had assigned groups of students who were rotated each class to a new lens so learners explored multiple liberal arts perspectives across the development of business.

Learning design

Each module sought to incorporate tools, activities, and feedback mechanisms that were believed to help facilitate a learning community. Modules were hosted in a Learning Management System (LMS) that included introductory videos, video teleconferencing software, an online interaction app, online forms, emails, and a shared forum for online discussions. To improve online engagement, an app was initially used to encourage engagement through quizzes, discussions, voting,

questions, and feedback. Open questions and anonymous feedback were used in the app to encourage engagement and promote a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Learning and assessment preparation

Assessments were designed to scaffold learning so learners progressively developed research and critical thinking skills through class discussions and debates in areas of personal and business interests. As learners were communicating in English as a second language, assessments were designed so learners could demonstrate critical thinking in a format that best suited their English communication ability. After consulting with learners, we decided to use weekly presentations and a final written report as they promoted learner interaction and group work using various reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. This approach drew on aspects of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Savignon, 2008) to help strengthen English communication without becoming an 'English language' course.

Group-based learning and feedback were introduced with the intent to improve student learning. Yu and Li (2014) found that learners demonstrated higher achievement and reported higher engagement levels through group-based learning. Furthermore, the use of group-based learning and class discussions reduced teacher talk time by encouraging learners to engage more deeply with the ideas and provide feedback to their peers, a strategy consistent with the principles of CLT (Swan, 1985) and what was believed to improve teaching effectiveness (Hattie, 2012). To further strengthen learning, formal feedback with references to assessment rubrics was provided for each group in each assessment.

Teaching and learning

The teaching and learning approach aimed to encourage self-directed and self-paced learning. All course content was uploaded to Google Classroom prior to the course, with learners being expected to explore the content before class so they could engage in class discussions. Each lesson had the lecturer introduce the topic, expand on student presentations, and conclude the class by introducing the following weekly topic. Forums in the LMS, social media, and emails were used to communicate with learners during the weeks and provide any required guidance.

Analysis and review

The study sought to strengthen the University's quality processes by liaising with previously appointed class monitors and by introducing optional surveys of each lesson to collect student feedback. These survey results were visualised on a class dashboard and discussed with class monitors in weekly meetings. Updates made

based on these recommendations were shared with learners at the beginning of each class. These initiatives were further supported by informal moderation by the University's Dean of International College and several lecturers. External moderation had not been completed at the time of writing this report.

Data analysis

Evidence collection in this study included informal interviews with class monitors and student volunteers during the course delivery period and from weekly and final class surveys. These insights informed and framed the questions in the semi-structured focus groups. Evidence from these focus groups was analysed to identify key themes related to the teaching framework. Excerpts from these focus groups are shared in the following sections. The higher participation rate in the focus groups 2 and 3 during the second iteration reflects that the focus groups were held immediately after class while the first focus group was held on a weekend (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Information about the focus groups*

	Focus group 1	**Focus group 2**	**Focus group 3**
Iteration	1	2	2
Number of participants	5	6	7
Number of females	3	5	4
Number of males	2	1	3
Aliases of participants quoted in this study	Henry Richard Valerie Leila	Sandra Christine Davina	Claire Cindy Victor

The data analysis process was informed by grounded theory principles. The seven categories – learning context, pedagogy, course design, learning design, learning and assessment, teaching and learning, and analysis and review – were informed by the teaching framework adapted from Polley (2022). New codes within the categories were created through a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) based on the prevalence and recurrence of emergent themes within focus groups and across focus groups. These themes then guided the study results, analysis, and recommendations. This research followed the general principles of research ethics in the social sciences and met the Cambodian research ethics guidelines (Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2022) while encouraging learner participation in the research process.

Findings

Findings are presented against the teaching framework processes in a reverse order to discuss course results first and the broader implications for teaching and learning in the University and other universities in Cambodia. We differentiate in this section between unnamed learners (those in the course) and the research participants (those in the focus groups), with dates on when the focus groups were conducted.

Analysis and review

The class monitors believed monitor meetings were efficient and effective in addressing student concerns as they helped consolidate feedback, discuss issues, and resolve real or perceived problems. These meetings resulted in increased content on academic writing, plagiarism, and research – efforts that may have improved learners' overall grades. The meetings also resolved concerns about software platforms, assessments, and resources. Class monitors believed these meetings improved the learning experience and should be implemented in other courses in their programme. As Leila concluded:

> [Future meetings should] just [include the] class monitors discussion and trying to find a solution to that problem… I would rather have a meeting [than use student surveys], like you did with [the class monitor meetings with] us. (24 December 2021)

Feedback on the survey efficacy was mixed. Survey feedback generally correlated with feedback collected informally through the class monitors and appeared to reflect overall learning trends and learner sentiments. One notable exception was feedback on learner disengagement in the first iteration which emerged in the focus group but not in the surveys. As Leila reflected, some class monitors believed module surveys were largely ineffective as they were not widely utilised by learners and generated fewer insights than class monitor meetings. As a result, the later iteration emphasised class monitor discussions.

Teaching and learning

The learners and participants noted how lessons and learning resources were easy to follow, insightful (particularly in relation to art movements) and scaffolded learners towards later topics and assessments. As Henry shared:

> I enjoyed this course. Our other classes were harder to catch up and learn, but [the facilitator] made this class easy to follow and [it was] easy to do my own research and put in my own work. (24 December 2021)

Many participants believed the formal and informal communication channels through various social media platforms, the LMS forum, and emails made teachers accessible and reduced the physical barriers imposed by online learning. Communication was subsequently streamlined to Telegram and LMS in the subsequent iteration.

Some participants reported how the acquisition of new concepts and language was a problem as each team explored a unique topic. This meant learners found it difficult to comprehend new terms and concepts that were not explicitly introduced and discussed in the weekly class presentations. As Richard shared:

> There were some words that were hard to pronounce and understand. I encouraged people to do research on these words and try to pronounce them. I think it's not bad, but also not great… Concepts that are difficult to understand, maybe we should note it and then discuss the term in class? (24 December 2021)

The participants in focus group 1 also suggested that a glossary of relevant terms be included to help scaffold comprehension on topics learners did not research. While these initiatives were implemented in the subsequent iteration, learners still found the transition to higher study difficult. Sandra shared that:

> It was challenging for me also as my English is not at that level yet. I can understand it, but I've only studied English in high school… I can't say I understand all the English, but I can manage. (14 September 2022)

While many participants noted difficulty in understanding the level of English, several noted how the English level was "what we should have" (14 September 2022). While further improvements are required to better meet the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, participants cautioned that any initiatives to improve language learning must be aligned to business education as English communication is already taught in a separate class.

Learning and assessment preparation

Participants felt the overall course structure was easy to follow and aligned well with the subject content. Valerie shared:

> I would rate the course almost a five [out of five] because it is informative and has a good structure. I loved how [the facilitator] structured and prepared everything for us and gave us sources and guidelines. (24 December 2021)

Some participants were initially confused and overwhelmed by the assessment process, tertiary-level assessment expectations, and the purpose of assessment marking rubrics. As Leila explained:

> From my perspective, at the beginning of the course it was hard to know what I did wrong [in assessments]. [The facilitator] provided explanations on what I did right and wrong, but it was still confusing until we nearly reached the end of semester. Then I could fully understand it. (24 December 2021)

These challenges were raised in class monitor meetings and led to more class time being allocated to discuss marking rubrics and how to cite references. Participants in focus group 1 recommended that more time be allocated to discuss the assessment process and progressively scale assessment expectations, recommendations that were applied in the second iteration. As Henry shared:

> Starting out, the students need to get familiar with the course and the structure… I found it a bit overwhelming at the start of the course [when there were sound issues with online learning and new approaches to learning]. (24 December 2021)

Despite content and class discussions on referencing, participants were still uncomfortable with referencing as they were new to enquiry-based learning and academic research. Claire, who found this challenging, made the following comment:

> [In other classes] there is no research unless we are specifically told how and what to research. We are normally given everything on the screen. (14 September 2022)

In both iterations, the participants believed that their lack of research and business experience encouraged plagiarism by their classmates, although they had no evidence that this happened. They recommended future courses apply more anti-plagiarism tools and allocate more time to discussing plagiarism, referencing, and academic writing.

Learning design

The participants believed that the LMS was easy to use with a clear structure and helpful resources. Participants also felt that the designated online word processor

functioned well, but participants in focus group 1 were critical of the presentation software as it often meant classmates could accidentally (or intentionally) change other learners' work. As Richard shared:

> The [presentation software had] a bug that allowed people to delete content and other people's pictures. When you tried to go back to the original at a later period, you would find your work had been deleted. It was quite risky… and frustrating. (24 December 2021)

All participants in focus group 1 were critical of the online interaction application which failed to adequately facilitate class engagement. Although most lessons had over 10 polls, many learners did not engage in polls, and those who did had their identities protected through anonymous feedback. This hampered class discussions and debates as opinions could not be 'owned' by the students. As Valerie shared:

> From what I saw on the poll, [some of] the class were not interacting. I encouraged actual interaction with talking, asking, and stuff. I can't say that it's totally the flaw of the course. It's online and we don't have a choice but to do it. (24 December 2021)

Henry also added:

> I would say that if [the polling software is only] anonymous, I don't think you should keep using it. Look for a different way to do polls. You may still do polls but ask students why they picked an answer. (24 December 2021)

Participants in focus group 1 strongly believed that removing anonymity would help learners 'own' their ideas. This was expected to reduce the response rate (though there is no evidence this occurred in the second iteration) but was felt necessary to improve class engagement. As Henry shared:

> [Having learners] commit to what they say through something is a double-edged sword. They will be less comfortable. But that's the only way to promote more effective engagement. With anonymous polls, you never know who has thoughts on this or that. (24 December 2021)

Participant feedback from focus group 1 prompted a transition to new software and strategies to better facilitate discussions and debates on extended topics. This was further strengthened by including a minor assessment requiring learners to write a summary of their group discussions. While this improved engagement, Cindy shared that:

> We are not really focused on the presentation but on putting down the answers [together for submission] after [the] class. This is a challenge as sometimes my brain is not able to pull this together. Sometimes I listen and sometimes I'm distracted. (14 September 2022)

Although it is difficult to directly compare the first and second iterations as these had different learners, the post-COVID-19 face-to-face classes appeared to have higher engagement, and the earlier concerns were adequately addressed.

Course design

The participants and learners believed that the course encouraged them to pursue topics of interest and develop their capacity for self-directed learning and research. As Leila shared:

> [The course] really helped me… understand that an art piece has a lot more meaning to it. It's not just looking at it, but it's about analysing what's going on in that painting. [The course] made me want to do more research. That's really something that I wouldn't [normally] do. (24 December 2021)

Henry also shared:

> [The course] offers a very good insight into different topics from around the world and different periods. Some of them are [directly] related to business… [like] how war shaped the world and how it brought upon a new age and new types of business… It blew me away when I found out about the art movements. It was the opposite of what I thought… [The course had] very good insight and [was] informative! (24 December 2021)

While multiple participants and learners said their capacity for research increased, the cited sources and referencing were generally of poor quality for the undergraduate level. Despite efforts to strengthen these skills in the second iteration, most learners believed research was difficult as it was not emphasised in other courses or during their secondary education.

Feedback in the first iteration on the social lenses was generally positive, with participants in focus group 1 noting how these helped them holistically understand the development of business and how it shaped the modern world. However, several participants and learners questioned the relevance of some lenses. As one learner shared:

> I think [using lenses is a] better way to understand art and design from the period as you can understand what was happening during that period. These events structure everything including art, fashion, culture, economics, etc. The related economic principles are not that hard to understand but I think it can be hard to relate this to economic behaviour. (14 September 2022)

The second iteration revised the structure from nine to six conceptual lenses – an overview, the underpinning philosophy, the historical development, the geopolitical impact, the Cambodian relevance, ethical considerations, and future implications. These changes simplified the design to emphasise business, yet some participants felt that this now had an insufficient focus on art movements. As Christine shared:

> I like seeing how people use art. Arts often has a lot of meanings and it helps me understand the moment and what this means. People get engrossed in art because it has meanings, values, and stories. By looking at art, you learn about the actors and their life stories. Art makes you think about beauty and meaning. (14 September 2022)

Participants in focus groups 2 and 3 believed that future courses should retain this structure and content but include guest presentations or field trips to an art gallery so learners can better understand and analyse art and have more context of the artefacts they encounter when researching business history. While the course successfully integrated arts and business, future courses should consider strategies to strengthen this relationship, possibly by incorporating recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI).

Pedagogy

Many learners in the first iteration felt the online context made learning difficult. Participants in focus group 1 felt this was partly mitigated by group work as this encouraged learner engagement and language learning. However, some learners did not get good teammates and felt that this created inequitable outcomes with their classmates. As Henry shared:

> I wouldn't do [teamwork] again. Maybe that's just me. I'm a bit unlucky! I would prefer working individually. While teams promote cooperation, discussion, and an exchange of ideas… to be on the receiving end [of bad teamwork is not fun]. (24 December 2021)

These participants believed learning and achievement could improve if teams were periodically rotated or changed, so learners met and engaged with more classmates.

The second iteration revised the course design to emphasise individual assessment work and rotate discussion groups. As Victor noted:

> There is not a lot of teamwork [now in this course]. Every [other] course prefers groupwork, so I wanted a course that does assessments individually. [Teamwork] never goes perfectly, there is always something that goes wrong. I prefer self-work because if something goes wrong you can look in the mirror… Otherwise, you point to others. (14 September 2022)

Although the course sought to be inclusive and reduce teacher talk time, participants from focus group 1 felt that the combination of class presentations supported by online polling through the app did not create an engaging learning environment and was a key weakness in the teaching and learning strategy. Valerie shared:

> I would say that [we found some classes disengaging]. We really tried to pay attention. But [since there was so much talking by others], if the talking goes on and on, it would be [hard to focus]. I'm not saying that [is true of] all of us, but I would say it's really easy to get distracted. (24 December 2021)

Valerie then suggested there should be:

> More interactive with the students, asking [discussion] questions or maybe having different polls [we discuss as a class]. (24 December 2021)

Participants from focus group 1 believed that learning could be strengthened by reducing content delivery through minimising the number of social lenses and using break-out rooms to facilitate group discussions on the content. When these recommendations were incorporated into the second iteration, participants in focus group 2 and 3 noted how engaging the course was. Victor highlighted that:

> …In this course, you don't ask the student five times to answer the question. In other courses, the student gives the answer and then [the professor]… repeats it and then they expand on it. It really grinds on me! (14 September 2022)

Several participants from focus groups 2 and 3 also noted how class discussions and debates improved engagement. Victor shared that:

> In my opinion… debates were fun. More debates would be fun. I feel like asking people's opinions or something controversial is fun. (14 September 2022)

While class discussions evidently helped improve engagement, some participants noted how class discussions were difficult if the prepared questions expected learners to integrate or extend on knowledge not covered in learner presentations. Future courses may consider engaging learners in crafting class discussion questions as a strategy to scaffold learners towards creating research questions.

Learning context

Learners and participants generally appreciated how the course integrated business and liberal arts and introduced academic writing, research, and referencing. Participants from focus group 1 recommended future topics be based on business topics rather than art movements, so the connection to international business is clearer. As Richard stated:

> For me, [having business topics rather than art movements as topics] links more into the course and is more relevant to the students as well. (24 December 2021)

These participants also recommended the course name be modified to better reflect the intent to develop international business students. These changes were applied in the second iteration with a more prominent focus given to Cambodian and Asian economics. Davina later shared:

> I learnt a lot about [Asian] markets, the banks, and Asia. Sometimes we [lack information] about the outside world so the course is really new. (14 September 2022)

Several participants noted how these related discussions helped them better connect business to their Cambodian context and understand its importance in Cambodia. This feedback suggests that the course is now better aligned with learner expectations and programme objectives.

Discussion and recommendations

The following section discusses the findings and recommends improvements for related Cambodian courses around three emerging themes – liberal arts and business education, the teaching framework, and pedagogy.

Liberal arts and business education

This study found that learners engaged well with the arts when this was integrated with business. This reflects how liberal arts and business can be complementary in the formation of business knowledge and ethics (Paris, 2007; Leng et al., 2021), even in a dedicated business programme. The participant feedback showed the need for a clear link and perceived relevance between business and arts so students recognise how this can support their study and intended career. This finding supports Knowle's (2015) model of andragogy which argues that adults are most interested and motivated by learning with relevance and immediacy. The suggested use of field trips and guest presentations to reinforce classroom learning and provide a broader exposure to art and culture is also consistent with other pedagogical approaches used within liberal arts education (Leng et al., 2021) and will likely help learners analyse and create better connections between liberal arts and business.

While this study highlighted one initiative to integrate business and liberal arts in a university, it was unclear if there is a feasible market for similar courses in Cambodia, given the relatively low enrolments in liberal arts (Un & Sok, 2018). Cambodian universities could integrate liberal arts approaches to differentiate against other 'business' programmes, but the participant feedback from this study suggests any such initiative must have the benefits marketed to potential learners.

Teaching framework

While the categories of the teaching framework helped frame the course design and delivery, some elements were irrelevant within this context. For example, the University had no 'graduate profile' and there were no applicable Cambodian tertiary standards. As this framework was designed primarily to aid teaching and professional development in new teachers and not as an academic model, similar adaptations are necessary if this framework is to be used more broadly to support teaching and learning in other institutions or contexts.

This study highlights the need for a holistic approach to course design that aligns learning and technology (Farjon et al., 2019). Dissatisfaction with the software app in the first course iteration revealed an incongruence between the technology and the intent to socially construct knowledge through class-based discussions in a community of learners (Croft et al., 2015). This supports earlier findings by Doeur (2021) who noted how education technology in Cambodia often failed to meet teacher and student expectations due to poor implementation and recommended educators develop a learner-centred and curriculum-aligned technology plan. In line with Heng and Doeur (2022), this study recommends that in their post-COVID-19 recovery and

realignment and technology plans, Cambodian HEIs should explore online and blended learning to enhance their offerings.

Future iterations of the framework should also consider classroom dynamics. Research has highlighted the need for online learning to address increased feelings of isolation and disconnection (Croft et al., 2015; Heng & Sol, 2021; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004), and participants and learners reflected this in their preference for more class discussion. Future iterations can encourage more class discussion by co-constructing 'forming' or 'warm-up' activities in the lesson (Smegen & Ben-Horin, 2020) or research questions and class discussions. These strategies further encourage student-centred learning as learners have more autonomy in what they learn and express (Hannafin & Hannafin, 2010).

Various feedback mechanisms strengthened continuous improvement by collecting and analysing learner feedback. Class monitors were an important intermediary for lecturers and students as they provided a way for non-confrontational feedback, an important consideration when teaching within Khmer culture (Selvarajah et al., 2013). Focus groups also helped shape the course design by providing valuable feedback and suggestions during and after the course deployment. While the informal surveys provided some insights, these could be strengthened by applying design-focused evaluation techniques to assess constructive alignment more effectively by evaluating course inputs and outputs (Smith, 2008), such as activities and assessments; this would ensure that future focus groups can be better framed.

Overall, there are several potential future directions for this framework. As previously noted (see Polley, 2021), the framework could be used to aid or guide professional development if adapted to the teaching and learning context of an institution and its programmes. Alternatively, this framework could be adapted to be a tool that educators can use to articulate and plan a holistic approach to teaching and learning.

Pedagogy

Delivering this course exposed some limitations in the initial course design and in preparing learners for university-level study. Areas for improvement identified by this study included academic writing, the research process, how to do citations and references, and how to use academic tools and rubrics. While English language and academic writing courses are offered in the Cambodian higher education sector (Keuk & Tith, 2013), this study reflects how aspects of Cambodian secondary education do not adequately prepare learners for research or communicating through English in their tertiary studies (Ngin, 2018). This may be further impacted by the education

disparity between urban and rural learners who often have lower education levels (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018). As a strategy to strengthen these skills, the University could adopt tools to combat plagiarism and support learners with academic integrity and referencing training.

Previous research has highlighted an increasing need for English in Cambodia (Seng, 2015), but developing these skills within the classroom is challenging as teaching is often focused on a discipline and not language learning. While the use of aspects of CLT through discussions and debates appeared to improve engagement and speaking and listening skills, there is no evidence that it encouraged grammar learning. This finding is consistent with earlier research (Chen, 2022) which noted how CLT could encourage grammatical gaps in language learning by prioritising 'function' over 'structure'. Unfortunately, there is insufficient evidence in this study to draw conclusions about English-language development from both course iterations.

It was clear from the learner and participant evidence that online learning is difficult and is likely to be challenging for learners if used in future programmes and/or courses. This is also reflected in other studies showing that learning and well-being have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Cifuentes-Faura et al., 2021), including in other Cambodian universities (Chet et al., 2022b). Other studies suggest that learner engagement may be affected by their previous years of online education in high school, caused by COVID-19 disruptions (Chea et al., 2022). This research supports previous studies showing that educators can improve online engagement by using groupwork (Umar & Ko, 2022) and breakout rooms (Bamidele, 2021). While these findings have limited value for future course iterations as the University intends to use face-to-face delivery, they reinforce how challenging online engagement can be in tertiary education.

Using enquiry-based learning demonstrated some pedagogical benefits. Consistent with other findings, learners believed that enquiry-based learning could improve their research skills (Spronken-Smith, 2012), although the present study could not quantify this development. The relative absence of critical thinking and enquiry-based learning in Cambodian high schools (Sok, 2021) means many learners join the course with a limited conceptual understanding of research and how to think critically, an issue noted in other studies also applying enquiry-based learning (O'Connor et al., 2016). Reducing the content scope by revising the social lenses gave more class time for exploring and scaffolding research concepts within the course, but this must be supported by a holistic approach at the programme level to teaching academic research to first-year students.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The course reported in this study was designed and delivered in an undergraduate programme in Cambodia over two iterations and reflects a 'snapshot' of the course during this period. While this provides some insights, the unique context of the University limits the applicability of the recommendations to other HEIs. Furthermore, given that advocates of qualitative research suggest a minimum of 20 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017) who would ideally be from one iteration, the study is limited in its generalisability for other contexts.

An important area for further research that emerged in this study is integrating English-language communication into individual lessons. Further iterations could consider how to integrate English-language learning strategies and measure their impact on Cambodian business education. Such strategies may include having clear target language terms for each class to help define concepts and build vocabulary (Savignon, 1997), collaborative writing (Yang, 2014), or other pedagogies such as problem-based learning (Allen & Rooney, 1998), to name a few possibilities. Future courses may also consider how to incorporate authentic assessments that can better prepare and assess English learners.

Conclusion

The development of the higher education sector in Cambodia requires creating and showcasing innovative tertiary courses and approaches, as described in this study. This is particularly important as the COVID-19 pandemic passes and the tertiary sector discovers a new 'normal' that includes online learning and reflections from teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns. The course analysed in this study reflects how the University and other HEIs in Cambodia can create holistic programmes that include business and liberal arts to better prepare learners for a future in international business. Educators can be supported in this approach by using a teaching framework that helps them consider the capacity and challenges of their learners and ensure tools and activities that support teaching and learning.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethics requirements of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Information in this study remained confidential and was restricted to the research team. To protect the participants' identity, names in this article are pseudonyms. All participants in this study were volunteers and did not receive payments or benefits for their contribution to this research.

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