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Review Article

Improving the quality of Cambodian higher education: Key challenges and suggestions

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Abstract

Higher education is one of the main drivers of economic development. Due to its significant roles, many countries, including Cambodia, have invested in developing their higher education subsector. For over two decades since 1997, Cambodia has experienced a high increase in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs). Despite the rapid institutional expansion, there are many issues impeding the quality of Cambodian higher education. Drawing on secondary sources and the authors' extensive experience and knowledge of the subsector, this article tries to investigate and explain some of the factors affecting the quality of higher education in Cambodia. The article focuses on several issues, including political interference, fragmented governance structures, ineffective ministerial policy implementation, fragmented institutional management, limited quality of teaching personnel, low academic salaries, business-oriented higher education, and issues concerning curriculum and academic programs. The article offers some suggestions to address these challenges. Key suggestions include (a) limiting political interference in appointing top university leaders, (b) setting up effective and independent higher education quality assurance bodies, (c) creating a term limit for top university leadership roles, (d) establishing a meritocracy-based policy for university leader appointments, (e) making academic salaries comparable to those of other similar professions, (f) developing policies on minimum tuition fees and student loan programs, and (g) introducing mechanisms to improve curricula and promote enrollments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Higher education; higher education quality; challenges, suggestions; Cambodia

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Introduction

The foundation of a nation-state is its education. Any nation can build the human capital necessary to support socioeconomic growth and national development with a great education system (Heng, 2023a; Ozturk, 2003; Sam, 2016). In the case of Japan, it is the quality education system that has brought this country to the world's highest stage (Ninomiya et al., 2009; Stockwin, 2003). Likewise, the higher education system in Taiwan has had significant effects on its economic development (Lin, 2004). To sustain the economic expansion, higher education institutions (HEIs) have to provide strongly matched skills and qualified academic programs to their students to help them have good career prospects, which contribute to national and socioeconomic development (Ford, 2006; MoEYS, 2014b; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Slattery, 2012; Un & Sok, 2022). Quality HEIs can offer specialized knowledge, traditional disciplines, and a variety of skills for industrial needs, increase student productivity and creativity, and foster entrepreneurship and technological advancements to promote the socioeconomic development of modern society (Cortese, 2003; UNESCO, 2009; Welch, 2011). As Heng (2023a) argued, "universities are the key engine of knowledge production and dissemination" to create a knowledge-based society (p. 5).

To transform itself into a knowledge-based society and sustain its economic growth, Cambodia has paid considerable attention to its higher education subsector with the expectation to bring about a quality labor force needed to drive socioeconomic growth (Hangchuon, 2018; Heng, 2023a). This has made the role of higher education vital to national development (MoEYS, 2014b; Heng, 2023a). In 1997, Cambodia had only nine HEIs, one of which was a private HEI (Un & Sok, 2018); however, since the introduction of a higher education policy or reform that promoted private participation for economic growth in the late 1990s, the number of HEIs in Cambodia has dramatically increased, especially from the mid-2000 onwards (Hangchuon, 2018; MoEYS, 2014b). In 2011, for example, the number of HEIs rose to 101, of which 39 were public and 62 were private HEIs (MoEYS, 2013). Ten years later, the number of HEIs in Cambodia jumped to 128 HEIs, 80 of which were privately run (MoEYS, 2021b). At present, there are 132 HEIs (48 public and 84 private) in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2023a).

The drastic rise of the number of HEIs in Cambodia has made higher education more accessible to high school graduates, increasing the number of enrollment rates. For example, in the 1997-1998 academic year, there were 8,902 students registered in

Cambodian higher education, and in the academic year 2007-2008, the number of student enrollments increased to 125,947 students (Hangchuon, 2018). In the academic year 2020-2021, the number of higher education enrollment was around 200,000 (Un, 2023), and for the 2021-2022 academic year, the enrollment rate was 209,069 students (MoEYS, 2023a).

Notwithstanding the rapid increase in the number of HEIs and enrollment rates, there are critical issues concerning the quality of Cambodian higher education. According to Ahrens and McNamara (2013), the key issue affecting the quality of higher education in developing nations was the rapid expansion in enrollments while HEIs lacked sufficient facilities, especially in terms of academic staff or skilled teaching personnel. Other researchers, such as Williams et al. (2016), Dahles (2017), Peou (2017), Vann and Ziguras (2017), Un and Sok (2018), and Heng and Sol (2023a) discussed various challenges to Cambodian higher education, such as ineffective management and administration, prevalent skills mismatches, limited quality of academic programs, inadequate textbook supplies, limited research and publication activities, and limited job opportunities for university graduates. Nith (2014), Hangchuon (2018), and Heng and Sol (2022) argued that many Cambodian university students did not have the right skills (technical and soft skills) for the industrial needs, and they tended to lack the ability to fully compete in the labor market.

In terms of physical infrastructure, some Cambodian HEIs have not tried to ensure that their infrastructure (e.g., buildings) could respond to the growing number of students (Un, 2023). According to Ford (2013), some Cambodian HEIs could hardly be called universities, as they lacked the materials, human resources, and infrastructure required to provide a good quality of higher education to students. In addition, many students lacked a good understanding of market needs, not knowing which skills are demanded by their prospective employers, and some chose their majors based on personal preferences or by following their friends or hearsay (Nith, 2014; World Bank, 2012). Thus, many Cambodian graduates are found to be not very qualified for the market demands. This suggests that the quality of higher education in Cambodia is a major concern that requires attention from all concerned stakeholders.

Within this context, this article aims to discuss major barriers to improving the quality of Cambodian higher education. The article contributes to recent literature on the development of Cambodian higher education, such as Eam et al. (2022), McNamara and Hayden (2022), Heng (2023a), Heng and Sol (2023a), Heng et al. (2023b, 2023c), Un and Sok (2018, 2022), and Sok and Bunry (2023). Drawing on secondary sources and the

authors' extensive knowledge and experience of Cambodian higher education, the article offers some suggestions for improving the subsector's quality. Suggestions for future research are also provided at the end of the article.

Key challenges to improving the quality of Cambodian higher education

Political interference

Politics is an influential factor in almost all sectors in Cambodia, especially in the public sector. As Eng (2014) stated, political decisions play a powerful role in deciding who gets what, when, and how. Many Cambodian HEIs have clearly been seen to get involved in politics (Heng et al., 2023c; Sok & Bunry, 2021). To illustrate, for every graduation ceremony, top leaders of the country or those with similar positions are usually invited to preside over graduation ceremonies at both public and private HEIs. More noticeably, politicians, especially those aging political elites from the ruling party, have exerted political influence on HEIs by appointing some top leaders at public HEIs, such as board members, rectors, vice rectors, deans, or vice deans (Doeur, 2022a). To be selected for these positions, public educational staff must have been loyal to the ruling party, making serving political affairs of the ruling party somehow mandatory for almost all educational staff, especially those in top positions. Based on our experience, a huge number of public educational staff have become local party activists, and they are often obliged to help strengthen the ruling party's political affairs in local communities, such as disseminating or spreading the political ideas and achievements to convince local communities to vote for the ruling party, recruiting party grassroots membership and newly registered students at HEIs, attending monthly political meetings, or joining any political campaigns at local or community levels.

The political interference in higher education has had repercussions on the subsector. For example, based on anecdotal evidence, some educational staff are seen to be busy with local political affairs, especially when it is the period of national elections, making them have less time for doing their main educational tasks, such as improving the quality of education and promoting institutional research and innovation. We have seen some top management of public HEIs taking important educational tasks for granted because of their strong connections to the ruling party. They tend to take less care of their educational duties, as they seem to not worry much about being fired from their posts. In some cases, the appointments of educational staff to top positions are not based on meritocracy but on political networks or loyalty (Dahles, 2017). Some top leaders of public HEIs, for example, are often appointed to high positions due to their political faithfulness,

not based on their actual capacity or performance in educational affairs, particularly the ability to manage, design pedagogy, upskill faculty members, modernize curriculum, or improve academic disciplines for better education quality (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). Some university administrators are found to lack the necessary knowledge, academic skills, and leadership skills for their positions (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). In addition, despite their strong academic skills, research experience, and leadership skills, some of them tend to have less chance to be promoted into the leadership roles or are left to languish in marginal and less lucrative roles if they have no or less political services to the ruling party (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). Thus, political interference has undesirably impacted the quality of administrative and academic affairs in many HEIs, which has in turn affected the quality of higher education in Cambodia (Dahles, 2017; Doeur, 2022a; Ford, 2013).

Fragmented governance structures

Table 1. *Ministries or state institutions supervising Cambodian HEIs*

No	Ministries or institutions	HEIs		Total
		Public	Private	
1	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport	13	71	84
2	Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training	12	13	25
3	Ministry of National Defense	5	0	5
4	Ministry of Cults and Religions	3	0	3
5	Ministry of Agriculture, Forest and Fisheries	3	0	3
6	Ministry of Health	2	0	2
7	Ministry of Culture and Arts	1	0	1
8	Ministry of Interior	1	0	1
9	Office of the Council of Ministers	1	0	1
10	Ministry of Public Works and Transport	1	0	1
11	National Bank of Cambodia	1	0	1
12	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation	1	0	1
13	Ministry of Mines and Energy	1	0	1
14	Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication	1	0	1
15	Ministry of Economy and Finance	1	0	1
16	Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction	1	0	1
	Total	**48**	**84**	**132**

Source: MoEYS (2023a)

Higher education in Cambodia is operated under a fragmented multi-governance structure that has impeded the quality of the higher education subsector. This issue is commonly referred to as fragmented higher education governance (Mak et al., 2019). According to MoEYS (2023a), all the 132 Cambodian HEIs are supervised by 16 different ministries and institutions, as shown in Table 1.

Given the quality control by 16 different parental ministries or institutions, Cambodian HEIs do not share common characteristics in terms of quality and operation, creating a serious fragmented governance system within the subsector (Mak et al., 2019). Although the Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE) of MoEYS has the authority to ensure that the necessary requirements are met before a new HEI is allowed to be established, the power of DGHE is limited due to the fragmented, multi-ministry governance structure (Mak et al., 2019). This multi-ministry governance practice is contrary to the policies of other ASEAN nations, such as Malaysia and Thailand, where almost all HEIs come under the supervision of a single ministry (Mak et al., 2019; Un, 2023). Although the rapid development of Cambodian HEIs appears to be in line with national development, some researchers are critical of its impact on the subsector (Ford, 2013; Heng & Sol, 2023a). Likewise, Mak et al. (2019) argued that "higher education institutions have proliferated in the absence of comprehensive policy or well-considered state intervention, and the subsector has been driven by a distorting market system without adequate regulation, supervision, or support to guide the subsector's development to meet national needs and improve Cambodia's regional competitiveness" (p. viii). Mak et al. (2019) also noted that there is little cross-ministerial cooperation and collaboration to ensure the quality education as a whole, while some researchers argued that Cambodia lacked a quality higher education system, limiting the sectoral development, especially the role of higher education in fostering national development (Heng, 2023a; Un, 2023; Vann & Ziguras, 2017).

Ford (2013) and Un (2023) also noted that public HEIs generally had standardized campuses, buildings, and facilities, but a few private HEIs, particularly those that have several campuses in Phnom Penh and in the provinces, lacked standard facilities, such as teaching and learning materials, human resources, and standardized buildings to be referred to as HEIs. In addition, Ford (2013) mentioned that although some universities lacked faculty members with legitimate postgraduate degrees, they had been granted permission to run PhD programs despite the fact that these universities did not have the necessary personnel to teach in the PhD programs. This is a result of the subsector being excessively politicized and multiply controlled, where politically powerful entrenched

interests trump the sensible application of legislation, putting more burden on supervising ministries, especially MoEYS, to set at least a basic standard to oversee all HEIs and ensure that they provide an acceptable minimum educational value (Doeur, 2022a; Mak et al., 2019). As Un and Sok (2018) stated, having more parental ministries to control all HEIs had led to lower higher education quality because they did not provide the same educational value or quality.

Ineffective ministerial policy implementation

Thus far, a number of higher education-related policies (Royal Decrees, Sub-Decrees, Proclamations, or legal or regulatory frameworks) aimed at improving the Cambodian higher education system have been introduced by the Cambodian government and MoEYS. These are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *Policy documents introduced to improve the Cambodian higher education system*

No.	Policy documents	Sources
1	Accreditation of Education Quality in Higher Education	RGC (2003)
2	The Education Law	RGC (2007)
3	Standards for PhD Training Programs	RGC (2010)
4	The Policy on Research Development in the Education Sector	MoEYS (2010)
5	Master Plan for Research Development in the Education Sector 2011-2015	MoEYS (2011)
6	Royal Decree on the Appointment of Professors in the Education Sector	RGC (2013)
7	Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018	MoEYS (2014a)
8	Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030	MoEYS (2014b)
9	Master Plan for Capacity Development in the Education Sector 2014-2018	MoEYS (2015)
10	Higher Education Governance and Finance Policy	MoEYS (2017a)
11	Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond	MoEYS (2017b)
12	Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023	MoEYS (2019a)
13	Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of Professors in the Education Sector	MoEYS (2020)
14	Strategies for Higher Education Subsector 2021-2030	MoEYS (2021a)
15	Strategic Priorities of Reform to the Education, Youth and Sport Sector for 2023-2028	MoEYS (2023b)

Source: Authors

All of these policy documents are introduced to enhance the quality of Cambodian education, particularly the higher education subsector, focusing on leadership and management, personnel development, infrastructure, facilities, regulations, quality of teaching and learning, research and innovation, and quality and standards of academic programs. In addition, all HEIs are required to operate with accountability and transparency to provide students with quality programs that equip them with excellent knowledge, relevant skills, moral values, and other necessary qualifications needed to respond to the needs of socioeconomic development and market demands (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). However, many policies are just in texts, while the policy implementation seems not very successful. Leng (2010), Vann and Ziguras (2017), and Mak et al. (2019) have argued that Cambodia is recognized for creating policies that are quite comprehensive on paper, but their full implementation is constrained, particularly when there is no external financial support. Stakeholders' commitment to implementing all policies is also insufficient (Sok & Bunry, 2021).

There are two possible reasons that could explain the ineffective implementation of high-level policies. First, MoEYS does not seem to have a termination or rotation policy for top university leaders within or across public HEIs. In general, after one has been nominated as a top administrator, a director, or a rector of any public HEI, no matter how well or poorly he/she manages or leads the educational institution, he/she will usually stay in that position for a very long time or until he/she retires. It is very rare to see that one is removed or asked to resign from his or her position or rotated to work at another institution due to low work performance. To some extent, in relation to management and leadership, a lot of freedom and self-control are given to administrators at public HEIs, resulting in low work productivity, rigid bureaucracy, centralized appointments, and unclear performance monitoring and evaluation (Mak et al., 2019). Such practice has led to many issues, such as a lack of well-organized quality assurance structures, a lack of well-trained researchers, limited professional development opportunities, insufficient teaching and learning facilities, trust deficit within the institutions, less participation from faculty members, parents, and/or students, etc. (Welch et al., 2011; Heng, 2023b).

Second, the other root cause of ineffective policy implementation is the appointment of top university administrators without always adhering to strict criteria, particularly in terms of selecting those with high academic excellence, research and publication skills, fluency in at least one major foreign language, leadership experience, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, and other credentials. As Un (2023) stated, some top university administrators were appointed by circumstances, and they tended

to lack career path preparation and the necessary qualifications for the positions. The necessary abilities can occasionally appear inconsequential, and the public university administrators are frequently criticized for lacking the qualifications and abilities necessary for efficient leadership and management (Heng & Sol, 2022). However, having loyalty, services, and inclination to the ruling political party is often seen as more dominant requirements for promotion to a higher position at a public HEI than having strong research skills, leadership skills, academic backgrounds, and ICT skills (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). Thus, the implementation of the policies from the top has faced some challenges, resulting in an issue of ineffective policy implementation in Cambodian higher education.

Fragmented institutional management

Good governance is, in general, a key factor leading to the improvement of higher education quality and success (MoEYS, 2015; Zaman, 2015). To achieve institutional goals, there must be active participation from all faculty members and staff (Un & Sok, 2018). Any decision must be made with full participation from academic and administrative staff, with transparency and accountability rather than being made by a few top university leaders. Brehm (2019) noted that the decision for institutional strategic plans or other activities of public HEIs usually lacked censorship, and the process was generally carried out by a few top leaders, especially those with strong political affiliations with the ruling party. Moreover, there is often no clear division for whom to be responsible for offering professional development for academic staff or allocating resources for the perpetual betterment of educational services (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Dahles (2017) and Bunry and Walker (2022) also stated that some administrators of public HEIs were careless with strengthening the quality of their institutions, as they tended to ignore research when it came to developing academic programs or providing capacity-building for faculty members. In addition, with a lack of uniting governing bodies, universities are not well regulated or under any strict supervision, making the system-level governance fragmented, and such fragmented governance has had a profound impact on the quality of higher education (Mak et al., 2019).

Since the early 2010s, some Cambodian public HEIs have had their own governance board to facilitate their smooth institutional governance (Mak et al., 2019). The board usually comprises 5-11 members led by a chairperson from the ministerial level or a high-ranking government official to provide directions, approve institutional plans and regulations, and monitor and evaluate the institutional development; however, in

practice, the governance boards do not fully perform their tasks. One of the reasons for this is that some board members seem not to fully understand their roles and responsibilities as they are career politicians without clear professional association or strong academic backgrounds (Mak et al., 2019; Un, 2023). Based on the first author's observation, any chairperson who is a career politician seems to care much about his or her political affairs in local communities surrounding the university rather than caring about modernizing the curriculum, linking academic programs with the needs of the local communities, and improving educational quality and services. University administrators and teachers at local levels are also usually obliged to serve in local political affairs in order to secure political victory for the ruling party, leaving educational tasks behind at times. Thus, there is a serious fragmentation in institutional management in Cambodian higher education.

Limited quality of the teaching personnel

Teachers are the key players in assuring student learning outcomes. Their roles are not only to provide students with new knowledge and skills but also to shape their behavior, habits, and values for their whole life (Em et al., 2021; MoEYS, 2015). In this regard, teachers need to be equipped with strong academic disciplines, good characteristics, and high moral values in their professions and competencies as their personal traits can deeply impact students (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006; Gil-Flores, 2017). However, in the Cambodian context, the quality of the teaching staff is still a critical issue that needs attention (Hangchuon, 2018; MoEYS, 2013). Many teaching professionals, both from public and private HEIs, take part-time jobs at other HEIs, making them have less time to prepare for quality teaching and engage in research (Ford, 2013; Hangchuon, 2018; Heng et al., 2023a).

Many teaching staff also lack the necessary qualifications (Un, 2023). According to MoEYS (2023a), for example, among the 16,471 educational staff in Cambodian higher education, only 8.83% are PhD degree holders, while others are bachelor's degree (23.59%) and master's degree holders (67.57%). In addition, the majority of the teaching staff are not involved in research and continuous professional development. Eam (2015) found that 65% of 444 university lecturers from 10 universities who participated in his research had never been involved in research activities as they perceived themselves as teachers, not researchers. Without continuous involvement in professional development, teaching professionals may not improve their teaching careers well enough to provide quality teaching to students (Doeur, 2022b; Tandon & Fukao, 2015).

Low academic salaries

The issue concerning low academic salaries is another reason responsible for limiting the quality development of Cambodian higher education (Heng et al., 2023c; Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Due to low academic salaries, for example, many public lecturers take part-time jobs in private educational institutions or engage in other kinds of work to earn extra incomes; as a result, they have less time for research to improve their teaching capacity or provide meaningful and timely feedback to their students, which negatively affects students' learning outcomes (Hangchuon, 2018; Heng et al., 2023a; Vann & Ziguras, 2017). Heng et al. (2023a) noted that lecturers in public universities in Cambodia generally received a basic salary of around $300 per month or a teaching rate of between $6 and $20 per hour. This low salary forced them "teach as many classes as possible to survive" (p. 332). Moreover, due to the low salary, there is no motivation among many Cambodian university teachers for professional development in order to update their teaching skills and research competencies; as a consequence, it is less likely that they can provide high-quality teaching to their students (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Un (2023) also mentioned that the issue of low academic salaries has led to a high turnover of faculty members who seek other more profitable opportunities in non-governmental organizations or private companies to secure better livelihoods.

Business-oriented higher education

Business-orientation of higher education in Cambodia is a result of the government's policy on higher education privatization introduced in 1997. The policy allowed public HEIs to charge tuition fees and private HEIs to operate (Un & Sok, 2018). This policy has significantly improved higher education access; however, it has somewhat affected the quality of higher education in Cambodia (Heng et al., 2023c). Higher education privatization has also led to a phenomenon of business orientation which sees some HEIs competing with each other to attract more student enrollment by lowering tuition fees (Doeur 2022a; Hangchuon 2018; Ros & Sol, 2021). What is worse, only a few HEIs apply a strict selection test to select potential students for enrollment (Nhem, 2022), and fee-paying students are usually admitted to any academic program for which they register (Dahles, 2017). As Ford (2006) argued, some HEIs accepted unqualified students for the academic programs and did not properly place them at a suitable level. To generate more profit, some private HEIs have even tried to enroll as many students as possible despite their limited capacity (Sam & Dahles, 2017). As a result, students with inappropriate background knowledge of certain academic majors may drop out or change their major halfway through their university studies.

In addition, due to their business orientation, some HEIs hire less qualified teachers and do not have sufficient facilities for teaching and learning. The teaching and learning activities usually focus on the surface knowledge and rely on traditional methods, classroom-based activities, course book-based teaching, memory-based examinations, and limited real practice in the laboratories or fields (Heng, 2021; Long et al., 2021; Sam et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2016). Students from low-income families and those in rural areas or provincial towns usually seek universities that charge low tuition fees or provide partial scholarships with easier and fewer entry requirements (Leng, 2010). Many of them enroll at HEIs and then end up with fewer skills or become semi-skilled undergraduates who are incompatible with the market demands (Bruni et al., 2013; Heng & Sol, 2023b; World Bank, 2012).

Issues concerning curriculum and academic programs

Academic programs are critical to ensure the quality of education. They are to be designed and updated based on the needs of key stakeholders, such as students and teachers, and they should be linked to the evolution of technology, especially industry requirements (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Slattery, 2012). However, some Cambodian HEIs do not pay much attention to developing their curriculum. They simply copy and paste the curriculum from abroad or from other local HEIs (Nith, 2014; Un & Sok, 2018). Therefore, what students learn may not always respond to the job requirements. As an analysis of the situation of higher education indicated, a mismatch between academic programs and the employment markets was prevalent due to the fact that the academic programs are not developed or designed based on the development of technology and the ever-changing job requirements (MoEYS, 2014b). Ford (2013) mentioned that an oversupply of under-skilled graduates occurred in some areas while an undersupply happened in others. In addition, many HEIs across the country offer the same academic majors and compete with one another for students. They do not rely on research to update their own curriculum to link it with the current demands of the industries, generally because of their lack of funds and human resources (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013).

Due to various factors, including a lack of information about market demands and a lack of orientation on choosing academic majors at university, many Cambodian students register for similar programs, such as Accounting, Banking and Finance, Economics, Marketing, and Management, while fewer students are enrolled in other important fields in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Agriculture. According to MoEYS (2022), in the academic year 2020-2021, among 170,247 students

(86,158 females) in bachelor's programs, 42% of them majored in business-related fields, such as Accounting, Economics, Finance, and Management, while other fields had lower enrollment rates; for example, ICT was 10%, Social Science and Arts (9%), Engineering (8%), Health Science (5%), Basic Sciences (5%), and Agriculture (3%). The fields of Foreign Languages, Law, and Tourism also had low enrollment rates, only at 9%, 6%, and 3%, respectively. These statistics are not much different from the two previous academic years, 2017-2018 and 2019-2020, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Percentages of enrollment by fields of studies in three different academic years*

No.	Fields of studies in bachelor's degree programs	Percentages of enrollment by fields		
		2017-2018	2019-2020	2020-2021
1	Business-related fields (Accounting, Banking, Marketing, Management, Finance, Economics, and Marketing)	42%	42%	42%
2	ICT	7 %	9 %	10%
3	Foreign languages	11 %	10%	9%
4	Social Sciences and Arts	10 %	9%	9%
5	Engineering	8 %	8%	8%
6	Law	8 %	7%	6%
7	Health Sciences	4 %	5%	5 %
8	Basic Sciences	5 %	5%	5%
9	Agricultural sciences	3 %	3%	3%
10	Tourism	2 %	2%	3%

Note: Data were taken from MoEYS (2019b, 2021b, 2022). In the academic year 2017-2018, there were 168,242 students (98,630 females) registered in bachelor's degree programs in various fields (MoEYS, 2019b). In the academic year 2019-2020, there were 171,183 students (92,237 females) (MoEYS, 2021b), while in the academic year 2020-2021, there were 170,247 students (86,158 females) (MoEYS, 2022).

By comparing three different academic years, it can be seen that there is almost the same preference in relation to the choice of academic majors in Cambodian higher education. As Table 3 shows, many students enrolled in business-related majors. Therefore, the oversupply of job seekers in the same common majors occurs (Peou, 2017). There is an issue of job seeking when students graduate from university. Many students, for example, have been found to be employed in jobs that do not fit the areas they have studied (Peou, 2017; World Bank, 2012). The reason for the oversupply of graduates with

the same academic majors is also due to the fact that many HEIs in Phnom Penh and in the provinces offer the same academic majors, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. *An example of the same academic majors offered by Cambodian HEIs*

No.	Majors (Bachelor's degrees)	Universities							
		A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**H**
1	General Management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Banking and Finance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Law	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Teaching English as a Foreign Language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	English for Business Communication	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Computer Science	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Hotel and Tourism	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
8	Accounting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
9	Economics		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Marketing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
11	Business Administration				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Civil Engineering	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
13	Networking		✓	✓			✓		
14	Agricultural Sciences		✓	✓				✓	
15	Natural Resource Management			✓	✓			✓	
16	Khmer Literature				✓	✓		✓	
17	Mathematics				✓			✓	
18	Physics				✓				
19	Biology				✓			✓	
20	Electrical Engineering				✓	✓	✓		
21	Public Affairs					✓		✓	

Note: Letters A-H are codes for eight different Cambodian universities (four in Phnom Penh, four in the provinces) randomly selected as examples. For ethical purposes, their names are not revealed. Information about the majors offered was gathered from the websites of the eight universities by the first author.

As can be seen in Table 4, six academic programs are similarly offered by eight different Cambodian HEIs, while another four similar programs are also offered by seven Cambodian HEIs. Some of these 10 majors (1-10) are not very much in line with the market demands (MoEYS, 2019a), while other important skills for the current economic development, such as Health Science, Engineering, Agricultural Sciences, and Electrical

Engineering, are not widely offered. This has resulted in an oversupply of graduates with similar skills and an undersupply of some highly demanded skills (Ford, 2013). This phenomenon is commonly described as skills mismatches (see Heng & Sol, 2023b for a recent discussion of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education).

Suggestions for improving the quality of Cambodian higher education

Limiting political interference in appointing top university leaders

Firstly, to address the issue of political interference, the Cambodian government should not require education staff to be involved in political affairs as the main task of educators is to produce high-quality students for the industrial needs. Instead of focusing on political gains, those with political power should make an effort to strengthen the quality of higher education, for example, by setting up a stringent policy requiring the top management of public HEIs to perform well in their university-related tasks, such as improving education quality, modernizing the curriculum, promoting research and publication, and linking the academic programs with the industrial demands, among others. To sustain the development of Cambodia, it is important to pay attention to the young generation, particularly their academic excellence, technological skills, moral values, leadership skills, and cultural preservation skills, rather than requiring educational staff to serve political parties. To ensure top university leaders work hard to fulfill their educational responsibilities, there should be mechanisms that ensure their satisfactory performance, including termination from the positions, if necessary. By so doing, rectors, directors, and other top leaders will likely do their best to perform their jobs well by providing high-quality education to produce qualified graduates for the evolving industrial needs. As discussed above, being required to serve in political affairs has made some university leaders take their educational duties with less care, which has in turn contributed to limiting quality development in Cambodian higher education.

Setting up effective and independent higher education quality assurance bodies

Secondly, to address the challenges of a fragmented, multi-ministerial governance structure, there should be two overall national coordinating bodies set up with clear jurisdiction, formal mechanisms, and an overarching governance law. One coordinating body is to strictly exercise vigilance on education quality: academic excellence, relevance, necessary skills, research and development, publication, innovation, and leadership and management, while another body is to take control of financial management. Although the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, commonly known as ACC, is overseeing the

quality of Cambodian HEIs, this quality assurance body is lacking in many respects when it comes to ensuring higher education quality (Un & Sok, 2018). The process of creating the two proposed bodies must be carefully crafted with good coordination and cooperation from all HEIs and ministries concerned in order to ensure effectiveness in governance and implementation. If there is no full participation from concerned stakeholders, these national coordinating bodies may not have real power or strong capacity to introduce positive changes to the Cambodian higher education ecosystem.

Creating a term limit for top university leadership roles

Thirdly, to ensure the effective implementation of higher education policies, MoEYS should create a term limit for top university leadership roles in public HEIs. This means that after one or two terms of four or five years, top university or institute leaders, such as rectors or directors, should be rotated, terminated, or re-elected based on their performance. Those who can produce good results, for example, ensuring more qualified graduates with highly paid employment, improving the curriculum in line with market demands, developing the quality of teaching and learning, enhancing professional development among faculty members, and making good progress in research and publication, should be kept in the same position or promoted to a higher one. University leaders with poor or unsatisfactory work performance and who do not make any positive change to their institutions may be demoted or transferred to different, more suitable positions. With this meritocracy-based policy, top university or institute leaders will devote their time and energy to work hard on improving the education quality of their institutions, such as promoting research and publication, identifying and addressing weaknesses and threats, fulfilling students' needs, developing and implementing strategic plans, promoting professional development for the teaching and administrative staff, and modernizing academic programs to link them with the current industrial needs. Robinson (2006) claimed that promoting professional development for faculty members and building the linkages between academic programs and the market demands can strongly and positively impact students' learning outcomes and career prospects. Thus, MoEYS should develop or strengthen existing mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Establishing a meritocracy-based policy for university leader appointments

Fourthly, to deal with fragmented governance at the institutional level, three possible solutions are suggested. The first idea is that the appointment requirements at the

institutional level should not favor political inclination or connections. In this regard, rectors, vice rectors, deans, and heads of departments or offices must be people with strong abilities in educational leadership and management, academic excellence, research and innovation skills, digital literacy, curriculum development skills, knowledge of the regional and global educational trends, high foreign language proficiency, and a strong commitment to making positive changes to their institutions. Another idea is that the nomination of university governance board members should also be based on similar merits, particularly leadership skills and academic excellence. The board members should include representatives of the teaching staff, the industry, the community, the municipal or provincial governor, and MoEYS, all of whom should be knowledgeable of the needs of the students, parents, teachers, administrators, the private sector, and the local communities. The third idea is that the governance board members must understand their roles clearly and take their responsibilities seriously in helping to design strategic and operational plans, as well as monitor and evaluate the work performance of rectors, vice rectors, and deans of faculties on a regular basis in order to ensure the provision of education quality and the advancement of their institutions.

Making academic salaries comparable to those of other similar professions

Fifthly, to deal with the issue concerning the limited quality of teachers and low academic salaries, MoEYS needs to find ways to ensure that salaries for academic staff become comparable to those of other similar professions. Better academic salaries will have at least three benefits. The first benefit is to encourage graduates with qualified attributes to join the teaching profession, particularly in rural or remote areas, where university teacher shortages are prevalent. The second advantage is that it will possibly motivate university teachers to consider reducing their teaching workloads by cutting the number of hours for teaching extra classes or doing other jobs to earn an extra income. This will allow them sufficient time to prepare for teaching or engage in other academic activities such as research and publication. The last benefit is that the teaching staff will have more time for their continuous professional development, an important factor for ensuring teacher quality. As Hangchuon (2018) stated, teacher quality is always equated with quality education as teachers are the most important resources for accelerating good quality learning. Ahrens and McNamara (2013) also mentioned that the teaching capacity of university lecturers is a critical issue to consider as they are the sources of knowledge and core values for the students, and if the sources are of poor quality, they will produce low-quality successors.

Developing policies on minimum tuition fees and student loan programs

Sixthly, to tackle the issue of business-oriented higher education, the government or the parental ministries should strictly exercise vigilance in controlling minimum tuition fees. Some HEIs lower their tuition fees to a minimal level to attract more student enrollment, but they provide poor educational values to their students (Welch et al., 2011). Charging low tuition is a good idea as it enables more high school graduates from rural or remote areas to attend higher education; however, providing younger generations with low-quality education programs can put Cambodia at more unexpected risks. To address this issue, MoEYS should create a policy or a reform in which all HEIs, whether public or private, are required to show their education quality status to the public, for example, showing how much they link their academic programs with the industrial demands. In addition, the government should allocate more funds to support students from low-income families so that they can study at good universities. This can be done through student loan programs. State-sponsored students are then required to pay some money back when they graduate and have a job. By doing so, students from low-income families will have the opportunity to attend HEIs with quality programs. Furthermore, MoEYS should embrace digitalization by developing a unifying website that stores all useful information about all Cambodian HEIs, for example, their quality status, quality ranks, teacher resources, infrastructure, ICT resources, dormitories, libraries, teaching and learning facilities, research and publication, academic programs, and information about the alumni's employment. All information on the website may be checked by an independent body for accuracy and truthfulness. The benefit of this one-stop website is to ensure that the public can access all information about a specific university before they can make a decision for themselves, their family members, or friends. Although MoEYS has recently included important resources on choosing majors in a new website, called Sala (www.sala.co), the dissemination and promotion of this website and other similar resources are needed to reach and benefit a wider audience.

Introducing mechanisms to improve curricula and promote enrollments in STEM majors

Last but not least, the issue concerning curriculum and academic programs could be addressed if the concerned ministries introduce mechanisms or initiatives to improve the curriculum and regulate the number of enrollments in certain fields at both public and private HEIs. To this end, HEIs should be required to make their academic programs more aligned with the industrial needs by continually developing their curricula, not just making copies from others or using the same old programs for years. This can be achieved with strong internal and external quality assurance bodies. Meanwhile, there is a need to

pay more attention and allocate more resources to promote enrollments in STEM-related majors and other important fields to address the issue of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education and respond to the changing needs of the industry. Although MoEYS, through the implementation of its Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP), has made efforts to promote enrollments in STEM, available data still show an undersupply in some important majors, such as Electrical Engineering, Agricultural Sciences, and Health Sciences (MoEYS, 2022).

Conclusion

This article has shown that the Cambodian higher education subsector has made considerable strides in terms of access to education enabled by rapid institutional expansion; however, it has somehow failed to fulfill one of its main duties, that is, producing high-quality graduates for the evolving industrial needs. Several challenges can explain the limited quality of Cambodian higher education. They include political interference, fragmented governance structures, ineffective ministerial policy implementation, fragmented institutional management, limited quality for the teaching personnel, low academic salaries, business-oriented higher education, and issues concerning curriculum and academic programs.

The article has also provided suggestions for addressing the challenges facing Cambodian higher education. The key suggestions center around (a) limiting political interference in appointing top university leaders, (b) establishing top-level coordinating bodies to oversee higher education quality, (c) creating a term limit for top university leadership roles, (d) promoting meritocracy-based academic appointment and promotion, (e) increasing academic salaries to promote the status of the teaching personnel and attract highly qualified graduates to join the teaching professions, (f) developing policies on minimum tuition fees and student loan programs to support students from low-income families to study at good HEIs, and (g) introducing mechanisms or initiatives to improve curricula and promote enrollments in STEM majors.

In light of the challenges and suggestions discussed above, relevant stakeholders in Cambodian higher education need to join hands in order to ensure effective leadership and management of Cambodian HEIs, promote effectiveness in policy development and implementation, enhance professional development, promote research and publication, and ensure that academic programs are able to produce graduates with academic

excellence and the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the demands of the changing labor market and the challenges awaiting them post-graduation.

Moving forward, we call for future research to investigate the impact of political interference in Cambodian higher education to understand the nature and complexity of this critical issue. In addition, research into the effectiveness of a term limit or rotation policy for top university leadership roles should also be carried out to understand how concerned stakeholders perceive it. Future research should also examine how academic research and publication can be promoted in Cambodian higher education to ensure that the subsector can contribute to improving Cambodia's innovation capacity, supporting its vision for a knowledge-based society, and enhancing its knowledge generation capacity to improve its competitiveness in the regional and global stage.

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Conflict of interest

None. The authors would like to declare that the views, findings, and conclusions or recommendations in this article are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views of their affiliations.

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