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Review Article

The implementation of the professorial ranking system in Cambodia: Opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

Cambodia recently implemented an academic ranking system for professorial titles in the education sector under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport through the issuance of two Royal Decrees in 2023 to appoint professors, associate professors, and assistant professors. This article explores the opportunities and potential challenges associated with this new development, outlining the criteria for professorial appointments and discussing the impact on Cambodia's higher education and research landscape. The opportunities arising from the implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship are various, including increased interest in research and publication among Cambodian academics and the development of a performance-based academic system, which provide greater hope and a more positive outlook for the development of academic research in Cambodia. However, this development may lead to potential unethical academic practices, such as a surge in proxy writing and publication in predatory or low-quality journals. The article provides some recommendations to enhance the good practices of the academic ranking system in Cambodian higher education by highlighting the salient criteria for professorship assessment and mechanisms to improve its implementation. It concludes that the implementation of the professorial ranking system is a commendable step towards academic excellence in Cambodia, fostering a culture of meritocracy and providing a well-defined career path for university academics in Cambodia.

Keywords: Academic ranking system; professorial titles; professorship; opportunities; concerns; Cambodia

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Introduction

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has recently implemented its academic ranking system for professorial titles in the education sector under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). This is a new development that has drawn considerable interest within the academic community in Cambodia. In 2013, RGC introduced a Royal Decree on the Appointment of Professorial Titles, commonly referred to as the Royal Decree on Professorship, which outlines evaluation criteria for three professorial titles, such as Professor, Associate Professor, and Assistant Professor (RGC, 2013). In 2023, a decade later, this Royal Decree was implemented by MoEYS with higher education institutions (HEIs) under its supervision (Heng et al., 2023b).

Previously, two ministries, namely the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, have taken steps to implement Sub-Decrees on Professorship in the field of health (RGC, 2010) and in the field of agriculture (RGC, 2011), enabling them to offer professorial titles to academic staff employed in HEIs under their supervision (Un et al., 2017). These HEIs included the University of Health Sciences for the Ministry of Health (see RGC, 2010), and the Royal University of Agriculture and Prek Leap National College of Agriculture for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (see RGC, 2012). MoEYS, which oversees the highest number of HEIs (84 out of 132 HEIs or 63%) in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2023), has just recently implemented the Royal Decree on Professorship.

It is important to note that, in 2020, to encourage the implementation of professorial titles in the education sector, MoEYS issued a Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of Professorial Titles in the Education Sector (MoEYS, 2020) to advise all Cambodian public HEIs under its supervision to prepare and submit applications for requesting professorial titles for their faculty members. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it took an additional three years before the Royal Decree on Professorship was enacted by MoEYS.

In June and July 2023, two Royal Decrees were issued, creating an exciting moment in the academic community in Cambodia because the enactment of the Royal Decree on Professorship had been pending since 2013. Both Royal Decrees were about the appointment of professorial titles to academics or researchers in the education sector in Cambodia. The first Royal Decree, dated June 9, 2023, and signed by the King of the Kingdom of Cambodia, saw a total of 52 Cambodian academics receiving the titles of Professor, Associate Professor, and Assistant Professor (RGC, 2023a). Specifically, there were seven Professors, five Associate Professors, and 40 Assistant Professors.

This first batch of academics receiving professorial titles came from two major public universities, namely the Institute of Technology of Cambodia (a major specialized university focusing on science, technology, and engineering) and the National University of Management (a major comprehensive university focusing on degrees in accounting, business, and management).

In the second Royal Decree, dated July 20, 2023, there were a total of 276 academics receiving professorial titles from the King (RGC, 2023b). Among them, 25 were granted the title of Professor, 53 received the title of Associate Professor, and 198 obtained the title of Assistant Professor. These academics were from seven public Cambodian HEIs, including the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the Royal University of Law and Economics, the Institute of Technology of Cambodia, the National University of Management, Svay Rieng University, Heng Samrin Thbongkhmum University, and Phnom Penh Teacher Education College. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of professorial titles conferred by the two Royal Decrees in 2023.

Table 1. *The number of professorial titles conferred by two Royal Decrees in 2023*

	Royal Decree No. 0623/1128 (June 9, 2023)		**Royal Decree No. 0723/1570 (July 20, 2023)**		**Total**	
	n = 52	%	**n = 276**	%	**n = 328**	%
Professorial Title						
Professor	7	13.5	25	9.1	32	9.8
Associate Professor	5	9.6	53	19.2	58	17.7
Assistant Professor	40	76.9	198	71.7	238	72.5
Sex*						
Female	7	13.4	48	17.3	55	16.7
Male	45	86.5	228	82.6	273	83.2

* The number of female academics receiving professorial titles is based on the authors' estimates, as such information is not available in the two Royal Decrees.

It is worth noting that there was no information about the number of female professors, as such information was not available in both Royal Decrees. However, anyone familiar with Khmer names could make an educated guess regarding the number of female professors included in both Royal Decrees. Our own estimate indicates no female professors or associate professors but around seven female assistant professors in the first Royal Decree, which has a total of 52 academics receiving professorial titles. In the second Royal Decree, out of a total of 276 academics receiving professorial titles, there were probably three female professors, five female

associate professors, and around 40 female assistant professors. Thus, it could be estimated that there are now approximately 55 female academics in the education sector with official professorial titles, equivalent to around 16.7% of the total number of academics (n = 328) receiving official professorial titles in 2023.

To be appointed as Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant Professor in the field of education in Cambodia, academics need to meet specific professorship criteria, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Minimum criteria for professorship in the education sector*

No.	Criteria	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Professor
1	Degree	Holds a PhD degree for at least two years after graduation or holds a master's degree for at least five years after graduation	Holds a PhD degree for at least five years after graduation or holds a master's degree for at least 10 years after graduation	Holds a PhD degree for at least 10 years after graduation
2	Article publication	Publishes at least three articles in national or international journals or publishes at least one recognized textbook in the relevant field	Publishes at least five articles in national or international journals	Publishes at least seven articles in national or international journals
3	Conference presentation	-	Has presented or served as a speaker in national or international conferences for at least five times	Has presented or served as a speaker in national or international conferences for at least seven times
4	Textbook publication	-	Has published at least one recognized textbook in the relevant field	Has published at least two recognized textbooks in the relevant field
5	Teaching and research experience	Has at least five years of experience in teaching and research recognized by the	-	-

		scientific council of the applicant's university		
6	Recognition	-	-	Is a person who is recognized in their own respective field
7	Professional ethics	Has never violated professional codes of conduct or has never been convicted of a crime or misdemeanor	Has never violated professional codes of conduct or has never been convicted of a crime or misdemeanor	Has never violated professional codes of conduct or has never been convicted of a crime or misdemeanor

Source: Adapted from MoEYS (2020)

Note. For the title of Assistant Professor, there are options for article publication (at least three articles) or textbook publication (at least one textbook). The other two titles have the requirements for both article and textbook publication.

As can be seen in Table 2, there are six evaluation criteria that need to be fulfilled if an academic wishes to be appointed Professor, five evaluation criteria to meet for Associate Professor, and four criteria for Assistant Professor. All these criteria must be met to be considered for the professorial appointment. Failing to meet any criteria will result in disqualification, rendering an academic unable to attain any professorial titles. It should be noted that there are no specific requirements for teaching and research experience for the titles of Associate Professor or Professor, and there are no requirements for recognition in the field for Assistant Professor or Associate Professor. In addition, there are no requirements for conference presentations for Assistant Professor and no requirements for publication of research articles for this category of professorship if one has published at least one recognized textbook (see Table 2). These evaluation criteria may have been formulated to make the criteria for each professorial title different, but such differences seem to suggest a lack of consistency in how the minimum criteria for professorship were developed, which in turn suggests the need to consider revising the minimum criteria.

Against this background and considering the unique and exciting nature of the implementation of the academic or professorial ranking system in the Cambodian higher education sector, this article aims to contribute to the discussion concerning this new phenomenon. It also aims to discuss the opportunities associated with the large-scale implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship, which had remained dormant for a decade. The article also intends to bring to light potential challenges or concerns about the implementation of the professorial ranking system in the

Cambodian higher education sector. It concludes with a set of recommendations to enhance the implementation of the academic ranking system in Cambodia in the future.

Opportunities associated with the appointment of professorial titles

No doubt, the implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship by MoEYS has quickly influenced the research and publication landscape in Cambodia. Although empirical data on the impact of this new development is lacking (Tek et al., 2023), based on the authors' observation, experience, and interactions with many university teachers and institutional leaders (rectors, vice rectors, directors, deputy directors, deans, associate deans, research directors, and program coordinators), there is increasing interest in research and publication among faculty members across Cambodian HEIs. There is also a growing intent to increase research publications. HEIs have also become better aware of the roles of scientific journals. Many academics talked about the need to conduct research and publish their findings in peer-reviewed local or international journals and showed more interest in writing academic books to prepare for future rounds of professorial title selection and appointment. Although the implementation of the professorial titles has so far faced some challenges in terms of their assessment and inclusiveness, it is clear that Cambodian academics are anxious about it and are preparing themselves, in one way or another, for a chance to be granted a professorial title by a Royal Decree.

Heng (2020) was among the first researchers to discuss the importance of the introduction of the academic or professorial ranking system in Cambodia after MoEYS issued its proclamation on the appointment of professors in the education sector in 2020. He argued that "there is a new hope for the development of research and publication in Cambodia" (p. 1), brought about by a few notable research-promoting initiatives, particularly the Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of the Professorial Titles issued by MoEYS in August 2020.

Phan (2015) previously stated that the introduction of the professorial ranking system in Cambodia via the Royal Decree in 2013 was one of the most important policies introduced in the higher education sub-sector in Cambodia in the early 2010s. He noted:

> The adoption of [the professor ranking system] is an important step for the quality improvement of the Cambodian higher education sub-sector. It will provide a clear career path that will develop and motivate strong faculty

> members to contribute to the well-being of their institution and the higher education sector. (p. 57)

In a similar vein, Un et al. (2017) argued that "the lack of academic promotion in Cambodia in the last two decades hinders the ability of universities to recruit and retain overseas trained personnel to teach" (p. 46). In addition to discussing in detail the academic promotion policies in Cambodia, they added that "in the Cambodian context, a real academic culture needs to be in place" (p. 68), and the conferment of professorial titles would encourage academics to work industriously and efficiently. Likewise, Heng and Sol (2021) noted that the implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship "is crucial as it promotes a culture of meritocracy and motivates academics to conduct and publish research to meet the requirements of each professorial rank" (p. 14).

Since the issuance of the two Royal Decrees on Professorship in 2023, a few researchers have made an attempt to bring the significance of the appointment of professorial titles in Cambodia into the spotlight. Chet et al. (2023) argued that the implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship is "essential to engender the creativity and innovation required to drive economic growth and social development" (p. 5). They noted that the appointment of professorial titles dated back to medieval Europe and became popular in the 16th century. The term 'professor' is derived from Latin, referring to a "person who professes to be an expert in some art or science; teacher of highest rank" (Harper, n.d.). Thus, a professor simply refers to an expert in a particular field who teaches at a university.

Chin et al. (2023) also discussed the importance of providing professorial titles to academic staff in promoting research in Cambodia. They argued that professorial titles could help to encourage research culture, motivate academics to engage in research, enhance intellectual curiosity, and contribute to knowledge generation. In addition, the provision of professorial titles could promote research productivity and collaboration among academics.

Heng et al. (2023b) also made an observation about the significance of conferring professorial titles in Cambodia. They stated that the appointment of professorial titles in the education sector was a notable achievement that needs to be built upon to promote research and publication in Cambodian higher education and in Cambodia at large. Moreover, the introduction of the professorial ranking system is a major step in building a career pathway for academics in Cambodia. It also provides an important foundation for the development of a meritocratic, performance-based academic system linked with clear incentives (i.e., professor titles) for academics who aspire to become researchers or scientists.

Overall, the implementation of the Royal Decree of Professorship and the Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of Professorial Titles is a notable and positive development in Cambodian higher education, which provides further hope and opportunities for the development of academic research in Cambodia and the building of a vibrant research ecosystem in Cambodian higher education (see Heng, 2020, 2023; Heng et al., 2023). However, from practical and academic points of view, there are also challenges that have arisen from such an exciting and welcoming development.

Challenges associated with the appointment of professorial titles

The hope and opportunities associated with the appointment of professorial titles in the education sector in Cambodia do not come without challenges and concerns. In fact, there are many issues that could arise in the future. Em (2023), for instance, noted that the implementation of the Royal Decree on Professorship could lead to unethical academic practices. For example, some academics may "employ individuals to write books, articles, and other scholarly documents on their behalf" (para. 2). This kind of proxy writing could harm the principles of meritocracy, undermine academic integrity, and promote academic dishonesty, which could in turn damage the value of professorial titles (Em, 2023). The use of artificial intelligence (AI) applications to produce scholarly documents could also be factored in as a concern for academic integrity among researchers who aspire for professor titles.

In a similar vein, Chin et al. (2023) argued that the provision of professorial titles could undermine research integrity in that some academics may "prioritize acquiring titles over conducting rigorous and innovative research" (p. 137). As we have observed, in recent years, there seems to be an increase in publication by some Cambodian researchers in journals of questionable quality. The implementation of the academic raking system will likely lead to an increase in this publication practice.

The lack of a clear link between the appointment of professorial titles and an incentive system may, in one way or another, affect its credibility in the long run. Tek et al. (2023) observed that "it remains uncertain to what extent this professor ranking system will incentivize academic staff to actively participate in research" (p. 12). They argued that Cambodian universities lacked competent researchers to promote university research, as academic careers were not attractive to well-trained Cambodian researchers who had returned from their graduate studies overseas. Thus, there is a need for the establishment and implementation of a clear career pathway and support system for researchers to maintain this momentum.

In addition, the implementation of the professorial titles could lead to a major issue in academic publishing, that is, the rise of publication in predatory journals[1] by Cambodian academics. Although, to the best of our knowledge, there seems to be no research investigating the issue of publication in predatory journals by Cambodian researchers, there appears to be a growing trend among aspiring or new Cambodian researchers to publish in low-quality or predatory journals. This issue has important implications for policy formulation at the national and institutional levels, particularly in introducing or implementing policies on publication to encourage academics to publish in quality peer-reviewed journals.

Another concern worth highlighting is related to the rising number of professors in Cambodia. With the publication requirements for the three categories of professors being relatively low, compared with other country contexts, including those in Southeast Asia such as Vietnam (see Thu Vien Phap Luat, n.d.), more Cambodian academics will be granted professorial titles, making the number higher while the research productivity perhaps continues to remain low, as previous research has indicated (see Barret, 2023; Heng, 2021; Ros & Heng, 2022). With the absence of a quota of professors for each faculty and university, the number of professors appointed may be higher than needed. This concern also has important implications for policymakers and concerned stakeholders in Cambodian higher education, particularly in terms of determining the number of professors for each discipline, faculty, or university.

Another concern lies in the rigor of the process of evaluating applications for professorial titles. Although data on this is not available at the time of writing, anecdotal evidence suggests some issues with the evaluation process. First, guidelines for the types of publications considered for evaluation have not been detailed. Are articles in low-quality or predatory journals counted for the publication requirements? How are the different types of publications with varying levels of quality, such as research reports or conference papers published by local or international institutions, considered for evaluation? These questions need to be addressed in future guidelines on professorship to dispel doubt concerning the rigor of the professorship evaluation process. Second, to be an associate professor, one does not need to hold a PhD degree, as a 10-year-old master's degree is sufficient to meet the degree requirements for the title of Associate Professor. Although this criterion is inclusive as it allows Cambodian academics who do not have a doctorate to apply for the associate professor title, it does not bode well for research development in Cambodia because, as research has shown, academics with a master's degree tend to lack the capacity to be actively involved in research and publication (see Heng et al., 2022, 2023a). This is not to mention the fact that some Cambodian academics with a PhD degree do not engage

in research or simply abandon research upon graduation from their overseas doctoral studies (Heng et al., 2022, 2023a).

On the whole, as it remains to be seen how the implementation of the academic ranking system will impact the development of research in Cambodian higher education and in Cambodia at large, unforeseen issues may arise, requiring attention from policymakers, practitioners, and concerned stakeholders who should work together to mitigate potential problems that may be caused by this new development in the Cambodian higher education context. The next section discusses recommendations concerning these issues.

Recommendations

In light of the opportunities and challenges regarding the appointment of professorial titles in the education sector in Cambodia, there are several recommendations that can be considered to improve the implementation of the professorial ranking system to promote research activities and productivity among Cambodian academics.

First, it is important to ensure that the criteria for professorship evaluation are transparent and objective. To achieve this, in future guidelines for professorship, it is essential to specify the types of publications considered for professorial titles. For example, are working papers or conference papers considered? How about editorials, short articles, policy briefs, or technical reports? There need to be clear guidelines on what types of publications are considered and what are not. In addition, the quality of publications must be considered in the evaluation process. Publications in peer-reviewed international journals or major publishers, for example, need to receive more weight than local publications. Publications in top-ranked journals also need to be considered differently from those in less-known or lower-ranked journals. There should also be a serious discussion on whether or not publications in predatory or very low-quality (non-peer-reviewed) journals are considered for professorship evaluation. In fact, publications in predatory or non-peer-reviewed journals should be discouraged or may even be penalized. To do so, applicants with a distinct number of publications in predatory or non-peer-reviewed journals may be ruled ineligible for professorship for a specific period of time until they demonstrate commitment to quality publications.

Second, the evaluation criteria need to be revised to consider the tripartite roles of universities and academics, such as teaching, research, and service, in a clear and specific manner. At present, the minimum criteria for Associate Professor and Professor neglect teaching and research experiences, while the minimum criteria for

Assistant Professor do not consider conference presentations and service to the community or society. These criteria should be revised to ensure consistency and include the three main roles of academics. In this sense, it may be advisable to give the highest weight to research, followed by teaching and service. In the criteria on research, publication, knowledge generation, discovery or invention, and supervision of research students, particularly master's or doctoral students, should be prioritized. For teaching, various aspects could be considered, such as teaching experiences, teaching excellence or effectiveness, and teaching innovation. As for service, consideration should be given to academics' contributions to their institutions, the academic and broader community, society, and/or the whole world. There should be specific weight given to each of these three major roles of university academics.

Third, the implementation of professorial titles needs to be more inclusive in terms of institutional types. This means that the Cambodian government, through MoEYS, needs to expand the scope of the appointment of professorial titles to include academics in private universities. Two scenarios may be possible to achieve this goal. In the first scenario, MoEYS may advise or encourage all private universities to appoint professorial titles to their academic staff using the same evaluation criteria outlined in the Royal Decree on Professorship and the Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of Professors in the Education Sector (MoEYS, 2020). In the second scenario, private universities may develop their own evaluation criteria for professorship to appoint their deserving academic staff professorial titles. However, in both scenarios, the evaluation criteria and/or the evaluation outcomes need to be subject to review and/or approval by MoEYS to ensure quality, transparency, and integrity. Later on, when the professorial ranking system becomes the norm in Cambodian higher education, Cambodian universities can be given full autonomy for the appointment of professorial titles for their deserving academic staff.

Fourth, it is essential to ensure flexibility in how the selection and appointment of professorial titles are implemented. This means that if the criteria for appointing professorial titles are considered to be too high or too low, there should be a possibility to revise them and make them more appropriate for the Cambodian context or more reflective of evolving academic norms and societal needs, including those in the region and beyond. At present, the publication requirements for professorship appear to be relatively low, considering the evolving publication landscape in Cambodia. For example, some university teachers could publish a few textbooks per year with local publishers, while others could publish many research articles in peer-reviewed journals. This is not to mention publications in predatory or low-quality journals, which can be achieved within a short period of time. Thus, it may not be difficult for some Cambodian academics to meet the publication requirements for professorship,

which have yet to clearly consider the quality of publications. In this case, a revision to the criteria for professorship should be made, with a focus on both the quality and quantity of publications. To this end, publications indexed in Scopus or Web of Science, or at least those indexed in the ASEAN Citation Index, may be considered as one of the criteria for publication requirements. In a similar fashion, a new publication requirement may be needed for the title of Associate Professor to ensure that one needs to have at least a PhD or a good research profile to be appointed as Associate Professor. For example, the new requirement could state that an academic must hold a PhD to be eligible to apply for Associate Professor, or in the case of a master's degree holder, he or she must demonstrate excellence in research and publication or other areas such as teaching or service.

Fifth, it is paramount to take into serious account the ethical standards and integrity of an academic in the selection and appointment process for professorship. Although one of the evaluation criteria for professorship focuses on professional ethics (i.e., never having committed a misdemeanor or a crime), greater attention should be paid to the various aspects of professional ethics. For example, academics who have violated ethical standards or academic integrity should be banned from applying for professorship for a certain amount of time or, in serious cases, should be denied consideration for professorial titles. Possible violations of academic integrity include plagiarism, fabrication or falsification of data, academic dishonesty (i.e., cheating or unethical authorship practices), abuse of power, and violations of research ethics or intellectual property rights (University of Cambridge, 2023). To avoid conflict of interest in the evaluation process, an independent body comprising independent evaluators should be established to assess applicants against the criteria for professional ethics.

Finally, it is crucial to raise public awareness of the importance of professorship and its role in promoting a culture of excellence in research, teaching, and service. At the same time, it is vital to ensure that professorial titles are prestigious, valuable, and well-respected in the academic community and beyond. To achieve this goal, the selection and appointment process for professorship needs to be based on transparent and rigorous criteria, merits, teaching and research excellence, commitment and contribution to the academic community and broader society, and alignment with international best practices. If there exists an easy pathway to professorial titles, the value of the titles will be undermined, jeopardizing the true intention of the implementation of the professorial ranking system in Cambodia.

Conclusion

The implementation of the professorial ranking system in Cambodia signifies a significant milestone that merits attention and praise, albeit not without concerns and challenges. This new development not only serves as a catalyst for elevating academic excellence within the country but also fosters a culture of meritocracy, where faculty members are recognized and rewarded based on their contributions to research, teaching, and service. In addition, the professorial ranking system will serve as an important source of motivation for Cambodian academics to strive for excellence in their respective fields of expertise. Irrespective of the concerns associated with it, the academic ranking system will also provide a well-defined pathway for career advancement and recognition, at least in the public sector, which contributes to building a healthy research ecosystem in Cambodia. Moreover, the introduction of the professorial ranking system will place Cambodia on par with the international academic community, in which professorial titles are the norm for academic excellence. With this alignment with international practices, there will be greater opportunities for collaboration and partnerships, enabling Cambodian universities and academics to stay relevant and competitive on the regional and global stage.

Notes

1. According to Jeffrey Beall, there are various criteria for determining predatory journals or publishers. These criteria range from a lack of information about the identity or qualification of the journal editor(s), questionable business management styles, a lack of integrity in journal operations, and poor journal standards or practices. More information about these criteria can be accessed via https://beallslist.net/how-to-recognize-predatory-journals/.

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The authors would like to declare that they have recently been involved in the process of professorship evaluation. The second author has particularly been a core member of the committee developing the Proclamation on the Selection and Appointment of Professorial Titles in the Education Sector. Despite this engagement, the views,

findings, and conclusions or recommendations in this article are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views or decisions of their affiliations.

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