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Cambodia and Australia's policies on higher education: Can they meet the needs of future generations?

Kimkong Heng
The University of Queensland
Brisbane, Australia

Introduction

Higher education plays a crucial role in ensuring economic and social development and developing a knowledge-based society. To improve quality in tertiary education, both Cambodian and Australian governments through their responsible education departments and ministries have formulated different policies on higher education. This article focuses on Cambodia's Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 and Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011, and it examines how these policies can meet the needs of future generations of the two respective countries.

Through various educational policies, both Cambodia and Australia have tried to enhance their own higher education systems to ensure that younger generations are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to work and live in a globalized world. Their common goals appear to be in line with at least two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations, that is, SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (United Nations, n.d.). The term sustainable development is commonly defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 54). This is a broad definition, so for the purposes of this article, the definition of sustainable development that encompasses educational, social, and economic dimensions is adopted.

Considering the extent to which these specific higher education policies fulfill the educational, social, and economic needs of future generations of these two

countries, this article argues that the Cambodian policy has thus far achieved some success, while its Australian counterpart has almost fully realized its goals. In what follows, this article will first discuss and evaluate both higher education policies independently, focusing on their success and limitations and how they facilitate quality education and sustainable development. It will then discuss lessons that can be learned from the success of the Australian policy before offering recommendations for improving the implementation of both policies, particularly the Cambodian one.

Cambodia's Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030

The Cambodian Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 was introduced in 2014 by Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to develop a system of good governance and mechanisms to build a quality higher education system which can transform Cambodia into a knowledge-based society (MoEYS, 2014). Four objectives which are fundamental to this policy include: (a) ensuring all students have the opportunity to pursue higher education; (b) improving curricula in higher education; (c) enhancing quality of learning, teaching and research; (d) and improving the quality of management and performance of higher education institutions (MoEYS, 2014). Based on these objectives, the policy is certainly connected to the concept of sustainable development, specifically two of the UN's 17 SDGs, namely SDGs 4 and 8.

It may seem impossible to assess the outcome of this policy, as it is envisaged that implementation continues until 2030. However, a number of reports and research studies focusing on higher education in Cambodia have suggested some success of the policy in achieving its objectives and meeting the needs of Cambodia's current and potentially future generations (see Chea, 2019; MoEYS, 2019a; Un & Sok, 2018). The success can be observed in terms of an increase in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and academic staff. For example, the number of HEIs has increased from 110 in 2014 to 125 in 2018 (MoEYS, 2019b). The increase is also seen in the number of higher education staff. In the 2013-2014 academic year, there were a total of 11,362 teaching staff. This number jumped to 16,167 in the 2017-2018 academic year. Unfortunately, student enrollment has decreased over the years. The total

enrollment was 352,766 in 2013-2014 but decreased to 310,114 in the 2017-2018 academic year (MoEYS, 2019b).

The decrease in student enrollment is perhaps due to an unprecedented reform to the Grade 12 national examination introduced in 2014, resulting in fewer high school students passing their exam that year and the years afterward, which in turn means fewer students pursuing higher education (see Maeda, 2019). Despite this, the fact that fewer students can pass their merit-based high school exam suggests that there may be an increase in the quality of high school graduates (see Khouth & Amaro, 2016; Retka, 2017). This allows higher education institutions to recruit qualified students for their undergraduate programs. As a result, there is the prospect of quality improvement in higher education in Cambodia.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, there seems to be no significant improvement in the overall quality of higher education in Cambodia after the policy has been implemented for more than five years. According to Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018), there was a lack of policy synchronization or policy alignment across different levels or layers: superstructure (i.e., governmental policies), structure (i.e., institutional policies), and understructure (i.e., departmental and individual responses). The governance structure of higher education is still fragmented as all the 125 HEIs are governed by 16 different state agencies (see Mak et al., 2019 for a recent discussion of this issue). Ngin and Kao (2017) noted that Cambodia's higher education sector was still unable to produce graduates with specialized knowledge and skills for the competitive job market. Thus, the issue of quality in higher education still looms large.

The limited success of the policy is reflected in the quality of university graduates. As Ford (2015) has observed, there was a mismatch between higher education provision and labor force demands, forcing many graduates to find employment in areas not relevant to their major. Madhur (2014) has also noted that a shortage of skilled labor was a great challenge facing Cambodia as it prepared to join the ASEAN Economic Community, an ASEAN initiative allowing for a free movement of skilled workers within the ASEAN region. The issue of skills mismatch in Cambodian higher education was later explored by Peou (2017) who found that "it is rather common for Cambodian

students to do two degrees at the same time, usually at two different universities" (p. 31). This common practice reflects the "doubtful quality" of degree programs offered by Cambodian HEIs and the general lack of "a demanding and rigorous learning process," allowing students to study two degrees at the same time (Peou, 2017, p. 31).

Despite these setbacks, it remains to be seen how successful or unsuccessful this higher education policy will be. Although only some positive outcomes have been achieved, the overall effectiveness of the policy can only be properly evaluated once it is completely implemented by 2030. Thus, it may not do justice to the policy to claim that it will not meet the educational, social, and economic needs of Cambodia's future generations.

Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011 (TEQSA Act) was prepared by Australia's Office of Parliamentary Counsel (OPC), in 2011 and came into force in 2014. This 165-page document contains information about registration of higher education providers and accreditation of courses of study, higher education standards framework, the establishment of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and higher education standards panel, and enforcement mechanisms to ensure quality in higher education. The main purposes of this Act are to achieve national consistency in the regulation of higher education, enhance Australia's reputation for quality higher education, promote a higher education system that meets Australia's social and economic needs, and ensure the provision of quality higher education for existing and prospective students (OPC, 2011). Like the Cambodian policy, this Act appears to be aligned with two of the UN's 17 SDGs (SDGs 4 and 8) as well.

With regard to the effectiveness of this policy, very favorable outcomes have been reported. A review by Navitas, an independent education assessor, revealed that the Act has a "generally effective and efficient" impact on the Australian higher education sector (Navitas, 2016, p. 5). For example, this TEQSA Act has facilitated the establishment of the Higher Education Standards Framework, a mechanism which improves compliance and the maintenance of quality in Australian higher education. Quality of learner

experience and learning outcomes has also seen positive developments. Similarly, Innovative Research Universities (IRU), another education assessor, considered the TEQSA Act to have worked effectively, particularly in strengthening regulations and establishing Higher Education Standards Framework (IRU, 2016).

Despite its success, the TEQSA Act is not flawless. There are issues related to unnecessary overlap between the TEQSA Act and other legislation, including the Education Services for Overseas Students Act and Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (IRU, 2016; Navitas, 2016). Other issues which may be connected to the implementation of the policy include an under-representation of female students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses, and female graduates with STEM qualifications tend to experience gender-related barriers or discrimination in the labor market (Li et al., 2017; Lim, 2015). Moreover, Li et al. (2017) have found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as indigenous students and students with disabilities, appear to have problems with the completion of their higher education. These are weak areas which should be taken into account in future formulation or reform of the policy or Act on higher education in Australia.

Lessons learned from the Australian success

Despite some shortcomings, the formulation and implementation of the TEQSA Act offer lessons from which the Cambodian government and policymakers can learn. Firstly, to improve higher education quality, a higher education standards framework should be in place, enabling uniform standard quality across Cambodian higher education. Secondly, strict regulations on quality should be introduced and strengthened, and an effective enforcement mechanism is required to ensure that higher education institutions comply with the regulations. Thirdly and importantly, the government needs to consider allocating more funds for the higher education sector to drive positive change to the system so that future generations of Cambodia can benefit from this investment.

Until recently, there have been great efforts by the Cambodian government to promote the quality of teaching and research in higher education, particularly

in the field of STEM and agriculture; however, many challenges remain (see Heng, 2020a; MoEYS, 2019a). To ensure that higher education in Cambodia can prepare Cambodian students for the labor market in the age of Industry 4.0, greater efforts are needed to address the many challenges facing the sector, including policy misalignment (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018), fragmented governance system (Mak et al., 2019), limited stakeholder involvement (Sam & Dahles, 2017), prevalent skills mismatch (Peou, 2017), low quality of teaching and curriculum (Un & Sok, 2018), inadequate state budget for research and lack of a well-defined academic career pathway (CICP, 2016; Kwok et al., 2010), low academic research engagement (Eam, 2015), and inequal access to higher education (Chea, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cambodia and Australia share the same goal – to improve their respective higher education systems. However, while Australia has achieved considerable success, Cambodia has only made some progress. The difference in the development of higher education in both countries is understandable, considering the disparity in their economy: Cambodia's GDP was $27.08 billion in 2019, while Australia's GDP volume was $1.39 trillion in the same year (World Bank, 2020). The Cambodian policy on higher education has, to some extent, been successful in increasing the number of academic staff and HEIs. Interest in research has increased, and initiatives to promote a strong research culture have also been reported (see Heng, 2020b; MoEYS, 2015). Nonetheless, many issues and challenges remain, requiring concerted efforts and commitment from all stakeholders.

For the Australian policy, despite significant achievements in terms of better regulations, enhanced learner experience, and positive impact on the higher education sector, it does not seem to have fully achieved all of its objectives, one of which is to advance the higher education system that serves all Australians' social, economic, and educational needs. Thus, to address the shortcomings, future Australian policies concerning higher education need to pay closer attention to the disadvantaged students by providing them with greater technical, financial, and emotional support throughout their higher education journey.

As to the Cambodian policy, because it will remain under implementation until 2030, a reform and/or a monitoring system may be required to ensure that the policy meets the needs of future Cambodian generations. Equally important are the financial and political support from the government, active participation from stakeholders, in particular higher education institutions, and continued assistance from development partners and donors (see Heng, 2020a; Sam & Dahles, 2017). Unless the various challenges are addressed, the needs of current and future Cambodians are less likely to be fulfilled, potentially causing negative consequences on Cambodia's aspirations to become a knowledge-based society and to promote social wellbeing, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The Author

Kimkong Heng is currently an Australia Awards scholar pursuing a PhD in Education at the University of Queensland, Australia. He is a co-founder and lead editor of the Cambodian Education Forum and a visiting senior research fellow at the Cambodia Development Center. He has published several journal articles and over 100 short articles in local and international outlets. Email: kimkongheng@gmail.com.

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