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Academic research in Cambodia: Progress, challenges, and ways forward

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Abstract

Research plays a critical role in advancing knowledge, stimulating innovation, and driving socioeconomic development. In the context of a knowledge-based economy, the role of research in supporting knowledge production, dissemination, and utilization is indispensable. Drawing on secondary sources, this article examines the development of academic research in Cambodia. It focuses on three aspects: recent progress, challenges, and ways forward. The article first shows that there is hope for the development of a research culture in Cambodia. However, there remain many challenges, including limited state and institutional funding for research, low academic salaries, heavy teaching loads, limited research knowledge, unclear research policies, inadequate research infrastructure, and lack of well-defined academic career pathways. The article then discusses ways forward that focus on the role of key stakeholders, including the Cambodian government, the private sector, higher education institutions, and academic staff, in supporting research development. It is argued that active stakeholder involvement and collaboration are key to promoting academic research in Cambodia.

Keywords: Academic research; progress; challenges; stakeholder collaboration; Cambodia

Introduction

Research plays a critical role in producing new knowledge, enhancing innovation, and developing new technologies. According to Creswell (2012), research is important for at least three main reasons. First, it adds to our knowledge about issues or problems affecting our society. Through research, we can better understand the problems and develop solutions to address them. Second, research can improve practice through new suggestions, ideas, approaches, connections, and evaluation. Third, research informs policy debates because when policymakers read it, they will be informed about various perspectives and current debates, which in turn helps them develop better policies.

Un (2018) noted that there are two main types of research: academic research and applied research. Academic research aims mainly to advance knowledge, while applied research focuses on solving specific problems. Un (2018) explained the importance of research as follows:

> Research describes the process in which data/information is collected, analyzed and interpreted in order to advance our understanding of a topic or issue or to find a new solution for a particular problem. Research findings are very useful for establishing communication and a dialogue with policy-makers, planners and practitioners and to guide practical development interventions. Moreover, research provides positive impacts for education, the economy, the environment, industries, healthcare and society. (p. 1)

Given the role of research in advancing society and transforming the world, there is a dire need to promote research, particularly academic research, in any society, whether developed or developing. However, in developing countries, research is generally underdeveloped, requiring the government and relevant stakeholders to find ways to promote research, both academic and applied, to contribute to the progress and development of society.

In Cambodia, an aid-dependent developing country, research is underdeveloped and underfunded (see Heng, 2020b for a brief overview of the current state of research in Cambodia). Chet (2009) noted that "research is still

in a dark stage for Cambodian higher education," as the state budget for research is "relatively nonexistent" (p. 161). A recent study by Ros et al. (2020) showed that most Cambodian academics were knowledge consumers, not knowledge producers. Their perceptions and dominant roles as teachers put a limit on their contribution to wider academic communities, especially through research. Eam's (2015) survey (n = 444) showed that 65 percent of Cambodian lecturers were not involved in any research at all over the past five years prior to the survey. They tended to accept more teaching hours to earn extra income and did not engage in research activities, laying the blame on the lack of support. A recent bibliometric analysis by Heng (2021) revealed a similar result of limited research involvement and productivity. Specifically, it was found that over the past 10 years (2010-2019), Cambodia produced about 3500 publications which were indexed in Scopus, placing it 8th among the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

MoEYS (2021) also noted a few key challenges that could affect research development. They included limited or overdue investment in higher education institutions (HEIs) and university lecturers' lack of ability and experience to write for publication in academic journals. To promote research in Cambodia, MoEYS has worked with concerned stakeholders, particularly international donors such as the World Bank, to introduce a series of projects that aim to support research activities in higher education. Notably, it has introduced two key projects: the US$23 million Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) that lasted from 2010-2015/2017, and the US$92.5 million Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) that spans from 2018-2024. These projects present new hope for the development of a research culture (see Heng, 2020a); however, many challenges continue to hinder research progress in Cambodia.

In this article, we discuss the recent progress in the research space in Cambodia and highlight the challenges to academic research development in the country. We conclude by providing some suggestions for key stakeholders to work together in order to foster a research culture in Cambodia.

Recent progress

Un and Sok (2018) noted that the development of higher education in Cambodia was relatively recent. As much of its education system was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) and the country was consumed by decades of civil war, Cambodia has only truly begun to revitalize and develop its education system since the 1990s. In the early years, the development of higher education in Cambodia was predominantly driven by bilateral aid (Un et al., 2017), and only several public universities were available prior to the advent of the privatization of higher education in 1997 which ushered in rapid expansion and transformation of higher education in the country. In 2005, the number of HEIs rose to 51 (Chet, 2009), and in 2014, there were 110 HEIs (MoEYS, 2019). In 2021, Cambodia recorded 128 HEIs supervised by 16 different ministries and institutions. Of these, 80 are private HEIs (MoEYS, 2021).

Un (2018) noted that in recent years "there has been a growing demand for evidence-based policy among Cambodian ministries and policy-makers" (p. 3). This demand has resulted in more investment in research from the Cambodian government with support from development partners such as the World Bank. For example, the government, through MoEYS, has sought to build a research culture in Cambodian higher education through two key projects: HEQCIP and HEIP. Through HEQCIP, 45 research projects were completed (see MoEYS, 2015), and through HEIP that is still ongoing, a number of research projects have been conducted across several public universities (see MoEYS, 2021).

Heng (2020a) also observed new developments in the research landscape in Cambodia and argued that there was new hope for academic research in the country. In addition to HEQCIP and HEIP, Heng (2020a) highlighted two key initiatives that were introduced in 2020. The first was the introduction of research grant schemes, called the Research Creativity and Innovation Fund, that invited relevant actors to apply for research grants. The second initiative was a directive issued by MoEYS regarding the implementation of the policy on academic ranking. Three academic titles, such as assistant professor, associate professor, and professor, would be given to university lecturers who could meet the criteria for each title. As Heng (2020a) argued, these new

developments provided new hope for the development of academic research in Cambodia.

Another notable development is the establishment of annual or biannual national research forums or conferences. In 2021, the Department of Scientific Research of MoEYS virtually organized its 3rd National Research Forum with a theme on "Building Ecosystem for Higher Education Research." Similarly, the Comparative Education Society of Cambodia, in collaboration with the Cambodia Development Resource Institute and the Kirirom Institute of Technology, virtually organized its 2nd Biennial Conference on the theme "Envisioning Education 2030: New Models of Education." The New Generation Pedagogical Research Center of the National Institute of Education also organized its 2nd Cambodia International Conference on Mentoring Educators, while the Department of English at the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh organized its 3rd Cambodian ELT Conference (Virtual). These forums and conferences are examples of new developments that aim to encourage research and dissemination of research findings in Cambodia.

Moreover, another important development in recent years is the establishment of several Cambodia-based journals to provide platforms for Cambodian researchers to publish their work. For example, MoEYS, through its Education Research Council, launched a journal called *Cambodia Education Review* in 2017. The Royal University of Phnom Penh also launched its own journal called *Insight: The Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research* in 2019. The National Institute of Public Health of Cambodia also launched a journal called the *Cambodia Journal of Public Health* in 2020. Two other journals in the field of education coincidentally published their inaugural issues in 2021. One is the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Development* that is supported by Hiroshima University and Japan International Cooperation Center in Cambodia. Although this journal is not based in Cambodia, the editors and founders are mostly Cambodian researchers or Cambodian recipients of Japanese government scholarships. The other journal is called the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*. It was launched in September 2021 and is published by the Cambodian Education Forum, a newly established online publication platform dedicated to educational research.

The launching of these journals has marked an important milestone for research development in Cambodia. As Heng and Rautakivi (2020) argued, "Even though there are many things to do to nurture a vibrant research culture in Cambodia, it is imperative to start somewhere to build a positive research momentum. One of the first steps would be to establish more local journals, improve their quality and develop [the] Cambodia Citation Index" (p. 3). Thus, the establishment of local academic journals is crucial because it contributes to building a research ecosystem in the country and offers a platform where new writers or researchers can develop their skills and expertise before they can publish in international refereed journals.

Despite these new developments in terms of increasing investment in research and the establishment of local journals, many challenges and barriers remain, requiring attention from all stakeholders in education to work collaboratively to further build on the momentum of these positive developments in research. In the next section, we discuss the challenges to academic research development in Cambodia.

Challenges to academic research development in Cambodia

A recent review by Heng et al. (2020) showed that there were various factors that influenced academics' research engagement and productivity. These factors were divided into three levels: national, institutional, and individual. The national-level factors included research policies, politics and research culture, academic freedom, and support from the government, development partners, and the private sector. The institutional-level factors consisted of institutional research policies, adequate infrastructure and facilities for research activities, research incentive system, availability of research funding and networks, allocation of sufficient time for research, institutional research culture, and other institutional factors. The individual-level factors included research motivation, research knowledge and skills, academic rank/degree, language proficiency, and availability of research collaboration, among others.

In the context of Cambodia, many challenges limit the development of its academic research. Drawing on secondary sources, Heng (2020b) noted that key challenges included meager salaries among university lecturers, limited research funding, restricted academic freedom on sensitive topics, lack of

incentive mechanisms and requirements for research outputs, limited knowledge, skills, and experiences for research, unclear research policies, insufficient research infrastructure and facilities, low social recognition for research, and teaching-related overloads, among other challenges.

Some of the above challenges have been discussed by previous research such as Kwok et al. (2010), Moore (2011), Keuk (2015), and the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace ([CICP], 2016). For example, Kwok et al. (2010) outlined several key challenges to developing research in Cambodia, ranging from the lack of research culture and capacity to the absence of clear research policy and institutional mechanisms to support faculty research. Specific challenges raised by Kwok et al. (2010) included low academic salaries that forced lecturers to work at multiple institutions and caused brain drain, lack of well-defined professional pathways linked to promotion and salary increases, and inadequate facilities and funding for research activities. A study by CICP (2016) also discussed a number of significant barriers to research development in Cambodia. Some of them included the lack of well-trained local researchers and supportive infrastructure, research activities driven only by donors which were always limited in terms of both time frame and scope, and limited academic freedom for research on sensitive social topics.

Focusing on the field of English language teaching (ELT), Moore (2011) explored the research conceptions and engagement of Cambodian teachers who teach English at the university level. He found that their institutions showed little interest in supporting them to do research while the institutional policy for research was vague. Not having sufficient time to do research, inaccessibility to books and journals, and limited knowledge of research methods were also reported to have hindered academic research among Cambodian English teachers (Moore, 2011). Keuk's (2015) study of ELT research in Cambodia reported two key factors that played a part in hampering the development of academic research in Cambodia. They were the unclear conceptions of research held by Cambodian ELT teachers and the absence of true communities of research practice within ELT institutions in Cambodia. A more recent study by Moore (2021) investigating the research leadership of returned overseas ELT or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) scholars in Cambodia indicated that financial disincentives and

time constraints due to teaching and administrative overloads had negative influences on university lecturers and PhD holders' research involvement.

Meanwhile, MoEYS (2015) highlighted two key challenges to research in Cambodian higher education. They included the absence of an academic career structure that provides clear professional ranks and compensation and the dominant part-time teaching of most lecturers which makes academic research in Cambodian higher education difficult to develop. Ros et al.'s (2020) study underlined the lack of funding, research infrastructure, and teaching and administrative workloads as key barriers to Cambodian academics' research endeavors. MoEYS (2019, 2021) also emphasized some key barriers to research development in Cambodia, such as the lack of full-time lecturers and lecturers with doctorates, inadequate investment in both research and faculty resources, and the limited capacity and experience of lecturers in conducting research and writing research papers for publication.

Overall, many challenges have impeded the development of research in Cambodia. Unless these challenges are addressed, a healthy research culture is unlikely to develop, and Cambodia will continue to lag behind other countries in the region in terms of innovation, competitiveness, and development in the globalized knowledge-based economy. Therefore, there is a need for concerned stakeholders in higher education in Cambodia to work together to promote research to enhance Cambodia's competitiveness in the regional and global arena.

Ways forward

To promote research in the Kingdom of Cambodia, there is a need for collaboration and involvement from all relevant stakeholders such as the government, the private sector, higher education institutions, and academic staff (Heng, 2020b). These stakeholders play pivotal roles in shaping and improving the state of research in Cambodia. Following are some suggestions that all stakeholders should consider in order to foster the development of a research culture in Cambodian society.

The Cambodian government

The Cambodian government plays a critical role in fostering and accelerating research development in Cambodia. While a lot needs to be done, the government may consider three important suggestions. First and foremost, the government needs to expedite the enactment of the policy on academic ranking to grant qualified academic staff the professorial ranks (i.e., assistant professor, associate professor, and professor) that they deserve. This 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. It will also serve as a source of inspiration for the next generation of researchers and students who are keen to choose an academic career as their future career. In 2020, MoEYS issued a directive advising HEIs to start implementing the policy on professorial ranking (MoEYS, 2020); however, the actual implementation of the directive and policy remains to be seen. It is, therefore, essential that the policy on academic ranks be put into practice to encourage academics to engage in research.

Second, the government needs to start categorizing universities in Cambodia into two major groups: research-oriented and teaching-oriented universities. The bifurcation of universities is essential as it will help with funding allocation and other arrangements. Currently, MoEYS is investing in five major public universities to promote research and teaching in STEM and agriculture under HEIP. While this is an excellent start in promoting research in Cambodia, sustainable and inclusive research development may be an issue. For example, it is not clear whether these selected universities will develop their institutional research culture after HEIP is complete. It is also unclear how the next generation of researchers in Cambodia is built and supported in order to foster a healthy and sustained culture of research with Cambodian universities and society at large. In this respect, it is vital to select a certain number of universities and assign a status of research-oriented universities to them. This status will be accompanied by systematic government support and certain requirements that guide the operation and direction of these universities.

Third, the government needs to find ways to build an ecosystem for research. It needs to engage all stakeholders, including the development partners and donors, to encourage research activities among academic staff and students

within Cambodian higher education. Perhaps a nationwide research competition for universities, researchers, and students is a good starting point. National research awards for highly productive researchers or emerging researchers also need to be established. All of these contribute to stimulating interest in research and building an ecosystem for research to grow. In addition, MoEYS needs to encourage major universities in Cambodia to establish more university-based journals or magazines to provide a platform for novice Cambodian researchers and aspiring research students to publish their research. This is important because new researchers or research students need a supportive environment to build their research confidence and academic writing and publishing skills. It will also promote research activities within Cambodian higher education and serve as a great source of motivation and inspiration for other members of the academic community in the country. Once research and publication activities become more visible, a culture of research and publication will take shape and begin to develop and grow.

The private sector

The private sector plays a crucial role in promoting research, particularly applied research. To foster a vibrant research culture in Cambodia, the private sector or industry needs to increase their engagement with universities. They can provide sponsorships to research students and/or fellowships to both students and academics. They can also support university research activities by sponsoring research or science fairs, hosting research-related career fairs, and other events that aim to promote research interest among students. Moreover, they can establish collaboration with universities through agreed contracts or a memorandum of understanding to support and make use of talents in universities. Enhanced partnerships and cooperation between the university and industry will be mutually beneficial. Universities can receive funding to sustain research, while the industry can use research findings produced by universities to enhance their products or services.

Sam and Dahles (2017) showed that the industry had three main roles in Cambodian higher education: (1) employer and internship providers, (2) private donors, and (3) trainers. Thus, it is vital that the private sector promote research by setting aside some funding or donations for research to foster the development of a vibrant research culture in Cambodia. They can also offer

research training for students by providing them research internship opportunities and give extra value to job applicants who have research experience. All of these are crucial to promote greater social appreciation for research and instill favorable research mindsets among students who are the hope for the future of research development in Cambodia.

Higher education institutions

The role of higher education institutions, particularly universities, in promoting research is indispensable. First, it is crucial that Cambodian HEIs or universities develop a clear research policy that defines research expectations, requirements, and rewards. The policy should also provide information about the consequences for lack of research involvement. Thus, there needs to be clear information about what the requirements are and what happens when the research requirements are met or unfulfilled. Moreover, the policy needs to outline criteria for academic recruitment and promotion. It is important that research need to form a major component in the recruitment and promotion process. In other words, research output, especially peer-reviewed publications in credible journals, needs to be one of the major criteria in determining recruitment and promotion decisions. Without a clear research-based recruitment and promotion policy, it is hard to promote research and publication among academic staff.

Once a clear research policy is developed and implemented, it is essential to ensure that a supportive research environment exists within universities. To ensure a conducive environment for research, universities need to encourage research activities by establishing competitive research grant schemes, providing research training and mentoring opportunities, and recognizing and rewarding academics' research performance. As Fredua-Kwarteng (2021) noted, "An institution needs six fundamental building blocks to foster a scientific research culture: capacity-building, infrastructure, leadership, funding, incentives and collaboration" (para. 7). Among these building blocks, funding is one of the most important factors. Some universities in Cambodia, especially public universities such as the Royal University of Phnom Penh, have begun to provide research grants to their academic staff. This is a welcome initiative that has contributed to promoting institutional research activities and

increasing research interest among academics (see Chet, 2019 for lessons learned from the implementation of an institutional research funding scheme).

Another important issue that requires attention and commitment from Cambodian universities is the establishing of university-based journals. To promote research, no doubt, we need to promote a home-grown research culture by encouraging research and publication within the institutions through local journals. As Heng and Rautakivi (2020) argued:

> The lack of local journals in Cambodia significantly limits the development of new writers or researchers who may not have the capacity to publish their research in regional or international journals. They may need some publication experience, starting from publishing their works in local journals first. Once their research knowledge and confidence have improved, they can attempt to publish their works in reputable or international journals. (p. 3)

Overall, while supporting research by providing funds and other necessary support such as training and professional development, it is crucial to establish a platform where researchers, especially novice ones, can submit their work for publication consideration. This process will help new researchers learn the ropes of scholarly publication and understand how the world of academia works. Once they understand the politics of academic publishing, they will become a catalyst that drives research interest and activities among other stakeholders, particularly emerging researchers and research students.

Academic staff

Individual academics are "the key actors who should have the agency to engage in research regardless of external or structural constraints" (Heng, 2020b, p. 3). Although the practicality of this argument may be limited, the academic agency is critical in the context of scarce resources and insufficient support for research such as Cambodia. In other words, to promote research in Cambodia, it is essential that academic staff be committed to research. They need to be driven by their strong desire to contribute to knowledge and society. If they are committed and highly motivated, they are more likely to spend their time and energy conducting research and writing for publication. Moreover, their strong

research interest and commitment will have a positive impact on the attitudes of their colleagues and students toward research. This is crucial given the limited social appreciation for research in Cambodian society.

Furthermore, as Heng (2020c) argues, individual academics may help to encourage research activities in three important ways. First, they can encourage their students to learn more about research and develop curiosity and positive feelings about research by talking about it whenever possible and making efforts to share new research findings relevant to the Cambodian context or the topics they are teaching. Second, they should endeavor to serve as a research role model or a source of inspiration for research. This can be done if academics try to be involved in research and publication or regularly share research findings on social media or through other platforms. Whatever they do, they need to emphasize research and publication and ensure that students are exposed to research to develop their awareness and understanding of the importance of research. Third, individual academics can help promote research by supporting a community of research practice (see Wenger, 1998). In this community, academics can serve as "a research mentor, a participant, a collaborator, a motivator, an observer and/or an organiser" (para. 6). They need to motivate themselves and others to engage in research by reading, using, and conducting it.

Concluding remarks

To promote academic research in Cambodia, all stakeholders across different levels, such as national, institutional, and individual, need to "work together and actively engage in reciprocal relationships that center around research-promoting initiatives, projects and activities" (Heng, 2020b, p. 2). Each stakeholder has a pivotal role in shaping and improving the research landscape in Cambodia. The government and higher education institutions, especially major universities, need to develop a clear vision regarding research by setting priority areas for research, developing well-defined research policies, establishing research-based recruitment and promotion mechanisms, and initiating research development plans (see Altbach, 2009 for suggestions on how to develop research universities in developing countries). There is also a need to establish a systematic mechanism for research funds and incentives,

research requirements, and research community, both at national and institutional levels.

There is also a need to engage the private sector and development partners more proactively. These actors play vital roles in supporting research as they can be a good source of funding for research. To make a difference to the state of research in Cambodia, the government and universities need to find ways to enhance partnerships and collaboration with the private sector and development partners, including donor agencies and non-governmental organizations, to form a quadruple helix model of stakeholders in higher education (Sam & Dahles, 2017). These key stakeholders – the government, development partners, private sector, and HEIs – need to work together to create an environment conducive to research and researcher development.

Finally, the development of research relies largely on the will and commitment of individual academics who are important actors in driving research. They need to understand their role in contributing to developing a research culture in Cambodia. They also need to constantly remind themselves of who they are and how they can make a difference to an institutional research culture that is needed to foster a broader research culture in Cambodian society. If individual academics in Cambodia begin to look for opportunities to promote research and do whatever they can as a member of the academic community, the research landscape in Cambodia will experience positive changes and embark on a transformative development trajectory.

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