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The quest for world-class universities: A goal for Cambodian universities?

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Abstract

World-class university status and university rankings have captured the attention of many countries, including developing countries. While many countries in Asia, such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, have endeavored to have their universities ranked highly in the league tables, Cambodia seems not to be influenced by this global trend. This article puts the trend toward world-class universities into perspective and examines the factors that make Cambodia's universities less influenced by the quest for world-class universities experienced by universities in other countries. Considering the historical and present situation of higher education in Cambodia, this article argues that Cambodia is not readily aspired to take part in the catch-up game of building world-class universities. Nevertheless, Cambodian universities will be further marginalized on the regional and global stage if no substantial quality improvement can be achieved.

Keywords: World-class universities; higher education; university rankings; Asian countries; Cambodia

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Introduction

In the era of globalization and a knowledge-based economy, world-class university status and university rankings have captured the attention of many countries, including developing countries. It is believed that world-class universities contribute to national development, making countries with world-class universities globally competitive (Altbach, 2009, 2013; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Mohrman et al., 2008; Salmi, 2009). Despite the controversy over the accuracy of university rankings, most countries, if not all, still want to have their universities listed in the league tables (Mok & Wei, 2008). Obviously, some countries in Asia, such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, just to name a few, are fighting in the battle for world-class university stature, attempting to have their universities ranked highly (Deem et al., 2008; Mok & Hallinger, 2013). However, such pressure does not seem evident in Cambodia. In fact, the concept of world-class universities seems alien to Cambodia's universities.

This article argues that higher education in Cambodia, to a considerable extent, is not influenced by the global force of building world-class universities experienced by other Asian countries. The article begins by discussing the definition of and motives for world-class universities. This is followed by an overview of some Asian countries' efforts to pursue the goal of world-class universities. Then, the historical and present situation of higher education in Cambodia is briefly described. After that, the factors that make Cambodia's universities less influenced by the quest for world-class universities are examined. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

Definition of and motives for world-class universities

As Altbach (2004) contends, "Everyone wants a world-class university… No one knows what a world-class university is" (p. 21). What constitutes world-class universities is not precisely known. However, some researchers advocate that world-class universities possess global missions, excellence in research, highly qualified professors, academic freedom, self-governance, adequate facilities, and sufficient funding from different sources (Altbach, 2004; Mohrman et al., 2008). Salmi (2009) describes world-class universities as having an abundance of resources, a wealth of talent, and effective governance. Other

universities which do not have these features are not considered world-class universities. World-class universities are flagship universities that create new knowledge not only in science and technology but also in social science and humanities. They generate income and are linked to global knowledge (Altbach, 2011; Salmi, 2009).

The emergence of university rankings exerts great influence on universities and other stakeholders, especially the government (Mok & Wei, 2008). So serious has the quest for world-class status become that there should be at least one world-class university in a country to improve its economy and compete in the global knowledge-based economy (Deem et al., 2008). Being highly ranked in those leagues is linked with great prestige (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011).

Asian countries' efforts

Many Asian countries are keen on building up world-class universities and having them ranked highly in the global university league (Deem et al., 2008; Mok & Hallinger, 2013). Enhancing their higher education quality and achieving world-class status are driven by certain aspirations. First, world-class universities are needed if these countries want to participate in the global academic system of science and technology (Altbach, 2013). Second, Asian countries have always suffered from brain drain. Therefore, as traditionally major exporters of students to North America and Europe, Asian countries have been trying to attract international students, retain their best talents, and transform themselves into "regional hubs of higher education" (Chan & Ng, 2008, p. 487). Third, expanding diplomatic and political influence is another motivation. For example, China's attempts to recruit international students serve as a political strategy to transform itself into a superpower against the United States (Pan, 2013).

To build world-class universities, Salmi (2009) articulates that each country's government can upgrade its existing universities, merge them, or establish a brand new university. He further adds that universities per se must possess strong leadership, timely implementation of the plans, and internationalization. These approaches have been adopted by some countries in Asia.

China has, for example, launched two projects called "211" and "985" in order to upgrade its universities to obtain world-class status. One hundred universities were funded in the 211 Project, while the 985 Project selected only 34 universities in the first phase, and four other universities were included in the second phase to receive additional funding (Yang & Welch, 2012). The government of Taiwan has also implemented the funding scheme "Five Year – 50 Billion Excellence Initiative" to build up world-class universities to respond to the tough competition on a global scale (Hou et al., 2013; Mok & Hallinger, 2013; Song & Tai, 2013). South Korea has introduced the "Korea Brain 21" to establish high-quality research universities and produce talented graduates in science and technology (Byun et al., 2013; Shin, 2009). Since 2002, Japan has implemented the "Global Center of Excellence Project" to upgrade around 30 universities to become world-class and attract more international students (Oba 2008; Yonezawa, 2010). In 2014, the Japanese government also initiated the "Top Global University Project" to enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan (MEXT, n.d.). The project selected 37 top Japanese universities for ten-year implementation from 2014-2023. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education adopted the world-class university concept and framework in 2007, which later became a policy statement in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 (Sirat, 2013). The goal was to transform Malaysia into a hub of higher education excellence and attract at least 100,000 international students by 2020.

Apart from the governments, universities themselves are making as much effort as possible to transform themselves into world-class universities. For instance, with the vision of becoming world-class, the Pohang University of Science and Technology, a well-funded private research university in South Korea, focuses predominantly on science and technology, admits only top students, uses English as the medium of instruction, and hires talented researchers (Rhee, 2011). In China, Tsinghua University (Yang & Welch, 2012) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Wang et al., 2011) also follow similar trends. In Singapore, while its oldest university, the National University of Singapore, has consistently been ranked among the world's top universities, other Singapore's young universities, for example, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), have emerged as an inspiration for other young universities to become world-class (Srivastava, 2018). Despite these trends toward world-

class universities, Cambodia, due to its current situation of higher education, is not readily aspired to take part in this catch-up game.

A brief overview of higher education in contemporary Cambodia

The development of higher education in Cambodia is comparatively new, undergoing different political changes (Pit & Ford, 2004; Sloper, 1999). The modern origin of higher education in Cambodia can be traced back to the era of French colonization (1863-1953) when higher education conducted in French was offered to selective Cambodians at the only secondary school in the country, known as Lycee Sisowath (Clayton & Ngoy, 1997). After gaining independence from France on November 9, 1953, there was a remarkable growth in higher education in Cambodia with the establishment of nine higher education institutions (HEIs) across the country (Clayton & Ngoy, 1997). However, during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), higher education came to a complete standstill; most faculty members were killed, textbooks were destroyed, and all of the HEIs were abandoned (Clayton & Ngoy 1997; Pit & Ford, 2004; Sloper, 1999).

After the collapse of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, higher education in Cambodia started again from scratch with support from Vietnam and the Soviet Union (Clayton & Ngoy 1997; Sloper, 1999). However, the assistance from Vietnam and the Soviet Union was withdrawn in 1989, paving the way for the first National Election supported by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the formation of the Royal Government of Cambodia in 1993. Since then, there has been significant development of higher education in Cambodia (Chet, 2009; In & Dash, 2011; Un & Sok, 2018). For instance, to respond to the fast-growing number of high school graduates, the government in 1997 adopted a policy that allowed the private sector to operate HEIs and authorized public HEIs to offer fee-paying academic programs as a means to supplement the limited public funding for higher education (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2014). Since 1997, the higher education sector in Cambodia has expanded substantially from 23 HEIs in 2000 to 97 in 2010 and 128 in 2021 (Sok & Bunry, 2021). Student enrollment continued to increase from 28,080 students in 2000 to 223,221 in 2010 (Sok & Bunry, 2021). However, due to the sudden reform of the Grade 12 national exam in 2014, student enrollment has decreased slightly since 2014.

Issues in Cambodian higher education

Despite such development and expansion, there are still many issues to be addressed. Access to higher education remains comparatively low, especially for disadvantaged students (World Bank, 2012), and quality is still questionable (Dahles, 2017; Hayden, 2019; Cambodia Development Resource Institute [CDRI], 2013; Kitamura, 2016; Vann & Ziguras, 2017). There is still a significant mismatch between the skills graduates obtain and the job market, causing unemployment and underemployment among many graduates (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013; Dahles, 2017; CDRI, 2013; Kitamura, 2016; Un & Sok, 2018; World Bank, 2012). As a result, Cambodia still lacks graduates with the skills needed to contribute to its development. Influenced by their parents' decision (Leng, 2010), most students prefer taking business-related majors such as management, accounting, and banking and finance, resulting in an excessive supply of graduates in areas that the market cannot absorb.

Despite external financial support from France, Australia, the USA, UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank (Altner, 1999; Coyne, 1999; Dahles, 2017), public universities are still poorly funded, forcing them to adopt a fee-paying scheme as authorized by the government for their academic programs. As private universities rely mainly on students' tuition, most of both public and private universities compete with each other by offering subjects that are deemed popular by students, neglecting other hard science subjects which are currently needed for the development of the country (CDRI, 2013; Dahles, 2017; Sen, 2013; World Bank, 2012). Moreover, regulations and rules in most universities are not strongly enforced. There have been cases of students cheating in exams and students allowed to obtain an easy pass. In addition, most public and private universities have low admission requirements for their fee-paying programs, accepting students regardless of their academic performance from upper-secondary education (Dahles, 2017). Such low admission requirements further complicate the quality of graduates (CDRI, 2013) and are deemed the exchange of tuition fees for degrees (Vann, 2012; Vann & Ziguras, 2017).

Another pressing and prolonged issue in Cambodian higher education is the limited research capacity. A decade ago, Chet (2009) noted that research "is still

in a dark stage for Cambodian higher education" (p. 161). He added that the government budget for research activities in public HEIs is relatively nonexistent, while research activities in private HEIs are almost completely absent. Most universities, both public and private, in Cambodia focus on teaching, as their academic requirement does not include undertaking research (Kwok et al., 2010). Furthermore, they are overloaded with teaching hours and teaching at different universities to increase their income (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013; Brooks & Ly, 2010; Eam, 2015). Thus, they only do research that they perceive to support their teaching activities (Ros et al., 2020), while research for publication and scholarship building is not seriously pursued (Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019). Compared to other developed countries, most universities in Cambodia still face a significant shortage of academic resources and facilities, such as qualified PhD holders, online databases of scholarly journals and books, and laboratories (Chen et al., 2007; Kwok et al., 2010; Thun, 2021). Moreover, Cambodia is among the other few countries in ASEAN, specifically Laos and Myanmar, that do not have any universities listed in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2020, while other ASEAN countries have at least one university listed (Heng, 2020b).

Furthermore, academic freedom in higher education in Cambodia is not fully granted (Chet 2009). Any academic activities which are deemed politically sensitive are discouraged. For example, in 2012, thesis topics, such as land disputes, drug abuse, and the stock market, were banned (Say, 2012). The appointment of the management in public universities is politically made on the basis of cronyism and seniority rather than meritocracy (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013; Chet, 2009). However, with limited funding for higher education, the government is seemingly unable to direct public universities and private universities (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013). The lack of direction from the government has made higher education in Cambodia become market-driven and profit-oriented in an uncontrolled way to most extent, leading to the need to establish legal frameworks to regulate what universities should offer to students based on the local priorities or develop missions for universities to follow.

To solve the aforementioned issues in higher education, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has introduced some key initiatives and policies. In June 2003, the RGC established a public and independent agency called the

Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC). The ACC is mandated to regulate accreditation to all HEIs to ensure the quality of Cambodian higher education and develop legal documents to provide HEIs with institutional accreditation for their degree programs, ranging from bachelor's to doctoral degrees (ACC, n.d.). In 2010, MoEYS introduced the "Policy on Research Development in the Education Sector," focusing on building research culture in HEIs (MoEYS, 2010). MoEYS also introduced the "Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030" in 2014 with an ambition to "build a quality higher education system that develops human resources with excellent knowledge, skills, and moral values in order to work and live within the era of globalization and knowledge-based society" (MoEYS, 2014, p. 3). The Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 for the higher education subsector also indicated MoEYS's continuing commitment to improving equitable access to quality higher education and developing a governance and management system to support the complete autonomy of HEIs (MoEYS, 2019). Moreover, in 2020, MoEYS announced the Research Creativity and Innovation Fund to promote research activities in Cambodia with small grants available to scholars (Heng, 2020a).

The World Bank, one of the key development partners of Cambodia's MoEYS, has also continued to play an essential role in enhancing Cambodian higher education quality, particularly in higher education governance and management and research development (World Bank, n.d.). Since 2010, the World Bank has approved two vital projects worth US$115.5 million, namely the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) 2010-2015/2017 and the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) 2018-2024.

Cambodian realities in the context of world-class universities

From what most universities in Cambodia are doing and what the government is trying to solve, it can be implied that higher education in Cambodia is mainly local-driven rather than global-driven. Most universities are responding to the growing local demands for higher education. As public universities are unable to offer an adequate number of places for upper-secondary school graduates, private universities have taken this opportunity. However, access to higher education is still relatively low, causing the government to develop strategies to expand access, especially for disadvantaged students (MoEYS, 2010).

Moreover, the establishment of private universities is perceived as a business opportunity for investors in the higher education sector (Vann, 2012). In other words, profit is primarily the main motive for the existence of most private universities without the consideration of quality. For this reason, most private universities offer courses generally centered on social science and business-related subjects that are more affordable to operate than hard science subjects and popular among students to ensure their sustainability. Neglecting hard science subjects, most public universities also compete against private universities for students by offering similar social science and business-related subjects (Dahles, 2017; Kitamura, 2016; Un & Sok, 2018). Such focus of most universities in Cambodia is very different from those in other Asian countries which are pursuing world-class status. This is because they are emphasizing hard science over social science (Altbach, 2009; Byun et al., 2013).

Internationalization is also one of the aspects of world-class universities (Salmi, 2009). There have been some efforts toward internationalization by some universities in Cambodia. For example, English is used as a medium of instruction, and foreign faculty members are also hired in some universities. However, these efforts are made to serve as marketing strategies to attract local students who perceive that these elements are of high quality. Besides, given its current educational quality and scale, Cambodia is not anywhere near attractive to international students (Sok & Bunry, 2021). Pit and Ford (2004) asserted that:

> A lack of credibility of local qualifications has created a perception that 'foreign' equals 'quality,' and a few institutions have taken advantage of this. Due to a lack of regulation in the higher education sector, there are some linkages with unaccredited (in their home country) foreign institutions for the purpose of claiming international recognition that is simply fraudulent. (p. 344)

While world-class universities are excellent in research (Mohrman et al., 2008), not only are research activities in Cambodia limited, but research is also not the main focus of most universities (Kwok et al., 2010; Chet, 2009). Even though MoEYS has formulated some research-related policies and initiatives to promote research capacity in Cambodian universities, these policies and

initiatives prioritize local needs. Moreover, with regard to funding, Cambodia is currently unable to afford the cost of research-oriented universities, let alone world-class universities. For the case of private universities, Altbach (2009) noted that by relying on students' tuition fees, private universities can hardly afford such high expenses.

Concluding remarks

The current conditions of higher education in Cambodia have made most of the universities, both private and public, largely unaffected by the pressure to build up world-class universities, although some major public universities aspire to become research universities. There are local issues that Cambodian universities need to settle. Ahrens and McNamara (2013) have suggested that attention be put on the issues of quality and quantity, popular subjects and prioritized subjects, and the lack of agreed national vision for higher education. However, should universities try to solve these local problems? Or should the government select one or two universities and join the game of world-class universities? The answer to both questions should be a balance between the local and global demands. Even though Cambodian universities seem immune from the global pressure at present, it is inevitable that Cambodian universities will be further marginalized on the regional and global stage in the near future if no substantial quality improvement can be achieved.

Nonetheless, being world-class or not, Cambodian universities must correct the current shortcomings and simultaneously ensure the quality of education that must be recognized locally and regionally, if not globally. How long will it take Cambodian universities to achieve this? The exact answer might not be known, but such an achievement will not happen anytime soon.

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