

Editorial

Challenges facing higher education in Cambodia and ideas for reform

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Introduction

Higher education in Cambodia needs a reform to improve the sector's quality and development. Over the past few decades, although Cambodian higher education has experienced impressive progress, particularly in terms of institutional expansion and student enrollment, the sector needs to undergo a reform to move forward in a faster and more sustainable manner. In this editorial, we aim to offer ideas on how the higher education sector in Cambodia can be reformed to transform and bring it to a higher level.

A brief overview of the challenges facing Cambodian higher education

Many researchers have attempted to provide an overview of the development of higher education in contemporary Cambodia. Foreign researchers, such as Brehm (2019), Hayden (2019), and Kitamura (2016), have discussed various issues and factors shaping higher education in Cambodia. Cambodian researchers have also contributed to the growing body of work on higher education development in Cambodia. They have recently dominated this academic space by examining the development of the sector from various

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perspectives, such as higher education quality (Nhem, 2022; Vann & Ziguras, 2017); higher education stakeholder involvement (Heng, 2020; Sam & Dahles, 2017), higher education research development (Heng, 2023b; Heng & Sol, 2021a, 2022b; Heng et al., 2022, 2023a), higher education internationalization (Chet & Un, 2019; Sok & Bunry, 2021); higher education access (Chea, 2019), higher education governance (Mak et al., 2019; Sen, 2019), employability skills development in higher education (Chea, & Lo, 2022); major choices in higher education (Kao, 2020; Kao & Shimizu, 2019); challenges facing higher education (Doeur, 2022; Heng & Sol, 2022a; Sol, 2021), and a general overview of the higher education sector (Un & Sok, 2018b).

Recently, more research interest and attention have been paid to issues concerning how academics in Cambodian higher education perceive research (Heng, Hamid, & Khan, 2022); how they engage in research (Heng et al., 2023a); how they perceive their roles and identities (Ros et al., 2020); and how they lead their academic life (Chhaing, 2022). Findings from these studies seem to point in the same direction; that is, Cambodian higher education is in a transformative phase, as evidenced by the institutional expansion and the increase in higher education access facilitated by higher education massification and privatization (see Heng, 2023b; Heng & Heng, 2023; Un & Sok, 2018b). Yet, the sector continues to face considerable challenges that require both academic and policy attention to introduce mechanisms or initiatives to reform it.

Heng (2021) is among the first Cambodian researchers to propose a reform to higher education in modern Cambodia. Although previous research has discussed at length the various issues facing Cambodian higher education (Chet, 2009, Dy, 2015; Sen, 2019; Sen & Ros, 2013; Un & Sok, 2018b; Williams et al., 2016), recent research has suggested that Cambodia's higher education needs to adopt a structural reform in order to develop into an education system that could support Cambodia's aspirations for a knowledge-based society (see Heng, 2023a), as well as contribute to realizing the country's development vision for 2030 and 2050 (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2018).

The need for higher education reform stems from the many challenges that have constrained the development of the sector. A scoping study by Kwok et al. (2010), involving 15 Cambodian universities, revealed seven key challenges

confronting Cambodian HEIs in developing research capacities. They included (a) “a near-total loss of an entire generation of academics” (p. 35) due to the genocide Khmer Rouge regime; (b) low academic salaries (less than US\$ 700 a month); (c) a lack of a clear system for academic professionalism (although this situation has changed as the granting of professorial titles has begun since June 2023); (d) increasing brain drain from universities; (e) limited research facilities; (f) limited funds for university research; and (g) weak or traditional university leadership.

Eam’s (2015) survey showed that around 65% of Cambodian academics (n = 444) were not involved in any research within the last five years before the survey took place. A study by the Cambodian Institution of Cooperation and Peace (2016) added to the existing body of knowledge about research development in Cambodia. The study found that key challenges inhibiting research in Cambodia were related to how research was valued, inadequacy in research funding, low academic salaries and a lack of academic promotion pathways, limited research incentives and resources, limited research knowledge, heavy workloads, and limited academic freedom.

A series of studies by Heng (2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) and Heng and colleagues (Heng & Heng, 2023; Heng & Sol, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b; Heng et al., 2022, 2023a) have also examined the development of research and higher education in Cambodia. These studies indicated that academic research and higher education in Cambodia have experienced considerable progress even though more efforts are needed to bring about greater positive developments. For example, Heng (2022) explored how Cambodian youth and university students engage in research and knowledge creation. The study found that there were many challenges to Cambodia’s youth engagement in research. The challenges were mainly related to (a) “limited knowledge about research, publication, and English language skills,” (b) “less supportive environment for research,” and (c) other challenges of personal and professional nature (Heng, 2022, p. 17). Heng (2023a) examined Cambodian university students’ perspectives on Cambodia’s aspirations to become a knowledge-based society. The study also revealed several challenges believed to have prevented the country from realizing its knowledge-based society vision. Key challenges were related to a lack of a clear vision for the promotion of research and education quality, limited research activities, political influence on education, and the business-

driven nature of many Cambodian HEIs. Heng (2023b) discussed the challenges and developments in higher education research in Cambodia. The study revealed several major challenges to research development, including insufficient public research funding, a lack of well-defined academic promotion systems, limited academic freedom, inadequate financial support and incentives, a lack of institutional requirements for research, time constraints, and limited research knowledge and experience.

Other researchers have also discussed various issues in Cambodian higher education. Sol (2021) and Heng and Sol (2021b), for example, examined the challenges facing the sector during the outbreak of COVID-19. Sen (2019, 2022) looked at the effects of cultural norms and values on Cambodian higher education development, while Un and Sok (2022) discussed the development discourse of Cambodian higher education from the perspective of policies and project intervention. Chhaing (2022) and Chhaing and Phon (2022) explored the academic life of Cambodian academics, whereas Lin et al. (2023) examined a phenomenon of English-medium instruction in higher education in Cambodia. Doeur and Heng (2023) discussed issues concerning continuous professional development (CPD) for Cambodian university teachers. Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) and Oleksiyenko and Ros (2019) discussed the challenges and issues concerning the academic profession in Cambodian higher education. Chan and Sarik (2020), Chea et al. (2020), Chet et al. (2022), and Heng et al. (2023c) explored various issues in relation to online learning in Cambodian higher education. Most of these studies, if not all, have somehow discussed the challenges and deficiencies in various aspects that have impeded the development of Cambodian higher education. The various challenges inhibiting the development of the sector have suggested the need for a reform, a long-overdue one, which has the potential to pave the way for higher education transformation and bring about more positive developments to the sector.

Ideas for higher education reform

In light of the various challenges currently facing the sector and the new developments, we call for a reform of Cambodian higher education in order to enhance the sector to ensure it can effectively support Cambodia's aspirations for a knowledge-based society and vision for 2030 and 2050. The reform should

place an emphasis on a number of key aspects, including infrastructure development, curriculum development, remuneration system development, continuing professional development, research development, and quality assurance system development.

Infrastructure development

First, there is a need to improve higher education infrastructure. No doubt, to keep abreast of modern educational trends and provide students with a conducive environment for effective learning, Cambodian HEIs need to further improve their physical and technological infrastructure. In the context of Industry 4.0, technological infrastructure has become indispensable. It is imperative to have well-equipped classrooms; laboratory facilities tailored for different disciplines for practical lessons and research work; and well-stocked libraries with a great variety of reference books, journals, magazines, research reports, and digital content. It is also important to have well-designed spaces for individual study and group work, as well as other important facilities such as auditoriums, conference rooms, and common areas dedicated to specific learning purposes. As technology becomes more and more integrated with the education sector, it is equally vital that Cambodian HEIs are outfitted with the necessary technological infrastructure including centralized learning management systems (LMS); high-speed internet connectivity to support online or blended learning, research activities, and access to digital resources or digital libraries; educational software and applications; and measures/protocols for data security and privacy. This comprehensive infrastructure will foster an optimized teaching and learning environment, supporting students in acquiring both theoretical and practical knowledge while enhancing their digital skills for the rapidly evolving world. While a series of key World Bank-funded projects, such as the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) that was carried out from 2010-2015 (extended to 2017) and the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) that spans from 2018-2024, has contributed to the enhancement of physical and technological infrastructure of some targeted HEIs (Heng & Heng, 2023), a broader reform, fervently and sustainably backed at the national level, is necessary. Furthermore, the momentum of digital transformation of Cambodian higher education accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be maintained and promoted (Heng et al., 2023b, 2023c).

Curriculum development

Second, the curriculum should be thoroughly revised and/or developed to be better aligned with regional or international standards and the constantly evolving job market as well as reflect the latest research and advances in each field of study. Indeed, the introduction of the Research Creativity and Innovation Fund in 2020 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) is a commendable initiative, as it has provided financial support for public and private HEIs in Cambodia to develop and refine textbooks in the Khmer language for use in higher education (MoEYS, 2023; Torn, 2023). However, a mechanism involving most, if not all, HEIs is needed to implement an inclusive and large-scale curriculum reform while ensuring quality and relevancy. The curriculum should ensure that students are equipped with skills and knowledge pertaining to their chosen disciplines (i.e., hard skills). In addition, innovative pedagogies should be employed to enable students to gain crucial 21st-century skills such as critical thinking skills, creative problem-solving, and digital competency (i.e., soft skills). It is important to underscore that to effectively implement the curriculum, sufficient resources should be allocated, and academic staff should be provided with adequate training, with particular regard to course content and materials, teaching methods, and assessment techniques. Moreover, in addition to revising or developing the curriculum, it is crucial to ensure effective implementation. As curriculum implementation is not a one-time process, there should be a functional mechanism to regularly review and, if necessary, further revise the curriculum based on feedback and assessment results from teachers and students.

Remuneration system development

Third, it is also of vital importance to establish or improve a remuneration system, entitling Cambodian academics to a decent standard of living and enabling them to focus on their teaching career. The remuneration package or system should include competitive base pay, additional performance/merit-based pay, upper-tier health insurance coverage, retirement contributions, and other incentives, such as research/writing stipends, housing allowance for high-cost areas, and funds for CPD. This can be hard to achieve given the current state of socioeconomic development of Cambodia and the need for the government to prioritize other critical issues; however, it is important to start

thinking about different options that may lay the foundation for the establishment of a robust and well-defined remuneration system. Even though the optimal approach to faculty remuneration varies based on key factors such as the size, funding structure, mission, and vision of each educational institution, offering a competitive remuneration package remains crucial. It can serve as a key instrument for attracting and retaining highly qualified faculty members, incentivizing them to perform at their highest potential.

Continuing professional development

Fourth, to ensure that Cambodian faculty members are able to deliver and facilitate effective learning that promotes essential 21st-century skills among students, they should be given ample opportunities to engage in CPD activities. CPD can help them to stay up-to-date with developments in their respective fields; thus, there should be a well-defined system in place to promote and stimulate their CPD participation in all sorts of learning approaches, including work-based learning, professional activities, self-directed learning, formal education, and collaborative learning. By implementing a dynamic approach to CPD, faculty members will be well-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to diversify their teaching methods, integrate innovative practices tailored to different learning needs, and adapt to the changing educational landscape. Although MoEYS and Cambodian HEIs have done a great deal in promoting the capacity of Cambodian academics (see Doeur 2022), more work needs to be done. Providing sufficient CPD opportunities will also create a culture of continuous improvement, innovation, and excellence in teaching and research within Cambodian HEIs.

Research development

Fifth, to fulfill their tripartite roles in teaching, research, and service as well as to serve as a catalyst for innovation and societal development, HEIs in Cambodia need to undergo a reform to enhance their research and innovation capacity. On this basis, we concur with Heng (2021) who has argued that higher education in Cambodia needs to introduce a reform that focuses on (a) establishing clear research policies at both national and institutional levels; (b) providing sufficient institutional support, including research incentives and research time and space; and (c) categorizing Cambodian HEIs into teaching-

focused and research-oriented universities so that an appropriate level of government funding/investment can be allocated to support each type of institution. While we agree with this proposal for reform, we argue that it is extremely vital to cultivate a culture of academic rigor and intellectual curiosity among students and faculty members alike by creating an encouraging environment for questioning, critical thinking, and creativity. Moreover, it is crucial to ensure that the reform within this domain is aligned with Cambodia's socioeconomic needs, focusing on creating new knowledge and practical solutions to address existing social problems while also enhancing the internationalization of Cambodian higher education by promoting research collaboration and knowledge exchange. Overall, special attention should be paid to establishing a research-supporting system that considers various approaches to knowledge mobilization, including linear, relational, and system approaches, as proposed in a recent publication by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Mouthaan & Révai, 2023). In these approaches, as Mouthaan and Révai (2023) argued, the focus is on research communication and dissemination and applied research (linear), capacity building and professional network development (relational), and research incentives/rewards and research infrastructure and leadership (system).

Quality assurance system development

Lastly, there is a dire need to introduce reform to the existing system of quality assurance within Cambodian higher education. This is to ensure that HEIs in Cambodia are held accountable for upholding high educational standards and practices that can competitively meet regional and global benchmarks. At present, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, commonly known as ACC, is mandated to oversee the quality of higher education and accredit all HEIs in Cambodia (Un & Sok, 2018a). This quality assurance body requires Cambodian HEIs to meet its nine minimum standards focusing on (a) vision, mission, and goals; (b) governance and management; (c) academic staff; (d) academic programs; (e) student services; (f) learning resources; (g) physical resources; (h) financial resources; and (i) internal quality assurance (MoEYS & ACC, 2023; The Phnom Penh Post, 2022). ACC provides either provisional or full accreditation to HEIs in Cambodia. Provisional accreditation is awarded to HEIs that meet the key standards and have a clear plan to fulfill all the prescribed minimum standards after holding the status within a maximum period of three years,

while full accreditation, valid for five years, is awarded to HEIs meeting all the minimum requirements (ACC, n.d.). However, not all Cambodian HEIs meet these standards, and there appear to be no penalties for those that cannot meet the minimum standards, making it hard to improve the quality of higher education in Cambodia. Thus, a reform to the existing quality assurance body or the establishment of a new quality assurance entity is needed to enhance the quality and relevance of Cambodian higher education. If the reform to the existing system is adopted, the focus should be on a few pivotal aspects. First, it is crucial to ensure that the nine minimum standards are strictly and fairly employed for the accreditation process and that all HEIs must meet all the prescribed standards within a given timeframe as per ACC's assessment to be eligible to keep conferring any degrees. Second, those involved in quality assurance at every level need to be well-equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively perform their duties. This extends beyond mere familiarization to a deeper understanding of the quality assurance process. This can be attained through regular capacity-building activities that combine specialized theoretical training with practical, hands-on sessions. Third, the quality assurance process should be well transparent, allowing all concerned stakeholders to easily access the evaluation results. Such transparency not only strengthens the accountability of each educational institution but also supports prospective students and their families in making informed decisions concerning their choice of majors and/or educational institutions. Finally, it is of vital importance to promote a culture of self-assessment, peer review, and collaboration among Cambodian HEIs. Embracing this collegial and collaborative approach to quality assurance will allow HEIs to learn from each other's successes and challenges, ultimately strengthening the quality of higher education in Cambodia.

Overview of this issue

In this issue of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research* (CJER), there are six articles and one book review. Of the six articles, there are four full-length articles and two short articles. Two of the full-length articles are original articles, and the other two are review articles. The first full-length article was published online first in June 2023. It was contributed by Sophon Hieng, Sodom Thlang, and Seanghai Nget. The article, employing an experimental design, compared the effectiveness of concept-based instruction with a

deductive approach in teaching English grammar. It was found that concept-based instruction could improve students' ability in learning and using English grammar, and the student participants were satisfied with this approach.

The second full-length article by Vibol Boy and Tineke Water examined the challenges of teaching English in Cambodian high schools. Employing a mixed method design, the article found a number of issues related to physical facilities, resources, management and administration, teaching staff, and curriculum. The article concludes with some recommendations for improving English language teaching in the context of Cambodian public schools.

The third and fourth full-length articles are review articles that drew on secondary sources and focused on critical issues in higher education in Cambodia. The third article was contributed by Kimkong Heng and Koemhong Sol. It dealt with an issue of skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education. The article discussed major causes of skills mismatches and offered possible solutions to address this pressing issue.

The fourth full-length article examined the challenges in relation to the need to promote higher education quality in Cambodia. This article was co-written by Kimkong Heng, Bunhorn Doeun, and Liseinet Din. Like the previous article on skills mismatches, this article discussed the challenges to improving higher education quality in Cambodia. It then offered a set of recommendations on how to enhance the quality of education in the Cambodian higher education sector.

There are two short articles in this issue. The first short article was published online first in May 2023. It was co-authored by Sarin Sok and Kimkong Heng. The article discussed issues concerning the use of an artificial intelligence (AI) tool, commonly known as ChatGPT, for education and research. It particularly focused on the benefits and risks of using ChatGPT for educational and research purposes.

The second short article was published online first in August 2022. It was contributed by Engalin Ek and Sovannara Muth. The article examined major issues influencing the quality of Cambodian higher education. In particular, it discussed problems related to the weak relevance of the curriculum and the

limited competence of Cambodian university lecturers when it came to teaching and research. It concluded with brief suggestions for addressing the issues.

In this issue of the journal, we are able to include a book review, the first of its kind in the history of CJER, because in the previous two volumes (four issues), there were no book reviews. The book review introduced in the present issue was contributed by Samarnh Pang who reviewed a book entitled “Mindfulness in Multicultural Education: Critical Race Feminist Perspectives.” The book was written by Kathryn Esther McIntosh and published by Routledge in 2022. In the review, Samarnh Pang provided a summary of the book and offered his assessment of its merits and limitations.

Conclusion

In this editorial, we have discussed key challenges facing higher education in Cambodia. By drawing on our knowledge of Cambodian higher education and secondary sources, we bring to the foreground major challenges facing the sector, such as a lack of highly qualified academics; limited public funding; low academic salaries and lack of well-defined career progression; limited research engagement, capacity, and outputs; and a lack of strong strategic direction for higher education governance, among others.

We have also proposed a number of fundamental areas for reform agendas of Cambodian higher education. First, the reform should focus on improving the physical and technological infrastructure of Cambodian HEIs. Second, it is crucial to revise and/or develop the curriculum to ensure its alignment with international standards, the evolving job market, and the latest advances in knowledge. Third, it is essential to pay attention to improving the remuneration system. Fourth, it is important to promote CPD among Cambodian faculty members. Fifth, there is a need to revamp the research and innovation capacity of Cambodian HEIs. Finally, it is imperative to introduce reform that enhances the system of quality assurance within the Cambodian higher education sector.

In addition, we have provided an overview of the research articles included in this issue of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*. Despite featuring only two original research articles, we strongly hope that this journal will continue

to attract manuscripts from various stakeholders in Cambodia, particularly those within the realm of Cambodian higher education, so that more insights, perspectives, and/or research findings can be shared to reach a wider audience. We also hope that the momentum of a research and publication culture in Cambodia will continue to grow and develop, giving us a stronger hope for the development of research and higher education in Cambodia.

Finally, while we are advocating for substantive reform in Cambodian higher education and providing ideas for such a reform to usher in transformations and new developments within the sector, we suggest that future researchers, especially Cambodian ones, conduct empirical research to investigate key issues shaping Cambodian higher education, particularly issues concerning skills mismatches, higher education quality, higher education internationalization, university-industry linkages, research development, academics' research engagement, and digital transformation in higher education. Future research should also examine how Cambodian higher education can be modernized or developed into a high-quality education system that can competitively position Cambodia on the regional and global stage.

Conflict of interest

None.

About the editors

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