
Review Article

Challenges and suggestions for improving the quality of higher education in Cambodia

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Abstract

This article examines the current trends and challenges in developing higher education in Cambodia, offering insights for enhancing its quality. While the Cambodian higher education system has made noticeable developments in the last few decades, it still faces significant obstacles, including inadequate facilities, unequal educational standards, and limited access for marginalized groups. The article highlights the increasing importance of digitalization, science, technology, engineering, mathematics education, and technical training, which demand qualified educators and innovative teaching methods. It emphasizes the need for institutional autonomy, improved faculty qualifications, and outcome-based learning approaches. Furthermore, the article advocates for integrating digital technologies and robust quality assurance mechanisms to enhance transparency and accountability in higher education, thereby fostering a more effective and equitable educational environment. The article is a valuable resource for policymakers and educators aiming to foster a more effective educational landscape in Cambodia by identifying prevailing challenges and useful suggestions.

Keywords: Higher education; quality assurance; quality improvement; challenges; suggestions

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Introduction

The higher education system in Cambodia has made significant strides, yet there are still noticeable differences when compared to other Southeast Asian nations (Un & Sok, 2018). Clayton (1998) noted that the system, severely disrupted during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, has rebounded. Following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s, the Cambodian government reinstated free higher education, establishing over 130 higher education institutions (HEIs) offering both degree and non-degree programs (Sok & Bunry, 2023).

The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) is unwavering in its commitment to nurturing highly competent and morally upright individuals, fostering a society that values education and knowledge (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2007; Thornberg, 2008). This inspiring vision is at the core of MoEYS' Education Strategy Plan for 2019–2023. Nhem (2022) and Williams et al. (2016) have noted a shift in the perception of education quality in Cambodia, moving away from the traditional view of quality as the effective transmission of knowledge and services. Vann (2012) revealed that many of Cambodia's universities operated more like profit-driven businesses than legitimate institutions of higher learning, compromising the quality of their academic programs in pursuit of financial gain.

Within this context, this article aims to analyze the current trends, challenges, and advancements in Cambodian higher education, serving as a valuable resource for concerned stakeholders in the educational sector and adding to the existing body of work in this area (Heng, 2024). By identifying prevailing patterns and obstacles, the article offers insights crucial for policymakers and educators to understand the complexities of the higher education landscape in Cambodia. Furthermore, examining advancements highlights successful initiatives that can inspire further innovation and adaptation within the system (Da Silva, 2024; Huang et al., 2022). The article also proposes alternative methodologies to enhance the quality of higher education, providing actionable strategies that can lead to meaningful improvements in teaching and institutional management (Rasli et al., 2022; Shirani et al., 2016). Although it does not explicitly identify a specific research gap, the synthesis of existing materials and prior studies lays a foundation for future research endeavors, making it a relevant contribution to the discourse on educational reform in

Cambodia (Duggan, 1996; Heng & Sol, 2023; Tan, 2007). As a result, the insights presented in this article are essential for driving positive change and fostering a more effective educational environment.

New trends in higher education in Cambodia

Cambodia's higher education system has recently experienced notable changes and developments (Heng, 2024; Williams et al., 2016). A significant trend to highlight is the commitment of MoEYS to push the total number of accredited HEIs in the country to 100 by 2025. This includes public and private universities (MoEYS, 2019). In 2017, MoEYS collaborated with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to establish two specialized colleges dedicated to teacher education. These include the Phnom Penh Teacher Education College and the Battambang Teacher Education College (Sok & Heng, 2024). Moreover, there are plans to merge other regional and provincial teacher centers to form colleges in different regions (Vanzin, 2020). The main objective of these two TECs was to cultivate highly skilled educators for primary and lower secondary levels in the modern era in Cambodia.

Furthermore, the higher education system in Cambodia is in line with the requirements of the current employment market since it emphasizes STEM subjects, which stand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Yamada, 2023). The STEM effort reassures students about the relevance of their education and the potential for future employment (Molesworth et al., 2009). Many Cambodian educational institutions are currently working to expand their programs, research collaborations, and curricula internationally, fostering a sense of global connection and shared learning in the higher education community (Ban & Heng, 2023; Chapman, 2009; Em et al., 2024). This inspiring international collaboration paves the way for a brighter future in higher education. Many HEIs involve establishing partnerships with foreign universities, offering English-language courses, and attracting international students to study in Cambodia to pursue their academic interests (Hill et al., 2021). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, school systems in Cambodia have shifted to remote or online learning. This shift is poised to persist as educational institutions strive to enhance educational opportunities and provide more adaptable learning options (Heng & Sol, 2021).

The development of higher education in Cambodia

Despite numerous challenges, Cambodia's education system has achieved significant progress. The history of education in Cambodia dates back to the 12th century. [Dy \(2004\)](#) and [Sam et al. \(2012\)](#) classified the history of education in Cambodia into seven stages, beginning under the French protectorate and continuing to the present day (Table 1).

Table 1. *Stages of education systems in Cambodia*

Stage	Era	Timeline
1	French colonization	1863–1953
2	Prince Sihanouk	1953–1970
3	Khmer Republic	1970–1975
4	Khmer Rouge	1975–1979
5	Vietnamese occupation	1979–1991
6	UNTAC and coalition government	1991–1997
7	Hun Sen regime	1998–Present

Note. UNTAC = United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

The mechanism of strengthening Cambodia's higher education system commenced after the civil war in the 1990s ([Sen, 2012](#)). Education in Cambodia has encompassed the establishment of new institutions and the refurbishment of pre-existing ones. In addition, [Sen \(2012\)](#) asserted that the number of higher education enrollments in Cambodia substantially grew from 117,420 in the academic years 2006 and 2007 due to the establishment of several new state and private universities and institutes. In the academic year 2022-2023, student enrollment in Cambodian higher education was 284,599 ([MoEYS, 2023](#)). This figure indicates a continued increase in enrollment as the country expands its higher education sector, which has seen significant growth over the past few decades ([Heng, 2024](#)). The rise in student numbers is attributed to the increasing number of HEIs and the growing accessibility of education for high school graduates in Cambodia ([Sok & Bunry, 2024](#); [UNESCO, 2024](#)). Recently, there has been a noteworthy rise in the focus on the standards of educational institutions in Cambodia ([Sam et al., 2022](#)). These measures have included establishing quality control systems, improving faculty salaries and working conditions, and supporting research and innovation ([Heng & Soth, 2023](#); [Obwogi, 2013](#)).

Cambodian HEIs increasingly prioritize internationalization efforts to collaborate with foreign universities, attract international students, and offer English-language programs (Hashim et al., 2014). The accrediting system has effectively served as the primary mechanism for ensuring the quality of this level of education (Rath & Tao, 2022). Rihed (2011) stated that the swift growth of higher education without an adequate quality assurance system could establish institutions of questionable quality, undermining the entire system.

The challenges for higher education in Cambodia

Despite their significant advancements, HEIs in Cambodia face significant constraints. These include the impact of globalization on academic research and collaboration, the transformative role of information communication technology (ICT) in teaching and learning, socio-political shifts, the need for lifelong learning, and the transition to a knowledge-based society (Ban & Heng, 2023; Heng & Doeur, 2024; Heng et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, the higher education community in Cambodia has shown remarkable resilience, fostering a sense of optimism and determination for the future (Heng & Sol, 2023).

Limited funding for HEIs in Cambodia has led to poor teacher wages and a shortage of facilities and resources, making this a significant problem (Pou, 2012). Finding and retaining skilled professors and lecturers while maintaining the ability to provide students with an excellent education becomes difficult for many HEIs (Chet et al., 2022; Ek & Muth, 2023). Institutional autonomy, resources, and quality are the three primary issues facing Cambodian higher education that have persisted for a few decades (Hayden, 2019).

Public universities possess the governing committee structure required to exercise institutional autonomy, including the authority to award funds (Harman, 1978; Wang, 2010). Hence, this raises concerns about institutional independence. However, state bureaucracy is weighing down academic managers, whose academic committees and governing boards have negligible voting power (Bott, 2007). Furthermore, research laboratories, libraries, classrooms, and information technology networks are improving by exception rather than by rule, and the need for resources such as funding is a significant worry in Cambodian higher education (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013).

Furthermore, because some universities need more substantial funds and experience to provide top-notch instruction, it can be challenging to guarantee higher education quality (Duggan, 1997). Thorough accreditation and the quality assurance system may also make it necessary for businesses and students to receive assistance in assessing the caliber of degrees and certificates awarded (Agrawal et al., 2017; Un & Sok, 2018). Significant gaps exist in equality and access as well; for example, low-income and rural students frequently encounter obstacles to pursuing higher education, while students with disabilities receive inadequate support (Williams et al., 2016).

Moreover, international students confront linguistic obstructions in Cambodian university settings due to the prevalent use of Khmer as the primary mode of classroom instruction (Neau, 2003). According to Lin et al. (2023), this could limit opportunities for internationalization and non-Khmer speakers' access to education. Furthermore, reputable universities, which should have sufficient funding to meet operating costs and faculty salaries (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013), are experiencing a significant exodus of highly skilled academics from Cambodia's higher education sector (Vann, 2012).

Suggestions for quality improvement in Cambodian higher education

The standard of higher education in Cambodia should take advantage of the strengths of both sectors and put those HEIs in autonomous institutions with sufficient financial support. Cambodia can establish partnerships with public and private HEIs to facilitate resource pooling, group research endeavors, and curriculum development (Rath, 2010; Webber & Robertson, 2003). Consequently, initiatives that enable faculty members to increase their knowledge and skills can improve the quality of instruction in higher education (World Bank Group, 2024). In addition, regardless of location or background, students may receive quality education through digital technology and online or blended learning (Heng et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2020).

This technique can enhance the quality of instruction by providing access to online materials and opportunities for collaborative learning (Ally & Samaka, 2013; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007). Similarly, an outcome-based approach to education prioritizes establishing explicit learning goals for students and creating curriculum and teaching methods that align with those goals (Ahmed & Opoku, 2022; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). This technique guarantees students the necessary knowledge and skills for success, which is crucial in

selected academic disciplines ([Abuhassna et al., 2020](#); [Sofi-Karim et al., 2023](#)). Enhancing the systematic accreditation and quality assurance system can guarantee that HEIs adhere to specific quality standards ([De Paor, 2016](#)). Promoting accountability and transparency can also help instill confidence in students and employers regarding the quality of higher education ([Shah et al., 2011](#)).

The difficulty for Cambodia is not establishing a centralized national certification organization but the successful implementation and operationalization of such an accreditation body for HEIs ([Berkvens, 2009](#); [Hang, 2017](#); [Quyen, 2019](#)). The primary challenge in establishing a centralized national accreditation system lies in its effective implementation and integration within the higher education framework ([Aithal & Shubhrajyotsna, 2019](#); [Allais, 2010](#)). The primary concern is not the need for this organizational structure. However, the successful implementation of its mandate is to enhance quality assurance and uniformity across Cambodia's HEIs. The main focus should be overcoming obstacles to successfully implementing a centralized accrediting framework for the nation's tertiary education industry ([Vlăsceanu & Barrows, 2004](#)). MoEYS should oversee the organization, ensuring that institutions adhere to a predetermined set of quality standards ([Knight, 2007](#)). The development of standards is necessary to ensure that educational institutions provide students with a rigorous education that meets both their needs and the demands of the labor market ([Sparks & Waits, 2011](#)). Accreditation agencies must, therefore, regularly evaluate HEIs to guarantee compliance with accreditation criteria. Institutions that fail to satisfy the established criteria must be given specific advice for improvement and a timeline for completing the necessary adjustments ([Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003](#)).

Moreover, there is an urgent need to overhaul Cambodian higher education's current quality assurance system. This ensures that Cambodian HEIs are held responsible for upholding high standards and practices that can relatively meet regional and international norms. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) monitors higher education quality and accredits many HEIs in Cambodia ([Un & Sok, 2018](#)). Nonetheless, not all Cambodian HEIs fulfill ACC's minimum standards, and there are no repercussions for those failing to comply, hindering the enhancement of higher education quality in the nation.

Cambodia can implement a comprehensive system to ensure the quality of higher education, incorporating frequent assessments of faculty, curriculum, facilities, and other pertinent factors (Di Nauta et al., 2004). The accrediting and quality assurance authorities must guarantee transparency and accountability by publicly disseminating accreditation reports and evaluations (Conchada & Tiongco, 2015). Implementing this strategy can improve openness and accountability in the higher education system, guaranteeing that degrees are of excellent quality and instilling confidence in students and employers. Moreover, individuals engaged in quality assurance at all levels must possess the knowledge and abilities to execute their responsibilities proficiently. This goes beyond basic familiarity to a profound comprehension of the quality assurance process, achievable through consistent capacity-building initiatives that integrate specialized theoretical instruction with practical, experiential training.

Finally, it is crucial to encourage a culture of collaboration, self-evaluation, and peer review among Cambodian HEIs, allowing them to improve their quality assurance via cooperative and collegial approaches, as they can benefit from one another's successes and challenges.

Conclusion

Updating Cambodia's accreditation requirements to align with the country's progress in higher education quality is imperative. However, as previously discussed, the current quality assurance system faces significant challenges. ACC supervises the accreditation of all HEIs. However, many still need to meet ACC's basic standards, and there appear to be no consequences for those who fail to comply. This lack of accountability hinders meaningful improvements in the quality of higher education nationwide. Therefore, it is critical to develop the accreditation system in collaboration with various stakeholders to address these issues and ensure that educational institutions provide high-quality instruction.

Overall, fostering a collaborative environment between public and private HEIs is crucial. Such collaboration will facilitate resource consolidation, promote joint research initiatives, and enhance educational program development while ensuring that institutions maintain adequate independence. Moreover, it is essential to cultivate a culture of evaluation, including self-assessment and peer

evaluation. By adopting a collegial and cooperative approach to quality assurance, challenges and lessons learned can be shared, ultimately helping HEIs to collaborate and enhance the overall quality of Cambodian higher education.

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