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Promoting teachers' continuous professional development in Cambodian higher education: Issues and recommendations

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Abstract

Teachers need to continually update their teaching skills and knowledge to keep up with the needs of students and the entire education sector. Many teachers are urged to engage in self-improvement to offer their students the best content and get the best outcomes. However, in the Cambodian context, there are several challenges that affect teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). Key challenges include financial challenges and a lack of support from relevant institutions and stakeholders. As a major facilitator of CPD, the Cambodian government has been involved in various measures to facilitate CPD, especially in the higher education sector. This article discusses the involvement of the Cambodian government in promoting CPD in higher education. It also examines key challenges to CPD provision and offers recommendations to further improve CPD opportunities for Cambodian university teachers.

Keywords: Continuous professional development; higher education; university teachers, recommendations; Cambodia

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Introduction

The higher education sector plays a vital role in national growth as it produces professionals who are involved in all other sectors. Thus, it is a sensitive sector for any country seeking to develop competent workers. Enhancing professional development ensures that teachers are proficient and competent in their profession while furnishing them with essential skills that can help them to progress in their careers. In many cases, however, teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is usually neglected with the assumption that university teachers are qualified and competent to meet the educational demands of learners and the job market (King & South, 2017). This assumption leads to the continued recycling of old teaching content, meaning that all the graduates learn the same content knowledge over the years (King, 2018a). Government involvement in CPD opens up doors of opportunities to the teaching profession and education sector in general. The most significant benefit of CPD is ensuring that teachers can keep pace with the standards of other teachers who advance their CPD in the same field. Therefore, CPD training can be used as a point of reference for improvement. Governments, therefore, have a role in ensuring that all teachers have some minimum professional qualifications gained through self-improvement. Another benefit of CPD is that it helps teachers to stay interested in the profession. Many governments have been experiencing challenges of high attrition and turnover rate for teachers (Eather et al., 2022; Ebrahim et al., 2021; Fang et al., 2022). Providing CPD means that teachers will be engaged and interested in learning new knowledge and skill areas. It also means that governments do not waste their resources training teachers who leave the profession after some time.

In the Cambodian context, the government has heavily invested in ensuring that teachers keep updating their knowledge to meet the demands of students in both general and higher education in the last two decades (Kov, 2022). The investment in CPD-related matters includes research and development, tuition subsidization through scholarships, infrastructural development, and CPD (Tinio et al., 2022). The higher education enrollment rate in Cambodia stood at 10% in 2011, which was extremely low compared to that of other countries in the region. According to MoEYS (2022), there were 16,676 teachers and 201,900 students in Cambodian HEIs in 2020. Cambodian higher education does not have global recognition, and none of the local universities are ranked as world-

class universities by the QS World University Rankings (Heng, 2020b; Leng, 2022). Cambodian higher education is still at a low standard, way below that of many countries in the Southeast Asian region. The laxity of the Cambodian government to enable CPD has made the level of higher education remain low.

In this article, the role of the Cambodian government in promoting CPD will be discussed. The article will also outline some gaps that the government can bridge to enable CPD in higher education. It concludes with some recommendations on how the government can be further involved in CPD for teachers to improve educational standards.

Rebuilding the higher education sector

Following the genocidal regime in the 1970s, it was estimated that there were 28,000 teachers in 1970, but only 7,000 remained in service in Cambodia in 1979 (Fergusson & Masson, 1997). This was a massive loss to the educational sector, and the Cambodian government had to develop policies to rebuild it. However, education rebuilding would only be possible if the challenges ailing the education sector were identified and resolved (Sam et al., 2012). It was established that systemic issues such as corruption and the patronage system were deeply entrenched and complex, making it difficult to implement reforms (The Asean Post, 2020). Through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), the Cambodian government tried to ensure that these challenges were eliminated to give room for the proposed reforms (Kitamura, 2016). The National Higher Education Task Force created for the redevelopment of the sector also identified the risk-averse mentality as a vital hindrance to introducing educational reforms and innovation (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013). It was established that low teacher salaries and the underfunding of higher education were significant challenges that affected teacher recruitment and motivation (Zhang, 1998).

Over the past few decades, Cambodian higher education did not receive much attention from the government as the focus was on improving the dilapidated basic education (Milton, 2013). Universities received minimal funds that were only adequate for the operational cost and infrastructural development. As a result, many universities were underfunded, making it hard for them to ensure their sustainability (Ford, 2006). The government has, however, worked with

international organizations such as the United Nations and World Bank to offer developmental assistance to Cambodian universities (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013). For example, UNESCO has introduced a STEPCam program to offer financial and professional support for Cambodian university teachers, while the World Bank has introduced the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project and the Higher Education Improvement Project to improve higher education in Cambodia (Beng, 2020; Heng, 2020b). These projects are parts of the World Bank's assistance that seeks to improve the quality and relevance of higher education and research, mainly in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and agriculture, at targeted public higher education institutions and to improve governance in the sector (Beng, 2020). This assistance has somehow made it possible to organize and facilitate CPD, which contributes to an improvement in the overall quality of Cambodian higher education.

Efforts of MoEYS to promote CPD for teachers

MoEYS has been actively rebuilding the education sector (Burkhardt, 2009). It has introduced in-service teachers' CPD activities in all universities. In-service CPD activities are typically viewed as relevant, practical, timely, and topical. They are generally appreciated by teachers who are accustomed to working in isolation with little technical support (MacNeil, 2004). In-service CPD for teachers has played a vital role in ensuring that teachers are enabled to deliver quality teaching as required (Un & Sok, 2018). In-service CPD aims to accomplish educational objectives by incorporating a range of other factors that improve teachers' current professional development (King, 2018b). MoEYS considers CPD as a multifaceted process that imparts skills for effective teaching. The involvement of MoEYS in in-service CPD aims to ensure that teachers are adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to respond to emerging needs. The Cambodian government has sought to ensure that in-service CPD is a continuous process that goes on throughout a teacher's career (Ros & Sol, 2021). This enables teachers to be updated on the emerging issues and developments in the education sector.

Thus far, the government has taken key steps to implement CPD for teachers (Eam, 2022). The first step involved identifying the key features of effective professional development (Roesken-Winter et al., 2015). It aimed to ensure that

CPD was planned and delivered effectively. The features of effective CPD were identified as content, active learning, coherence, duration of learning programs, and collective learning (Armour et al., 2017). The next step entailed selecting a task force of experts to ensure that these features were available in the proposed CPD sessions. The provision of professional training was conducted cautiously, resulting in positive changes in teachers' pedagogies and classroom practices (Waters, 2021). Finally, MoEYS deployed qualified officers to confirm that the features of effective CPD were reflected in classroom practices (Wallace & May, 2016). The collaboration between universities and ministry officials in assessing CPD implementation had ensured that more teachers were committed to furthering their knowledge base.

MoEYS also has a dedicated department of personnel with a CPD management office. This office was tasked to assist teachers seeking to continue their CPD. It was a part of a program called Strengthening Teacher Education Programs in Cambodia (Vanzin, 2021). The office was opened in August 2020 and sought to support reforms on the establishment of the CPD system and the Teacher Career Pathway for teachers in Cambodia (Meak, 2021). The new office aims to help manage a high-quality, school-based professional development system, which supports and empowers educators to ensure that every public school in Cambodia has well-qualified and effective teachers and school directors (Holmes, 2020). This is achieved through the management and regulation of CPD delivery, which includes benchmarking, accreditation and quality assurance, CPD credits management, and communication with teachers, school leaders, and education specialists. This form of CPD focuses on higher education, which did not attract as much attention as the basic education in the past.

The government has also continued to be actively involved in CPD enhancement for university teachers. For example, through MoEYS, it has developed the CPD Action Plan 2019-2023, which identifies key areas and how they can be addressed using short- and long-term strategies (MoEYS, 2019). These strategies are adopted to implement the key areas to improve the overall face of higher education by promoting CPD. Therefore, teaching is likely to be more interesting if university teachers are given a chance to contribute to developing CPD training sessions. MoEYS has asserted that the success of the action plan depends on the effective implementation and management of key

priority activities. These include the theory of change, management mechanisms, CPD delivery, CPD for teachers, CPD for schools, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring and evaluation (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020). The objective of the action plan is to ensure that teachers are trained for an all-rounded experience that favors quality delivery of education (Bo et al., 2018).

MoEYS has also made several reforms in recent years, aiming to improve the quality of teachers. During the 2020 World's Teacher's Day, the Minister of Education, His Excellency Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, announced reforms that would be undertaken for teachers' improvement (Tolbert, 2018). At first, he noted that teachers had been awarded a pay increase to motivate them. The Minister also claimed that MoEYS would continue working with different stakeholders, particularly the Ministry of Economy and Finance, to explore possible ways to continue to increase teacher salaries (The Phnom Penh Post, 2020). He also outlined several pillars that were the basis of the education policy reforms. These pillars included the implementation of the teacher policy action plan, review of curricula and textbooks, improved learning environments, enforcement of inspections, improvement of learning evaluations, and higher education reforms. This statement for reforms was to show the commitment of the government through MoEYS to promoting CPD among university teachers.

Remaining challenges that constrain CPD provision

Despite the steps taken by MoEYS to improve higher education by providing teachers with CPD opportunities, the sector is still facing many challenges (see Heng & Sol, 2022). The main challenge is the low educational level among university teachers. According to MoEYS (2022), among the 16,438 teachers in both public and private HEIs, there are 3,948 teachers with bachelor's degrees, 11,053 with masters' degrees, and 1,788 with PhD degrees. This number suggests a questionable quality of teaching as those with bachelor's degrees can still teach in the undergraduate programs. This issue also means that there are few qualified CPD trainers because to be qualified, CPD trainers should have master's or PhD degrees.

Another challenge is the inadequate infrastructure for CPD provision, especially in HEIs in rural areas. This makes it difficult to conduct on-site CPD. Teachers from such institutions are forced to take their CPD in other institutions

with the necessary infrastructure and resources for CPD, making it hard for them to fully participate in CPD sessions. Moreover, the existing quality assurance bodies, including internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance, do not function well. An IQA office has been established at some universities only to satisfy the requirement of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), while other institutions may not have the IQA office established at all (Vann, 2012). Although more universities have the IQA office in place, its operation to ensure the quality of teaching and learning remains an issue, requiring attention from the university management and relevant IQA officers.

In Cambodia, there is an issue with university teachers focusing heavily on teaching to generate income, making it difficult to participate in self-improvement or CPD activities. This issue translates to less interest in CPD as many teachers are busy generating extra income. This problem affects career progression as many university teachers are more oriented toward income generation (Heng et al., 2022). CPD is usually associated with benefits for teachers such as career progression, promotion chances, retention, and commitment (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). However, in the Cambodian context, teachers' promotion and retention are influenced more by the number of classes they can teach than the opportunities for CPD. Therefore, teachers tend to focus more on having more teaching classes, additional responsibilities, and leadership skills which could get them an easier promotion than CPD (Sot et al., 2022). This reluctance to participate in CPD continues to affect the quality of higher education in Cambodia.

Recommendations

The government plays a significant role in ensuring that university lecturers are well prepared and trained to meet the needs of their students. The government's involvement in promoting CPD has been fruitful, suggesting a positive outlook for university teachers who are the first beneficiaries of CPD before it spreads to the learners and eventually the entire higher education sector. Professional development should therefore be continuous to ensure that teachers are adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge to understand the dynamic technology-emerging phases in the education sector (Doeur, 2022).

The following are some recommendations for the Cambodian government to further promote CPD among university teachers.

Strengthening quality assurance mechanisms

It is recommended that the government should strengthen the quality assurance mechanism in higher education by improving the existing curriculum content used for CPD for teachers. Strengthened quality assurance mechanisms can ensure that students are being taught the recommended content materials. CPD for university teachers can enable them to provide learners with the learning content they need. Currently, there seem to be no clear quality assurance measures, although ACC requires every higher education institution in Cambodia to have its own IQA office.

Improving research and innovation facilities

Another strategy the government can pursue to support CPD would be to start and improve university research and innovation facilities. As of 2015, it was established that 64.9% of 444 faculty members from 10 Cambodian universities had never been involved in research at all (Eam, 2022). Since Cambodian HEIs could play a critical role in the growth and development of the country, enhancing research and innovation would be an important way to produce competent professionals through the guidance and assistance of well-trained teachers. The research and innovation facilities would therefore be beneficial to students, teachers, and communities. However, CPD needs to ensure that teachers are properly trained on how to handle and use emerging technologies and other important skills. This can be achieved when the government sets up these facilities in strategic universities to facilitate exchange programs among the teachers who come to improve their profession.

Financing CPD

Lack of adequate funding has been established to be one of the leading impediments to CPD in the Cambodian higher education sector (Tithsatya, 2017). The government has for long paid attention to basic education at the expense of higher education. Although in 2019, the government allocated $915 million to the education sector, only 33.6% went to higher education, hence

creating a deficit (Heng, 2020a). Increased funding by the government with proper management of HEIs could open doors for effective CPD. Universities themselves find it difficult to offer CPD given the insufficient funds provided by the government. Collaboration between the government, the private sector, and universities could help to increase funding and stimulate improvement in the higher education sector in Cambodia (see Heng 2020b). Cambodia has received funding from international organizations such as the World Bank to improve its higher education and research and broaden access to higher education for vulnerable learners (Bou & Marcela, 2018). This funding can strategically be used to facilitate CPD that will eventually improve teachers' skills, expertise, and knowledge.

Establishing legislation for CPD

National legislation stating the obligation for higher education teachers to have an initial entry training certificate would help promote CPD. These teachers should have a basic level of training that is above the students they teach. This is to ensure that they already have prior knowledge of what their students would want to know. Having national legislation outlining the minimum academic achievement for university teachers would ensure that students are taught by competent teachers. The legislation would also provide directions on how university teachers should carry out their CPD. Having this stipulation as a law would mean that teachers who are reluctant to participate in CPD will have no choice but enroll in CPD or training sessions.

Creating monitoring task forces for CPD

The government can also create a task force to oversee the effective implementation of CPD for university teachers. While the will of individual teachers shapes their decision to be involved in CPD, the government should have a role to play in maximizing the involvement of higher education teachers in their CPD through a clear monitoring mechanism. Otherwise, even those who are willing to take part in CPD are likely to be failed by the lack of support from the government or their institutions. It has been reported that some teachers are reluctant to seek CPD, while others are not supported by their institutions to participate in CPD (Corrado & Tungjan, 2019). Therefore, the government should seek to seal the loopholes that affect the dissemination of

training to all teachers. This can make it easier for individual teachers and universities to participate in CPD training.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the Cambodian government is actively involved in CPD for teachers. Initially, the Cambodian education sector was affected by the civil war and the genocidal regime, leading to the great loss of the teaching staff. Over the past few decades, the government has been making initiatives for teachers' capacity development to address the sector's challenges. The government has tried to eradicate corruption and the patronage system, which has inhibited CPD. It has also identified teachers' low salaries and the underfunding of the sector as key challenges affecting teacher recruitment and motivation. The government has also helped higher education by stepping in to identify effective key features for CPD to ensure success and effectiveness. The CPD management office opened by MoEYS is also an indication of the government's efforts to strengthen CPD in Cambodia, especially in higher education. MoEYS has also introduced the CPD Action Plan 2019-2023, establishing key areas that need improvement to encourage development in the higher education sector.

However, there are remaining challenges. Key challenges that have been frequently discussed include low qualifications among university teachers, inadequate infrastructure for good distribution of CPD, and limited quality assurance mechanisms. The reluctance of many teachers to participate in training sessions is also a common problem for CPD. This is associated with the minimal incentives for participating in CPD, such as limited opportunities for promotion and retention (Sot et al., 2022).

This article has made recommendations on what the government can do to improve higher education standards through CPD. It is recommended that the government should strengthen quality assurance mechanisms, improve research and innovation facilities, finance CPD, establish legislation for CPD, and create a task force for CPD, among other strategies.

Finally, this article has some recommendations for future research. For example, future researchers should conduct actual research involving empirical

data collected from MoEYS officials, higher education institutions' management teams, and teachers to design cost-effective and practical CPD for teachers. Future research should also dig deeper, conduct a cost-benefit analysis, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the current CPD, and take action to improve the quality of the CPD implementation.

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