

A Brief Review of Cambodian Higher Education

Deepening ASEAN integration has brought to the fore concerns about the quantity and quality of Cambodia's human resources. The issue of quality in higher education has also come under scrutiny. Related reforms over the last two years have raised many important questions about educational process. This brief review finds that Cambodian higher education is evolving significantly and in the right way, but slowly. There remain some challenges, particularly the need for effective mechanisms to hasten the development of higher education.

Introduction

More than half (51 percent) of Cambodia's population is under the age of 25, and one fifth (19.96 percent) is in the 15-24 year age group and therefore classified¹ as youth (MOP 2015). Boosting the skills of this young workforce will support industry and lift growth. However, failing to unlock this huge one-time potential by "Not providing young people with quality education and skills needed in the country's labour market could amount to forgoing the demographic dividend" (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 234).

Human resource development through education has been identified as a top research and policy priority (MOEYS 2015; World Bank 2015), with a significant focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching in Cambodia's higher education institutions and facilitating the transition from education and training to employment for the highly skilled (Sam, Zain and Jamil 2012a, 224).

Despite the substantial literature on higher education in Cambodia that has been built up since the 1990s, a contemporary review of this body of work has yet to be compiled. Therefore, the

main objective of this paper is to present a broad literature review of higher education in Cambodia, covering the history of higher education, the issues facing higher education today, and the nature and scope of higher education policy. The paper concludes by identifying knowledge and research gaps to ensure that future work on higher education in Cambodia supports the pressing needs of the country.

History of higher education

Cambodian higher education dates from the Angkor period. There is documented evidence (Chhem 1997) that higher education institutions were established in the ninth century during the reign of King Yasovarman I (889-910) in the form of small colleges. Almost three centuries later, under King Jayavarman VII (1180-1220), Buddhist monastic universities flourished. The largest ones, Ta Prohm and Prah Khan, were founded on the model of Nalanda University (427 to 1197), India's ancient seat of learning. Teachers, monks and thousands of students lived on the same campus. The curriculum included religious studies (Mahayana Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism), Sanskrit, art and architecture, medicine, astrology and astronomy, mathematics and so on (Chhem 2007, 2008). This Angkorian culture of learning and teaching seems to have faded progressively.

Very few written records exist regarding the history of Cambodian higher education between the 13th and 19th centuries. Further research is needed to shed light on this largely unexamined

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¹ Following the United Nations' definition (United Nations Secretary-General 2001).

topic. Some aspects of the Cambodian education system during the French colonial period (1863-1953) were described by French administrators, but by then the higher education system based on large Buddhist monastic universities no longer existed. Instead, there were many small schools operating within the Wat (pagodas). These were the only types of indigenous schools existing within the kingdom when the French annexed Cambodia in 1863 (Ayres 2000; Peycam 2010) and they were open only to boys.

Wat education continued into the early twentieth century (Leng 2013), when primary and secondary schools were established under the French Protectorate (1863 to 1953). Modern higher education institutions (HEIs), based on the French model, were set up towards the end of the colonial period. The National Institute of Law, Politics and Economics was the first Cambodian HEI to be built in the late 1940s (Sloper 1999; Yuok 2007). It later became the Royal University of Law and Economics.

Immediately after Cambodia gained independence from France, the number of HEIs increased steadily and university student enrolment grew from 200 in 1953 to 5753 in 1970 (Sam, Zain and Jamil 2012a, 228). This rapid rise stopped when Cambodia was drawn into successive national and regional conflicts. During the period 1970-75, when Cambodia was known as the Khmer Republic, US carpet bombing and civil war displaced nearly half of the population and destroyed about 50 percent of educational facilities (Mysliwicz 1988; Chet 2006; Duggan 1997). Then, in 1975-79, the Khmer Rouge deliberately annihilated the formal education system. Universities were closed and the majority of the educated citizens were killed or went into exile (Clayton 1998).

Protracted civil war after the Khmer Rouge was ousted led to further destruction of educational institutions and infrastructure (Duggan 1997; Chet 2006, 13). The geopolitics of superpower diplomacy between 1979 and 1993 left Cambodia in virtual diplomatic, political and economic isolation throughout the 1980s (Mysliwicz 1988), profoundly debilitating post-war reconstruction efforts. With assistance from the former Soviet Union and its allies, the country made some progress in restoring its primary education system,

while “higher education benefited little from this effort, and the embargo against assistance to Cambodia by the United Nations from 1979-1989 prevented many other countries from giving direct aid to Cambodia” (Chet 2006, 13; Read 1992). Reconstruction started in earnest after the UN-sponsored election in 1993, and the Cambodian education system was once again open to multiple international influences (Chhem 1997).

In sum, over the last six decades, the modern Cambodian higher education system has been moulded on various academic models: through the prism of the French “mission civilisatrice” to the imposition of the Soviet format of education, and then, from 1993 onwards, an era of intense internationalisation with a flux of technical assistance from international and regional organisations and countries such as Australia and Japan and more recently China. The French model remains in a few HEIs, though English is now the second language of choice for Cambodian students. Thousands of students choose to study abroad, mainly in Japan and Australia.

The single main challenge of Cambodian HEIs is to provide a qualified and relevant workforce to further develop the Cambodian economy, as articulated in the government’s Industrial Development Policy 2015-25. Education reform aiming at strengthening the quality and relevance of HEIs is a must.

Higher education today

A snapshot of tertiary enrolments, completion and teachers

Investment in education has played a key role in Cambodia’s development, in keeping with national strategy to “align economic and national development by strengthening the education sector” (Duggan 1996, 362). The shift in the 1990s from a centrally planned to a more open market economy led to the emergence of both private HEIs and fee-paying programs in public HEIs. The number of HEIs mushroomed from just 14 in 2000 to 110 in 2015. Even so, Cambodia’s tertiary enrolment ratio² is one of the lowest

² Defined as “The number of pupils enrolled in tertiary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total population of the five-year age group following on from the secondary school leaving age” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2016).

Table 1: Number of new higher education graduates in 2013/14

Tertiary graduates	Associate	Bachelor	Master	PhD	Total
Male	3338	21806	3468	33	28645
Female	2264	16428	1047	1	19740
Total	5602	38234	4515	34	48385

Source: Authors' aggregation of data from MOEYS 2015, 34-35

Table 2: Qualifications of tertiary teachers, 2012-14

Teacher	2012/13				2013/14			
	Bachelor	Master	PhD	Total	Bachelor	Master	PhD	Total
Local teacher	3470	6023	700	10,202	3139	6632	717	10488
Foreign teacher	250	285	105	640	270	485	119	874
Total	3720	6317	805	10,842	3409	7117	836	11362

Source: MOEYS 2015

across the ASEAN region; standing at a meagre 16 percent in 2011, it is second only to Myanmar (14 percent) and trailing behind Vietnam (24 percent) and Thailand (53 percent) (UNESCO 2016).

In academic year 2013/14, HEIs produced 48,385 graduates (Table 1) and employed 11,362 teaching staff (Table 2). Most HEI faculty members are Cambodian and hold a master's degree, implying that efforts to build the teaching capacity of Cambodian HEIs have been relatively successful. However, these improvements appear to have stagnated in recent years: the number of staff with a master's degree increased by roughly 1000 between 2009/10 and 2013/14, whereas it rose by almost 1900 between 2008/09 and 2009/10 alone (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 47). In 2012/13, just over 255,000 students were enrolled in higher education degree programs,³ some 60 percent of them in private HEIs (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 38; MOEYS 2015).

³ The enrolment rate comprises the total number of enrolled students across all year levels (first year to final year), though it is not uncommon for students to be enrolled full-time at multiple HEIs simultaneously, which may distort student numbers (Innes-Brown 2006).

Key issues besetting higher education

Despite increases in the numbers of HEIs, graduates and qualified teachers, widespread problems persist. The key issues facing the revitalisation of Cambodia's higher education sector are summed up neatly by Sam et al. (2013, 284) as "the Government's financial constraints, lack of admission requirements and academic support services, lack of human resources, teaching quality, and research capacity, academic relevance, and autonomy, and academic freedom within universities". Our literature review reveals three significant challenges: inequalities in access to higher education, poor quality teaching and learning, and skills mismatches.

Higher education access

Twenty of the 25 provinces and Phnom Penh municipality have HEIs (MOEYS 2015). However, because a large number (60 percent) of HEIs are privately funded, they have concentrated in Phnom Penh. This has led to rural-urban education disparities and consequent information asymmetries in the provision of education further exacerbating inequalities in access to higher education. Many young people are therefore compelled to move from the provinces to access

higher education opportunities in the capital. This migration of students is not a new phenomenon, yet there is a lack of systematic research to address issues related to learning and training opportunities and services provision. The modest body of published work on migration in Cambodia (MOP 2012; Bylander 2015) emphasises employment rather than accessible education.

Urban-rural divide aside, an earlier study by Chet (2006) sheds light on the narrow and inflexible pathways to higher education. Few entry routes to higher education exist, and only for students who pass grade 12 or hold an associate's degree or equivalent.

Other studies have identified gender-based disparities (Un, Chuon and Ngin 2013a). For instance, Un and Sok (2014, 17) identified "... a number of areas where action needs to be taken: inequitable access from certain groups like female students and poor families." Compared with men, women arguably face more limitations to accessing higher education, mainly related to entrenched gender roles and stereotypes in society expecting women to stay at home and get married. Even upon gaining access to higher education, women may face further challenges including coping with living in the city, lack of on-campus housing in schools, commuting long distances which could be unsafe, sexual harassment and discrimination, and continued household pressures and parental expectations. And yet, research reveals that investing in women's education is a key factor for socioeconomic development at local and national scales (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015; CDRI 2015).

Education quality

Even in areas served by many HEIs, the quality of higher education is by no means assured. A scoping study of research capacities in 15 Cambodian universities (Kwok et al. 2010, 9) stresses that "quantitative expansion of the HEI sector raises questions about the quality of universities, especially the lack of research culture and research capacity". Tertiary students also seem to focus more on quantity. Hashim, Leong and Pich (2014, 503) observed how "in order to maximise the perceived future gains", university students typically enrol in multiple degree programs and HEIs concurrently. Although

multiple degree programs may complement each other, the authors posit that the focus on higher education quantity may have adverse impacts for student performance and university admission requirements.

Despite quantitative improvements in tertiary teacher training, the quality of higher education teaching and the availability and use of specialist resources for teaching and research remain problematic (Sam et al. 2013). A research model developed by Sam et al. (2013) to examine the quality of Cambodia's tertiary graduates articulates the links between student background and work ethic (student inputs), the educational environment (institutional inputs) and academic success (higher education outputs). However, further empirical research is required to identify readily feasible measures that could support improvements in education quality and research capacity in Cambodia's HEIs.

Skills mismatches and vocational education

Recent studies have identified marked skills mismatches between the knowledge and skills new graduates have acquired and what potential employers need (Chen, Sok P. and Sok K. 2007; Chet 2009; Madhur 2014). These mismatches are especially pertinent in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector. A STEM skills base is integral to Cambodia's socioeconomic development and vital for underpinning industrial growth. Yet the majority of tertiary students opt to specialise in humanities or social sciences, especially business, economics and foreign languages (Un, Chuon and Ngin 2013b; Sam et al. 2013, 284).

A similar imbalance is evident in technical and vocational education and training (TVET): the most popular courses are business, finance, ICT and English language, rather than hardcore subjects such as mechanics and engineering (Lonn and Khieng 2015, 93). Despite its importance and potential for upskilling the workforce, TVET remains a relatively under-researched and undervalued area in Cambodia, and wrongly stigmatised as a second-best option for underachievers (Lonn and Khieng 2015).

The rapidity of economic growth and the deepening of ASEAN integration, coupled with uncoordinated economic reforms, meant that

the provision and relevance of higher education and training was sidelined (Chet 2006). Underlying factors for the poor development of higher education include insufficient financial support (Un, Chuon and Ngin 2013b), outdated curriculums, shortage of quality faculty, low teacher salaries, and fragmented HEI governance, management and financing (Chet 2006). Another aspect is the absence of university-government-industry strategic partnerships (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 71).

The following section looks at how these challenges are being addressed through policy, with a focus on recent steering documents of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS).

Higher education policy

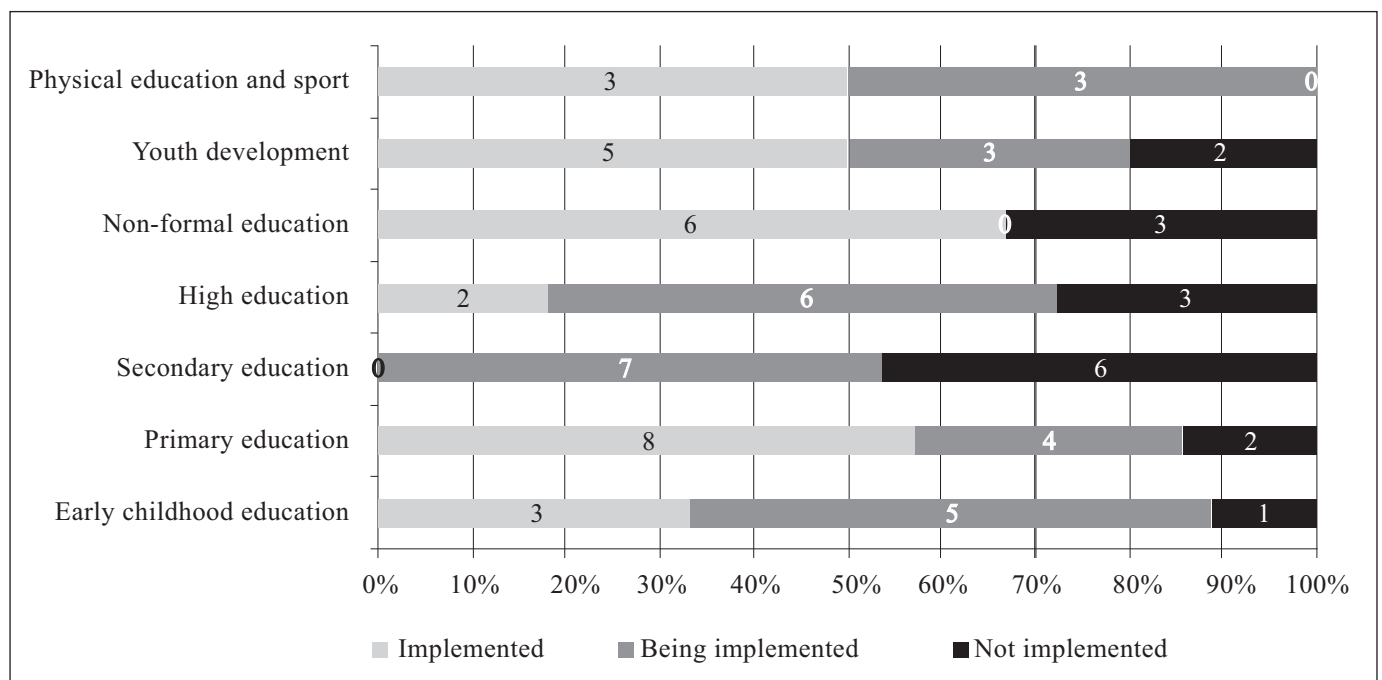
The government’s development vision is for Cambodia to become a high-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050 (MOEYS 2014). Towards achieving this vision, MOEYS has placed higher education as a top priority on the education reform agenda, as reflected in Rectangular Strategy III 2014-18 on building capacity and developing human

resources through “Strengthening and Enhancing Education, Science and Technology and Technical Training”. The Higher Education Vision 2030, adopted in April 2014, outlines key strategies and comprehensive action plans to ensure equity and access for all, effective and efficient management of the higher education system, and adequate human resources development (MOEYS 2014).

The Education Strategic Plan 2014-18 sets out three top policy objectives: (1) to increase the number of scholarships for eligible students from low-income, especially disadvantaged or vulnerable, families to access higher education opportunities, (2) to improve the quality and relevance of higher education, and (3) to have fully functioning education systems in place by 2018 to support HEIs to meet national and regional standards (MOEYS 2014).

As Figure 1 indicates, despite significant progress in several subsectors, policy actions to strengthen higher education systems are lagging. Possible explanations for the apparent policy inertia are financial and governance constraints. Public spending on education constitutes a meagre 2.6 percent of GDP, higher only than that of Laos and Myanmar among ASEAN member

Figure 1: Progress in policy implementation by subsector, 2014



Note: The figures on the bars represent the number of planned policy actions.

Source: MOEYS 2015, 2

states, and only half of UNESCO's international benchmark of around 5 percent (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 234).

A second reason is the highly fragmented governance of the higher education sector. As Un and Sok (2014, 7) point out, "there has been no formal permanent mechanism for overarching coordination" among HEIs, which have been under the supervision of 14 government agencies, known as parent ministries (You 2012; Sen and Ros 2013). Thus collaboration between ministries, let alone cohesive long-term planning and development strategies for the higher education sector, has been very limited. Further, education legal and regulatory framework is not sufficient for controlling the higher education system.

Despite policy and finance challenges, Cambodia has indisputably made significant progress in the development and establishment of quality assurance systems and procedures. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), set up in 2003 in response to the proliferation of HEIs, plays an important role in enforcing external quality assurance functions and procedures for higher education (Un and Sok 2014; Sam, Zain and Jamil 2012b). Although its efficacy and institutional structure have been questioned (Chet 2009; Ros 2015), the ACC is a major step towards improving equity, transparency and accountability in higher education.

However, external reviews by the ACC seem to have had limited impact on improving the quality of learning and teaching in Cambodian HEIs. The issues facing higher education quality are clearly too big to be dealt with by one agency acting alone. Instead, each university should reactivate its internal quality assurance office and work collaboratively with the ACC under the supervision of MOEYS (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015, 61). Indeed, HEIs have become actively involved in implementing complementary and supporting policies and measures. For example, the RUPP developed its 2014-18 Strategic Plan within the framework of the Law on Education, the Higher Education Vision 2030, and the Education Strategic Plan 2014-18 (RUPP 2014).

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are also being encouraged, wherein researchers, education leaders and government agencies work more closely with the private sector to ensure

the successful development and implementation of higher education policy. For example, in addressing current and expected education/skills and jobs mismatches, information about private sector recruitment needs and practices will help keep higher education policy and practice relevant and pragmatic (Lonn and Khieng 2015, 96-7).

Future research directions

This review highlights the pressing need for policy and action research in Cambodian higher education that:

- Examines in detail remaining rural–urban and gender-related inequalities in higher education access, including the phenomenon of youth migration for education;
- Delves more deeply into the quality assurance of HEIs to understand how best to improve teaching-learning quality and environments for student success;
- Determines the current skills gaps between higher education and industry, especially in STEM jobs;
- Explores the potential for PPPs, specifically how to form and implement PPPs to enhance policy and strategy for developing employability skills, maximise HEI outputs and facilitate the transition of new graduates into rewarding careers.
- Identifies the nature of TVET programs and the need for TVET system reform;
- Re-evaluates the financing of higher education;
- Evaluates university accountability, particularly financing and governance;

Such research will be instrumental in supporting continuous improvement in Cambodia's higher education system, in line with national Industrial Development Policy 2015-25, particularly in relation to the development of a highly skilled workforce. As Cambodia makes fast progress towards its development targets, careful consideration of, and response to, pressing research needs is arguably more important than ever.

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