

Cambodia Development Research Forum (DRF) Symposium 2018

Postsecondary Education Development through Multi-stakeholder Engagement

1. Cambodian postsecondary education development: Where are we?

The 1990 UNESCO conference in Jomtien, Thailand, brought together the global education community to launch Education for All, moving the dialogue beyond access to general education. This call, along with Cambodia’s transition from central planning to a market economy with a multi-party political system in the early 1990s, led to both a growing demand for and a wide range of options in postsecondary education – an inclusive term that covers higher education (academic) and technical and vocational education and training (TVET). At the time, the country had only eight public postsecondary institutions, which were in poor condition and underresourced. To expand access, the government introduced privatisation reforms in 1995, allowing public institutions to offer fee-paying programs and private institutions to operate countrywide.¹ By 2017, there were 121 postsecondary institutions (48 public, 73 private), which are overseen by 16 government ministries/institutions (73 under the Ministry of Education and 35 under the Ministry of Labour).²

Postsecondary education is now available in 19 of 25 provinces and Phnom Penh. A wide range of programs in various disciplines from associate

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1 Private postsecondary education is a new phenomenon in the ASEAN region where private institutions were few or non-existent in most countries two decades ago. As in Cambodia, privatisation reforms in most ASEAN countries were a response to demand, shaped by changing national, regional and global economic and geopolitical contexts.

2 Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Education Congress* (Phnom Penh: MOEYS, 2017).

to doctoral degree are offered.³ Enrollments in postsecondary institutions have increased, from 13,461 in 1996 to 219,069 in 2016, or from 1 percent to 12 percent of the youth-aged cohort. Overall, in the past 20 years, postsecondary education in Cambodia has transitioned from an elite system to a massified one.

Postsecondary education in national development context

It has increasingly become accepted that postsecondary education matters in determining an individual’s earnings. A conservative estimate of the return on investment to postsecondary education in Cambodia is that an additional year of postsecondary education equates to a 10 percent increase in wages for men and an 11 percent increase for women.⁴ Postsecondary education also plays a critical role in enabling the socioeconomic development of a nation and raising its competitiveness. In Cambodia, the government’s commitment to higher education is shown in the increase in the education budget from USD335 million in 2014 to USD600 million in 2017, or from around 14 to 18 percent of total government spending.⁵ Policy wise, as stated in the National Strategic Development Plan 2014-18 and Rectangular Strategy III, there is a need to develop competent human resources that will enable Cambodia to realise its vision of achieving upper-middle-income status by 2030 and developed country status by 2050. In the education sector, a science, technology,

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3 MOEYS, *Education Congress*.

4 National Institute of Statistics, *Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey* (Phnom Penh: MOP, 2016).

5 Yesenia Amaro and Touch Sokha, “More Education Funds Urged,” *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 April, 2017.

engineering and mathematics (STEM) policy was introduced in 2016 to produce more graduates in these fields to support Industrial Development Policy 2015-25, which sets out to transform Cambodia from a labour-intensive to a high-skilled value-added economy by 2025. The role of postsecondary education goes far beyond economic development, however. Cambodia’s Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond⁶ and National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-25⁷ stress the development of human resources with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, ethics and values that are required in the workplace. To hasten progress, the two policies have pinpointed the following as reform priorities:

Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond	National TVET Policy 2017-25
Access and equity	Equitable access
Quality and relevance	Quality
Internationalisation ⁸	Public-private partnership
Governance and finance	Governance

Cambodian postsecondary education development is aligned with regional developments and standards aiming for skill mobility in the ASEAN Economic Community. Currently, mutual recognition agreements have been signed for eight professions: engineers, nurses, architects, surveyors, medical and dental practitioners, accountants, and tourism professionals. Education collaborations through people-to-people exchanges have enhanced knowledge sharing and mutual understanding among ASEAN countries and beyond. The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework

6 Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond is the first national comprehensive policy document developed in 2017 to enable Cambodia to achieve its Higher Education Vision 2030 (2014).

7 Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, *National Technical and Vocational Education and Training Policy* (Phnom Penh: MOLVT, 2017).

8 Knight (2008) defines internationalisation as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education. See Jane Knight, *Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalisation* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008).

(AQR) has been developed as a common regional framework that enables comparisons of ASEAN education qualifications. This growing interconnectedness with institutions in the region and beyond means Cambodia needs clear and strategic internationalisation approaches to avoid external threats and challenges and to gain maximum benefits from their engagement.

2. What are the challenges facing Cambodian postsecondary education?

Despite its significant growth and expansion, Cambodian postsecondary education remains constrained by many challenges, partly as a consequence of the legacy of civil conflict and international isolation in the 1970s and 80s. Lack of resources, weak regulatory policy and inexperienced management amid rapid growth exacerbated the already weak institutional capacity. As a result, a number of issues have emerged, some of which are discussed below:

Skills gap: There is a discrepancy between educational provision and labour market needs, with employers often complaining that graduates are ill-prepared for career transition, lacking 21st century competencies like communication and critical thinking skills.⁹ This reflects the shortcomings of Cambodia’s postsecondary curriculum in which innovative pedagogy and ICT for teaching and learning are largely unknown, or poorly adopted.

Weak multi-stakeholder partnerships: Skills mismatches have been attributed to poor linkage between the private sector and education providers. Despite the government’s intention to bridge the two sectors, coordination mechanisms remain weak and unstructured. Most Cambodian education and training institutions, public and private alike, are dependent on tuition revenues, effectively limiting or distorting their performance to a teaching function, even though the majority profess the tripartite mission of teaching, research and public service. Without investment

9 Khieng Sothy, Srinivasa Madhur and Chhem Rethy, *Cambodia Education 2015: Employment and Empowerment* (Phnom Penh: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2015).

in research and innovation, Cambodian higher education already lacks a competitive edge over its regional counterparts.

Lack of STEM graduates: The disproportionate growth of social science programs has eroded the possibilities for industrial upgrading. Most high school graduates have gravitated towards business majors, with fewer than 20 percent choosing sciences.¹⁰ Also, TVET remains unattractive to youth, with only 1 percent of employed Cambodians reported to have formal technical and vocational education in 2012.¹¹ All this has raised the question of how Cambodia can establish a quality postsecondary education system that can respond to national and regional labour demands.

3. Cambodia DRF Symposium 2018 and key policy issues to be addressed

This year marks the 10th DRF Symposium – a significant milestone since its establishment in 2008 by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) in partnership with five other Cambodian organisations, with financial support from Canada’s International Development Research Centre. This year’s event is supported by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Swiss Development Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and many local higher education institutions.

The theme of the symposium *Postsecondary Education Development through Multi-stakeholder Engagement* highlights the importance of improving the quality and narrowing the skills gap of Cambodia’s postsecondary education. This theme is not new in that the 2013 Symposium touched on how higher education and TVET could

10 According to CDRI’s (2014) report, Cambodia needs 35,000 engineers and 46,000 technicians in order to sustain annual GDP growth of 7 percent in the near term. See Srinivasa Madhur, *Cambodia’s Skill Gap: An Anatomy of Issues and Policy Options* (Phnom Penh: CDRI, 2014)

11 Hana Polackova Brixie, *Matching Aspirations: Skills for Implementing Cambodia’s Growth Strategy* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2012).

help Cambodia modernise its agriculture and diversify its industrial and service sectors to sustain economic growth and avoid the middle-income trap. Therefore, picking up from where we left off, this year’s event focuses on multi-stakeholder engagement in the development of Cambodian postsecondary education. Specifically, it aims to address these three questions:

1. What can Cambodia learn from the successful experiences of other Asian countries’ stakeholder engagement in postsecondary education development?
2. How can Cambodia leverage internationalisation to improve the quality of postsecondary education?
3. How can Cambodia promote TVET through multi-stakeholder partnerships?

4. CDRI education research

To align with the government’s development policies on postsecondary education, the Education Unit of CDRI is implementing several major policy research and capacity development programs, with support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. The higher education program has covered a range of university-related topics, including:

- STEM education
- internationalisation
- governance
- accountability
- research promotion.

Complementary to higher education projects, the TVET research programs include:

- TVET models and pathways
- apprenticeship and internship practices
- public-private partnerships
- curriculum and quality assurance
- gender equity in TVET.

These research themes are in line with Cambodia’s Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond and National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-25. Many

of these studies are underway, with data being collected, analysed and interpreted. Thus the 2018 DRF Symposium will serve as a platform to promote dialogue among stakeholders with a focus on employers and the private sector, and to disseminate and discuss CDRI's research findings on postsecondary internationalisation and public-private partnership.

5. CDRI's inclusive and participatory approach

To ensure the relevance of research and to promote local ownership, CDRI strives to fully engage policymakers, development partners,

practitioners, local institutions and ministries throughout the research cycle. Consultative meetings and capacity building programs are conducted, followed by dissemination and sharing of research results. Active participation from women and underrepresented groups is emphasised to ensure social equity and inclusive development. With accumulated experience and growing public trust, CDRI senior researchers are often invited to contribute to the formulation of key national policies. All this is a testimony to CDRI's far-reaching policy impact in its mission to support the growth and development of Cambodian society.

Themes of previous symposiums

- 2016 Science, Technology and Innovation for Sustainable Development in Cambodia
- 2015 Building Research Capacity for Cambodia
- 2014 Getting Education Right for Cambodia's Changing Labour Market Needs: Reform and Policy Research Priorities
- 2013 Cambodia Tomorrow: Development Research Priorities For a Middle-Income Country
- 2012 Inclusive Sustainable Development for Cambodia – Regional and National Policy Research Priorities
- 2011 Achieving Inclusive Growth, Social Equity and Sustainable Development for Cambodia
- 2010 Research and Policy Response to Cambodia's Recovery and Development
- 2009 The Contribution of Research to National Development Strategies and Policies in Cambodia
- 2008 Emerging Trends, Challenges and Innovations for Community-Based Approaches to Natural Resource Management in Cambodia

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