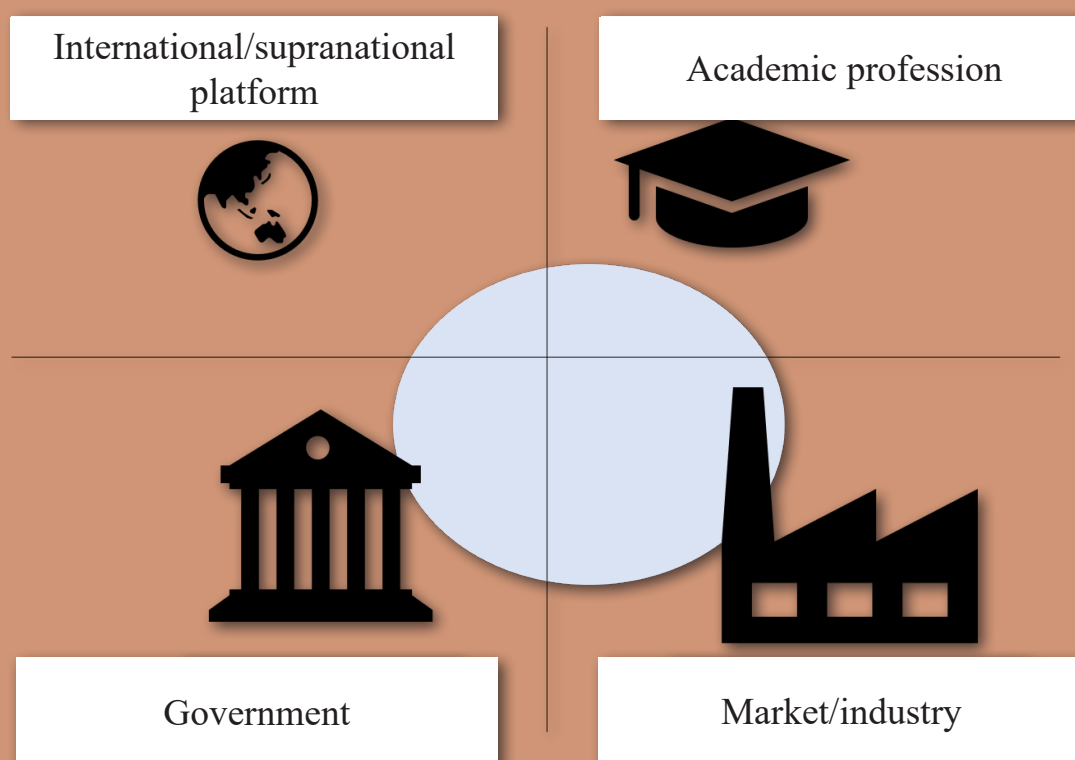


Understanding Cambodian Deans' Conceptions and Approaches to University Accountability



Eam Phyrom, Ros Vutha, Heng Sambath, Ravy Sophearoth

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Abbreviations

ACC	Accreditation Committee of Cambodia
CQF	Cambodia Qualifications Framework
HEI	higher education institution
IQA	internal quality assurance
MEF	Ministry of Economy and Finance
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
PAI	Public Administrative Institution
RULE	Royal University of Law and Economics
SEAMEO-RIHED	South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development
TVET	technical and vocational education and training

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Highlights

- Cambodian university accountability is conceived by deans as university's increasing responses to market needs and national/governmental requirements.
- Reported accountability approaches of Cambodian universities constitute not only formal ones (shaped by quality assurance scheme and formal institutional agenda) but also informal ones (based more on personal relationships, real working conditions and tolerance principles).
- Achieving accountability at Cambodian universities further requires:
 - more evidence-based, data-driven, evaluative and enforcement-oriented accountability instrument schemes and implementation framework;
 - a capable academic governing, leading and managing body that prioritizes power-balance arrangements within university (to reduce negative impacts from clashes between institutional accountability requirements and academic freedom demands); and
 - an enforceable but empowering system governance, with clear conceptual directions and expectations of accountability from university.

Executive summary

University accountability, in both theoretical and practical contexts, is ruled by complexity. At the individual and conceptual level, the idea is neither clear nor understood in the same way by everyone. At the institutional and practical level, accountability approaches and instrument schemes are manifold and sometimes overlapping as they are designed to serve different but related purposes. At the national and international/supranational levels, power struggles between the government, the market, academia (and sometimes international stakeholders) skew the university towards different forms and magnitudes of accountability. Along the same line, cultural clashes between managerial controllers and academic-freedom seekers have long persisted at the university. These complexities influence both the way a university views the concepts of accountability and the approaches it uses to achieve accountability.

The current study aims to put the concept of university accountability in Cambodia in its proper perspective. It examines how accountability in Cambodian universities is oriented towards different accounting constituencies (i.e. the government, the market, academia and international/supranational platforms). Guided by local literature, the study also explores how Cambodian university accountability is shaped by two agendas – governance and finance structures, and quality assurance practices – at both the system and the institution levels. The main research question is: What is the orientation of Cambodian university accountability? Under this main question, two themes form the study's core focus: the conceptions and the approaches of university accountability. These are explored through semi-structured interviews with deans who are knowledgeable and experienced in both academic and non-academic affairs. Two sub-questions are specified:

- How do Cambodian deans conceive the idea of university accountability in response to different accounting constituencies?
- How do governing, financing and quality-assurance schemes influence Cambodian deans in approaching and achieving university accountability?

A total of 29 deans from different faculties at six purposively selected universities (two public, two private and two public administrative institutions) were interviewed. The interviews were electronically recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. The interview datasets were supplemented with data from secondary sources (i.e. relevant institutional documents and policy documents).

On conceptions of accountability: When it comes to constructing the meaning of university accountability, Cambodian deans' responses reflect:

- Market-oriented accountability (i.e. towards students as clients, students' parents, employers and the labour market). This dimension is generally conceived as a response to market needs, characterised by the principles of academic capitalisation, resource accumulation and competition.
- National/governmental accountability (i.e. being accountable to parent ministries and the government, to national legal regulations, to civic communities and sometimes to political agenda). This dimension is conceived within the scope of the Cambodian nation, generally characterised by the logic of political and bureaucratic conformities and social or national responsibilities. Related to this dimension, the deans referred to hierarchical/institutional accountability (i.e. being accountable to junior staff, senior leaders and other colleagues). This institutional aspect is generally characterised on the

basis of organisational conformities and managerial job responsibilities within the scope of the higher education institution itself.

- Academic/professional accountability (e.g. concerns about teaching quality, students' learning, updated curriculum and research promotion) and international/supranational accountability (e.g. international student and faculty exchanges and regional/international quality assurance). These two dimensions are generally discussed in relation to the notion of "quality" and "qualification". But, based on the current dataset, they are not fully attended to and sometimes conceived in submission to (or as a bridge to) the market dimension (e.g. curriculum designed with academic contents reduced to fit market needs, or graduate quality defined by employment status).

The conceptions of Cambodian university accountability are still vague, but, interpretably, they reflect the hidden interplay between private/commercial and socio-political substances, which seems to have dominant influences over academic/professional dimension and international/supranational dimension of university accountability.

On approaches to achieving accountability: Even though the literature generally discusses accountability from the formal point of view, the current accountability approaches, as experienced by the Cambodian deans in their academic and administrative university affairs, can be conceptualised in two ways (formal and informal) and observed through various practices:

- Formal approaches (i.e. conforming to the strategic plan and institutional rules and regulations; having formal organisational meetings and commissions; practicing centralised financial management; supporting internal quality assurance processes; supporting external accreditation processes; conducting student surveys of teacher performance, and updating curricula to respond to market needs). These approaches are evidently fashioned by governance frameworks with institutional effectiveness logics, the centralised financial system, and quality assurance movements.
- Informal approaches (i.e. uninformed classroom inspections; conversations with students about teacher performance; personal conversation with and advice to teachers; and informal sharing of information or reports). These practices are based more on personal relationships and real working conditions and cultures. They are generally hard to record and measure and seemingly shaped by the deans' attitudes towards realistic and tolerant ways of working.

The reported formal instruments are generally limited in information availability and openness, evaluative capacity and actual enforcement, so restraining the achievement of university accountability in Cambodia in a systematic way. The informal, personal and less regulative approaches are more practical and preferred in approaching accountability issues. Deans justify having to use these informal approaches citing inadequate finance, time and human resources, the difficulty and high costs of formal enforcement procedures, the nature of academic work and the freedom to do it properly, the culture of tolerance, and somehow the culture of irrational interventions.

Conclusions and implications: The orientation of Cambodian university accountability towards the market dimension and its submission to the national/governmental dimension are clear from the data, yet its blurred orientation towards the academic/professional and the international/supranational dimensions (particularly, in response to most universities' missions and vision of academic excellence and international quality standards) remain a concern.

Institutional interventions that focus on creating a more *evidence-based, data-driven, evaluative, and enforcement-oriented* accountability instrument scheme are seriously needed. Such interventions are beneficial for university in two ways: (1) it allows university to comprehensively and systematically achieve accountability and (2) it helps university to efficiently manage knowledge (i.e. organisational learning). Fulfilling these gaps will, in turn, internally assure the quality of Cambodian universities and support the existing accreditation practices.

The authenticity gaps in responses to the academic/professional and the international/supranational dimensions of accountability require new directions in institutional governance, leadership and management that allow *academic freedom* and *collegiality* to prosper at the faculty and department level. With that said, the governing, leading and managing bodies of university institutions need *optimal power balance arrangements* to eliminate the debates and gaps between institutional autonomy and institutional control, between academic freedom and academic management, between formal approaches and informal approaches, between the internal situations of universities and external forces and between local quality standards and international qualification parity.

From these findings, there are also some big-picture implications for system-level higher education governance. Because the invisible hands of the market are encapsulating Cambodia's higher education sector, the governance system needs to focus on both *enforcement* and *empowerment*. To get into the market flow, the governance system should adaptively embrace the quasi-market, competition-based and so standards-based and performance-based principles of governance. Because a key rule of the market is "competition", the governance system should focus on improving *the national-level data and information system* to inform clients in the market (e.g. local students, students' parents and international students) as well as on developing a scientific *classification and ranking standard* of higher education institutions to ensure fair and merit-based competition. These system-level, competition-oriented interventions will contribute largely to a mission to bring academic excellence and international qualification parity for Cambodian higher education institutions.

Such market-enforced accountability designs and developments at the system level should be sensitive, however, and need to be accompanied with an *empowering system* to support diverse HEIs of different types, classes and ranks. In terms of accountability, a good starting point to empower university is to fulfil the gaps in the clarity of concepts of accountability. These require proper policy-guided dialogues that focus specifically on the *multidimensionality, answerability* and *enforceability* principles of accountability. System-level as well as institution-level policies need to show clear expectations and directions in terms of how HEIs and academics should perform accountably.

1. Cambodian higher education environment and emergence of accountability questions

Young and complex, the Cambodian higher education sector has been searching for the right governance system and institution model (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a, 2019b). Originally shaped by the Continental European model of governance, financing and institutionalisation (particularly the French and Soviet systems), Cambodian higher education has been increasingly influenced by capitalist ideas and market forces and geared to emulate the Anglo-Saxon model of higher education governance (Pit and Ford 2004). The state, which had full control over academic and higher education affairs until 1996/7, has tried to embrace market needs and global higher education massification movements. Touch, Mak and You (2014, 50) highlighted various Cambodian higher education reforms:

These reforms were an effort to respond to national needs and to cope with global changes. The major reforms included privatization, the transformation of public institutions into public administrative institutions (PAIs), the establishment of accreditation agencies, and the formulation of new higher education legislation.

These endeavours and developments have faced many structural challenges. In the same way that the academic literature refers to “complexity” of higher education in general, Cambodian higher education governors, policymakers, higher education institution (HEI) leaders, and education researchers generally point to the problem of “fragmentation” of Cambodian higher education sector (see Un and Sok 2018; Mak, Sok and Un 2019a, 2019b). Some of the most significant trends that explain the fragmented and complex nature of higher education in Cambodia include the lack of uniform governance structure and finance systems throughout HEIs; the uncontrolled massification, corporatisation and privatisation of HEIs; the rather piecemeal accreditation and quality assurance endeavours; a somewhat reluctant approach to regionalisation and internationalisation of higher education quality; and to some extent HEIs’ slow adoption of technologies necessary for improvement.

In the face of such complication, questions of accountability have emerged. Factors leading to the increased demands for higher education accountability (discussed by Huisman and Currie 2004) are well reflected at the system, institutional and programmatic levels in Cambodia.

- *Changing relationship between government and HEIs:* Several higher education policies – for example, Cambodian Higher Education Vision 2030 and the Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap – have been issued at the national level and become major guiding documents for HEIs. Public expenditure on public universities has increased in recent decades, though it is still relatively minimal. At the outset of the most recent education reform, just 4 percent of public education expenditure was allocated to higher education; the aim at the time was to increase this share to 20 percent by 2018 (MOEYS 2014 cited in Dy 2015, 49). Programmatic interventions also exist. Certain well-financed national higher education development programs, such as the World Bank-supported Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project 2011–15 and the current Higher Education Improvement Project 2018–24, have been implemented. These policy changes in national system governance and financing, supported by programmatic interventions, have influences on institutional practices as the government demands better responses from HEIs.
- *Demands for efficiency and quality:* Similar to other nations, Cambodia has experienced a transition from elite to mass higher education, accelerated by privatisation policy starting

in 1997, increasing both the number and the autonomy of public universities to offer fee-paying programs. In 1997, Cambodia had its first private university, the Norton University (Pit and Ford 2004). Higher education enrolments increased rapidly to the point that the system in 2005 was six times larger than it was in 1970 and 81 times larger than in 1980 (Williams, Kitamura and Keng 2014, 76).¹ The official Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap 2017 lists 121 HEIs, only 39 percent of which are public universities (MOEYS 2017, 61–66). Furthermore, by 2008, just 10 years after the government sanctioned private sector involvement in higher education, almost 90 percent of enrolments were on a fee-paying basis (Williams, Kitamura and Keng 2014, 77). This underlies present concerns about higher education quality and institutional performance in Cambodia.

- *Regionalisation and internationalisation movements:* The nature of internationalisation of Cambodian HEIs is in the form of aid and, historically speaking, has been highly politicised (Leng 2013). Senior Cambodian scholars were mostly educated in France or the former Socialist Bloc, while many scholarship students of later generations were sent abroad to pursue postgraduate studies in different countries spanning different continents (Pit and Ford 2004). Currently, albeit piecemeal, the progress of local universities' internationalisation, whether through faculty or student exchange programs, also happens in certain forms but has altered its nature. The current ideal of internationalisation movements is to drive local HEIs to navigate towards regional and international standards and benchmarks. These exchange activities and the new ideal are parts of the internationalisation strategies explicitly elaborated in Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap (MOEYS 2017). Likewise, the current quality assurance movement, led by the 2003-established Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), has been highly influenced by international and regional endeavours (see, for example, SEAMEO-RIHED 2010). The Cambodia Qualifications Framework (CQF), largely engineered by the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) subsector of the Cambodian higher education, also has the same nature as it is shaped by ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) economic integration. Obviously, increasing international/supranational interests² on Cambodian higher education have been apparent.
- *Technological disruptions and influences:* Emergence and progress of Massive Open Online Courses and uses of Artificial Intelligence and big data in higher educational affairs have become real in countries with advanced technological systems. In Cambodia, the uptake and use of digital technologies at HEIs has been improving, in some ways driven by the notion of entrepreneurial universities and the appeal for stronger university-industry linkages (see, for example, Sam 2016). In an institutional document titled “Information and Communication Technology Master Plan 2017–2020”, the Royal University of Phnom Penh sets out how it intends to upgrade its ICT infrastructure through seven projects, with financial support amounting to USD4.6 million from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and MOEYS (RUPP 2017, 18). Other universities and institutes – such as the Institute of Technology of Cambodia and the Institute of Foreign Languages – have reportedly piloted various blended learning approaches and platforms in their programs. To help bridge the global digital divide,

1 Despite the overall expansion, the gross enrolment ratio (by 2005) remained in the elite benchmark – that is, less than 15 percent according to Trow's (1996) classification and UNESCO data (Williams, Kitamura and Keng 2014, 84; Dy 2015, 37).

2 International/supranational interest refers to an interest shared by collective decisions of member countries of an international group or association. ASEAN and European Union are examples of international/supranational organisations.

MOEYS has worked to promote ICT throughout the education system since 2004, though these efforts have been criticised as being “limited” (Richardson 2008).

Changes that lead to accountability demands of Cambodian HEIs are clear. Along with them, research literature focusing on governance, finance and quality assurance of Cambodian universities has emerged (i.e. SEAMEO-RIHED 2010; Sen and Ros 2013; Touch, Mak and You 2014; Sam 2017; Un and Sok 2018; Sok and Un 2018). These studies raise important questions, such as whether to regulate universities or deregulate them, to give them more institutional autonomy or exert more procedural control over them, to give academics more freedom in the pursuit of knowledge or guide the focus of their work, to centralise or decentralise financial mechanisms and resources, to reduce the number of board/committee members or keep them the same, and to keep the same number of institutions or consolidate them and promote quality. It is because of these attempts to systemically govern universities and assure their quality that Cambodia has seriously searched for a model or a system that is the right fit (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a). In general, it is the changing context of higher education that pushes governments the world over to alter how they regulate their universities (Dill 2001).

Against the backdrop of the abovementioned change tendencies and research-based policy debates, the emerging questions of accountability have not been answered and are sometimes unclearly discoursed. Struggles between “accountability” and “autonomy” at the system and institution levels of Cambodian higher education have become more frequent (see, for example, Mak, Sok and Un 2018, 2019a, 2019b) and seem to be the foremost concern for policymakers and ministers. In those studies, autonomy-oriented ideas such as administrative deregulation (or institutional autonomy) and academic freedom are raised in a perplexing way along with accountability-oriented ideas such as financial management and quality monitoring and evaluation.

It is also safe to say that, currently, such discourses on accountability are still limited to policymakers and researchers. In fact, from a scholarly perspective, discussions on accountability per se remain scant because most previous studies include accountability as a peripheral part of the overall discussion. Likewise, while accountability concerns focus more on governance, finance and quality assurance at the system level, the concept of accountability seems to be less observed from the institutional organisation, leadership and management of HEIs; thus voices from practitioners on accountability at the institutional level are generally missing.

More to the point, some previous research studies on the concept of accountability in Cambodia were not directed towards the higher education sector (see, for example, Pak and Craig 2008; Horng and Craig 2008; Eng and Craig 2009; Pak 2011). Rather, they focused more on the political, social and institutional accountability of Cambodian public institutions in general. Some other local studies related to education focused more on school accountability, but not necessarily at tertiary level (e.g. Pellini 2005; No and Heng 2015).

Exactly how Cambodian universities and their academic managers understand and respond in an accountable way to emerging trends and endeavours remains a highly dubious area. How have Cambodian universities and their managers been accountable to the government, students, academics, employers and other stakeholders? Are the fulfilment of their missions, the use of their resources, the design of their institutional policies and their management practices justifiable? And are they justifiable considering global, regional and local higher education realities? A core research problem pre-requisite to these macro questions is that there is no sharp identification and delineation of Cambodian university accountability orientation, conceptions and approaches.

2. The current study

2.1. Research scope and significance

The scope of this study diverges from that of previous local literature in two aspects: the focused subject of the study and the focused type of HEIs.

First, the previous literature – such as Chet (2006, 2009), Sen and Ros (2013), Sam (2016), Sam and Dahles (2017), Un and Sok (2018) and Mak, Sok and Un (2018) – are mostly centred on perspectives from system-level policy makers and senior-level HEI governors and leaders. In contrast, the current study focuses on institutional middle managers, particularly from the perspective of faculty deans. University deans were included in some of the previous studies, but the deans were seemingly not the target subjects of those studies. Likewise, the studies that included deans in their sample frames (e.g. Touch, Mak and You 2014; Sam 2016) did not focus specifically on the topic of accountability. Those previous studies generally approached senior university leaders and/or policymakers at the system level because their focused topics were on higher education system, governance, finance and quality assurance. The current study, on the other hand, focuses specifically on the topic “accountability”. The necessity of exploring university accountability from the deans’ perspectives can be justified by two considerations.

- First, the deans, in a general sense, play significant roles in ensuring the quality and institutional effectiveness of the academic programs under their oversight. Deans everywhere have multiple roles (Creswell and England 1994). In practice, their general roles and responsibilities embrace both academic areas and institutional affairs within and beyond the faculty. That said, the deans can function as a faculty-oriented leader, a manager, a subject/discipline expert, and being externally oriented (Creswell and England 1994, 13–14). Failing to consider their perspectives on accountability devalues the practical aspects of accountability in the university. A large and realistic repository of information and data about university lies in the hands of the deans.
- Second, existing studies did not pay specific attention to the deans’ accountability concepts and approaches. In fact, apart from the accountability measures reported by Touch, Mak and You (2014), none of the previous studies inquired into how these measures are realised in practice or what accountability means in real contexts or how it is interpreted. Therefore, academic and policy knowledge on Cambodian higher education at both the system and institutional levels needs more lessons learned and insights from the deans’ perspectives on accountability.

The second difference in terms of study scope is that previous studies mostly focused on Cambodian HEIs in general, whereas the current study set out to examine only the university subsector. The university subsector is one of the three subsectors, the other two being (vocational education) institutions/independent schools and academies (see, for example, Touch, Mak and You 2013, 49). The diversity of different sub-sectors of Cambodian higher education and their respective institutions requires different study designs.

In sum, the current study’s focus on the notion of university accountability from the perspective of faculty deans aims to provide a comprehensive account of the complex accountability conceptions and approaches at the institutional level. The study can therefore add new knowledge to previous analyses of accountability-related notions (e.g. governance, quality assurance, accreditation) of Cambodian higher education. This will in turn contribute to the policy search for a new governance regime and a model for high-quality HEIs in Cambodia.

2.2. Research objectives and questions

The study set out to investigate and reflect on two specific aspects of accountability: deans' conceptions of university accountability, and their approaches to achieving accountability at their faculty and university. The study was guided by one main research question: What is the orientation of Cambodian university accountability? From this, we formulated two sub-questions:

- How do Cambodian deans conceive the idea of university accountability in response to different constituencies?
- How do governing, financing and quality-assurance schemes influence Cambodian deans in approaching and achieving university accountability?

3. Comprehensive literature review and conceptual framework

3.1. General background of accountability in the higher education sector

Against the backdrop of constantly changing systems in higher education, the notion of “accountability” emerges, mechanised by the government and influenced by the market. The emergence of accountability is therefore closely related to the policy search for a new higher education governance system; efforts to promote the quality, productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs; and initiatives to forge a new identity for HEIs (see, for example, Kogan et al. 2007; Mok 2013).

According to Huisman and Currie (2004, 532–533), the concept of accountability penetrates the higher education sector through four key factors: the changing relationship between government and universities; the demand for efficiency and value for money in the private higher education sector; the globalisation and internationalisation of higher education; and the advancement of information and communication technology. All these factors arguably stem from the neoliberal economic motives of HEIs and quasi-market principles. These movements are considered neo-liberal and quasi-market because the state's role in higher education governance is now placed within two extremes: full state control and free market forces. In other words, while deregulating and acknowledging free market forces, the government also needs to ensure quality, efficiency and effectiveness, and in a sense allegiance, from HEIs. To that end, the government holds HEIs accountable while allowing them some autonomy. These mechanisms are generally devised by the state and pushed by the market through massification, privatisation and corporatisation.

Various countries, in allowing HEIs to realise their missions in an accountable way, have adopted intertwined policy ideas and strategies, including new public management, competition-driven values, total quality management, deregulation, performance-based funding and institutional autonomy. In response, HEIs have had to become more flexible and adaptive to system-level policies and market forces by trying to find a model that fits. Generally, they have come up with ideologised “third missions”, institutional “managerialism”, “entrepreneurial university”, “adaptive university” and even “learning organisation” (see, for example, Dill 1999, 2001; Askling and Henkel 2006; Pruiskens and Jansen 2015), all of which are geared in certain ways towards economic motives and market principles.

The abovementioned emerging policy mechanisms can be scholastically attributed to the Anglo-Saxon model of higher education governance introduced in the 1980s (Pruiskens and Jansen 2015). Even European countries with the Continental European model of higher education governance, which mainly allows the state to lead, are influenced by these new capitalist,

neoliberal, quasi-market movements. Dill (2001, 24) claimed that these global trends are supported by management experts and political economists who believe that the command and control approaches are no longer relevant in today's knowledge-based markets and industries which have the best information in their hands.

The economic motives, neoliberal trends, quasi-market principles and system-level strategies as well as the embedded new missions and adaptive principles of institutions generally hold significance for the notion of "accountability" in HEIs. But these trends complicate, rather than simplify, the concepts of and approaches to higher education accountability. Previous studies have hinted at the significance and the complicated concepts and approaches of accountability in the higher education sector (see, for example, Trow 1999; Dill 1999, 2001; Burke 2005; Salmi 2009; Middlehurst 2011).

The essence of higher education accountability is guided by a big question mark over how higher education organisations can hold themselves accountable to their beneficiaries and stakeholders in response to their vision and mission statements. Salmi (2009, 4) clarified this matter: "For universities and their leaders, accountability represents the ethical and managerial obligation to report on their activities and results, explain their performance, and assume the responsibility for unmet expectations". The fundamental questions therefore are: Who is to be held accountable, for what, to whom, through what means, and with what consequences? (Trow 1996, 2). Public HEIs have to justify how they use their public resources, account professionally for their teaching and research results (Fielden 2008 cited in Salmi 2009, 3), and so clarify what significant roles (and at what quality levels) they actually play in the society. Likewise, private HEIs need to justify their quality in response to the required standards and, even though profit-driven and not naturally under state control, proclaim their role in the market and society. These broad discussions of the definition and significance of accountability, more often than not, generalise rather than specify the concept of higher education accountability, leading to the multiple faces and silos of accountability, described by Burke (2005) and Brown (2017) respectively.

The following elaborates on three further factors that sustain the difficulties in handling higher education accountability concepts and approaches: one at the implementing level, the second at the conceptual level and the third at the cultural level.

- First, different nations have attempted in various ways to achieve higher education accountability, from the use of conventional tools such as peer-based teaching/learning quality assessments, accreditation and academic audits to more modern tools such as university rankings, benchmarking and national qualifications frameworks (Burke 2005; SEAMEO-RIHED 2010). These various accountability tools are generally used with quality assurance and improvement schemes and directed to achieve different goals guided by the values of the different accounting constituencies (e.g. government, markets, industries, academic communities, civic communities and international communities). However, these accountability mechanisms cannot be standardised and generalised for application in different national and institutional contexts of higher education (see, for example, Trow 1996; Horng and Craig 2008).
- Second is the vagueness of the concept of accountability. Schedler (1999) studied political accountability and labelled it a comprehensive and broad concept. Burke (2005) similarly considered higher education accountability a multifaceted concept. Other scholars offer different definitions and different conceptual frameworks for accountability (Bovens 2010; Brown 2017). To paraphrase Schedler (1999), accountability has become a popular

buzzword, but few understand what it means. Such bias leaves many confusing residuals in both the comprehension and the approaches to accountability among practitioners.

- The third factor concerns the academic and collegial nature and culture of HEIs. Unlike other types of social institutions, when the government and the market impose their managerial and corporate cultures onto an organisation that is naturally academic and collegial, cultural clashes happen (Burke 2005). The simple logic that sustains such clashes and debates is that the government culture values control and the university culture values freedom, leading to further philosophical debates on the question: Higher education is what and for what? Accountability concepts and approaches are also centred upon the complicated interplay within and between power structures, resources/inputs, processes and outcomes/quality of HEIs, shaped by different institutional systems and organisational cultures.

In sum, despite the acknowledged significance of accountability, how different nations and HEIs at different levels systemise, approach, instrumentalise, understand and interpret it is ambiguous and complicated. And it is ambiguous and complicated at multiple levels. Both in practice and in scholarly literature, university accountability has always been ruled by the threat of multidimensional, multilevel complexities (Burke 2005; Brown 2017). These complexities raise question: Where to best place the means of university accountability? (see, for example, Trow 1996 and Burke 2005). Coupled with that, the epistemic questions concerning what it means to be accountable in a certain university context and the procedural aspects of accountability are continuously discussed in the literature (Bovens 2007; Salmi 2009; Stensaker and Harvey 2011; Brown 2017) and are increasingly pertinent for academic researchers and policymakers.

3.2. Different constituencies influencing university accountability

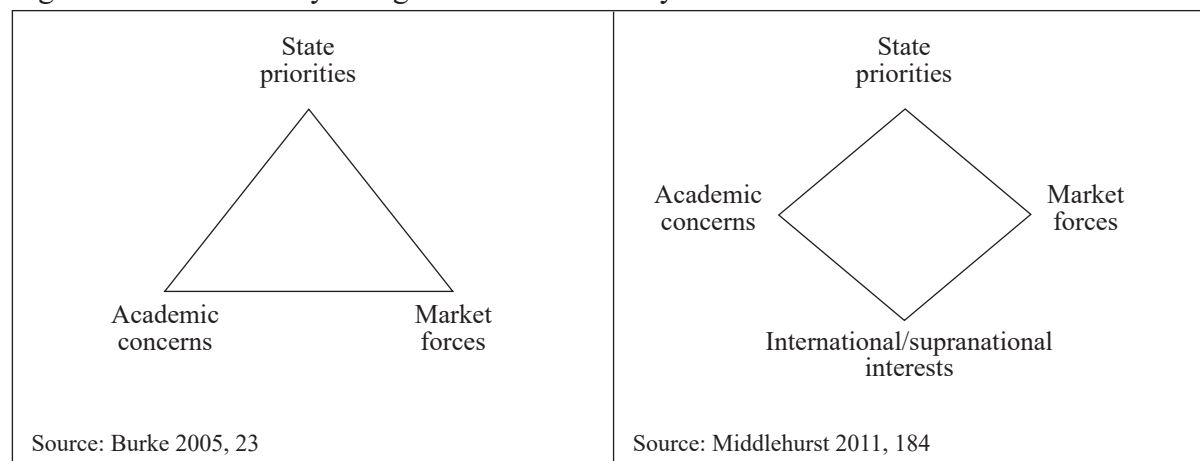
Different constituencies (such as the academic community, HEIs, the government, the market, the international stakeholders and other social agencies) shape and continuously influence higher education cultures. Widely cited, Etzkowitz (2008), from a human capital economic theory perspective, refers to the three main constituencies as the triple helix – government, academia and industry. According to him, the links among and between these three actors drive innovation, development and economic growth, within which HEIs (i.e. academia) play a vital role. HEIs' orientation towards one or other of these constituencies results in different governance, leadership and management principles, approaches, strategies and systems.

Similarly to Etzkowitz (2008), though from an organisational point of view of higher education, Clark (1983) created the concept of the “accountability triangle” (see Figure 1) to frame the orientation of higher education accountability, which is composed of state priorities, academic concerns and market forces. HEIs are influenced by different organisational cultures: disciplinary, professional, entrepreneurial and systemic (Clark 1980, 1983). These different cultures and angles, however, clash against each other, especially the managerial, entrepreneurial and academic cultures. The government imposes on the university a managerial culture, the market imposes an entrepreneurial culture and the academic profession imposes an academic and professional culture (Clark 1980; Burke 2005).

Middlehurst (2011) extended Clark's (1983) framework by considering “international/supranational interests” as a fourth dimension of accountability. Global, international and cross-border platforms and groups have emerged as another force that influences HEIs and are related to the other three angles (Temple 2011, 101; Middlehurst 2011), making what

Middlehurst refers to as the “accountability diamond” (see Figure 1). This is fuelled by the internationalisation, regionalisation and globalisation of cross-border higher education, the search for global academic excellence and the increasingly important role of university rankings.

Figure 1: Accountability triangle and accountability diamond



3.3. Blurred accountability definitions and multiple conceptual dimensions

Accountability is an important but a vague concept (Burke 2005). The literature on accountability in general is disconnected as different authors try to offer their own definition of accountability (Bovens 2010, 946). Accountability in higher education, according to Trow (1996, 2), is “the obligation to tell others, both inside and outside the institution, what has been done with those resources to further teaching, learning and public services, and to what effect”. The term with the closest meaning to accountability is “answerability” (Schedler 1999; Burke 2005, 1; Romzek 2000, 22; Kaler 2007, 328). So, to be accountable is to provide answers, to report or to give an account (Kaler 2007, 328).

Schedler (1999) discussed another element of the accountability concept, which is “enforcement”. To give an account implies not just a mere report of what is done or answers to what is asked, but goes further to include all the outcomes (rewards or sanctions) expected of the subject being held accountable (World Bank 2003). So, accountability as a concept constitutes both answerability and enforcement.

Previous literature (e.g. Burke 2005; Brown 2017; Temple 2011; Middlehurst 2011) has increasingly suggested another principle of accountability: multidimensionality. In discussing accountability in HEIs (which is already complicated and heterogeneous in nature), Trow (1996, 7) considered two sets of contradictory forces to conceptualise accountability. On the one hand, there is external vs internal accountability. On the other, there is legal and financial vs academic accountability. Therefore, according to Trow (1996), there exists external accountability, internal accountability, legal accountability and academic accountability. The conceptualisation stands largely on the logic of the “on what” and “to whom” aspects of accountability. This conceptualisation is in some ways similar to Romzek’s (2000, 23) conceptual classifications of accountability, which include hierarchical, legal, political and professional accountability. Romzek’s framework is a more general conceptualisation of accountability, though not necessarily in the higher education sector. According to Romzek (2000, 24), the hierarchical, legal, political and professional aspects of accountability are related in a matrix shaped by the “degree of authority/autonomy regarding administrative actions” and

“the source of authority”. The former is about whether the authority is weak or strong. The latter concerns whether the authority is internal or external. Vidovich and Slee (2000 cited in Burke 2005, 3) mentioned a similar classification of accountability for HEIs. Their conceptual framework includes downwards, upwards, inwards and outwards accountability; simply put, they focused on the logic of the direction of accountability.

Moving beyond these conceptual typologies of accountability, Stensaker and Harvey (2011, 13) considered Trow’s and Vidovich and Slee’s classifications “stylistic” and “traditional”. In the current complex system of higher education, accountability has become more integrative and “diagonal” in form because of the joint missions of stakeholders (i.e. external, internal, financial/legal and academic) working together to achieve accountability of HEIs. This diagonal situation cannot avoid the blurring of boundaries between the vertical and horizontal, legal/financial and academic, external and internal, and national and international forms of accountability (Stensaker and Harvey 2011, 14).

Burke (2005, 10) further suggested a more comprehensive matrix to visualise different accountability genres at HEIs. His conceptualisation embraces six types of accountability (bureaucratic, professional, political, managerial, market and managed market). These genres are analysed and identified by 10 structural features in the same matrix (i.e. levers, agents, goals, indicators, conditions, techniques, consequences, governance, theory and programs).

All these conceptual discussions suggest that accountability is a blurred concept. It constitutes answerability and enforcement and is multidimensional. Burke (2005, 24) refers to this situation as “the many faces of accountability”. For higher education sector, the concept of accountability is even more confusing as it is used in a blended fashion with other related terms, such as quality assurance, performance, evaluation, accreditation and audit.

3.4. Different accountability approaches and evolving instruments

The area of higher education accountability is shaped by different disciplinary (e.g. historical, economic, organisational and psychometric) frameworks and approached by at least seven silos (i.e. assessment, accreditation, institutional research, institutional effectiveness, educational evaluation, educational measurement and public higher education policy) (Brown 2017, 42). These different approaches result in many different accountability instrument schemes. So, as with the complex definitions and conceptualisations, accountability procedures and implementation schemes are not easily measurable or applicable in different higher education settings. Many controversies and challenges remain as to how to properly systemise and systematise accountability procedures, schemes and tools for HEIs in a way that benefits, not harms, the system.

There is a general, linear framework to systematise the formal procedures of and approaches to accountability. The World Bank, in World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People (2003, 47), defined the procedural features of accountability to include delegation, financing, performance, information sharing and enforcement respectively. This service-providing procedural stage tends to stand on the classic organisation theory framework and operates in the sphere of interaction between principals and agents. Within these procedural relationships between the agents and the principals in different domains, various activities and tools are exercised and used.

From the network theory perspective, there is another way of classifying accountability approaches, namely formal and informal accountability approaches (Romzek, Blackmar and Leroux 2012). The authors, however, claimed that most literature focused on just formal approaches, especially on contract relationships. Yet, informal approaches are less focused. As Romzek, Blackmar and Leroux (2012, 442) put it: “Far less attention has been focused on the interorganizational and interpersonal behaviors that reflect *informal* accountability of organizational actors within a network”. Boesen (2007) noted that the informal and formal approaches to governance are historically related, claiming that one is based on relations and entrusted in people and the other based on and entrusted in rules.

In the field of higher education, approaches to accountability is generally viewed through formal lenses. Burke (2005, 307) illustrated formal accountability instruments and tools to include financial program audit, assessment, accreditation, academic audit, standardised testing, report card, performance reporting, budgeting funding, student-alumni satisfaction survey, reputational rating, vouchers and other financial aids. Similarly, Salmi (2009, 3) offered one of the best descriptions of different formal tools and schemes of accountability in the higher education sector from a policy point of view:

Accountability may take many forms: legal requirements such as licensing, financial audits and reports, quality assurance procedures such as program or institutional accreditation, benchmarking exercises to compare programs across institutions, professional qualification examinations, budget allocation mechanisms that reward performance, and oversight structures such as governing boards with representation from external stakeholders.

In Cambodia, formal accountability instruments (as briefly reported in Touch, Mak and You 2014 and SEAMEO-RIHED 2010) are based generally on quality assurance (which entails accreditation) and different institutional effectiveness frameworks (which include institutional rules and regulations).

Driven by the current notion of world-class universities, other emerging quality assurance and improvement instruments such as university ranking, qualification frameworks, benchmarking and assessment of higher learning outcomes (Marope, Wells and Hazelkorn 2013) have been developed to directly or indirectly support university accountability mechanisms. The latest tools are generally standardised and designed with attempts to achieve international or even global applicability.

Clearly, accountability instruments are evolving, and they evolve depending on which perspectives HEIs and their stakeholders take to evaluate higher education performance. Higher education accountability procedures, schemes and tools vary significantly. Different accountability instruments are directed towards different goals, serving different stakeholders.

These multiple approaches and mechanisms can be considered part of the confusion and complexity in attempts to achieve accountability at HEIs (Brown 2017). Debates on the appropriateness, reliability and validity of traditional and emerging tools of accountability in the higher education sector are ongoing within academic, policy and practice circles. Without proper, scientific accountability approaches and schemes, the many performance- and quality-related expectations of HEIs (from resource management to student learning and faculty rewards) can be hard to ensure.

3.5. Influential trends on accountability in Cambodian universities

When the different values and cultures of different accounting constituencies are injected into the practical context of a country, the concept of accountability is rendered even more complex. Trow (1996, 2) acknowledged the contextual differences in accountability, stating: “Accountability to others takes many different forms in different societies, with respect to different actions and different kinds of support”. Likewise, Brown (2017, 42) contended that “differences between the multiple accountability silos persist as a result of unique responses to the broader social institutions in which they are embedded”. This implies the need to include the local framework and its multidimensional factors in the study of accountability (Horng and Craig 2008; Pak 2011).

In Cambodia, the concepts of accountability mentioned by previous studies are generally confused and mixed together – among them are governance, quality assurance, accreditation, assessment, accountability and even autonomy. These conceptual complexities can be framed through different lenses, among which (1) the system and institutional governance and finance and (2) the system and institutional quality assurance (both evidenced in policy studies such as SEAMEO-RIHED 2010; Touch, Mak and You 2014; Un and Sok 2018; Mak, Sok and Un 2018, 2019a, 2019b).

3.5.1. System and institutional governance and finance

Governance: No and Heng (2015) claimed that the accountability discussion in Cambodia is rooted in the field of governance, particularly the notion of good governance brought by international development partners. Discussions about governance and accountability were highly correlated with each other in the late 1990s, which was essential given that most of Cambodia’s institutions had been destroyed during the war and needed to be reconstructed almost from scratch. It should be remembered that good governance forms the backbone of different phases of the Cambodian government’s Rectangular Strategy (Royal Government of Cambodia 2018). The government acknowledges the limitations of public and legal services, asserting that “the organization, structures and functions of the sub-national institutions have not fully responded to the needs of sub-national democratic development” (Royal Government of Cambodia 2013, 5).

Higher education sector governance in Cambodia, as in many other countries, is constrained by the complexity and fragmentation of the super system but without a strong legal scheme (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a). The system was originally framed by the state-led Continental European model, which contains only public institutions but has increasingly embraced Anglo-Saxon influences and so become more autonomous. This transformation came about after the issuance in 1997 of two decrees – one on privatisation and the other on public administrative institutions (PAIs)³ (Touch, Mak and You 2014). However, there is no overarching law on higher education to systemically guide institutional direction (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a).

The number of the ministerial governing bodies of Cambodian HEIs at the system level also invites a lot of questions. As of 2018, Cambodian HEIs were under 16 different ministries. The number of HEIs in Cambodia, especially private universities, has steadily increased, reaching 121 HEIs by 2018 for a population of around 16 million. Although previous studies generally

3 A public administrative institution (PAI) is a form of university given “autonomous” status, which has a decentralised administrative system under its own governing board (Sam 2017). PAIs are not necessarily educational institutions; institutions in other sectors can have PAI status, too. PAIs are the result of a 1997 royal decree to transform public agencies into autonomous institutions. As of 2010, there were eight PAIs (Touch, Mak and You 2014, 50).

considered only three distinct HEI types – academies, universities and specialised colleges (Chet 2009; Williams, Kitamura and Keng 2013), in reality these Cambodian HEIs bear more name tags, including institute, school and centre. Such different governance bodies, sectors and name tags may in some ways complicate the original functions, roles and identities of these institutions – especially between institutions governed by and oriented towards vocational and technical training subsector and universities that are supposed to be governed and directed more towards academic and liberal goals.

Different forms of governance mean different ways of decision making, which creates difficulty in terms of structural policy application and implication. Sam (2017) divided Cambodian HEIs into three types: public institutions, PAIs, and private institutions. Sam (2017) also differentiated their approaches to decision making and institutional governance, specifying that PAIs have a decentralised decision-making approach with the governing board at the top, private HEIs have a top-down decision-making approach with the governing board and shareholders or owners at the top, and public universities have a centralised approach with the parent ministries at the top. With such diversities, higher education policy designs and applications are tasked with many issues to consider. Mak, Sok and Un (2019a) confirmed that the governing boards of public universities are government centric, not corporate or collegial in style. Interestingly, Mak, Sok and Un (2019a) furthered that the idea of governance (and decision-making) via academic committee is an “alien notion” in Cambodia.

Finance: Related to the issue of governance is the issue of finance (e.g. Mak, Sok and Un 2018, 2019b). The governance of Cambodian HEIs involves not only their parent ministries but also others such as the Ministry of Economy and Finance (e.g. on issues of budget allocation) and Ministry of Civil Services (e.g. when HEIs want to create a new centre or a new position). More autonomy has been given to public and public administrative HEIs with their governing boards (which used to be financially controlled by the parent ministry and the Ministry of Economy and Finance) (Varghese and Martin 2013). Private HEIs, on the other hand, rely on tuition fees as their main income source and receive no financial support from the government.

Mak, Sok and Un (2019b), however, criticised the meagre and slow budget allocation, pointing to a serious need to restructure the financial management system at the institutional level. They reported the “slow disbursement of funds, excessive and rigid regulation and ineffective and efficient uses of resources” of Cambodian “bureaucratic” financial management (Mak, Sok and Un 2019b, viii). Overall, there is no question that public investment in higher education as a percentage of GDP is low and that the allocation of public funds is sometimes behind schedule. But the claimed lack of financial support in some cases is questionable. For example, Mak, Sok and Un (2019b, 18) noted that 32.1 percent of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia’s (ACC)⁴ approved budget in 2016 was left unspent.

Politics as the cross-cutting issue of governance and finance: Finally emerging in the literature is the cross-cutting issue of politicisation that affects the governance and finance of Cambodian HEIs at the system and institutional level. Since the early establishment of modern Cambodian HEIs in the 1940s, politics has always had a hand in Cambodian academia and higher education at both the institutional level and the system level (as implied in Eng 2011; Sam 2017). How Cambodian universities function and survive is strongly related to how the government views their roles and significance and how the government treats them. Sam

4 The ACC, established in 2003, operated independently of MOEYS for a while but in 2019 was placed back under the jurisdiction of MOEYS.

(2017) argued that politicisation is a challenge to the governance of Cambodian HEIs, both at the system and the institutional level.

The politicisation aspect can be seen from the institutional culture of the workplace in general, not necessarily in the higher education sector. The underlying institutional weakness in the Cambodian economy is a criticism often levelled against the country's otherwise remarkable rapid development (Hill and Menon 2013). Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) characterised weak institutions as “extractive institutions” and considered them the main reason why some nations fail.

The multiple aspects of accountability research in Cambodia (Pak and Craig 2008; Horng and Craig 2008; Eng and Craig 2009; Pak 2011) generally pointed to the state of politically-driven neo-patrimonialism and the observed patron-clientelism in the workplace and the administrative and governance traditions in public institutions. Patrons and clients interact in a framework that defines the local meaning of accountability. As inferred by Horng and Craig (2008, 17) and Eng and Craig (2009), these normative relationships are systemically and systematically present in party and electoral politics, resource allocation and autonomy delegation, political leadership, donors' modalities, legislative and judicial oversight, clarity of functions and coordination, social and cultural norms and history, and cross-cutting reforms (e.g. public financial management, decentralisation and deconcentration, and public administrative reforms). The same studies further argued that those relationships and traditions influence individual and organisational accountability behaviours in terms of pay, functions and duties, family wellbeing responsibilities, evaluation and monitoring, performance expectations, career prospects, *kse* and *knong* practices,⁵ political party organisations, organisational cultures and working conditions. These deeply rooted patron-client relationships and neo-patrimonial cultures in the Cambodian public workplace usually clash with the newly introduced donor-driven democratic culture.

3.5.2. External and internal quality assurance

Accountability in Cambodian HEIs, as in many other Southeast Asian countries, is generally discussed through quality assurance frameworks, where accountability is seen as an output of quality assurance. These quality assurance frameworks (external and internal) have been discussed since the start of privatization and have increasingly involved international/supranational dimension.

Privatization and the issue of quality: The growing number of private institutions and the semi-autonomy of public and public administrative universities is a big concern, especially in terms of quality. Sam (2017) argued that HEI governance is challenged not only by politisation but also by commercialisation. Because their wages are based on the number of teaching hours, teachers (especially part-timers) tend to work in several institutions. Some even teach across subsectors – in universities, in academies and/or in TVET-oriented institutions. Having multiple teaching roles in different institutions may obfuscate how they perceive their accountability (e.g. to whom and for what) (see Ros and Oleksiyyenko 2018; Oleksiyyenko and Ros 2019). The increased number of programs based on part-time teaching is another cause of faculty members' limited research and academic underperformance (Mak, Sok and Un 2018, 2019a), again raising the question of academic accountability and academic excellence. Actually, the policy attempts – by creating the ACC in 2003 – were the very first endeavour to assure the quality of emerging private institutions. But legal loopholes caused by the governance structure

⁵ *Kse* and *knong* are Khmer terms that reflect the idea of nepotism.

at the system level and political influence that weakens the ministerial governing power still allow many private institutions to enter the higher education market and make it hard to control them later.

Quality assurance and its international/supranational dimension: The South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED 2010) reported nine quality standards,⁶ accreditation (by the ACC), and in some ways the CQF as relevant mechanisms for the quality assurance of Cambodian universities. In relation to that, Touch, Mak and You (2014) described various approaches and tools of Cambodian HEIs' accountability, including internal regulations and committees, academic and research committees, university councils, development committees, internal auditing, and internal quality assurance (IQA). Along with these approaches and tools come various practices such as site visits, interviews, peer reviews, document reviews, external validation and reports (disseminated to stakeholders), institutional and national policies and guidance. There are no assessments or academic audits (SEAMEO-RIHED 2010), however, and newer tools such as university rankings and benchmarking do not exist. The descriptions generally do not dissect and analyse whether and to what extent these approaches, tools and practices are efficient and effective. At the institutional level, quality assurance processes also remain an issue. The challenges facing quality assurance in Cambodia are generally attributable to inadequate financial support and lack of quality assurance experts (SEAMEO-RIHED 2010).

There is a international/supranational substance in the higher education quality assurance in Cambodia. The ACC has some influence through its regional and international connections with national and international quality assurance agencies. These include the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, Asia-Pacific Quality Network, Malaysian Qualifications Agency, and the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (SEAMEO-RIHED 2010, 40). The CQF, approved in 2012 by the National Training Board, is also influenced by regional movement. Its design was shaped by the vocational dimension of the Cambodian postsecondary education sector because it was expected to be used by education/training providers, employers and workers. This is true in general because the CQF (covering degrees, certificates, prior learning) focuses on the relevance of qualifications (used to demonstrate key skills and competencies to employers) and is influenced by the regional qualifications framework to ensure its permeability across institutions and countries (Allais et al. 2009, v).

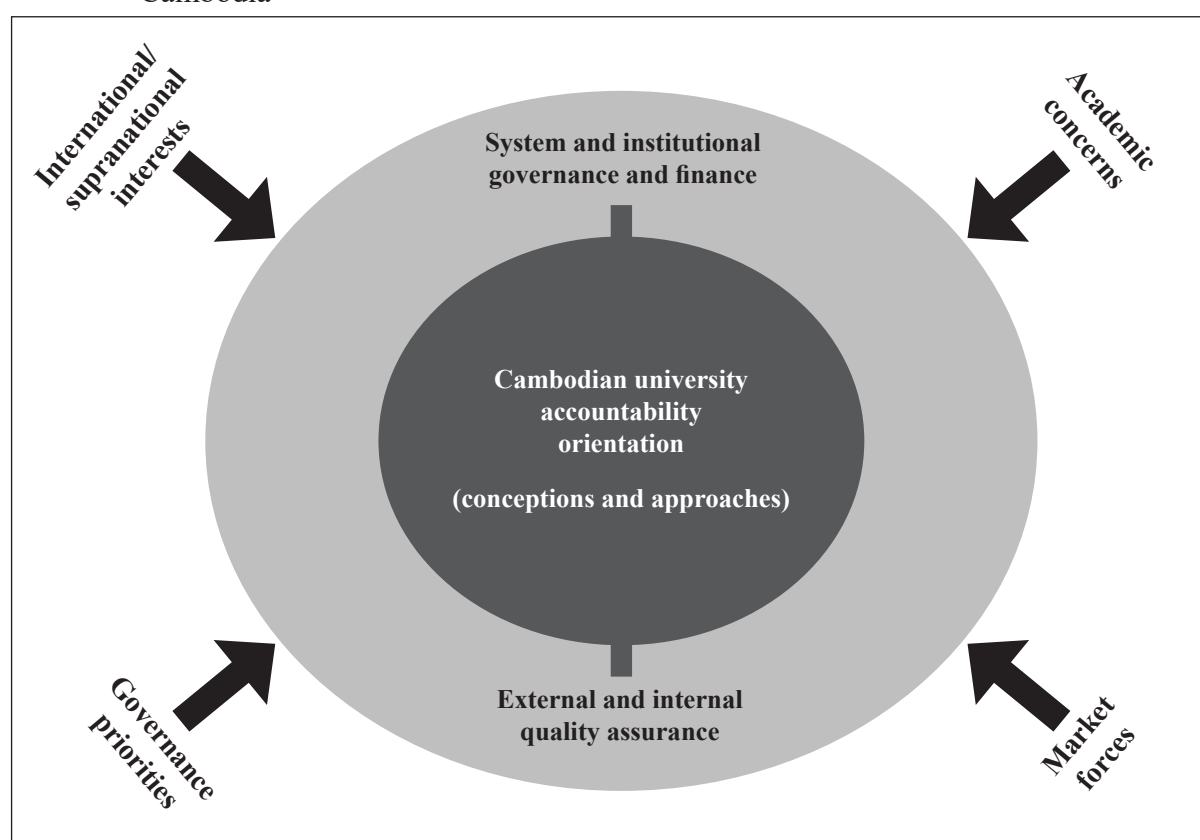
3.6. Exploratory conceptual framework

One conclusion is clear from the comprehensive literature review: multilevel and multidimensional complexities underly accountability. The logical threat of the complexity of university accountability spans various levels and landscapes. At one level, the conceptions and approaches of accountability are unclear. At another level, the two lenses of governance/finance and quality assurance come into play, in relation to various specific issues such as politicisation, working culture, commercialisation and regional influences. These complexities are shaped around various higher education cultures and respective constituencies – the government, the market, the academic profession, international/supranational platforms (Clark 1983; Burke 2005, Middlehurst 2011) – and national and institutional contexts. These complexities at multiple dimensions and levels orient university accountability towards different positions and responses.

6 The nine standards include (1) vision, mission and goals; (2) governance and management; (3) academic staff; (4) academic programs; (5) student services; (6) academic resources; (7) physical infrastructure; (8) financial resources; and (9) internal quality assurance (MOEYS 2019).

Embracing this multidimensional complexity as an exploratory framework, the current study explores the two objects of Cambodian university accountability (i.e. conceptions and approaches) under the four different constituencies of accountability (i.e. the government, the market, the academic profession and the international/supranational platform). While examining how Cambodian university accountability orients towards the four accounting constituencies, the study also explores how Cambodian university accountability is shaped by the system and institutional governance and finance structures and the system and institutional quality assurance practices. In so doing, the current study is integrative in its conceptual approach, inclusive in its conceptual focus and contextually relevant. It aims to put the concept of university accountability in Cambodia into its proper perspective. Figure 1 is a conceptual sketch to represent this study's non-hypothesised, exploratory conceptual landscape.

Figure 2: The study's exploratory conceptual landscape of university accountability in Cambodia



Source: Authors, influenced by the accountability triangle (Burke 2005) and accountability diamond (Middlehurst 2011) frameworks

4. Research methods

4.1. Participants and sampling

The study samples were university deans. A total of 29 deans and vice-deans (or program directors) from different faculties of six universities participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. The six universities were purposively selected to include the three main types of HEI: two public universities, two private universities and two public administrative institutions. The aim of the study was not to generalise the findings to the larger population (i.e. all faculty deans), but rather to deeply explore the idea and approaches of

accountability from a small sample. The inclusion of the diverse types of universities allowed us to look at the issues through a scoping lens. The three major types of universities have different finance, governance and management mechanisms (see Sam 2017 for the differentiation of the three institution types). They also embrace different purposes (i.e. for-profit vs non-profit) and so may approach the idea of quality and accountability differently.

The 29 participants were assigned by the selected universities to take part in the study. Only one of them was female. Fifteen deans were from undergraduate faculties in social sciences and business, 10 from science and engineering undergraduate faculties, and four from research institutes and graduate schools (see Table 1). The researchers were able to interview all deans in only four of the six institutions. The other two universities allowed us to interview only some of their deans for the reason of availability during the requested period. Data collection started on 26 April 2018 and ended on 15 June 2018. All participants signed a consent form, but five of them did not want the researchers to make an audio recording of their interview.

Table 1: Demographic attributes of the study participants

Characteristics	Attributes	Frequency
Gender	Male	28
	Female	1
Faculty	Social sciences, arts, humanities or business undergraduate faculties	15
	Science, technology or engineering undergraduate faculties	10
	Research centres or graduate schools	4
University	Public universities	12
	Private universities	6
	Public administrative institutions	11

Source: Authors

4.2. Overall research approach, procedure and data analysis

Where literature is scant and specific tools for quantitative or evaluative measurement do not exist for all facets of inquiry, an exploratory study has always been a good approach to grasp the big picture and real issues of a focused research topic. Exploratory in nature, this study used interpretivist and constructivist paradigms to guide its observing, analysing and reflecting approaches, with the belief that knowledge is in many ways subjective to the persons who view it and is constructed relative to social, cultural and contextual realities.

The study design was created through five distinct procedural stages, elaborated in Table 2: (1) research topic, purposes and questions broadly defined, (2) literature review⁷ and synthesis to create the exploratory conceptual framework⁸, (3) research instrument development, (4) data collection and management and (5) data analysis and interpretation.

The primary data collected through semi-structured interviews was the main data source for this study. The interview questions focused on the concepts, conceptualisations, approaches and instrumentation of accountability in relation to the four dimensions of the conceptual framework (i.e. the government, the market, the academic profession, the international/

⁷ A literature review was considered essential for the study design given that the research team would draw on the literature for conceptual clarification throughout the study and the development of the semi-structured interview guide.

⁸ This conceptual framework was used for exploration, not for testing hypothetical relationships.

supranational platform) and the two literature lenses of governance and finance and quality assurance at the system and institution levels) (see Figure 2). These core questions constituted 10 exploratory and descriptive questions used in all interviews with participants, with additional prompts or questions to explore emerging issues and to check information (see Appendix 1).

Table 2: Key stages in the study's methodological procedure

Stage	Tasks
Stage 1	Research topic, purposes and questions broadly defined: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided by the researchers' institutional research scope and framework
Stage 2	Literature review and synthesis to develop an exploratory conceptual framework: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a comprehensive review of local and international academic and policy-focused literature to identify the historical development, conceptual elements and practical models of accountability which are related to the defined research questions • Synthesise the literature review into manageable themes
Stage 3	Research instrument development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an interview protocol to collect data, based on information and insights from the literature
Stage 4	Data collection and management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct semi-structured interviews with selected deans (write fieldnotes) • Listen to the audio recordings of the interviews to extend and clarify the fieldnotes to produce an analysable dataset (resulting in extended notes) • Collect secondary data in the forms of institutional documents
Stage 5	Data analyses and interpretation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a clear structural code list based on the interview guide and the stage-4 data sensitisation • Code the extended notes at three levels according to the structural code list, identify the main themes and categories, and identify evidences and exemplary cases that constitute the themes and categories (in Nvivo platform) • Conduct iterative discussions and reflections on the study data and findings among team members • Review a selected number of secondary documents, guided by the research questions, the themes and the categories identified

Source: Authors

The main data analysis method was applied thematic analysis (as instructed in Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011). In the coding process, the first stage is to formulate a structural list of codes in response to the research questions and based on the data sensitisation and the extended fieldnotes. The structural coding list was then shared among the four team members who engaged in detailed content coding at three stages: initial coding, coding to find themes and coding to find major categories. The data was coded separately by the team members. Each team member was assigned the task of coding some parts of the 29 extended fieldnotes⁹. More specifically, because of time limitations, each member coded about 25 percent of the total extended fieldnotes. By coding in this way, the researchers saved time and could still compare the codes to check the level of coder agreement and to further interpret the data in response to each main research question. Also, where primary data was limited, the researchers used secondary data (from Cambodian policy documents, collected institutional documents of each university and policy-centric literature sources) to support the claims. So, in the findings there exists information that is not from the interviews.

⁹ Coders could extend the structured coding list at this stage.

4.3. Attempts to minimise methodological caveats

The question of whether the approaches to data analysis and interpretation are truly rigorous can be settled by understanding the focus, scope and treatment of our datasets. First, the study design focused more on the perceptions of the deans, so our data revealed the realities as described or interpreted by them. We allowed the participants space to thoroughly think through and construct their realities in response to our questions. The researchers' role was to listen attentively and try to understand the interviewees' responses. While assuming that the responses were realistic from the participants' viewpoints, during data analysis, the researchers remained critical of the trustworthiness of the responses by situating and cross-checking them in the real institutional conditions and the respondents' backgrounds. In that sense, the researchers not only engaged as a mere describer but also as an interpreter (through reflective "bracketing") of the responses.

Neither did we quantify our data nor aim to generalise the scope of our interviewees and their institutions. With a small sample size from just six institutions, this study was considered a qualitative, exploratory study. We only aimed to conceptualise the topic of university accountability, scope various related themes and understand key issues, as experienced by the study participants in their real situation, rather than predict any relationships in a generalised way.

We acknowledge that we may have lost some finer details in the aggregate description of the data because we did not transcribe the interviews fully. Even so, the combined output of the raw fieldnotes during data collection (as we generally collected data in pairs with one asking questions and the other taking notes) and the extended notes (made as we listened to the audio recordings and clarified or added missing information) allowed us to capture the key and important information and insights. In coding and writing, the researchers often turned to the audio recordings to clarify participants' responses. The researchers' shared the responsibility for cleaning, coding and interpreting the datasets, which together with subsequent discussions at different stages of coding and interpreting was an important means for avoiding single researcher's confirmation bias. This work was also reviewed and validated by external reviewers.

5. Key findings and discussions

5.1. Research question 1: How do Cambodian deans conceive the idea of university accountability in response to different constituencies?

When asked to define accountability of university, some participants expressed that accountability is quite a recent term they have encountered and at the same time acknowledged their limited ability to specifically conceive and explain it in an academic way; as one dean admitted:

Actually, I am not sure about accountability. Maybe we do it, maybe we don't. Maybe we do it, but we don't know that it's accountability. (AP26)

Nonetheless, the participants were able to relate to the concept "accountability" citing other terms such as "duty", "responsibility", "quality", "transparency" and "conformity". These terms were frequently used to relate to university accountability throughout the interviews. One dean (and also a center director) shared the following sentiment:

Let me just talk about the university level... say, if a university wants to compete with Harvard University, it has to be transparent, to be accountable, to share information correctly, to distribute correctly, to deliver correctly... in all forms – works or finance. So, it [accountability] is very important. (AP12)

Although in the literature the concept of accountability contains two important elements – answerability (monitoring and justification) and enforcement (sanction or rewards) (Schedler 1999, 14) – we hardly found these two elements stated specifically or directly in the deans' conceptions of university accountability in Cambodia.

Although the elementary principles of accountability were not concisely spelled out in the participants' conception of accountability, their answers displayed the multidimensionality of accountability responses. Among these dimensions, the accountability orientation *towards the market* was very clear. The deans' responses basically reflected the idea of being accountable to students as clients/customers (especially regarding their employability), to employers and even to the whole labour market. Most of the deans believe their responsibilities to be fulfilled when students are satisfied with their teaching, graduates find employment and employers are satisfied with graduates' performance. The data also revealed clear evidence of curriculum revision and re-design in response to market needs. A dean from a private university emphasised his belief:

... we have to make sure that students can work after their graduation. We have to avoid curriculum content that students learn but cannot use in the workplace. (AP26)

Some deans rationalised that high employment status among recent graduates is a sign of quality, which furthers the popularity of their university, which in turn influences their university's generated revenues and sustainability. In fact, the main income source of most Cambodian universities (especially private ones) is tuition fees (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a, 2019b). To ensure institutional survival, every year universities (and other types of HEIs) have to compete for a percentage of high school graduates seeking to pursue higher education qualifications.

The “skill mismatch and gaps” critique from employers (see, for example, Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015) is perhaps another key reason that influences this strong market-oriented reaction. There was evidence of increased interest among the selected universities in receiving feedback and engaging with employers and external stakeholders (e.g. students' parents). Such interest is realised through university alumni associations, internship programs and/or other mediums of engagement.

The second dimension was the idea of *national/governmental accountability*, which reflected the deans' conceptions of being accountable to the legal regulations of the government and the parent or line ministries (basically, MOEYS and/or the parent ministry which supervises a university by specific discipline or sector), to civic communities and in a sense to political agenda. This second dimension was also clearly emerging from the data. This dimension is characterised by the logic of political, legal and hierarchical conformity as well as social or national responsibilities. All participants claimed their universities always try to follow guidelines, requirements and standards from the ministries. The ideas of abiding by national/governmental legal agenda and serving society were almost always discussed together by our participants as the broad functions of a university, as they [deans] associated them with the role of universities in stimulating citizenship and national development. A vice-rector and former dean asserted:

When we talk about accountability, it relates to what aspect of it... one is the aspect of citizenship ... the idea of accountability of major universities has to bring this aspect into consideration... that is, how we want to see our citizens become... as reflected in our university mottos... this is how we want to contribute to developing our nation's citizens. (AP27)

What the deans referred to as the legal aspects are broad terms covering education law in general and various government policies and regulations in particular. Legal accountability is generally considered an independent form of accountability in the literature (Trow 1996, 7; Romzek 2000, 23). A unified law on higher education in Cambodia does not exist, however (Mak, Sok and Un 2018, 2019a, 2019b). But, in certain national legal documents, the notion of accountability has been taken into consideration. Article 13 of the 2007 Cambodian Education Law points to the need for the administrations of Cambodian HEIs to be based on the principles of accountability, transparency and public interest, while highlighting the right of HEIs to managerial autonomy (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007, 5). Article 22 also instructs educational establishments to monitor their internal assessment mechanisms and assess the quality of education, and suggests that MOEYS develop an external assessment mechanism (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007, 9). Nevertheless, these documents do not elaborate on the concepts of university accountability, and subsequent strategic or practical guidance to realise accountability seems to be absent.

Closely related to the legal aspect is the political aspect. The idea of political accountability was also pointed out by Romzek (2000) as an independent form of accountability. Sam (2017) argued that Cambodian higher education governance is strongly politicised. The same view can be inferred from Eng (2014) on political influences on research in Cambodia. For public universities, political accountability in this national/governmental dimension is evident as certain senior positions are politically related, in addition to seniority and merit. In discussing Cambodian public institutions, Horng and Craig (2008 citing World Bank 2003, 15) characterised Cambodian education as being politically structured, which leads to informal evaluation of teacher performance based on political party affiliation rather than on student achievement. Sam (2017), in the same way, claimed that top leaders are mostly appointed based on their connections, loyalty and service to the political ruling party. As for our study, some deans spoke frankly about having to be careful in their decisions on faculty policies and activities that may be sensitive or contradictory to political agenda. Not opposing the political agenda is one of the practical core principles at most Cambodian universities, and some public universities even ban student political activities on their campuses. This is not to say that there are political threats or intimidation, but to avoid unnecessary and untoward non-academic controversy, deans tend to employ this conformity principle.

Although the dimension of national/governmental accountability was always conceived within the scope of the Cambodian nation as a whole, sometimes it was discussed along with the institutional dimension of accountability. This institutional sub-dimension generally reflects working hierarchy, corresponding to the deans' belief that they have to be accountable to both junior staff and senior leaders as well as to other colleagues in fulfilling their formal duties (based on the normative roles for their position) and obligations (assigned by their senior leaders such as vice rectors or rectors). To explain their opinions, participants related the idea of accountability to what they generally called "job responsibilities" and "terms of reference", though some universities still do not officially have these. The deans firmly argued that no institution can survive without their staff accomplishing their roles responsibly. The emerging substance of formal institutional accountability under the dimension of national/governmental

accountability can be inferred from all our interviewees – from private, public and public administrative universities. As one participant put it:

Accountability is at a more professional or formal level... So, accountability is responsibility of a formal and legal type... on the process of an institution or a firm in response to stakeholders, to colleagues and to the environment... (AP01)

In the literature, this is sometimes referred to as “the hierarchical dimension” of accountability (Romzek 2000, 23), which is close in meaning to downwards and upwards accountability (Vidovich and Slee 2000, 432; Burke 2005, 3) and internal accountability (Trow 1996, 7). In the formal organisational hierarchy at most Cambodian universities, the deans, with both managerial and academic responsibilities, are situated in the category directly below vice-rectors and rectors and above department heads and faculty members. Their institutional responses to the downwards assignments and upwards suggestions imply in some ways that being accountable can be explained by the notion of patron-clientelism embedded in Cambodian institutions (see, for example, Horng and Craig 2008; Eng and Craig 2009).

The third dimension of accountability expressed by the participants was *academic/professional accountability*. The majority of deans in our sample believed that this notion of accountability is associated with educational quality and qualification. Some deans believe that to be accountable means better teaching performance, better quality learning, high educational outputs and outcomes, proper curriculum, greater job security of teachers and trust building and conflict avoidance in academic affairs. With the realities of available resources at workplace and working conditions and culture at Cambodian universities, the deans generally thought that their faculty had done what it could to fulfil the expected roles in promoting the academic quality. A dean from one private university claimed:

... the university will close... if I do not care about the curriculum... for example... teaching quality will be poor, and students will say that teachers teach just for money and not clearly. ... the number of students will decline... they will think my faculty is not good... the university will close... and that will also affect the students who do not acquire quality knowledge... (AP29)

Even though the responses from our participants hinted on academic/professional accountability in some ways, this dimension was neither sharply articulated nor conceived as a dominant form of accountability. The data of our study showed a pattern of influences of the market forces on the academic accountability (i.e. curriculum, teaching, learning and research geared towards the market). The deans justified their efforts to promote students’ achievements and qualities in line with market needs as being their academic duty. Curriculum and teaching are designed with the clear intent of satisfying students and serving the labour market. If the market does not need, some academic contents can be reduced. Here, it seems clear that academic knowledge is viewed as a means and market-based outcomes as an end.

We can understand that academic accountability orientation remains limited in Cambodia by also looking at the overall quantity and quality of the academic research activities and products of Cambodian faculty members and students in general (Eng 2014; Eam 2018; Ros and Oleksiyyenko 2018; Oleksiyyenko and Ros 2019) and the functions of academic and research committees (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a). This has brought serious concerns for academic leaders and policy makers alike in directing Cambodian universities, even the flagship ones, towards academic excellence at par with their regional and international peers.

Also, particular to Cambodian universities, the accreditation process, which is perhaps the most obvious quality assurance tool in HEIs and thus important for academic accountability, has been the focus of recent criticism and is not yet trusted. In terms of academic/professional depth, some deans find the mechanism of ACC or IQA unsatisfactory for it is based too much on document review and records of surface statistical information while often lacking depth of technical or professional measures and evaluation of quality. One of our interviewees directly criticised the accreditation process:

I'm not very satisfied with the accreditation process because it's not effective. It's more superficial and there are lots of gaps in evaluation. They need more commitment to do this work [properly]. (AP12)

The fourth (but barely emerging) dimension of university accountability in our data is the *international/supranational dimension*. Few deans from some of the universities declared that they must be accountable to international donors or partners. A private university's dean, for example, pointed to several examples of responsibly engaging international exchange students in community services in Cambodia as well as sending Cambodian faculty members to teach at foreign universities (e.g. in China) on an exchange basis. One participant from a PAI also recalled the first curriculum development experience at his institution:

Curriculum development was originally helped by American experts and Cambodian experts... (AP17)

However, without being prompted by the interviewers, the international/supranational accountability dimension was hardly raised by the participants. It is not yet the focused dimension of accountability in Cambodian university. Cross-border exchanges remain limited in overall, particularly in terms of in-bound foreign students or faculty members. Our data revealed few signs of concrete and objective conceptions towards this dimension of accountability. Even though the attempt to engage foreign partners is stated in higher education internalisation¹⁰ strategies in the approved Higher Education Roadmap (MOEYS 2017), at the time of writing, the institutional infrastructure and inputs available to ensure accountability for internationalisation or in response to, for example, the regional qualification frameworks or global benchmarks of academic excellence, were still limited in practice.

As with the academic/professional dimension, this dimension is somehow conceived in relation to the market dimension, with reference to the idea of resource seeking. In fact, part of the historical reasons for internationalisation is to seek resources, opportunities, status and funding (for example in the form of foreign assistance (Leng 2013, 30)). Current collaborative research activities or consultancies with local and international partners can somehow be considered a partial driver of Cambodian universities' resource seeking efforts.

5.2. Research question 2: How do governing, financing and quality-assurance schemes influence Cambodian deans in approaching and achieving university accountability?

Even though the academic and policy-centric literature generally discusses formal approaches and instrument schemes, reported activities and approaches to ensure accountability by the deans in our data can be conceptualised not only in the form of formal-institutional approaches

10 Internationalisation of higher education refers to "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight 2003, 2).

but also informal-personal approaches. The informal ones are more preferred by most deans. Both approaches to university accountability in Cambodia are challenged in many ways.

Formal approaches: We found evidence that quality assurance mechanisms as well as finance, organizational governing structure, and formal job responsibility processes shape how Cambodian deans formally approach accountability. According to most deans, to be accountable, they need to engage with the external accreditation process, support the IQA office, fulfil their official duties in alignment with the organizational expectation and structure, enforce conformity with laws and regulations of government or the supervising ministry, make sure the allocated budget is used properly in accordance with the planned budget line, and ensure the teaching performance of faculty members through various strategies (particularly, student survey). Correspondingly, the reported specific tools used to promote accountability in these institutional aspects include strategic plans, internal documents on rules and regulations, financial audits, student surveys of teacher performance, internal quality assurance monitoring guidance, and requirements and reports for the whole ACC accreditation process. One of the deans described the entire picture:

Normally, we prepare the university strategic plans and quality assurance system in the university. It is a very important mechanism that we have to think about. Talking about practice, we use the system to observe, monitor and evaluate to ensure the quality of practices. If it is just in the planning stage, we cannot ensure accountability. We need to know the outputs, outcomes and impacts to see the real results. So, we regularly use a monitoring and evaluation system to enhance quality and achieve results to the point that we think there is enough accountability. (AP25)

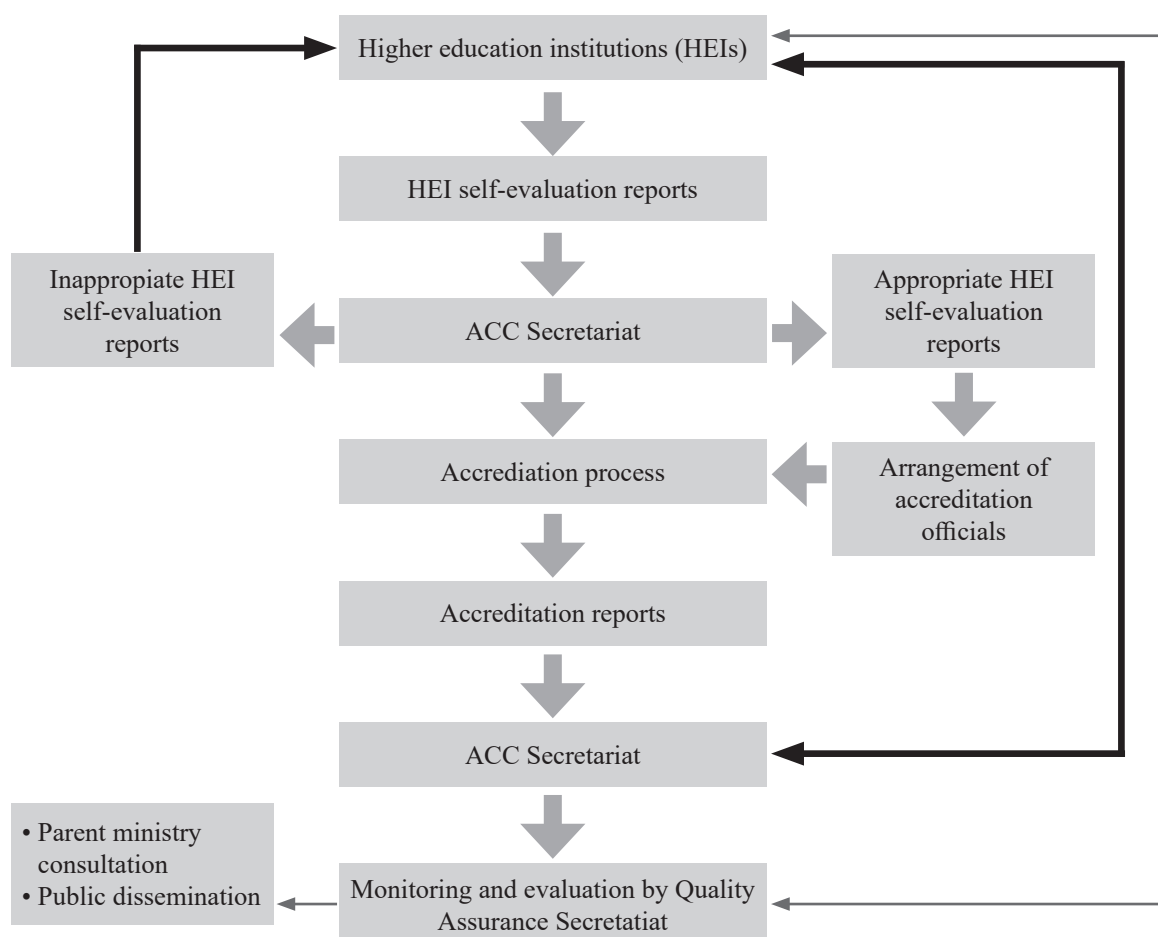
Quality assurance: The deans and their faculties offer support for the IQA office upon request, generally in response to the ACC's external accreditation activities. This is generally done university-wide and within a set period. So, the external accreditation by the ACC and the internal activities of the IQA are related in practice. The mechanism of the ACC generally comprises university self-assessment reports (using the ACC's forms), site visits by ACC assessors, ACC interviews with university key informants, ACC-organised meetings for rectors and university representatives, and public dissemination of the accreditation results (see Figure 3).

It would appear from the interviews that accountability and quality assurance processes are really together at the institutional level. As the deans reported their approaches to accountability, they pointed to some of these quality assurance instruments. Touch, Mak and You (2014, 58) listed various tools used in the Cambodian higher education sector to achieve accountability: internal regulations and policies, university council, academic committee, research committee, development committee, internal auditing, and IQA team or office. This toolkit is akin to the Cambodian quality assurance scheme, particularly the accreditation by the ACC (see, for example, SEAMEO-RIHED 2012). In the literature, accountability, transparency and quality improvement are the purposes of quality assurance (Krcal, Glass and Tremblay 2014, 23-24). In other words, quality assurance schemes (such as accreditation, quality assessment and quality audit) and specific instruments (e.g. qualification frameworks, governance guideline, student survey, research assessment, IQA instruments) can be used to achieve accountability.

It should be noted that the accreditation mechanism through the creation in 2003 of the ACC as a quality assurance agency has been the core official institutionalised action in Cambodia (Varghese and Martin 2013, 34). The ACC comes under the umbrella of the government

and under the Council of Ministers of Cambodia. Although the ACC had largely operated independently of MOEYS, it has recently been put under MOEYS's supervision. In principle, both public and private universities are supposed to be assessed and evaluated by the ACC before receiving official university status. In practice, however, not all universities (as of 2018) have been accredited. What is more, a new government declaration has apparently relaxed some regulations requiring all universities to be assessed by the ACC and instead given that role to the parent or supervising ministries.

Figure 3: ACC accreditation process



Source: ACC 2016, 10, translated

Besides the mandated ACC, no other independent institutions from the private sector or the media have constructed university rankings or conducted disciplinary audits of certain fields and programs at Cambodian universities.¹¹ It was reported in our data that ad hoc academic audits used to take place in three of the selected universities, but the deans acknowledged that those have taken place just once since their universities have been operating. Formal and continuous academic audits by independent, external professional institutions do not exist just yet.

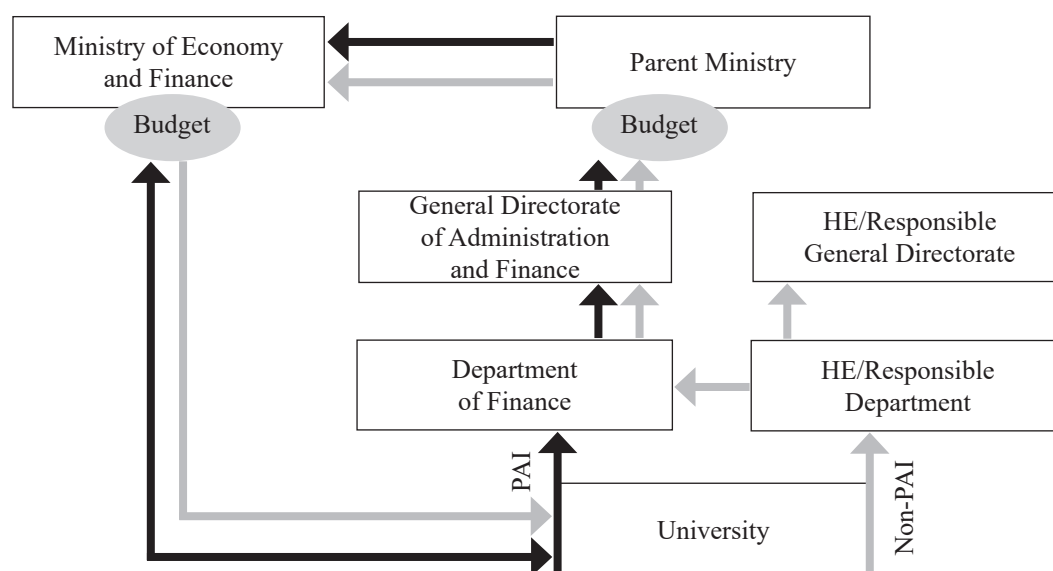
Financial mechanism: At the planning stage, the deans coordinate various strategy meetings to discuss annual activities of their faculty before submitting their budget proposals to university management. Since the 1997 reforms, there have been some changes in the budget allocation process (see Figure 4). For public and public administrative institutions, financial resources

11 Some unofficial rankings used to be constructed, but the results were not reliable.

basically come from the government (i.e. the parent ministry) through the MEF. Financial accountability at the institutional and system level is done through an annual internal audit by the parent ministry and the MEF (Touch, Mak and Sok 2014).

At the institutional level, all the selected universities (including the private ones) use the centralised system of financial and administrative management. Deans generally find the process too bureaucratic, slow and inefficient, posing constraints on their decision making (see, for example, Ros and Oleksiyenko 2018; Mak, Sok and Un 2019a, 2019b). The deans generally do not have full authority over financial decisions. They can only use financial resources after requesting or submitting a proposal to the central finance office. Most of the deans in our study reported dissatisfaction with this system, especially when they have to raise a proposal for a task that only needs petty cash. To them, such situation challenges achievement of quality and accountability.

Figure 4: Effects of autonomy on the budget allocation system

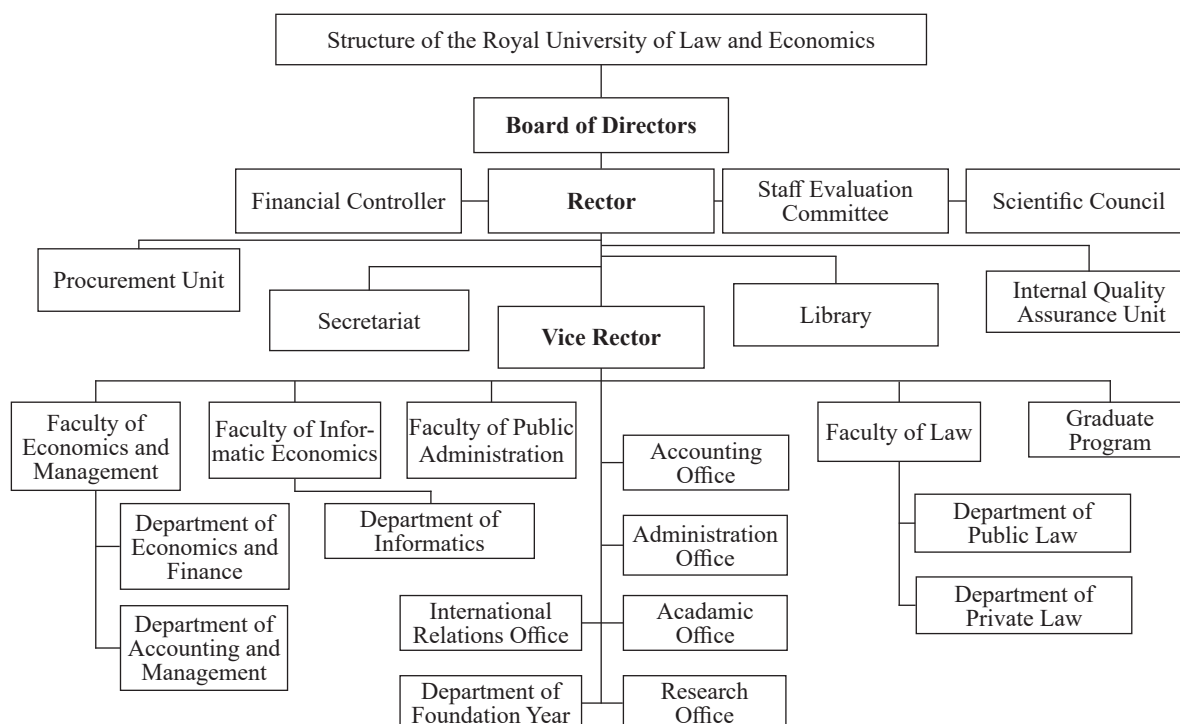


Source: Touch, Mak and You 2014, 60

Organisational structure and governance: The deans report their activities to senior management and generally seek decisions from their senior manager (vice-rector or rector) before taking any action, as evidenced in the way universities arrange their organisational structure (see Figure 5, which shows an exemplary organisational structure of a PAI). However, the level of deans' authority varies from faculty to faculty in each university. Some interviewed deans seem to have more authority in their decision making and activities than others.

Despite the reported establishment of research committees and academic/scientific committees (Touch, Mak and Sok 2014) in the organizational structure, questions remain as to how these committees function in an accountable way to assure academic quality (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a). Data and information on the detailed roles and functions of these committees is scant. So, it remains questionable whether such committees can ensure both academic/professional accountability and institutional effectiveness.

Figure 5: The organisational structure of the Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE)



Source: RULE Prospectus 2017, 3

Curriculum updates and teaching evaluation: Formal activities to accountability were also reported by the deans in relation to the core and daily managing and teaching duties they and their faculty members perform. These tasks include curriculum committee meeting, recruiting new faculty members, checking teaching materials, tracking the attendance of faculty members, facilitating institutional meetings with faculty members, and ensuring faculty members' compliance with institutional rules and regulations. The deans work not only with their senior leaders and faculty members but sometimes directly with students. They try to make sure that teaching staff come to teach regularly, that students are satisfied with the teaching staff, and that the curriculum is up-to-date and fits the job market. To them, these activities partly affirm their academic and managerial accountability to senior management, to the faculty members and to the students. The deans believe that the results of these activities will lead to students' academic and vocational achievements and positive attitudes after graduation.

The most frequently used tool to evaluate teacher performance is the student survey. One of the deans described the practice of student evaluation:

Students' evaluation of teachers (students can rate teachers level A, B, C or D) every term... say, the teacher named [CR] received [a score of] 3.60... so, if the full score is 4... we can see that teacher's weak points and good points... if the teacher gets D, that is bad... we want A, not even B and C... (AP29)

The course evaluation questionnaire survey is generally prepared by each department in collaboration with the IQA office. Table 3 gives an example of the questionnaire. It contains 16 psychometric items (measured on a 1–5 Likert scale) and additional space for further comments. Of course, different universities have different evaluation forms.

Table 3: Example of student survey questionnaire to evaluate teacher performance

Course title: ...						
No	Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Ambivalent	Agree	Strongly agree
1	This course is relevant to subjects at high school	1	2	3	4	5
2	This course is well prepared	1	2	3	4	5
3	This course has adequate resources to support learning and researching	1	2	3	4	5
4	This course has adequate exercises for practice	1	2	3	4	5
5	My assignments are checked and feedback is given within an acceptable period of time	1	2	3	4	5
6	I can well understand the course contents	1	2	3	4	5
7	I have engaged a lot in self-study	1	2	3	4	5
8	I am satisfied with this course	1	2	3	4	5
9	This course is significant for my major	1	2	3	4	5
10	My instructor has adequate knowledge about this course	1	2	3	4	5
11	She/he plans her/his lessons well	1	2	3	4	5
12	Her/his lessons are easy to understand	1	2	3	4	5
13	Her/his explanation is clear	1	2	3	4	5
14	She/he encourages me to do self-study	1	2	3	4	5
15	She/he is punctual	1	2	3	4	5
16	I am satisfied with her/his teaching	1	2	3	4	5
Additional comments:						

Source: Translated from the Khmer version of a participant public university's student evaluation form

Questions, however, arise as to how much the use of student evaluations alone can ensure or improve teaching performance. This is a serious concern, especially when it comes to assessing academic quality beyond teaching content knowledge. Assessing faculty research productivity and faculty's contribution to student learning, for example, remain limited. There is scant evidence of academic audits or peer assessments in the Cambodian quality assurance process (SEAMEO-RIHED 2010). The concept of benchmarking for quality improvement also did not exist in our data or in the literature.

Informal approaches: While formal approaches to accountability seem entirely natural in a working institution, there exists evidence of perceived informal personal approaches to accountability. The deans acknowledged that the formal accountability mechanisms have not been fully operationalised at the institutional level. One dean confirmed that:

Accountability practice is not yet a system or a clear procedure. I can answer quickly on this point... There is no mechanism that states clearly what will happen whether one is accountable or not. (AP01)

From our datasets, the participants clearly engaged in some forms of informal approach to accountability. Informal approaches can take many forms, from teacher performance evaluation to conflict resolution and problem solving. The deans use this approach for both academic and administrative affairs. Most of the deans believed that in the Cambodian context they cannot

always adhere to formal approaches. Some of them even believed that informal approaches are on the whole more efficient and effective than formal approaches in solving problems at the faculty level. One of the deans claimed:

We tell teachers to change and suggest new approaches (if they are having problems) informally (e.g. when having lunch together or in the meeting). Sometimes, they talk about the real problems when we are close to them... I think we do not have the authority to do that [putting pressure on teachers] ... I think you can pressure workers ... but not teachers... they may not [be able to] do it [things that are far beyond their teaching responsibilities] ... I do not think there are such rules... Informal approach is better. There is no enforceability power. We cannot pressure teachers. They will stop. Teachers know their roles. (AP10)

So, the idea of strict formal sanction for unaccountable performance is a rare undertaking. Rather, the treatment is less serious. Teachers who do not teach properly or whose teaching does not satisfy students' expectations stand to have their teaching hours reduced or classes suspended for a while by way of punishment for poor performance. For public universities, the position of full-time civil-servant faculty member is basically a job for life. This group of faculty members can only be dismissed if they seriously breach professional ethical standards. The process of dismissal is enormously complicated and time-consuming. Participants therefore avoid reaching this stage because they neither want to waste time with disciplinary or dismissal procedures at work nor risk setting themselves up for future difficulties with anyone who has been dismissed. Sometimes a dismissal can affect the program because the dean might take a long time or find it hard to recruit a new faculty member with the required level of experience or qualification.

Similar to sanctioning, the rewarding approach can also be informal, namely in the form of verbal appreciation of good performance, or ad hoc when those good performers need support (e.g. when they want to apply for a civil service position or go abroad for training). They can also get more teaching hours if they keep good records of teaching performance.

Other informal practices for ensuring the accountability of staff and faculty emerged from our data, including deans' uninformed monitoring and classroom visits, informal discussions with students about teacher performance, informal talks with junior or senior staff, responding to requests for consultation or information, and sharing information with faculty members or students through social networks. There is also evidence of soft informal approaches such as discussions with external stakeholders (i.e. employers, parents and alumni) about curriculum and job markets. Deans and faculty members have recently become increasingly concerned about their graduates' employment prospects. They sought various activities to make sure that their programs serve the market well and that their students can secure decent jobs. But these activities were generally reported as informal and ad hoc practices.

Why are the informal approaches more popular? To be accountable, the deans believed that the principles of flexibility and balance, collective satisfaction, conformity and tolerance must be understood in Cambodia and in the academic or teaching profession. Even though the deans we interviewed had different ideas about the principles of accountability, these few informal principles – shaped by how they construct the Cambodian working culture, the teaching career and the political system – are important to validate their works as organisationally acceptable and valid. These realistic working principles seemed to be far more applicable and dominant than the theoretical principles of formal accountability, such as criticality, meticulousness and judicious courage to confront problems. The deans' further

justifications for having to use these informal approaches include the freedom to make decisions, the lack of financial and human resources, the difficulty and high cost of official procedures, and somehow the culture of illogical interventions.

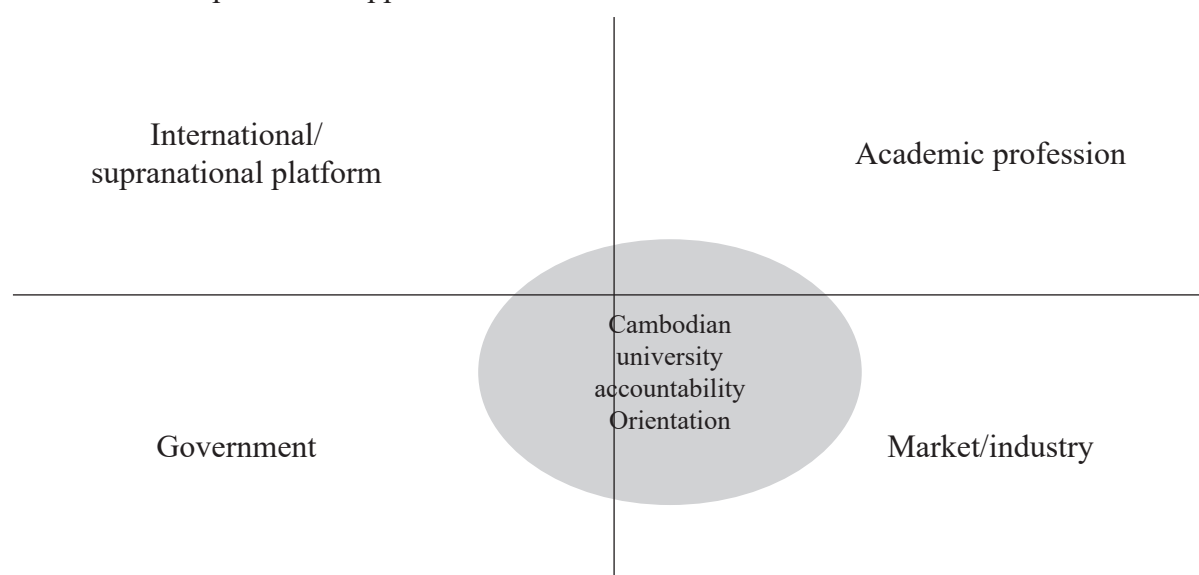
In the literature, there are cases where informal, personal and less regulative approaches are more practical and preferred, both in dealing with academic quality issues and internal managerial problems. Boesen (2007, 83) calls for “Realistic policy objectives in transforming (negative) informal institutions that need to respect the existing power balance in order to gain maximum support of different political actors”. The reasons behind the preference for informal approaches or soft mechanisms in Cambodia can be linked to the patron-client culture of the workplace (e.g. Pak and Craig 2008; Horng and Craig 2008; Eng and Craig 2009; Pak 2011) and weak institutions (Hill and Menon 2013).

6. Further discussions

6.1. Cambodian university accountability orientation

Submission to the market forces and the government priorities: The findings from this study clearly indicate market and government influences on university accountability (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Cambodian university accountability orientation as inferred from university deans’ conceptions and approaches



Source: Authors

The data revealed clear evidence of curriculum designed with attention to market needs and increased university interest in receiving feedback and engagement from employers and external stakeholders. Universities behave in such a way because university resources are congregated mainly from tuition fees, creating a situation where universities have to compete for students to ensure institutional survival. Most of the deans in our study associated the concept of accountability with students’ satisfaction with faculty members, students’ employment and employers’ satisfaction. In fact, one of the most constant Cambodian university missions has been to create employable graduates, and thus employment is often regarded as a benchmark for quality and excellence for differentiation among universities (Oleksiyenko and Ros 2019).

Even though the universities have become oriented towards the market, decision making in the universities still requires a lot of policy and legal conformity to the government, especially for public universities and public administrative institutions. It is clear that Cambodian public, public administrative and private universities in principle have to conform to the existing higher education policy and legal frameworks (which are still limited), are subject to accreditation by the ACC and respond appropriately to requests or new policy guidance from parent and line ministries.

Conforming to the ministerial requirements (particularly, engagement in accreditation process by the ACC) is true across all forms of universities in our study. The private universities also have to follow these requirements. However, whether private universities are subject to the policy will of ministerial intervention in practice is a more complicated issue in reality and depends largely on the real affiliations of each institution and its leaders. This situation is always portrayed as a pointing-finger debate between what the private universities may consider as encumbered evaluation process and what the policy level considers as a lack of full cooperation from the universities.

In the higher education sector, political influences exist especially at the governance level (e.g. Chet 2009; Eng 2014; Sam 2017). University leadership appointments are not always entirely independent of political influence (Chet 2009; Sam 2017). In fact, from previous local studies on accountability in general and accountability in the education sector specifically, it can be implied that the aspects of neo-patrimonialism, patron-client relationships, political influence and cultural mismatch between local and newly introduced working cultures remain relevant in Cambodia's higher education sector (Pak and Craig 2008; Horng and Craig 2008; Eng and Craig 2009; Pak 2011; No and Heng 2015). With such governance, leadership and management conditions at university, the perceived accountability parameters of deans and academics cannot go beyond what are normatively written or abstractly agreed within the institution. Academics either tend to pragmatically ignore or submit to the political agenda.

Weak responses to academic concerns and international/supranational interests: Whether such a market-dominant and politically-driven trends in accountability conceptions and approaches is positive or negative for academic quality, especially given the current performance of Cambodian higher education, remains debatable. In some literature, market orientation may in fact lower the academic quality (see, for example, Dill 1999; Burke 2005; Ros and Oleksiyenko 2018). Academics rely on their community and a peer review system, a system that makes knowledge accountable, as it enforces scientific standards (Huutoniemi 2016, 168–69), rather than just fit a limited scope of technical skills or vocational frameworks.

The data revealed little evidence showing strong orientation towards the pure academic/professional dimension of accountability in which academic teaching, learning and research in response to the standards of academic integrity and quality are the core concerns. There seem to be no regular evidence-based practice of peer assessment or academic audits by professional institutions at the national level besides the existing accreditation practice of quality assurance which remains a limited scheme. Some of our respondents were concerned that the accreditation process could not discern deeply the professional quality of each academic discipline at each faculty. Reported occurrences of some forms of academic audits at program level by external expert groups at three of the six universities were ad hoc and voluntary. Academic research productivity is also not a sound criterion for evaluating and promoting Cambodian academics and faculties. Peer review of academic works is not a common practice. Despite the existence of academic and research committees, previous studies questioned their roles (e.g. Mak, Sok

and Un 2019a) in embedding academic power in a system that was originally state-led. How the committees have contributed in elevating the academic qualities of their university to the excellence level of the international platform also remains unproven.

To gear universities towards academic dimensions and to relax centralized political controls and power games, previous local studies (e.g. Mak, Sok and Un 2019a, 2019b) called for “autonomy”; and what they perhaps mean by autonomy is both institutional autonomy (in terms of administrative procedures) and academic freedom. Local researchers have already highlighted the need for “a real academic culture” in the country (Un, Hem and Seng 2017, 68). This suggests the limited presence and power of academic communities and professional societies in Cambodia and how little work they do to serve academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Such limitations are also associated with weak connections with the global academic community (Oleksiyenko and Ros 2019). Cambodian universities’ ability to respond to the demands of regional and global standards of quality assurance and improvement remains limited. The international/supranational dimension, albeit scarcely emerging from our data, have only indirect influence on system-level design of institutions and instruments, counting the ACC and the CQF. Most of these instruments are designed based on experience from other countries in the region as well as outside of the region. At the institutional level, however, the performance measures of faculty and faculty members have yet to seriously take this international/supranational and global academic community dimension as a core focus.

After all, the tolerance practices towards academic excellence and international qualification parity goals may be a misleading approach in the context of the competitive market and entrepreneurial orientation of university accountability in Cambodia. It is not pragmatic to believe that quality should be reduced in response to the market or that international benchmarks alignment can be left as a peripheral mission. Quality academic institutions always question this kind of purely capitalism-based principle because it does not bring progress and growth in terms of science and knowledge for the institution. Such practices will lead neither to achieving academic excellence nor fulfilling international qualification parity.

6.2. Limited high-quality instrument schemes for accountability

Situating the reported accountability approaches and instruments of Cambodian universities into the accountability literature (e.g. Burke 2005; Salmi 2009; Krcal, Glass and Tremblay 2014), we can understand that Cambodian accountability instruments still lack formality and quality. With that said, the accountability instrument schemes need to be more data-driven, evaluative and enforcement-oriented. The existing instruments are not comprehensively by design, but are a byproduct of quality assurance scheme and normative institutional rules and regulations. Also, the informal approaches seem to influence the accountability implementation to a large extent (See Table 4). It should be noted that the classification of formal and informal accountability approaches is seen only in a small amount of literature such as that by Romzek, Blackmar and Le Roux (2012) because accountability is generally viewed from the formal vantage point. Even though informal practices can work in certain institutional contexts at certain times, in the long run the system needs a formal, high-quality accountability scheme to ensure standardized processes and outcomes.

Table 4: Summary of identified accountability approaches, instruments and principles at Cambodian universities

	Informal approaches	Formal approaches
Planning and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and institutional planning based on institutional strategic plans; written rules, regulations and policies; organizational structure; and requirements from system level
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal approaches to monitoring (e.g. informal talks about problems with juniors or seniors, tolerance of the situation that requires confrontation, informal classroom visits) • Engaging employers, parents, alumni to discuss curriculum or seek advises and increase networks on an ad hoc basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACC accreditation process • IQA • Financial audits (internal and by MEF and MOEYS) • Compliance with institutional rules and regulations • Student evaluation of teacher performance • Curriculum development and update committee meetings (sometimes engaged by international experts)
Reports and discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal information sharing through social network applications or other personal meetings • Informal verbal conversations and/or questions about the performance of faculty members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting and discussing at official meetings • Written reports submitted to seniors, relevant ministries or the ACC (only when required)
Sanctions and rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal advice to change behaviours when there are reported problems • Informal verbal motivation for good performance • Reducing or increasing teaching hours according to mere observation of performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismissal from work, principally regulated but rarely practiced • Ad hoc formal rewards (certificates or medals)
Reflected underlying principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility, collective satisfaction, tolerance, problem avoidance, oriented towards generalised situation rather than specific issues, and laissez-faire attitudes • Can be more practical and efficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic, hierarchical, legal, political, formal-institutional, centralized, and quality assurance guided • Hard to enforce comprehensively and systematically

Source: Authors

The dependence on quality assurance scheme and institutional rules and regulations alone to formally achieve accountability results in various critiques. In terms of quality assurance, for example, the accreditation by the ACC and the IQA apparently receive limited inputs or involvement from research and academic/scientific committees (as mentioned in Touch, Mak and You 2014) which were formulated on an ad hoc basis (Mak, Sok and Un 2019a). So, this formal accreditation process was still questioned by some of the participants in terms of its ability to assess and evaluate real academic quality and performance.

The quality assurance based formal accountability scheme of Cambodian universities are also not comprehensively responsive to different constituencies. For the academic dimension, no official academic audits, higher education assessments, standardised tests or reputational ratings (as listed in Burke 2005 and Salmi 2009) were reported. Also, while the market is the domain towards which Cambodian universities seem to be oriented, many of the standard tools used

by the market in other countries are not employed in Cambodia. Ranking, for example, does not exist. A formal, public database of university information accessible to students and other stakeholders also does not exist. How can the market have adequate information for clients/customers to choose an accountable university? Logically, this explains why the essence of “enforcement” in the notion “accountability” does not exist in Cambodia just yet.

From our interviews, all the deans seemed to view the enforcement of formal sanctions and rewards as complicated; and as such, formal accountability procedures are rarely enforced. Because administering formal sanctions and rewards is time consuming, deans use less strict ways to discipline, warn or motivate their staff. Mok (2010) claimed that in East Asian countries, there are legal regulations but irregular practices. This situation particularly applies to Cambodian context. We could identify the informal substances of accountability practices in all the studied institutions and with all the interviewed deans.

This situation is fuelled by the blurred concept of accountability and policy expectation from the beginning. We learn from our data that the concept of accountability is still vague – mixed with job responsibility, quality assurance, transparency and duties – and the core elements of accountability (i.e. answerability and enforcement) are generally missing. Answerability and enforcement are the two core elements of accountability (Schedler 1999). Some deans expressed uncertainties about their own approaches to accountability, describing their daily working practices and seeing those as their spontaneous duty. In other words, accountability to them may be just a byproduct of what they do every day. What are expected from university and dean in terms of accountability from the policy level have not been clearly articulated.

In describing the limited formal approaches and instruments of accountability, the study does not mean to imply that all existing formal instruments must be implemented at Cambodian universities. Different contexts and systems of higher education and institutions require different formal approaches and instruments. But it is important that the instrument scheme is data-driven, open, systematic, evaluative and enforceable. While soft informal approaches may work in a practical sense, Cambodian HEIs may face long-term challenges if formal and hard approaches (of accountability) are not put in place along the higher education journey towards excellence. Cambodian accountability instrument schemes need to go beyond the framework of quality assurance, and the existing quality assurance practices need to be improved in order to serve all accounting agencies.

6.3. Towards principles of balanced accountability

The key to achieving accountability at Cambodian universities should be the same as what Burke (2005) considered as a balanced accountability principle that serves all constituencies (academia, government, market and international/supranational dimension). Approaches to university accountability should also be more formal (in the context that informal approaches are dominant). These principles acknowledge that universities should progressively embrace all dimensions and be accountable to them in balanced way. Universities should not submit to none of different constituencies but serve them all efficiently with different approaches and instruments (Burke 2005, Brown 2017).

Table 5 suggests some pro-active conceptual principles to Cambodian university accountability relative to different accountability aspects emerging from the current data. Business-as-usual approaches to accountability that is too informal (with laissez-fair attitude to academic quality, unsystematic institutional processes, full submission to political power, lack of conformity to legal framework, full submission to market influence, and vague contribution to social and

international contribution) should be avoided at all costs. At least a more pragmatic approach should be taken to move an accountability implementation scheme from a business-as-usual to a functioning one.

Table 5: Possible scenarios of balanced accountability principles towards different aspects of accountability

Academic quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve evaluative and enforcing capacity of the existing accreditation scheme and international quality assurance • Organize and perform higher education or peer assessments and academic audits • Acknowledge academic freedom and professional autonomy
Institutional management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid laissez-fair leadership style and management • Systemise, systematise and regulate accountability achieving schemes • Engage academic/scientific or research councils and academic communities • Acknowledge institutional autonomy and cutting unnecessary and distracting administrative procedures
Political loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate neo-patrimonialism and political influences in the working cultures at the institution level and throughout the higher education environment • Balance academic and political powers in the governing and leading positions
Legal regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote conformity to (and support the formulation of) higher education legal framework • But do not use it to restrict university autonomy and academic freedom
Market response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge unavoidable influences of industrialism, commercialism and entrepreneurialism • Keep relevance and responsiveness to the market • But do not lower academic quality and activities to satisfy market needs • Balance academic and economic focuses
Social and international/ supranational contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to social communities in a way that is relevant to academic practices • Increase engagement in global academic communities and keep approaching international/regional qualification and quality benchmarks

Source: Authors

7. Policy implications and conclusions

7.1. Policy implications

What is clear from our data is that Cambodian universities, like those in other countries, cannot escape the power interplay between different agencies and so cannot be completely free of the complexities of accountability. Within these layers of complexities, university governors, leaders, managers and academics alike have to be courageous, clear sighted and sure footed in the pursuit of a fitting accountability structure and model.

- ***On instrumentation of accountability scheme:*** There is a serious need for a more data-driven, evaluative and enforceable university accountability instrument scheme that both serves all accounting agencies and adds value to the institution. Data, information and evidence should be the focus of evaluative decisions and should be open. Institutional or policy roles in sharing the data and information to the customers and relevant stakeholders should be strongly encouraged. By being able to do this, university governors could eliminate the loose coupling of HEIs, which survives because the control approaches are flawed and

customers are not aware of those flaws. To quote Fuller, Henne and Hunnam (2008, 11), “In the absence of ‘systemic reform’ the loosely coupled layers of the school institution and increasingly fragmented programs would protect lousy teachers and ineffectual principals”. Likewise, university is benefited from the collected data for its own organizational learning and knowledge management (e.g. Dill 1999). This in turn results in future institutional growth and development.

The current formal accountability approaches at Cambodian universities seem to be fashioned technically by deans’ and universities’ experiences with existing organizational structures and quality assurance movements, which is not a problem. But schemes that embrace other different dimensions of accountability (academic, governmental, market and international/supranational dimensions) are needed. Higher education and peer assessments, academic audits, reputational rating, benchmarking and ranking may need to be promoted to transform the current practices. To make the different instruments work together, the whole accountability implementation framework would have to be designed in tandem with the given inputs/resources, work environment, expected outcomes, and clear logical framework for evaluation.

- ***On institutional governance, leadership and management:*** A capable governing, leading and managerial academic body with clear direction on academic/professional and international/supranational dimensions of university accountability is needed, embracing academic freedom and collegiality principles and courageously racing towards universal academic excellence. Academic leaders need clarity in academic and international goals of academic qualities and productivity (for example, in terms of the number of research publications, international network engagement, and teaching innovation) and have specific rather than generalising attitudes towards academic performance indicators. It has to be made clear that lowering the academic/professional qualities of students and academic institutions in response to market needs is a wrong perception. In other words, universities should respond to market demands without forfeiting academic quality and professional integrity.

The core task of the academic leading body (in terms of council or representative) of university is to put in place resilient and optimal power-balance arrangements within the university. Optimal power balance is needed to curb clashes between institutional autonomy and institutional control, between academic freedom and academic management, between formal approaches and informal approaches, between the internal situations of universities and external forces and between local quality standards and international qualification parity. Institutional power balance arrangements between control and autonomy is needed to serve – rather than submit to – different accounting constituencies.

- ***On system governance:*** What is needed at the system level is an enforceable and empowering governance model that fully embraces the quasi-market, competition-based and thus total-quality, information-driven and performance-based principles of governance, administrative regulation and financing. This system governance model should be underpinned by a sustenance structure to empower diverse types of HEIs. In other words, the governing principles should focus on both the top-down enforcement power and from-within-university empowerment drivers. What enforces is not the governors but the market. The governors’ role is to regulate the markets that can hold HEIs accountable and concomitantly create a sustenance system to support diverse HEIs as they strive to adapt to market forces. Here, the system governance has three roles: (1) governance, administrative

regulation and financing; (2) developing and designing market enforcement tools; and (3) developing and resourcing an empowering system for HEIs. No matter how many inputs are offered or how much restructuring is done to the system or institutional governance, accountability may not be realised if there is no enforcing power and no system to empower the HEIs.

From the current study's data, an example of how to empower universities to respond accountably to different constituencies is to ensure conceptual clarity through policy-directed dialogues which focus on the multidimensionality, answerability and enforceability logics of university accountability. Such guidance and clarification are important to develop a proper understanding or attitude towards accountability. This conceptual dialogue is needed because accountability has to be understood from within the context being discussed. The system-level as well as institution-level policies need to show clear expectations in terms of how HEIs, deans and academics should perform.

7.2. Conclusions

The study findings add to the body of literature that characterises university accountability as being of a multidimensional, multilevel complex nature and that university accountability in many countries is currently oriented towards the market dimension due to neo-liberal, capitalist principles. The current accountability conceptions and approaches reflect the strong orientation of Cambodian universities to the market and acquiescence to the government angle to a certain degree. But the current form of Cambodian accountability is not deeply oriented towards the academic profession and the international/supranational dimension. This situation may yield low public trust on whether the Cambodian universities' missions of academic excellence and international qualification parity can be achieved. Formal approaches to accountability, geared by existing quality assurance scheme and normative institutional framework, are also limited in serving different constituencies in a balanced way, and informal practices are more commonplace in certain stages of accountability implementation.

The necessary measures to serve the different university accountability angles in a balanced way are to improve and/or establish high-quality accountability instruments (e.g. connecting various system-level quality schemes, enhanced data-based knowledge system at HEIs, improved accreditation processes, and additional academic audits or higher education assessments) and to properly regulate university power-balance arrangements (e.g. balancing power between academic management vs academic freedom and institutional autonomy vs institutional control). The findings also imply the need to pay more attention to the design of the system-level higher education governance that both enforces accountability requirements and empowers HEIs to achieve accountability. This corresponds to the needs to offer conceptual clarity in terms of accountability expectations and directions from the beginning to universities, deans and academics.

This exploratory study provides a foundation for further investigations. Future studies should analyse the conceptions, approaches and orientation of accountability, particularly academic accountability, in a comparative framework, based on the different types of HEIs in Cambodia and possibly from the different perspectives among university governors, leaders, managers, academics and students.

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Appendix 1: Interview questions

Interview Guide on Conceptions and Approaches of Accountability of Deans at Cambodian Higher Education Institutions		
<p>Interview instruction: Setting the scene (5 minutes)</p> <p><i>1. Interviewer's self-introduction:</i></p> <p>After salutation, interviewers introduce themselves to participants, giving their name, position, institution and connection between the interviewer's institution and the target interviewee's institution when appropriate.</p> <p><i>2. Interview objectives:</i></p> <p>The interview is guided by three main objectives: 1) to explore how deans at Cambodian universities conceive the idea of accountability, 2) to seek to understand how they translate the idea of accountability into practice, and 3) to explore some perceptions on challenges and balance around the implementation of accountability. These three objectives further comprise 10 main questions to be put to the interviewees.</p> <p><i>3. Confirming time availability of respondent and the use of voice recorder:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interview lasts about 1 hour. • Voice recorder is and should be used for technical reasons. The data will be kept confidential and used only by the interviewers and the research team for the purposes of this study. • Interviewees and interviewers read and sign the consent form to agree to participate in the interview. 		
Sections	Time	Specific questions
Interviewee's self-introduction	3–5 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name, age, position, institution, work background, and current institution • Educational level, university attended, and academic background
1. Conception and perception of accountability	10–15 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As a dean (a leader in an academic institution) how do you personally define the term accountability in the context of higher education institutions? 2. Do you think it is important or necessary for higher education institutions to be accountable? Why or why not? 3. Do you think your current institution and department are accountable for their actions? Why or why not?
2. Implementation of accountability	10–15 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. In what areas are your institution and department accountable? Who in the institution and department should be accountable? 5. To whom are your institution and department accountable? 6. What strategies, actions and tools do you use to implement or ensure accountability? 7. From your experience, if you were to guide an institution's leaders to work in an accountable way, what would you suggest they do? 8. What is it like to be accountable or to lead an accountable institution?
3. Perceptions of accountability implementation	10–15 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. How complicated or easy is implementing accountability at academic institution? What challenges do you face? 10. Do you think asking deans or professors to take too many responsibilities (related to accountability works) can influence their academic works and life? How? What can be the solution?
Closing the interview	3–5 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanks, interviewees' questions after the interview, and incentives • Ask participants to suggest interviewees for academic identity projects
Thanks for your cooperation!		

Appendix 2: List of participants

No	Code	Gender	Position	University orientation	Interviewers	Date
1	AP01	M	Dean	Public	Eam Phyrom	18 Apr 2018
2	AP02	M	Dean	Public	Eam Phyrom	21 May 2018
3	AP03	M	Dean	Public	Ros Vutha	28 May 2018
4	AP04	M	Vice Dean	Public	Ros Vutha and Heng Sambath	4 Apr 2018
5	AP05	M	Dean	Public	Eam Phyrom and Heng Sambath	12 Jun 2018
6	AP06	M	Dean	Public	Eam Phyrom and Heng Sambath	13 Jun 2018
7	AP07	M	Dean	Public	Ros Vutha	30 Apr 2018
8	AP08	F	Dean	Public	Ros Vutha	30 Apr 2018
9	AP09	M	Dean	Public	Ros Vutha	26 Apr 2018
10	AP10	M	Dean	Public	Eam Phyrom	30 Apr 2018
11	AP11	M	Dean	Public	Ros Vutha	30 Apr 2018
12	AP12	M	Director	Public	Ros Vutha	30 Apr 2018
13	AP13	M	Dean	Public administrative	Ros Vutha	25 Apr 2018
14	AP14	M	Dean	Public administrative	Ros Vutha	25 Apr 2018
15	AP15	M	Dean	Public administrative	Ros Vutha	25 Apr 2018
16	AP16	M	Dean	Public administrative	Ros Vutha	25 Apr 2018
17	AP17	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	30 Apr 2018
18	AP18	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	30 Apr 2018
19	AP19	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	30 Apr 2018
20	AP20	M	Dean	Public administrative	Ros Vutha	2 May 2018
21	AP21	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	28 May 2018
22	AP22	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	4 Jun 2018
23	AP23	M	Dean	Public administrative	Eam Phyrom	13 Jun 2018
24	AP24	M	Dean	Private	Eam Phyrom	23 May 2018
25	AP25	M	Vice Rector/ Dean	Private	Heng Sambath	23 May 2018
26	AP26	M	Dean	Private	Eam Phyrom	28 May 2018
27	AP27	M	Vice Rector	Private	Eam Phyrom and Ros Vutha	2 Apr 2018
28	AP28	M	Dean	Private	Eam Phyrom and Ros Vutha	2 Apr 2018
29	AP29	M	Dean	Private	Eam Phyrom and Ros Vutha	2 Apr 2018
Note: All the six universities are based in Phnom Penh. One of the two private universities has some branches in other provinces.						

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