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ANATOMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA



SEN Vicheth and ROS Soveacha
With the assistance of HIENG Thiraphumry

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Responsibility for the ideas, facts and opinions presented in this research paper rests solely with the authors. Their opinions and interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Cambodia Development Resource Institute.

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Acronyms

ACC	Accreditation Committee of Cambodia
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
DHE	Department of Higher Education
HE	Higher Education
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MoLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
SNCE	Supreme National Council of Education
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

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ABSTRACT

Higher education plays a fundamental role in enhancing the intellectual capacity essential to creative leadership in all fields of national activity and in providing a skilled workforce able to respond to changing labour market demands. All citizens, and particularly the poor, need the opportunity and the skills to participate productively in the labour market and other economic activities.

Improving the quality of higher education means providing the skills and capacities to think logically and critically for a society's most talented citizens, including the disadvantaged, so allowing them to participate in, make a major contribution to and lead growth. Countries around the world now face challenges in establishing and sustaining governance to ensure quality higher education for rapidly growing enrolments.

Cambodia is different in having to face these challenges without the assistance of a previous generation of university graduates, who should by now have become competent and experienced planners and managers, but who were dispersed and in many cases annihilated by a generation-long internal conflict spurred by ideological competition between external powers.

There is an acknowledgement by the institutions concerned of the underdeveloped governance arrangements in Cambodia's higher education system, which negatively impact the quality of higher education. This study aims to contribute to and inform existing efforts to improve higher education governance by mapping the governance structure of Cambodia's current system and identifying core issues. Interviews on these issues were conducted with high-level policy makers in government ministries, departments and institutions, representatives from development partners, scholars or researchers in this area, senior national and international education consultants and the private sector.

Key words: Cambodia, higher education system, governance, education policy

Section 1.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Both developed and developing countries face specific development issues arising from their geography, history and politics. A common theme is institutionalising quality solutions to meet unprecedented levels of demand for higher education (HE). This report explores higher education governance in Cambodia in the light of the policy implications derived from our research into the priority needs of Cambodian HE.

Cambodian HE strives to produce the characteristics of a desired national identity by building on its historical foundations, including the experience of numerous international donating entities and occupiers since the beginning of the French protectorate in 1863, which followed other external influences dating back over two millennia.

Like many others, particularly in developing countries, the Cambodian HE system needs more funding and human resources. However, a constructive inquiry into Cambodia's HE governance should begin from a study of those plans and actions that are achievable with the available resources, rather than seeking international solutions to shortages of financial and human resources. Of course, it would be even better if national planners could also receive additional financial and human resources.

Indeed, demonstration of the effective use of existing resources is more likely to attract external confidence and resources. Many countries share similar shortages of resources for HE governance, so the international competition for resources is intense. This study attempts to contribute to strengthening Cambodia's HE governance.

Rationale and Objectives

HE plays a fundamental and constantly evolving role in enhancing the intellectual capacity essential for producing creative leadership in all fields of national activity, and creating a capable and skilled workforce able to respond to changing labour market demands. All citizens, and particularly the poor, need the opportunity and the skills to participate in the labour market and other economic activities. Improving the quality of higher education means providing to society's most talented citizens, including the disadvantaged, the skills and capacities to think logically and critically, thus allowing them to participate in, make a major contribution to and lead growth. In the long run, this overriding priority of quality will promote inclusive growth and contribute to poverty reduction.

Quality is crucial to improving Cambodia's HE for the following reasons. First, Cambodia needs to compete regionally and globally. ASEAN economic integration in 2015 is both an opportunity and a challenge for HE to improve and to produce qualified graduates for a borderless labour market. Second, Cambodia needs to continue growing its economy, for which a well-qualified labour force is essential. Third, HE institutions are no longer just educational institutions. They reflect pride in the nation's HE when it compares positively with other nations' (Mok 2010: 1); the nation will take pride in its achievements if its HE is seen by competing nations to be performing well.

Unfortunately, the limited quality of current HE in Cambodia (HRINC 2010) and the consequent mismatch between HE and labour force demand have produced an oversupply of poorly trained graduates (Heng 2011; D'Amico 2011; Ford 2006). "The state of the higher education system

in Cambodia ... is characterized by very disparate organization mechanisms, poor quality output, and low enrolment. These three factors are greatly inhibiting the development of higher education and more capable human capital in the country” (UNDP 2011: 43).

This is a big challenge if Cambodia is to sustain economic growth. There is an acknowledgement by the institutions concerned of the lack of clear education policies, and the governance of higher education institutions is still a major issue (Pak 2011). The World Bank (cited in HRINC 2010) also raises underdeveloped governance arrangements as a key issue. There is a need for a more comprehensive exploration of the issues and the policy implications. This necessitates rigorous and systematic policy research to answer some of the fundamental questions. Answers can contribute to more strategically focused investments in education, and particularly in HE, so developing a more capable and skilled labour force.

This study aims to analyse the issues and opportunities surrounding HE governance in Cambodia. The primary objectives are:

1. to map the governance structure of HE in Cambodia; and
2. to identify core issues and possible policy options to respond to them.

Defining ‘Governance’

The term “governance” originated from the Latin term *gubernare*, meaning “to steer”. Policy research in political science establishes concepts of governance that have grown out of other academic and policy studies. Initially intended for “steering” states, it is currently known as also “steering” elements of state operations such as collaboration, performance and systems. Systems can be either internal to a nation or collaboration with other nations. The latter can be in the shape of internal-external affiliations or of nations with shared objectives. The form must be agreed, so requiring member compliance with each system’s institutional governance policy. Therefore, governance often deals with structured rules and collective measures (Stoker 1998) within systems, whether institutions, nations or international bodies. Governance normally denotes regulatory and lawful authority and the use of institutional or national resources to administer and enforce performance. Governance depends on unrestricted interactions between those who steer and those who are steered. With regard to national politics, governance is concerned with the interaction between the government and its citizens. With regard to HE systems, governance is concerned with the interaction among top management and operational staff.

Although governance is a contested concept, many scholars in political science and public administration agree that post-modern societies require a shift in the state’s function from “rowing” to “steering” (Mok 2010: 2). States are no longer able to provide all public services on their own. There is a need for the involvement of others, such as the private sector and the market, to contribute to financing public services, including tertiary education.

The new realities facing higher education mean that many traditional ways of running higher education systems are becoming less relevant. A *laissez-faire* approach, which assumes that all the components of a higher education system will simply fit together and serve everyone’s needs, is untenable. System-wide coordination is clearly needed (World Bank 2000: 58).

Because of the rapid expansion of HE in Cambodia and the effects of internationalisation, the traditional top-down HE management no longer works. The governance structure of HE needs to be revisited and modified.

Some 20 years ago, “governance” was used to refer to Cambodia’s HE system as influenced by the United Nations-backed democratic election in 1993, which marked the beginning of the influx into HE of such ideas as governance, quality assurance and accreditation. Policy makers started to think of reforming the system to respond to globalisation trends in HE.

In this paper, we have applied the broad framework of “systemic governance” to the governance structure of Cambodian HE. Systemic HE governance is “the broad relation between higher education, the state, and other major social institutions and processes, including ‘the market’” (London 2010: 203). We look into the relationships and interactions between the state institutions in charge of HE, including parent ministries other than the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) supervising higher education institutions, the accreditation body, the market or employers and the HE institutions themselves.

Methodology

This paper draws widely on international and local policy documents, research reports, and other publications relevant to HE and on semi-structured interviews with high-level policy makers in the relevant ministries or departments, representatives from development partners, scholars or researchers in this area, senior national and international education consultants and the private sector. The interviews were conducted from February to July 2012. Requests for interviews with some high-ranking ministry officials were not successful; only 68 percent of all informants approached agreed to meet the research team. This is a limitation of the study. The opinions expressed here are based on the interviews with those informants who were willing to make themselves available, supplemented by research reports, policy documents and other publications available in the public arena.

Section 2.

GLOBALISING AND INTERNATIONALISING HIGHER EDUCATION

Globalisation can be viewed as either a source of democratisation or a form of escalating oppression. Regardless, it is inescapable. We live in an interconnected world that is no longer composed of isolated nations that can shut out complex global issues. Globalisation influences how far many countries can stretch their financial and human resources to govern their HE. In Cambodia, HE governance is experiencing funding shortfalls, the same small pool of intellectuals having to deal with a rapidly growing body of global knowledge and cross-border academic exchange programmes.

“Globalising” and “internationalising” describe two complementary trends in governing HE. Altbach (2006: 123) defines globalising HE as “the broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect HE and are largely inevitable in the contemporary world” and views internationalising of HE as “specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to deal with globalization”. Some developed countries are moving their HE governance forward, while some developing countries are seeking approaches to reprioritise the use of limited resources.

To internationalise their HE governance, developing countries are even receiving international loans. For this, Cambodia receives financial assistance from a number of sources, above all the World Bank. Altbach *et al.* (2009) assert that some countries are intimidated by global practices and are often stretched to govern a HE system that needs to reflect global practices while also meeting local needs, objectives and practices. Professor Neth Barom, former vice rector of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (cited in Kao 2005: 36), points out that the resources shortage threatens the internationalising of the university, affirming that “both human and financial resources may be too limited for the huge expansion”. Internationalising HE in developing countries appears a risky investment when resources are also needed for many other national development priorities. This does not mean developing countries should not internationalise HE governance, but is a reminder to prioritise their investments most carefully.

Privatisation of Higher Education, Globally and in Cambodia

Privatisation of HE is a global phenomenon, and it is an absolute necessity in Cambodia. This is an additional means to meet the inescapable popular demand for “mass participation across different social, income and geographical groups”, a global trend signifying that higher education is no longer just for elites (World Bank 2000; Lee and Healy 2006: 3). The need to privatise HE is also due to the increasing number of students aspiring to HE and the state’s inability to finance it (Altbach 2007; Lee and Healy 2006; Welch 2010; World Bank 2000). “The growth of private higher education worldwide is proof that when state-supported higher education cannot provide sufficient access, other kinds of institutions will be established” (Altbach 2007: xviii). Coupled with these factors are “[d]emographic change, income growth, urbanization, and the growing economic importance of knowledge and skills” (World Bank 2000: 27). All this has led to the rapid growth of private higher education institutions worldwide. Other forms of privatising HE include the corporatisation of public universities, the generation of income through consultancies and the formation of strategic partnerships between universities and industries (Altbach 2007; Lee and Healy 2006).

However, the expansion of HE has brought with it new serious problems because the “expansion, both public and private, has been unbridled, unplanned, and often chaotic”(World

Bank 2000: 27). The most obvious problem is the decline of overall quality (World Bank 2000; Altbach 2007). As Altbach (2007: xix) explains, “This is probably an inevitable result of an academically more diverse student population, institutions with poorer facilities and less highly trained professors, and less rigorous selection of students”. Another problem is the ongoing inequalities within and among countries and regions (World Bank 2000). The other issue is that HE is increasingly profit-oriented (World Bank 2000). Rising involvement of the private sector “does not necessarily lead to increased diversity, as new universities may simply imitate the curricular offerings of the public universities” (World Bank 2000: 29).

Cambodia has been drawn into this global phenomenon for similar reasons. The state was the sole provider of HE under a fee-free tuition system until the mid-1990s, when HE institutions were allowed to charge fees (Chet 2006). The first private university was officially recognised in 1997. The fact that the state was not able to finance sufficient expansion of HE to meet popular demand was due to the fact that by far the largest portion of its education expenditure was targeted at basic education. The resulting politically unsustainable budget shortfall in HE offered an opportunity for “private funding to enter the tertiary education sub-sector taking the form of fee paying sites in public universities and the rapid opening of private HE institutions” (World Bank 2010a: 3). A unique characteristic of current HE in Cambodia is its huge private financing, almost exclusively from student fees, accounting for more than 80 percent of the total funding for HE; this reverses the funding situation in most developing countries (World Bank 2010a). In such a situation of high dependence on student fees, the absence of a well-functioning quality assurance system and the lack of a long-term, human resource development framework could result in the collapse of the whole system. Chet (2006: 14-15) warns:

... there is a risk of the private sector focusing on the short-term and neglecting the long-term needs of the country... Additionally, rapid expansion of higher education without sufficient quality assurance systems in place can lead to the creation of institutions of dubious quality weakening the whole system. Cambodia is currently exposed to both of these dangers.

HRINC (2010: 6) reinforces Chet’s point, stating, “This rapid growth [of higher education] raises challenges regarding the capacity of the system to absorb such large numbers while at the same time improve the quality of education”. The report continues, “... the emphasis has been weighted too strongly towards *expanding* the system (coverage and quantity), with insufficient regard for *improving* the system (quality and labor market responsiveness)” (HRINC 2010: 7, original emphasis). One of the many remaining challenges is “the importance and urgency to vastly enhance the quality of education” (Chhinh and Dy 2009: 121). Although HE in Cambodia has expanded significantly in quantity, “the issue of quality has become a growing concern that needs to be urgently and jointly addressed” (Pit 2012: 2).

Section 3.

CAMBODIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

According to the Education Law, higher or tertiary education is the education in establishments following completion of secondary education (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007). The number of HE institutions has increased from 10 in the 1990s (Pak 2011) to 97 in 2012, 38 of which are public HE institutions (You 2012). The number of students doubled in just five years, from 117,420 in 2006-07 to 245,329 in 2011-12 (You 2012). This rapid increase has implications for the capacity of staff to cope and therefore the quality of graduates and whether the supply of graduates responds to labour market needs. There are reports indicating not only an oversupply of university graduates (D'Amico 2011), but also a decline in their quality (Pak 2011).

At present, the 97 HE institutions and their many regional branches are under the supervision of 14 different ministries and agencies (Table 1). There is no single government body designated to coordinate all the ministries or institutions that offer HE courses. The current overall governance of 76 of the 97 institutions falls under two separate ministries, 57 under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and 19 under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT).

Although MoEYS, particularly the Department of Higher Education (DHE), supervises more than half of all the current HE, it does not have much authority to control institutions supervised by other ministries or institutions, especially those in the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) stream, which is supervised by MoLVT (Royal Government of Cambodia 2005). Based on the legislation of 2007, the establishment, management and supervision of institutions in the HE stream are subject to the jurisdiction of MoEYS, while their accreditation is under the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), supervised by the Council of Ministers. The accreditation of TVET institutions does not yet exist because a quality assurance committee for TVET is being formed. A *prakas* on the Establishment of the Committee to Strengthen the Quality and Effectiveness of TVET was released by MoLVT in September 2012 (MoLVT 2012). TVET was formerly a part of the Department of Higher, Technical and Vocational Education of the MoEYS.

Although MoEYS and MoLVT are two of the ministries most responsible for higher education and training, the Education Law does not provide a separate role for MoLVT, resulting in “a high level of competition, and difficulties in developing strong cooperation links between these Ministries. Understandably, this makes coordination of the higher education system very difficult for the government” (UNDP 2011: 43). While the ACC is independent of and above ministries, under the control of the Council of Ministers, another accreditation committee is dependent on MoEYS, which also manages the institutions to be accredited.

Currently, there is no single authority to govern all ministries that supervise HE, although the DHE seems to play a major coordinating role because of the large number of institutions under its supervision. However, the collaboration between the DHE and other ministries is limited to tasks such as selection of government-funded scholarship students, provision of technical assistance on some specific courses and some policy dialogue, which is usually based on requests from those ministries.

Table 1. Number of HE Institutions under Ministries/Institutions

No.	Parent Ministries	Number of HE institutions	
		Public	Private
1	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport	8	49
2	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training	9	10
3	Ministry of National Defence	5	0
4	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries	3	0
5	Ministry of Religious Affairs	2	0
6	Ministry of Health	2	0
7	Ministry of Interior	2	0
8	Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts	1	0
9	Ministry of Economy and Finance	1	0
10	Ministry of Public Works and Transportation	1	0
11	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation	1	0
12	Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy	1	0
13	National Bank of Cambodia	1	0
14	Office of the Council of Ministers	1	0
Total		38	59

Source: You 2012: 3

Most informants agreed that there is no formal mechanism for all ministries to interact with one another, apart from meetings at the Council of Ministers. However, a few ministries have been cooperating closely on some issues that require mutual support. That is the sum of interactions among HE parent ministries. Some informants attributed the lack of interaction to a shortage of technical capacity in each ministry in relation to the professional specialisations of the other ministries; therefore, they leave each ministry with full authority not only over the specialised policies of the profession under its supervision but also over the management of the general HE policies applied by its institutions. Rules and regulations for the management of vocational HE institutions are developed separately in each ministry. An outstanding example is the wide variance, among vocational institutions and between vocational and general higher education institutions, in the government financial support provided to institutions and students.

The key actors in the current HE system are the MoEYS and MoLVT and the other parent ministries (Table 1), plus the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia and the Cambodian Higher Education Association, which represents nearly 50 private institutions. The absence of a single governing authority has its own inherent issues. Many of the informants interviewed considered the Supreme National Council of Education (SNCE) as the coordinating body, although the SNCE is not yet fully established and functioning. Several informants expressed high expectations of the SNCE in addressing some of the core issues facing HE.

The Education Law establishes the SNCE with the main functions to (1) propose education policies and long-term strategies that respond to the country's social and economic needs; (2) evaluate the education system's performance; and (3) determine and mobilise the resources required (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007). Though not explicitly stated, the SNCE or

one of its units will probably play an advisory role in coordinating the ministries and institutions supervising HE institutions.

To be chaired by the prime minister, the SNCE is proposed to be based at the ministry in charge of education and the accreditation institution (Royal Government of Cambodia 2007). However, the SNCE still does not exist at the time of writing. There are many questions concerning the five-year delay in establishing it. One informant described this delay as “probably due to the problem it is intended to solve—the existence of 14 in effect independent authorities of which one, the MoEYS, is proposed to be the secretariat of the SNCE”. Similarly, another informant attributed the delay to the difficulty of designing its organisational structure because of the many different parent ministries.

Missing from the list of key actors in the current HE system are the market and employers, although some of the respondents acknowledged their potentially important role.

Section 4.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CORE ISSUES

This section presents the conclusions from a synthesis of the literature reviewed and the perspectives expressed by informants during the consultations. The first part focuses on the achievements of the government, together with the relevant institutions or agencies, in improving the HE system. The second part identifies several issues that repeatedly appeared during interviews and in light of the existing literature.

Achievements

The government and its concerned institutions have targeted many aspects of improving HE. “In an effort to improve quality in higher education”, noted the minister of Education, Youth and Sport, “various efforts have so far been made. Some examples of this effort include curriculum reform, improving learning and teaching practice, introducing a research culture, academic staff and student exchanges, and building networks with higher education institutions in the region and in the globe and so on” (Im 2012: 2). A number of laws and regulations, including the Education Law, illustrate the intention to lay a regulatory foundation. These important legal documents could serve as a framework for management and administration of the HE system.

In a system that had been completely demolished by the Khmer Rouge, there have been notable improvements in the quality of HE. The ACC is an external quality assurance body, and its many regulations are a response to the concerns about the quality of HE. It was established in 2003, the first step towards monitoring and improving the quality of HE. The royal decree on a professorship ranking system, promulgated in January 2013, is based on academic qualifications, publications and professional contributions to their institutions and society (Royal Government of Cambodia 2013). This could establish a career path that will encourage faculties to focus on quality improvement.

In an effort to promote a culture of research within HE, the government has secured loans and grants from the World Bank to implement the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project. This is a USD23 million project, of which 50 percent is grant and 50 percent loan. It has four main components: (a) strengthening the governance and capacity of the system; (b) competitive development and innovation grants to HE institutions; (c) scholarships for disadvantaged students; and (d) improved monitoring and evaluation of project management. The implementation period is from October 2010 to September 2015 (World Bank 2010b).

In supporting this project, in 2010 the MoEYS formulated and disseminated a Policy on Research Development in the Education Sector. Its main purposes are to (a) enhance the quality of higher education in Cambodia by transforming institutions into research centres for developing and creating new knowledge; (b) increase the opportunities for cooperation with national and international networks; and (c) advance human resource capacity, creativity and innovation (MoEYS 2010a: 4). This initiative could become significant in promoting the capacity of faculty members and in making research contribute to improving the quality of HE. It should also help staff to understand that the core functions of universities go well beyond lecturing.

A recent Master Plan for Research Development in the Education Sector 2011-15 also encourages more networking between HE institutions and industry (MoEYS 2011). As well, in the MoEYS’s agreement with the World Bank described above, institutions are invited to bid for grants to do research to update their curricula, and one of the requirements is that they

have to partner with an industry. This is an important step to improve HE institution-industry relations. Other steps include improving labour market information by establishing the National Employment Agency, promoting vocational training through the National Training Board and bridging skills gaps through consultation with the private sector (UNDP 2011).

Core Issues

Despite the praiseworthy efforts of the government and others, there remain a number of issues that need to be addressed to continue to improve HE and make it more responsive to labour markets. The issues presented below were raised by virtually all of the informants and the existing literature. Each negatively affects HE, and they do so even more in combination.

Plurality of Authorities

The entire HE system is fragmented because of a multiplicity of independent authorities, resulting in weak, ineffective and inefficient national policy implementation (Chet 2009; Mak 2012). “Although some steps toward system integration have begun, Cambodian higher education at a glance reveals it to be relatively fragmented” (Chet 2006: 19). There are at least 14 government ministries and agencies providing HE services in the country, supervising almost 100 public and private HE institutions (You 2012). Most informants agreed that there are too many authorities, and there is no single unifying body to ensure coordinated governance of the system. Although the SNCE is mandated by law to advise the government on education, it is not fully functioning yet.

The current governing structure of HE has critical implications for effective resource use, coordination, policy implementation and monitoring, and the relevance of education to the economy and labour market. One informant stated:

Our current higher education system is fragmented; there is no harmonisation among the ministries concerned, and there are too many parent ministries without an umbrella body to monitor the implementation of different policies. Therefore, it is difficult to invest in improving higher education because there are few resources split among many institutions.

The structure does not offer an effective and efficient way of allocating and using resources. The various disconnected components, operating largely independently, fall well short of a coherent HE system. The disconnections lead to a waste of resources and a duplication of roles and responsibilities. A report by HRINC (2010: 6) raises this concern, stating that the current system makes it “difficult to coordinate among government agencies in terms of scope of work, administration overlap and information sharing”. In particular, the report recommends that MoEYS and MoLVT collaborate more closely, especially on “curriculum development, data collection or sharing of market related information” (HRINC 2010: 35).

The lack of a single governing body also impacts on the interactions and coordination among different institutions. Most respondents voiced concern over the unevenness of coordination among the parent ministries and attributed this largely to the absence of a coordinating body. There are few signs of improvement in the very limited exchange of information among concerned ministries and institutions. Although the DHE of the MoEYS provides some coordination over the large number of HE institutions under its supervision, it does not have much jurisdiction over the other ministries offering HE. These limitations raise doubts about the extent to which HE can be described as a system operating under common policies and regulations.

In addition, the absence of an umbrella body affects national education policy implementation and monitoring. The question is: what single body oversees the development and implementation of national HE policies? The failure of the attempt to establish such a body (the SNCE) is gradually weakening the education system and in the long run may cause it to collapse. In that case, markets will identify and employ the graduates of those institutions and those programmes that best meet their needs. The remaining institutions and programmes will gradually go to the wall for lack of students willing to pay their fees, disillusioning the large number of parents and voters who have wasted their investments in HE.

This worst case scenario raises the relevance of HE to the economy and its skilled labour needs. A unifying governance oversight body is crucial to guiding human resource development to service the labour market and to sustain and accelerate economic growth. Such a body could also play a key role in overseeing the system's policy implementation and monitoring procedures. In the absence of such a unifying body, the present student-driven provision of courses¹ may eventually cause the whole system to descend into anarchy as HE institutions offer only programmes that are in high demand from students but not necessarily from the labour market. This will likely worsen the present over-supply of skilled labour in certain fields, complemented by an under-supply in priority areas of national development. In the long run it will also cause economic development to slow due to a shortage of skilled professionals, technicians and tradespeople.

However, establishing an umbrella national HE authority is no easy task. "This requires high-level political will and collaboration among the various actors in both the private and public sectors" (Chet 2006: 18).

Regulatory Regimes

The current HE system suffers from an overdose of outdated, incoherent, patchy and reactive policy documents and a shortage of regulatory regimes that are more strategic, long-sighted and responsive to national socio-economic development needs and the skilled labour demands of the 21st century. There is a long list of official compendiums about the establishment, management and administration of HE in Cambodia. These range from royal decrees through laws to ministerial decrees and ministry circulars, some dating as far back as the 1980s and many of which are no longer appropriate. Some of the more appropriate policy documents, such as the Education Law and the Education Strategic Plan, are insufficiently developed for the current system. As argued by one informant, the large number of often conflicting regulatory documents means: "An agency or institution which wants to go its own way can usually find somewhere in the pile a government decision which authorises its action".

Meanwhile, several policy papers needed for the current HE environment are long overdue. These include the Higher Education Vision, papers on Higher Education Governance, Management and Financing, and a National Human Resource Development Plan. It is imperative that there be a well-defined vision for HE shared by all involved, which requires among the government's highest policy makers a clear vision and a strong political will for the vision to be realised. The good news is that the proposed Higher Education Vision 2030 is now in draft form.² It is

¹ With 80 percent of funding coming from student fees, it is students, rather than employers, whose choices of courses make them the collective paymaster, determining which courses HE institutions develop and offer.

² Its aim is to build "a quality higher education system to develop human resources equipped with excellent knowledge, skills and moral values in order to serve the needs of national development within the era of globalization and knowledge-based society" (Mak 2012: 15). It has three main goals: (a) improve access and equity in higher education; (b) improve the quality and efficiency of higher education; and (c) improve the governance and management of higher education.

hoped that this document will be published soon with a view to public debate, followed by a government decision, promulgation and implementation.

The proposed policy papers on HE governance, management and financing could serve as a framework for assisting and improving the quality of HE. These policy papers will contribute to making policies across concerned ministries more coherent, relevant and harmonised. The National Human Resource Development Plan could be a blueprint for responding to skilled labour market demand. It could guide planning for higher education. Especially, it will provide a valuable framework for all HE institutions in developing programmes and courses that are relevant to real labour market needs as opposed to courses determined by the limited and uninformed student and parent vision of employment possibilities.³ This shift will enable institutions to produce graduates able to match actual rather than hoped for employment demand.

Inadequate Capacity of Actors

Adding to the problems are the low quality and ineffectiveness of the implementation of policies. Some good HE regulations have been formulated and adopted and, “when fully implemented, may prove to be instruments for effective and efficient development and management of the higher education sector” (Chet 2006: 18). However, several informants stated that the implementation of those sound policies is still limited. Ongoing developments such as the capacity overload resulting from rapid expansion of institutions and student numbers “make the enforcement of regulations both challenging and complex” (Chet 2006: 18).

There is a shortage of strong institutions and competent agents to implement policies effectively. This issue has been recognised because institutional and capacity development for national and sub-national education staff has been identified as one of the three main policy priorities in the 2006-10 and 2009-13 Education Strategic Plan of the MoEYS (MoEYS 2010b). Virtually all of the informants raised the low capacity of the major players in HE as one of many challenges of the system. One respondent described a “lack of decision makers with experience in the governance of an effective higher education system and therefore [they are] unaware of what must be the strategic priorities to enable Cambodian higher education qualifications to gain the respect of Cambodia’s ASEAN neighbours”. The informant continued: “Very few decision makers have been trained to get beyond one-off decisions to decisions as part of a comprehensive system”.

The capacity issue is also related to the work overload of the MoEYS.⁴ The MoEYS is responsible for early childhood education, general education (grades 1-12), post-secondary education and non-formal education, youth and sport. The Department of Scientific Research and the Paedagogical Department still “have very limited capacity and scope”, so undermining MoEYS’s efforts to promote university research and development (HRINC 2010: 29). That report also suggests, “Clarity of roles and responsibilities, clear job descriptions and performance criteria, and overall a clear HR strategy for the Department of Higher Education and assessment of the capacity, skills in place and skills needed, need to be addressed” (HRINC 2010: 37). Some informants raised the overload of MoEYS responsibilities affecting its ability to perform all tasks equally well. Added to this is the shortage of competent staff in key positions in different

³ A dilemma is that students, who provide 80 percent of HE institution financing, will still opt for courses that are not necessarily relevant to labour market needs. The government may need to put up more financing to enable it to determine which courses are developed.

⁴ Many countries have a separate ministry of higher education. This separation was briefly tried in Cambodia in 1993 but, given the short time it was allowed to exist, was abandoned for reasons clearly other than evidence that it was an unsatisfactory arrangement.

departments of the ministry. These other responsibilities, together with the HE supervision overload, undermine the capacity of the DHE (and also the ACC) to supervise and monitor HE institutions. One informant raised the issue this way:

Many of the administrators are not administrators by training but by experience only. They were originally trained as teachers, so they have limited capacity to develop strategic plans and action plans. This affects the quality of higher education as a whole.

The shortage of competent staff is evidenced in the absence of key policy documents and the poor quality of existing policy documents and their implementation. Policies on HE financing, governance and management, and on human resource development, still do not exist, despite their vital role. Many of the existing policies could be characterised as reactive, patchy and non-strategic. One and a half decades after the privatisation of HE, there exists no clear, long-term vision about what kinds of graduates the country and the labour market need. That is one of the main reasons for the mismatch between the supply of and demand for skilled labour. There is an urgent need for a detailed review of the skills and resources needed by the institutions in charge of HE.

Industry Linkages and Skills Gap/Mismatch

Linking HE institutions with the private sector and specific industries is crucial for ensuring the relevance of HE to labour market demand. However, such linkage is limited to a very few institutions, notably the Institute of Technology of Cambodia. This is another core issue that needs to be urgently addressed. All informants shared a view that the relationship between skills suppliers and skills users is very weak. There seem to be different reasons for the lack of linkage. The first is that there is no well-established labour market information system that is useful to both HE institutions and employers. Therefore, the HE institutions just provide programmes and courses that are in high demand by fee-paying students. One informant stated, “There is very little communication between employers and HE institutions about the curriculum and labour demands. There is a lack of cooperation between employers and HE institutions.” As a result, much curriculum design lacks the benefit of input by successful practitioners of the profession.

In part this is due to the lack of industry networks. There is no clear policy that encourages HE institutions to develop networks with prospective future employers of their graduates. Although most informants shared a perspective that HE institutions need to be more proactive in networking with industry, in the current situation it is essential that the state step in to encourage the formation of linkages. Some respondents went further, arguing that the parent ministries should also provide assistance in linking their HE institutions with industries because some HE institutions do not have enough capacity to reach out to employers. One informant stated:

So far, there are no mechanisms or little involvement of the market or employers in the HE industry because the market is not very open to HE institutions, and it may be costly. HE institutions are developing their own curricula without consulting or involving the employers, so there remains the issue of relevance to labour market needs.

The 1980 decision to place institutions preparing graduates for specific vocations under the relevant ministry has had the negative effect of fragmenting HE but not the positive benefit that was posited—i.e. the ministries concerned using the experience of successful practitioners to inform the design of curricula to develop the next generation of graduates (Clayton 2000).

Some informants attributed this problem to the lack of openness and willingness of many employers to provide internship opportunities for university students. Although this may reflect HE institutions' inability to gain trust and confidence from industry, it also shows a lack of support and cooperation from industry. However, a 2008 Employers' Federation survey of more than 2400 youth and all its members in Phnom Penh and four other provinces found that around 57 percent of employers offer internship or volunteer programmes, many of which typically last for three months (CAMFEBA 2008). These internship programmes are more likely to be found in NGOs (75 percent) than in the largest industry, garments (20 percent).

Regarding internships, one interviewee stated:

The general tendency is that employers do not seem to be supportive of providing learning opportunities to university students. The employers are not cooperative in providing internship opportunities to students seeking them. And even when they are provided with internship opportunities, the students are not provided with enough valuable learning experiences. Either they are mainly asked to do trivial, unimportant tasks, or they are prevented from having access to documents deemed to be confidential. Students and HE institutions have complained about this in many public forums.

One explanation for private sector employers not being interested in linking with HE institutions is that they have already invested a great deal in in-house capacity building and other on-the-job training for their staff. The current environment does not seem to encourage industry to invest further in linking with HE institutions. One private sector informant argued:

In fact, employers want to engage with HE institutions if they are invited. The lack of engagement of employers causes HE institutions to work with NGOs that offer internships as a source of practical experience. The private sector invests a huge amount in training staff, so they are not willing to invest in engagement with HE institutions that do not seem motivated to build this linkage. That's why the linkage between HE institutions and employers is very small.

A warning can be seen in the recent burgeoning of private non-HE courses, charging fees considerably higher than HE institutions and so able to provide the quality professional courses that HE institutions have not been able to deliver. A notable example has been the emergence of certified professional accountant courses, following the discovery by the national accountants' association that businesses relied almost exclusively on expensive foreign auditors because the plethora of business courses offered by HE institutions seemed incapable of generating competent auditors.

If the current weaknesses of HE institutions are not rapidly addressed by government, the flight of employers to other providers is likely to leave many HE institutions as hollow shells with even further declines in their already inadequate operating funds.

The weaknesses in HE institution-client relationships have resulted in a situation of over-supply of graduates in certain fields and under-supply in others. In fact, the education system has failed to lead to employment and social mobility (IIEP 2011; UNDP 2011; World Bank 2012). Current “education’s relevance to economic, political, civil, and social dynamics is limited” (IIEP 2011: 32). A HRINC report (2010: 8) states: “... graduating students do not have the right skills for the labour market. Course curricula and teaching methodologies focus too much on theory and not enough on practical workplace skills (analysis, problem-solving, decision-making).” A key informant argued: “The quality of graduates is low, not meeting job requirements. They do not possess the necessary skills and capacities to perform their jobs well enough.”

In a survey, 73 percent of employers reported that university graduates do not have the right skills (World Bank 2012). Despite a large number of people entering the labour market every year,⁵ there are still huge human capital deficits in garments, hospitality and tourism, construction, agriculture, mining and information and communications technology (UNDP 2011). This mismatch contributes to high youth unemployment and the weakening of economic growth and competitiveness. In the long run, this may contribute to social unrest and instability. IIEP (2011: 33) warns: “[Y]outh unemployment will continue to contribute to fragility and social unrest in Cambodia if job opportunities are not available to keep up with demand ... graduates are at risk of becoming marginalized and resorting to violence, crime, and other risky behaviours.” Unemployed graduates demonstrating in the streets of Phnom Penh were an important factor in the gradual collapse of the state between 1965 and 1975.

⁵ About 300,000 people enter the workforce every year, while the Cambodian economy could create only about 150,000 new jobs (World Bank 2012; MoLVT 2008).

Section 5.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

There are important opportunities for Cambodia's higher education to improve, if timely measures are taken to make the most of those opportunities. First is the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015,⁶ from when there will be a free flow of the labour force across borders within the region. Many informants posited that this is a wake-up call for Cambodian HE institutions to catch up with their peers in the other ASEAN countries. Although some argue that it is a bit late for Cambodia to start thinking about improving the quality of its HE and its workforce, others are of the opinion that correct action now will be more likely to improve Cambodia's competitiveness in regional markets.

A related opportunity is the inflow of cross-border education. ASEAN economic integration will open the door for top universities in the region to open branch campuses in Cambodia. This would contribute to improving the quality of HE here; it will also pose a great challenge for local HE institutions in attracting students. This will push local HE institutions to improve their quality.

The government's aspiration for Cambodia to become a lower middle-income country is another opportunity for HE. Achieving this goal requires more commitment to develop and increase the competence of the skilled labour force. This means improving the quality of HE, including the development and expansion of TVET institutions. An informant explained:

With Cambodia's current status, a lot of aid is still coming to Cambodia. This is a good opportunity for the country to try to improve its higher education system if we are willing to do more. However, if we don't grab this opportunity, it will be gone soon when the country graduates from its current status of eligibility for aid.

The government's intention to promote emerging industries such as energy, services and telecommunications also provides an opportunity to improve HE. Cambodia has a young, mobile and dynamic population with the potential to be a huge economic asset. According to a World Bank report (2012), 56 percent of the population was below 25 years of age in 2008, and this figure is even higher now. This demographic profile is important for economic growth so long as this labour force is equipped with the necessary skills. Improving the quality of HE will contribute to developing the capacities and skills of this critical workforce.

If correct measures are taken immediately, these external factors may help Cambodia to move forward and catch up with the other countries in the region.

⁶ Conversely, some informants argued that ASEAN economic integration will be a challenge for Cambodia's higher education system as a whole, especially the poorly performing institutions. Some asserted that Cambodia is running out of time to prepare for the free flow of the regional labour force. Some even doubted whether many HE institutions understand the challenges the implications of integration into this regional economic community.

Section 6.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is only a decade and a half since Cambodia began privatising HE. It is therefore not surprising that there are important issues that still need to be dealt with. History has also shaped the HE system, not always positively. Over the past five decades, the country has experienced several radically different regimes. Because key decision makers in different leadership positions have experienced such different education systems, there is a degree of ideological competition underlying the current education system. It is going to take a while to define clearly and in detail the system's preferred identity.

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has remarkably expanded the system to cater for the increasing needs of young people for higher education. With assistance from development partners, the country has also improved the HE regulatory foundation by enacting important policies and regulations and establishing the ACC. However, a number of institutions have not yet realised their promise. The Supreme National Council of Education should have been fully functioning by now because its core mission is fostering critical policies for the whole education sector. Issues such as the absence of key policy documents and the limited capacity of the major actors in the system need to be attended to.

The structural fragmentation of the current HE system is a critical issue. The "system" lacks coherence, remaining little more than an aggregation of separate, disconnected components. Many parent ministries supervise HE institutions without a single, unified governing authority to coordinate them. Almost 10 years of the existence of an external quality assurance body does not seem to have made any change to public perceptions of the quality of HE. The disconnect between HE institutions and the market worsens the situation.

ASEAN economic integration in 2015 will be a serious, possibly fatal, challenge to Cambodia's HE system if it does not move fast enough to reform and improve. Cambodia will be challenged to maintain economic growth if HE is not able to produce qualified graduates; more competitive goods, produced by better qualified graduates in regional neighbours, will swamp the Cambodian market. The supply of most fruits and many vegetables, dominated by Vietnam and Thailand, is an example of the failure of HE to meet the skills needed by Cambodian agriculture.

Political barriers to employment of graduates from regional neighbours will no longer be possible, and Cambodian graduates may find themselves bypassed by foreigners for the professional positions they thought they were being trained for. The stakes are high. "In order to continue the remarkable growth the Cambodian economy has seen the past 10 years, the government will have to ensure that it creates a well-educated skilled workforce. Rapid expansion of a skilled, capable workforce can attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and promote further growth; if the labour market is filled with unskilled workers, the economy will largely be unable to capitalize on these benefits" (UNDP 2011: 28).

To benefit from current and forthcoming opportunities and to address the core issues described above, some policy options need to be considered:

- Improve and expand HEI-industry linkages by means of policy frameworks and incentives. Finalise and publicise a labour market information system.
- Strengthen the external quality assurance body, so regaining confidence and trust from the public and employers. Study regional and international models and draw on the

lessons in order to develop a Cambodian model of a competent, effective, efficient and politically independent quality assurance authority.

- Continue to build the capacity of actors. Continue to recruit competent graduates, with lengthy experience in HE planning and management, to work in relevant HE ministries and departments.
- Adopt the Higher Education Vision 2030 as soon as possible and develop other key policies on HE governance and financing reform.
- Develop the National Human Resource Development Plan to map out the labour force needs of the next 15-20 years to guide HE institutions in producing graduates whose skills are in demand.
- Promote HE research and development by means of policy frameworks and financial packages. Encourage HE institutions to begin to allocate funds for R&D. The government needs to provide financial packages for research and capacity development for both academic and non-academic staff of HE institutions.
- Establish a national commission or authority or ministry with unchallenged responsibility for supervising HE and advising the government on coordinating HE management across all ministries. The TVET stream should function under this authority. The MoEYS would be relieved of supervising HE, allowing it to focus on early childhood and general education, youth development and sport.
- Develop an alternative path to further education for the poor, dropouts and those who lack the intellectual competence for HE.
- The number of HE institutions in Cambodia is excessive in proportion to the student population and too high for the MoEYS and the ACC to supervise satisfactorily. The government may need to support a few good universities to become centres of excellence, at least by regional standards, and turn the rest into specialised polytechnic institutes that provide shorter training courses in vocational skills that prepare students for job markets.

Section 7.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study so far presents only a broad overview of the current governance structure of HE in Cambodia, the relations between key actors and the core issues that need to be addressed. More specific studies are needed to gain a better picture of the system and to address the issues. Below are some suggested areas for further research.

- A comparative analysis of the governance structures of HE in the region, to guide the restructuring of the HE governance system in Cambodia.
- HE financing in Cambodia. It would be helpful to focus on transparency and accountability in relation to HE financing and governance. It may also be useful to calculate unit costs of completing a quality HE degree programme, allowing institutions to figure out how much they need to invest and providing a basis for estimating the funds needed to implement a realistic human resource development plan.
- It is necessary to look into the issues of equity and access to HE and to investigate the possible relationship between the privatisation of higher education and the social stratification currently emerging.
- It is important to investigate the impact of the ACC's accreditation on quality improvement of tertiary education and the reasons for such impact or lack thereof. It would also be essential to explore the perceptions of the public and employers of the ACC and its work.
- A related need is a study of student participation in demanding quality HE. To what extent do students apply to institutions where it is known that, if one pays the fees, one gets the degree, regardless of attendance or performance? How active are students in demanding improvements in quality?
- Another area is the actual process of HE policy formulation and implementation. Who is involved? Whose voices are translated into policies? What is the mechanism to implement and monitor a policy?
- A study of who is involved in HE curriculum development and what content is and is not included in courses or programmes. Is course development a function of the institution, or is each lecturer left to his/her own devices?
- Is there a relationship between graduates' unemployment and the perceptions and attitudes of their communities towards investment in education?
- What are the perceptions of young people who obtain HE but are not employed or are employed at a remuneration well below what might reasonably be expected for their qualification?

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