



Higher Education in Cambodia: Current Situation, Problems and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, Cambodia has made impressive progress in educational development. The educational system has changed again and again to improve educational services because education has been known as the backbone of Cambodian economics. The purpose of this study is to examine the current situation of Cambodian higher education, the problems and to provide the solutions to the problems. This paper used a predominantly descriptive approach relying on secondary sources such as academic papers, textbooks, government documents, non-government organization documents, and development partner reports. Therefore, this research could be significant for researchers, academicians, and policymakers to deepen their understanding of Cambodian higher education in order to reform its system to the benefit of educational quality and student academic success.

KEYWORDS : assurance; educational system; higher education institution; quality

1. Introduction

In the King Sihanouk era (1955—70) education expanded dramatically. The king Sihanouk used an ambitious national education system to exhibit the country's modernity and his devotion to Cambodian people. By the late 1960s, the system was severely strained financially and buffeted by pressures from the left, then collapsed in the civil war that broke out after the King Sihanouk was driven from power in 1970 (Ayres, 2000).

After Lon Nol's coup d'état in 1970 Cambodia entered a period of devastating war. The country's educational system had to stop its activities. After the wartime the country came to genocidal regime led by the Pol Pot (Le Thac, 1991). Tragically, during the Democratic Kampuchea regime between 1975 and 1979, most Cambodian intellectuals, scholars, and academics were lost in the genocide. After the civil war was over, Cambodia government has strived to develop and reform the higher education institutions until now (Rany, 2012).

Cambodian higher education institution lacks world recognition and is currently not acknowledged by World University Rankings. Furthermore, there is inadequate communication between schools and corporations. This thus hinders the necessary adjustment of the curriculum to equip the students with skills to meet the demand of the labor market. Graduates also find difficulty integrating into the workforce (Moniroith, 2012).

Despite this shortcoming, higher education in Cambodia is a very good case study of education reform underpinned by donor assisted development programs. It demonstrates the complexity of dealing with multifaceted education projects seeking to generate substantial reform in the short term in the context where government planning capacity is either weak, ill-informed or both (Stephen, 2001).

2. Current Situation of Higher education in Cambodia

2.1. Types of Higher Education institutions in Cambodia

The term "Higher Education Institution" refers to those institutions offering associate degree, bachelor degree, master degree and doctor of philosophy degree under relevant government agencies concerned and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). Public and private institutions are in many ways alike in terms of operation. Public institutions have been granted partial autonomy in curriculum design, recruiting teaching staff and charging tuition fees from students in order to significantly cover operation costs and ensure long term sustainability. The private institutions generally have greater autonomy, especially in staff recruitment and financial management (HRINC, 2010).

Cambodian Education Law, which was passed in 2007, states that higher education is the education following the secondary education, that higher education shall teach learners to have complete personality and characteristic, and that higher education

shall promote scientific, technical, cultural and social research in order to achieve knowledge, skills, morality, inventive and creative ideas and entrepreneurial spirit for the development of the country.

There are three categories of higher education in Cambodia as follows (Moniroith, 2012):

- The first category is the academy, an institution responsible for carrying out research. There is only one academy, the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC), which is under the supervision of the Council of Ministers. Although this institution is primarily assigned to conduct research, it also provides advanced courses ranging from masters to PhD programs.
- The second category is the university which provides the course of bachelor (4 years), master (2 years) and PhD degree (3 years).
- The third category is the institute, which mainly offers training in a particular field, but does not provide a wide range of research or training in multi-disciplinary subjects. As distinct from a university, an institute is specialized in a professional field, for example, in engineering, medicine, agriculture, education and so forth.

2.2. Entry of Students into Cambodian Higher Education Institutions

Entry to higher education has changed since the higher education sector was reopened in the 1980s. Before 2002, admission to universities and institutes in Cambodia had required high school graduates to sit for entrance examinations organized by each university and institute, and supervised by the Department of Higher Education. However, since 2002, entry to higher education has been based on grade 12 national exam results organized by the ministry of education. Currently, there are two pathways to higher education in Cambodia, which are simple but rigid. The first one is that the Department of General Education issues the Senior High School Certificate to Year 12 students who successfully pass the high school exams. With this certificate, students can apply for admission to a bachelor program in universities or institutes. The second way is through the Associate Degree, issued by university or institute to Year 12 students who fail the high school exams after they attend a one-year course within a university or institute. The Associate Degree is equivalent to the Senior High School Certificate. Year 12 students with the Associate Degree are also admitted to a bachelor program in any university or institute. Both students with the Senior High School Certificate and the Associate Degree have to pay for their tuition fees but some win scholarships which mean the waiver of tuition fees, based on a high score in the high school exams (Moniroith, 2012).

2.3. Governance of Cambodia's higher education

The Ministry of Education supervises all private universities and eight public universities and the Ministry of Labour and Technical Vocational Education and Training does the same for institutes. All private universities fall under the jurisdiction of the ministry of education, but sometimes some of them do not pay much attention

to the instructions from the ministry of education as the owners and rectors of private universities are very often influential persons who hold high office in the government (Cuyno, 2009). There are three main governmental agencies that coordinate, control and assist the work of higher education: the Department of Higher Education (DHE), and the Department of Scientific Research (DSR) and the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC). The DHE coordinates and assists universities or institutes in implementing regulations and directives from the ministry of education, particularly related to undergraduate programs, namely the Associate and Bachelor degrees. The role of the DSR is to coordinate, facilitate, and enhance the capacity of universities and institutes to undertake research activities related to the national interest, and it is responsible for post-graduate programs. The DSR has been criticized for its inability to control and supervise the postgraduate programs in universities and institutes as it lacks research capability and experience, and the DSR does not yet set any criteria for assessing post-graduate theses (Chealy, 2006; Moniroith, 2012).

The ACC, which was established by a Royal Decree in 2003, gives accreditation to universities and institutes by examining their governance, physical facilities and equipment and academic standards. The ACC reports its work to the Council of Ministers. Under the Decree, all universities and institutes both domestic and foreign are subject to accreditation in order to be eligible for degree granting. For the time being, the ACC is mainly responsible for the Foundation Year by giving provisional accreditation to most Foundation Year programs in universities and institutes. There is a conflict of interest between the DHE, ACC and DSR regarding the control of universities and institutes. The DHE seems to regard the work of the ACC as related to the Foundation Year only, claiming that the bachelor degree programs are its work. The DHE regards masters and doctoral programs, which are also supervised by the DSR, as its work, too. Now there are some suggestions that the regulatory and service role of the DSR should be integrated into the DHE mandate in order to simplify and streamline the operations of the government (Cuyno, 2009). The work of the DSR and DHE is ultimately reported to the ministry of education, while the Council of Ministers is keen to see the whole higher education sector reporting to its office (Moniroith, 2012).

2.4. Problems and Solutions

Ayres (2000) sees education policies and practices in Cambodia as "central to the tension between modernity and tradition". The quality of Cambodian higher education is low because it has many problems such poor admission, irrelevant curriculum, a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate resources, improper infrastructure, poor leadership, poor graduates, lack of internal assurance, financial constraints, etc.

• Poor Admission

Most Cambodian public and private universities do not specify or stipulate admission requirements into their institutions. They rely solely on the results of the final national high school examinations. This means that students who have completed six years of primary and six years of secondary education with passing grades and secondary school diplomas do not need to apply for admission in order to enter tertiary educational institutions. Admission to university is easy, just fill the form and pay the money. Only a few universities have difficult admission to their universities. Prior to 2002, similar to Soviet and European admission procedures to higher education, the government ministries prepared examinations to recruit the best candidates to enroll in the public higher educational institutions, but the private HEIs had already been setting their own entrance exams to recruit students under supervision by relevant ministries. Consequently, many public and private universities have selected unqualified students to attend their institutions. Thus, educational quality suffers a negative impact caused by the search for commercial benefits (Rany, 2012). To solve this problem, the Cambodian ministry of education should change the system of high school examination, increase high school teachers' salaries and redevelop the curriculum in high school by making the curriculum relevant to the study in higher education.

• Irrelevant Curriculum

Most universities in Cambodia use American curriculum and textbooks, so it cannot apply to all needs in Cambodian job markets. The graduates lack thinking skills and the work skills in Cambodian context. For the students that have low knowledge of English cannot find many textbooks to read because most textbooks are in English. Another thing, Cambodia lacks funds and qualified professors to reform curriculum, and is waiting for the help from donors such as America, Japan, World Bank, etc. For master and PhD, the curriculum is worse than bachelor degree, it is not standard, so most students prefer to study master and PhD in other countries such as America, France, England, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, Russia, China, India, Singapore, etc (Moniroith, 2012). To meet the needs of Cambodian job markets, Cambodian ministry of education should conduct a survey to find out what skills that the employers need for their workplaces. Also, the ministry of education should train their staffs who lacks expertise in higher education curriculum development.

• A lack of qualified teachers

According to the Cambodian Scientific Department (2010), there are 1510 masters' degree lecturers and 192 doctorates' degree lecturers in private and public HEIs nationwide. However, the Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE) and the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), both prestigious universities and member of ASEAN University Network, have only 7 and 16 PhD holders respectively. Most universities around the world require their lecturers to fulfill three basic functions: to upgrade the quality of training, to do research, and to provide consultation services (Rany, 2012). In addition, there is nepotism in working as university teachers. All universities rectors let their own family relatives or friends to work as teachers in their universities even though those people are not qualified to teach. Many teachers who get master or PhD from western countries feel unfair because they get low salary then those teachers who have relations with rectors. All rectors in Cambodian public universities are politicians in the government party. The party gives them position as rectors by not focusing on their academic backgrounds, just focusing on the party policy. Most rectors are unqualified rectors in running the universities, but they have political power to control the universities (Moniroith, 2012). To deal with this problem, the government should stop nepotism in higher education and the ministry of education should make sure all teachers have learned pedagogy. The ministry should also challenge teachers to work hard and give reward to those who perform well in teaching.

• Inadequate resources and improper infrastructure

All Cambodian universities' libraries do not have enough books for reading and research. The libraries are small with outdated books. Most of those books are in English. The universities do not have good Internet service, the Internet is very slow, and many documents cannot download. Those universities do not have electronic-books, or electronic journals that the universities buy or cooperate with other international universities or publishers. Most universities do not have new modern laboratory for some majors that needs to use laboratory for experiments. And the universities do not have research funds for research and development of their universities. In Cambodia, university administrators do not care much about research; they just care much about their revenues. Moreover, most universities have very small campus lands. Some private universities build only one building or hire a building to open a university branch. It is funny for foreign people to see the university buildings in Cambodia because they are too small to be university campuses (Moniroith, 2012). With this problem, the government should investigate each universities and colleges' resource and force them to equip learning and experiment resources that are lack and should stop those small campus universities.

• Poor leadership

As above-mention, most rectors of Cambodian universities are not academic qualified. They are appointed by political party that runs

the country. It is hard for them to lead the universities without higher education academic background. Some rectors have PhD in law, but they work in educational sectors. This problem is not easy to solve if the political party do not want to change. In addition, the governance structure in Cambodia favors political purpose over professionalization. In a political climate that is characterized as winner-take-all and patron-client relations, educational resources are a reward distributed to those who prove loyalty to political leaders. Education reform in Cambodia since 2001 has been institutionalized and structured in line with an international conceptual shift from donor dominance to governance-led ownership, from a project-type approach to a sector-wide approach, and from a market perspective to a human-rights perspective. However, it is equally true that governance rooted in traditional politics and culture influences the effectiveness of providing quality education in the Cambodian context (I-Hsuan, 2015).

• **Poor graduates**

Many graduates cannot find the job after finishing bachelor degree, or some work in the company that does not fit with their majors. Cambodian universities are looking for revenue, not quality. Some people say Cambodian universities are certificate shops because of low quality education. In general, many graduates from Cambodian universities have not enough skill and language proficiency to work in the company, so they cannot find the job easily, but for some who are work hard themselves and can speak English and Chinese fluently can find good companies to work with competitive wages and good benefits. In addition, addressing job-skill mismatches is a problem not just for Cambodia, given the reach of the globalized political and economic forces as well as demographic change in recent decades. Countries of Southeast, East and Central Asia, for example, have seen rapid social transformation that has resulted in common, but also distinct types of skills mismatch. Skills mismatch has recently been central to policy discussion about Cambodian higher education in relation to economic diversification and workforce development. The consensus appears to be that young people and their families are either unable to make rational decisions or lack enough information to do so in choosing the right fields of study that ensure better prospects of employment and hence support economic growth, and that the immediate need is to create institutional mechanisms that help 'improve' their decision-making in addition to improving the governance and quality of higher education, ranging from creating public-private partnerships to gathering and publicizing 'adequate' labor market information (Chivoïn, 2015).

• **Lack of internal assurance**

Most universities in Cambodia do not have internal assurance because the universities do not have qualified people to do this assurance job and the universities do not want to do this job also (Moniroith, 2012). In addition, Cambodian ministry of education does not have ranking university unit as other countries, so it is lack of motivation for universities management team to upgrade their university service quality. On the other hand, the reason of lacking human resource in higher education management is that all Cambodian universities do not have major in higher education research as in other foreign countries such as America, England, Australia, China, etc.

• **Financial constraints**

Financing higher education is virtually limited by the government's annual budget. Overall, educational expenditure amounts to 1.60% of the GDP while public higher education expenditure receives only 0.05 % of the GDP. For example, government has been financing public higher education institutions in the amount of approximately US\$ 8 million in 2011, and it will be dramatically increased to approximately US\$ 13 million in 2012. A large portion of the budget of Higher Education is spent on staff remuneration with a smaller portion on development of other subsectors (Rany, 2012). Moreover, the development of the HE sector requires a comprehensive approach which the Cambodian government by

itself is incapable of providing for lack of financial resources, knowledge and experience. The involvement of different stakeholders including donors, the private sector and government is required to upgrade Cambodian HE sector in order to prepare the country for its participation in the Asian Common Market (Chanphirun & Heidi, 2015). On the other hand, the Royal Government cannot finance reforms in higher education, and given the narrow focus of bilateral agencies in the sector in the past, the issue of how international organizations can contribute to higher education in Cambodia has become all the more critical. This speculative opportunity by the Australian government is appealing, but in the absence of adequate institutional infrastructure, mechanisms for higher education governance and reliable and regulated financing arrangements, the vision seems to be farfetched (Stephen, 1997).

Beside the above-mentioned problems, there are two bigger problems. First, the ministry of education in Cambodia cannot control all the universities, some universities are controlled by other ministries such ministry of health, ministry of agriculture, etc. So it means the ministry of education in Cambodia does not have full power in high education administration. Second, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) is not independent and qualified to judge the quality of Cambodian higher education. The ACC works under the policy of political party and does not have qualified staffs (Moniroith, 2012).

3. Conclusions

Higher education problems in Cambodia are hard to solve because higher education leaders are politicians. They work for their party and follow the party's policies. Those leaders know the weakness of higher education but they ignore because if they care much they will lose their positions or own benefits (Moniroith, 2012). In 2013, the government has changed a new minister of education, so Cambodian people are waiting to see how, in what way he can develop the education in Cambodia. In short, Cambodian HEIs need to expand their curricula and facilities, and improve teacher quality & admission requirement to provide a wide range of skills to link labor demands nationally and internationally. However, university autonomy and academic freedom are a part of the current problem to improve the education quality in Cambodia because political parties and parent ministries are actively involved in making important decisions in the administration of an HEI as well as nominating high academic ranking officers based on political tendency rather than academic qualifications in Cambodian public HEIs. For example, the presidents or rectors of public universities are appointed by the government without opening the positions to public competition and evaluation of academic experiences and competencies.

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