

## Higher education in Cambodia:

### Reforms for enhancing universities' research capacities

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While Cambodian higher education is facing many challenges (see Heng et al., 2022a; Sol, 2021), the major issue that calls for reforms is a limited research capacity of Cambodian universities and academic staff. This problem needs immediate attention. Policy actions are required to improve the research landscape in the country and empower local academics for a more productive and impactful academic performance. In the following sections, I elaborate on my arguments.

#### *Limited research output: A major challenge*

Previous studies have indicated that the research capacity of Cambodian universities and academics is very limited (Eam, 2015; Heng et al., 2022b; Kwok et al., 2010; Moore, 2011). A scoping study by Kwok et al. (2010), for example, indicated that most Cambodian universities lacked a clear research policy and did not regard research as their core mission. Most, if not all, universities have been functioning primarily as teaching institutions.

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A large-scale survey by Eam (2015) involving 444 faculty members from 10 Cambodian universities revealed that about 65% of these lecturers were not involved in research at all. Those who did research were the academics who were willing to spend their own time on research and had research competence. Chen et al. (2007) previously found that up to 85% of the Cambodian university lecturers who participated in their survey (n = 60) never published any research papers. A recent bibliometric analysis by Heng (2021) pointed to similar results. Specifically, it showed that within the last decade (2010-2019), Cambodia published only 3,521 documents indexed in the Scopus database, placing it 8<sup>th</sup> among the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in terms of research productivity. The neighbouring countries Thailand and Vietnam with 143,507 and 53,907 Scopus-indexed publications were ranked 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, respectively (Heng, 2021). Previous bibliometric analyses also indicated that Cambodia lagged behind most of the other countries in the region when it came to research productivity (Nguyen & Pham, 2011) and research collaboration (Barrot, 2017; Kumar et al., 2014).

There are many reasons explaining the limited research capacity of Cambodian universities and academics. Kwok et al. (2010) outlined several issues that constrained the development of research in Cambodian universities, including low academic salaries, limited research facilities, lack of clear academic career pathways, and lack of well-trained researchers and academics with PhDs due to a loss of generation of

academics, following the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) that killed about two million Cambodians (Clayton, 1998). In 2018, only 1,309 (about 8%) of 16,167 higher education teachers held PhDs (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2019), while there is an estimate of between 4,000-8,000 PhD holders in Cambodia today, creating a dual challenge: PhD inflation in Cambodian society and a PhD shortage in Cambodian higher education (Thun, 2021).

The major reason for the academics unwilling to do serious research is largely related to the low salaries for academics. In Cambodia, full-time lecturers in public universities are considered civil servants and receive a monthly government salary of around \$300 for teaching four classes (12 hours) per week (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). They usually do not receive additional income unless they teach extra classes or take up administrative positions which provide them with extra income. This low salary base forces many academics to focus on teaching and moonlighting, often at multiple institutions, to generate extra income, leaving them little or no time to conduct research (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018).

In addition, Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) emphasized a lack of attention to the quality of the academic profession. This means that opportunities for professional development and research hinge largely on academics' personal motivation and self-initiative. However, as Oleksiyenko and Ros (2019) argued, most Cambodian lecturers "were reluctant to take on research in the absence of an institutional support system or societal appreciation of their intellectual outputs" (p. 228).

Consequently, the total research output emanating from Cambodian universities and academics is very low.

Moreover, a study by the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (2016) cited political sensitivity as one of the major impediments to research. The study noted that political pressure and fear of retribution encouraged self-censorship among researchers, limiting what could be researched and discussed. Likewise, Sam et al. (2012) noted a limited space for academic freedom in Cambodian higher education, an issue previously raised by Chet (2009) who highlighted the lack of autonomy among Cambodian public universities regarding appointments of academic staff and university presidents as an example of state interference in academic freedom.

#### *A proposal for higher education reform*

In order to increase research activities in Cambodian universities, I would like to advocate for higher education reforms focusing on three key issues: research policies, institutional support for research, and university orientation. These I elaborate below.

First, to promote university research in Cambodian higher education, attention should be given to research policies, both at the national and institutional levels (Heng et al., 2022b). At present, there is no clear national research policy that outlines how research is supported, rewarded, and/or required (see Kwok et al., 2010). Although MoEYS has recently issued a directive advising HEIs to implement the policy on academic ranks which grants university lecturers academic titles such as

assistant professor, associate professor, and professor (see Heng, 2020a; MoEYS, 2020), the actual implementation of this policy contains a range of ambiguities. For example, it is not clear whether lecturers in private universities can apply for academic titles announced by MoEYS. Policymakers and relevant institutions would need to dispel doubts about the process and procedure for applying for academic ranks. The remuneration associated with the academic titles also needs to be made clear and transparent. Moreover, MoEYS should push HEIs to consider a well-defined institutional research policy that prioritizes research when it comes to academic recruitment, promotion, and retention.

Second, sufficient institutional support is required. To promote research, it is extremely crucial to foster an institutional environment conducive for research (Altbach, 2009). One strategy is to establish a clear system for research incentives and requirements. This raises the need to answer some important questions: Which incentive schemes (monetary and/or career-related) are available for research and publication? What are the institutional requirements for research? How many publications are required per year per lecturer/researcher? What kind of publications (i.e., working papers, journal articles, book chapters) is expected or required? What are the acceptable or most preferred publication outlets (local journals, international journals, journals indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science, newspapers, magazines)?

Another strategy to consider is to offer research incentives, research time and space, and research training and mentoring opportunities for lecturers. Full-time lecturers in public universities

should be classified into research-focused and teaching-focused lecturers. They should then be treated differently in terms of salaries, with research-oriented or research-active lecturers receiving an additional salary in a similar way to how lecturers in the managerial positions are remunerated. Moreover, lecturers who are research-oriented and research-competent can be exempted from teaching requirements if they can produce a certain number of publications within an agreed time frame. Research training also needs to be offered regularly by the research office, research coordinators, or key researchers in the department or faculty. This would foster a supportive environment for novice researchers or any lecturers who wish to take up research. Likewise, research mentoring opportunities or programs are crucial and should be encouraged as well as made accessible to all lecturers. To achieve all these objectives, strategic institutional leadership as well as technical and financial support from MoEYS and other stakeholders are required.

Finally, to promote university research, Cambodian universities need to be categorized into research-intensive and teaching-intensive universities. The bifurcation or categorisation of universities into research and teaching universities is vital as the government can appropriately allocate funding to support universities' research agendas and aspirations in accordance with their orientation (Fussy, 2018). To do this, leading public universities, such as the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Institute of Technology of Cambodia, can be officially assigned as research-intensive universities. The government, through MoEYS, can

then begin investing in these universities and set clear short- and medium-term targets for research performance. This strategy needs to be accompanied by reform to institutional structures, particularly as regards lectureship, academic promotion systems, incentives schemes, and salary structure.

At present, it seems that the government has considered a similar strategy to this by heavily investing in several public universities to improve research and teaching in the field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and agriculture within the framework of the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) funded by the World Bank. Yet, this initiative may not be able to bring about significant lasting changes, considering the outcome of a previous World Bank-funded project, called the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project or HEQCIP (MoEYS, 2015), and the failure of the implementation of one component of this project (see Rappleye & Un, 2018). Thus, since research activities rely on funding, it is vital to introduce a research performance-based funding system to encourage competition among universities and academics (Fussy, 2018). MoEYS should also actively engage academics at private universities to apply for research grants to encourage competition across universities. Likewise, given that many Cambodian lecturers are reluctant to invest their time and energy in research (Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019), it is essential to put forward the academic promotion system, research incentives and research requirements, and academic salary increase (Heng et al., 2022a). These

issues must be adequately addressed in order to pave the way for reform in Cambodian higher education.

### *Concluding remarks*

Although the Cambodian government has, in recent years, made efforts to improve the quality and relevance of the higher education system, as evidenced by initiatives such as HEQCIP and HEIP, more work needs to be done. The necessity to enhance the research capacity of Cambodian universities and academics must be at the top of the government's agenda for higher education reform. To ensure the success of any reform, all key stakeholders – the government, development partners, the private sector, HEIs, and the practitioners – need to collaborate and actively play their own roles (see Heng, 2020b for a discussion of stakeholder collaboration). Besides, the government and Cambodian HEIs should be the key change agents to introduce the much-needed reform in higher education.

Policymakers at both national and institutional levels, therefore, need to develop a clear vision for the future of Cambodian higher education and introduce the long-overdue reform to make a difference. They have the responsibility to ensure that Cambodian universities are positioned in a way that allows them to respond to both local and global demands, including the need to prepare university graduates to meet the needs of the changing society and the need to contribute to enhancing Cambodia's competitiveness in the global knowledge-based economy. Cambodia simply cannot afford to be further marginalized on the regional



and global arenas, particularly in the context of the knowledge economy where knowledge is a key driver of productivity and economic growth.

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