



PhD inflation and the lack of PhDs in higher education in post-civil war Cambodia



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Post-civil war Cambodia (1991-present) has experienced a period of rapid expansion in higher education in the aftermath of the deconstruction of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-979) and the civil war of the 1980s. Over the past thirty years, institutional expansion, increase in student enrollment, and growth in private provisions and fee-based enrollment (Williams et al., 2014) have developed rapidly, notwithstanding the country's existing flawed system and serious lack of human resources. With just eight public higher education institutions in 1997, the number increased to 125 in 2018, of which 77 were private institutions (MoEYS, 2019, p. 65). The number of students increased from nearly 10,000 in the early 1990s to more than 200,000 in 2018 (MoEYS, 2019, p. 66). There was also a growing number of doctoral students, who numbered 1349 in the 2017-2018 academic year, of whom 96% were studying social science subjects in public and private institutions (MoEYS, 2019, pp. 67-71).

There is no official report on the number of PhD holders in the country, but based on recent news reports, Cambodia has come to a point where PhD holders or people with PhD titles (*paṇḍit*) are “too high” in number (Ry, 2019). Given the lack of qualified PhD degree-holders in Cambodian universities, some observers use the term “PhD inflation” to describe the present circumstances, due to a situation where high-ranking government officials and businesspeople are increasingly amassing doctoral degrees (Neou & Wallace, 2011a). This essay discusses the cultural and epistemic implications resulting from this PhD crisis in post-civil war Cambodia.

PhD as a justification for good leadership

The unusual growth of people with PhD titles can be explained within a broader cultural change in ideas of good leadership in the kingdom. Since the reinstatement of the monarchy in 1993, the perception of good leadership has largely been associated with the traditional understanding of Buddhist kingship based on “merit” (*puṇy*) (Thun, 2021; Norén-Nilsson, 2016, pp. 39-64). This perception has diversified after social and demographical changes occurred rapidly since the late 1990s. Apart from justifying themselves as meritorious men/women (*anak mān puṇy*), Cambodian leaders, especially Prime Minister Hun Sen and his associates, have adopted a more secular notion of good leadership by associating themselves with “PhD” academic degrees.

A good leader has now been defined as a man/woman of “*gatīpaṇḍit*” or “PhD wisdom.” While the English word leans toward ideas associated with success in the completion of a course of study in higher education, the Khmer term encompasses meanings related to broader social, intellectual and moral actions. The word “*gatīpaṇḍit*” contains four features: being morally steady, being highly critical and intellectual, being a good role model, and conducting good deeds for family and society (Mao, 2015). The term is popularly used to describe the social and political actions of Hun Sen. For example, when government officials refer to Hun Sen's policies, “*gatīpaṇḍit*” is frequently used to describe his leadership as “a just one in accordance with PhD wisdom” (Pen, 2021; Roëun, 2019). There are many honorable titles for senior government officials and heads of the sangha that are associated with “PhD” degrees. They include “Kitti Br̥ddh Paṇḍit” (distinguished senior PhD), “Kitti Paṇḍit” (distinguished PhD), “Kitti Uddes Paṇḍit” (distinguished guiding PhD), “Saṅkha: Paṇḍit” (just PhD), “Santi Paṇḍit” (peace PhD), and “Paṇḍit Sabhācāry” (royal academy PhD). In 2011, Hun Sen's wife, Bun Rany, along with two other top leaders, was awarded by King Norodom Sihamoni the honorable title of “Kitti Br̥ddh Paṇḍit” of the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC). The award was given to her in recognition of her “remarkable and heroic contribution to the Cambodian leadership for progress and peace for the Cambodian populace” (Cambodia New Vision, 2017).

Apart from top leaders, the new notion of good leadership based on academic degrees has spread across a much wider Cambodian group of ruling elites and businesspeople. Over the last twenty years or so, a

significant number of people in these circles have shown a strong desire to hold a PhD title. New doctorate holders frequently have their names and portraits praised with large advertisements in Khmer-language newspapers (Neou & Wallace, 2011a).

PhD inflation

The fast-growing number of doctoral holders has now become a crisis in higher education in the kingdom. The term “PhD inflation” was used by Ros Chantrabot, a prominent member of the RAC and senior advisor to the Prime Minister, to describe a small country like Cambodia, which he said has too many PhD holders (Neou & Wallace, 2011a). Hun Sen similarly stated that Cambodia has become one of the countries with the highest ratios of PhD holders in the world (Ry, 2019). While there is no report on the exact number, a loose estimation could be somewhere between four to eight thousand PhD holders. This estimate is based on the ratio of people with PhD titles, which can be seen among senior ministers and ministers, secretaries of state, National Assembly members, Senate members, provincial governors, and advisors to the government. It also includes a significant number of PhD holders among businesspeople who hold another honorable title called “Oknha,” which accounts for approximately more than 1000 persons (more discussion of “Oknha,” see Verver & Dahles, 2015). Many of these PhD holders are awarded their degrees in the form of honorable titles, and they include the President of the National Assembly Heng Samrin, the former President of the Senate Chea Sim, and the Defense Minister Tea Banh, among many others. As of 2015, Hun Sen received 12 honorable doctorates from domestic and international institutions (Khy, 2015) apart from his first PhD degree, which was earned from the National Political Academy in Hanoi in 1991. The estimated number also includes PhD holders who had earned their academic degrees overseas from places such as Russia, Vietnam, Japan, Thailand, Australia, the United States, and countries in Europe.

The PhD inflation largely originates from the lack of effective regulations and enforcements in determining the quality of higher education programs. Hun Sen blames local universities for not setting up proper criteria before permitting students to enroll in their postgraduate degrees. He uses the example of an unnamed university, where he says many of the PhD students do not attend classes, except for exam time, and who just copy and paste their thesis from someone else (Ry, 2019). They can copy their school examinations and theses from others mainly because there is no recognized plagiarism checker for Khmer texts. Meanwhile, many institutions do not enforce a code of ethics related to plagiarism among students and faculty members. Between 2005 and 2011, Cambodia uncovered a serious diploma mill surrounding a foreign institution named Isles International University (IIU, formerly known as the Irish International University), which formed a brief alliance with a private local university. In December 2009, the IIU awarded 19 senior officials, lawmakers, and businesspeople with doctoral degrees (Eang & Wallace, 2009). In 2011, it awarded 15 other government and parliamentary officials with doctoral and master’s degrees (Neou & Wallace, 2011b). It claimed to be a Malaysia-based international higher institution, but the IIU in fact existed as a “bogus” university which had neither any physical existence nor recognition from the Irish or the Malaysian governments (Siang, 2005).

Since 2009, the government has tried to tackle the issue by establishing the National Commission on Doctorial Studies, sub-decree on Doctoral Degree Training in 2010, and several other rules and regulations to slow down the number of new PhD awardees and to strengthen the quality of PhD education. Foreign agencies such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the World Bank, and the Commission on Higher Education and the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment of Thailand, among several others, have also played a role in this effort (Williams, et al., 2014, p. 74). Based on the 2019 education congress report, there were only 15 reported new PhD graduates out of the 1349 doctoral students who were pursuing their degrees in the 2017-2018 academic year (MoEYS, 2019, p. 67). This

number is very small and suggests a notable improvement by the government in decelerating the increasing number of PhD holders over the past few years. But no mechanism has been put in place to deal with public and private institutions that have awarded PhD degrees to hundreds of unqualified holders over the past twenty years.

Lack of PhDs in higher education and implications

Even though too many people have been awarded PhD titles, Cambodian higher education institutions have in fact encountered a serious shortage of faculties which can produce high-quality teaching and academic research. There are 16,167 teachers at the higher education level, and only 1309 (8.10%) of them are PhD holders (MoEYS, 2019, p. 65). Recent research shows that several universities do not have even a single PhD holder on their entire staff (Rappleye & Un, 2018, p. 12). As of 2010, the largest public university, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), only had 11 PhD holders among its nearly 300 faculty members (Kwok, et al., 2010). Despite this, the number of degree holders has slowly increased over the last ten years. The low ratio of faculty staff with PhD degrees across all Cambodian universities has caused a paucity of well-trained researchers who engage in academic research (Kwok, et al., 2010). A qualitative survey among 47 faculty members from 10 universities in 2020 found very little evidence to suggest that their engagement was the basis of research for the purpose of extending disciplinary theoretical knowledge or for pure curiosity. A large proportion of these faculty members are in fact aware of the ambiguity of the term “academics,” but are unable to commit to quality research due to a high demand for teaching (Ros, et al., 2020). In most universities, salary payments are based solely on the teaching load, as there is no precedent for research (Rappleye & Un, 2018, p. 14). Some Cambodian academics are still barely aware of the value of their teaching (Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019, p. 233).

A sharp contrast exists between the shortage of teaching staff with qualified PhDs and the high number of PhD holders among the ruling elites and businesspeople. This suggests that there are at least two broadly different ways of embracing the epistemic norms and concepts of academic degrees in post-civil war Cambodia. Among top leaders, government officials, and businesspeople, the PhD title has emerged as a platform for many of them to earn social, moral and political admiration which, in return, offers legitimacy and profits. Most senior government officials and businesspeople are survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, who in the past lost an opportunity to pursue their higher education due to prolonged political instability, civil wars and the massacre of teaching personnel since 1970. Hence, earning a PhD title for them is a way to compensate for that loss with a new identification that can justify their experience and intellect and, at the same time, moralize their leadership and control. For this group of people, a PhD has very little to do with the promotion of academic integrity and research, as well as the strengthening of higher education quality.

Among faculty members and those who earned their academic degrees overseas, the way in which a PhD is understood is largely in line with many developed countries. For many of them, a PhD degree does stand for quality in higher education teaching and the ability to produce original academic research. In fact, over the past five years or so, people in this circle have joined efforts to bridge the gap between domestic doctoral training with that offered overseas by establishing new postgraduate programs (e.g., the Khmer Studies PhD program at the RUPP) that emphasize academic integrity and substantial pieces of original research. Although these programs are still in their early stages, their existence demonstrates slow growth in applying the epistemic norms and concepts of a PhD academic in relation to domestic perceptions. The improper human resources management in the PhD sub-sector (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018) and the shortage of available research funds have significantly contributed to this slow progress. Given the long absence of an academic culture in the kingdom, the reinforcement of research ethics and the transferring of the skills to students that

incorporate theoretical concepts and empirical evidence in their research will constitute key challenges for doctoral programs in Cambodia for many years to come.

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