

The politics of higher education in Cambodia

Cambodia is facing major challenges arising from its membership with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the new economic power-house established in 2015. The AEC, in promoting the free flow of financial and human capital within its boundaries, will have far-reaching impacts on the labour markets in and across its member states.¹ To keep pace with other countries in the AEC, the Cambodian government has turned its attention to Higher Education (HE) development to promote economic growth. As higher education is emerging as a sector of national strategic importance, it acquires significant political involvement.

Heidi Dahles

CAMBODIA IS STRUGGLING to establish a feasible tertiary education sector, wearing the scars of the destruction of its entire education system during a decade of civil war in the 1970s.² After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 and the UN-led general elections in 1993, bilateral development assistance from multiple developed countries poured into Cambodia. In the field of education, the bulk of funding from donor countries focused on improving access to, and quality of, basic education. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Cambodian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were heavily reliant on bilateral educational assistance from developed countries, and as a result foreign dominance over higher education soared. France, Cambodia's former colonial ruler, was the first to offer extensive assistance to Cambodian HEIs in a wide range of knowledge areas. However, this support came with conditions attached; for example, recipients such as the Institute of Technology of Cambodia were required to use French as the medium of instruction. Unsurprisingly though, French lost out as the English language enjoys growing popularity among young Cambodians. The story goes that students happily apply for French scholarships only to enrol in English language programs upon receiving the funding. US academic institutions also stepped up their collaboration with Cambodian HEIs, which eagerly adopted the American curriculum and programs of study.³

Commercialisation in higher education

The Americanisation of the HE sector in Cambodia coincided with reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Education in the mid-1990s, which unleashed the privatisation of the sector, allowing public HEIs to charge tuition fees and for private HEIs to operate in the country. Overseas universities, foreign-based religious groups, private investors and international NGOs established themselves in Cambodia to compete for student enrolments.⁴ As a consequence, the Cambodian HE sector soon entered a phase of rapid, largely unregulated, expansion.

Currently, the Cambodian HE sector counts 39 public and 62 private HEIs with over 250,000 enrolments, only 15,000 of which in postgraduate degree programs.⁵ While all Cambodian HEIs deliver undergraduate programs, only a few large HEIs offer postgraduate programs. Consequently, enrolments in undergraduate programs have shown a sharp increase since 2010 while enrolments in postgraduate programs are stagnating. The growth in HE is most pronounced in the private sector where enrolments exceed public university enrolments at all degree levels.⁶ While the increase in the number of HEIs and enrolments appears impressive in view of the 'scorched earth', after decades of civil war and foreign occupation in the 1970s and 1980s, Cambodia – with a HE gross enrolment rate of about 13 per cent – still holds the lowest rate in the AEC.

The low participation rate, while concerning in itself, is a symptom of more severe issues smouldering under the surface of exponential growth of HEIs and HE enrolments. The most pressing issues – chronic lack of government funding, the absence of staff development and trivialisation of curricula – raise the question why Cambodia, while leading in terms of economic growth in the region, persistently fails to adequately nurture its HE sector? Public HEIs are grossly under-funded and hampered by centralized ministerial control.⁷ In 2013, the government's total annual educational expenditure amounted to about 2 per cent of GDP while public higher education expenditure received only 0.1 per cent of GDP.⁸ A large portion of the HE budget is spent on

staff remuneration, leaving hardly any funding for staff development, quality assurance, or improvement of educational infrastructure. For the latter, Cambodian public HEIs still depend on support from international partners and donors such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

Public HEIs have increasingly become dependent on student tuition fees as their major source of income, landing them in direct competition with private institutions.⁹ Consequently, issues of quality and relevance continue to affect the sector. Efforts to raise enrolment numbers outweigh concerns with quality standards, notwithstanding government efforts – such as the establishment of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia in 2003 – to act as an external quality assurance body to ensure and promote HE quality.¹⁰ Most Cambodian public and private universities do not apply admission requirements beyond the results of the final national high school examinations. However, widespread corruption in the school system, where underpaid teachers are susceptible to payments from students in exchange for (passing) grades, does not bode well for high school diplomas as an adequate indicator of academic qualification.

The pressure of increasing student numbers in both public and private HEIs inevitably affects academic staff. Salaries in the public sector are by far the lowest in the region, less than USD 300 per month for a full-time university lecturer, insufficient for a family's basic needs. Therefore, public university lecturers have to take on additional part-time teaching in private institutions to make ends meet. Research is virtually absent from Cambodian universities. Unsurprisingly, few academics hold a PhD in Cambodian universities.¹¹ Those who do, find hardly any incentives to assume leadership positions in academia.

Academic relevance, or the lack thereof, is also detrimental to the HE sector. Curricula are assembled to meet the requirements and preferences of foreign donors or investors or, conversely, are dictated by commercial interests. The knowledge and skills provided in universities do not match the needs of the Cambodian labour market. Unemployment among Cambodian graduates is soaring.¹² Responding to student demand, both public and private HEIs focus on commerce, economics and IT. Business Studies is the most popular program among Cambodian students as their expectation is that a business degree guarantees a well-paid job in an air-conditioned office. However, employment in these areas is saturated, while the labour market is in desperate need of qualified graduates in science, mathematics, agriculture and health.¹³ From a lack of government funding, public universities are unable to increase enrolments in science programs as the required facilities (equipment, laboratories and qualified staff) are insufficient to absorb more students.

Political predicament

Returning to the guiding question of why Cambodia, despite rapid economic growth, remains unable to lift its HE sector out of the vicious circle of underfunding, underperformance and underdevelopment? The short answer is: politics. The HE sector in Cambodia is an arena for the ruling party to bestow favours, honours and lucrative positions on ruling elites. There is no autonomy of HEIs to govern themselves nor academic freedom to push the quality of education. Public academic institutions are under centralised ministerial control, including the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports and 11 other ministries and government agencies. The government has granted the status of Public Administrative Institution (PAI) to a number of public universities, apparently to provide them with greater autonomy in academic and financial issues.¹⁴ However, the political parties and parent ministries are actively involved in making important decisions in the administration of these PAIs, and public HEIs in

general. Promotion to senior academic leadership positions is subject to party membership. There are myriad examples of highly qualified staff who have been demoted because they refused to pledge their allegiance to the ruling party. Furthermore, curricula and course content are scrutinised for subjects related to human rights, social justice, democracy, transparency and good governance, and critical debates are banned in Cambodian HEIs.

Similarly, private HEIs are not exempt from party politics. An estimated 50 per cent of the private institutions are established by returnees from France, the United States, Canada and Australia.¹⁵ The role of returnees in Cambodian public life is controversial because, in the eyes of many Cambodians who lived through the terrors of the Pol Pot regime and the Vietnamese occupation, they either represent conservative forces attempting to re-establish traditional Khmer society or act as catalysts of foreign hegemonic interests.¹⁶ Most importantly, returnees are under suspicion of disloyalty to the ruling party because many support the opposition covertly, or even overtly.

Behind the shimmering façade of Cambodia's sustained GDP growth is a narrowing but persistent gap between the new middle classes and the urban and rural poor, a gap that is sustained by an education system that is in dire need of reform. Higher education, in particular, lags behind. Much of the higher education sector is commercially driven and fails to support the development of a viable domestic economy. For the ASEAN common market to incentivise the Cambodian HEIs to catch up with the standards in the region, the AEC would also have to interfere with Cambodian politics, which, in view of the delicate power balance revolving around the unresolved South China Sea issue, is most unlikely.

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Above: National Institute of Education graduation ceremony in 2015. Photo by Heng Chivoan/The Phnom Penh Post.