

New Hope for a Research Culture in Cambodia

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Despite the widespread news and pessimism regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, a glimpse of hope has emerged in Cambodia. It is a new hope for the development of a research culture.

It is widely known that Cambodia lacks a vibrant research culture. Research and publication are not common activities. They are privileged and limited to mainly a small group of researchers and those who have a very strong interest in research and academia. Previous research studies have shown that Cambodia lags behind many of its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Nguyen and Pham (2011) classified Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Brunei into the same group that had the lowest scientific outputs in Southeast Asia. There were three other groups based on the quantity and quality of publication. In terms of research performance in the field of language and linguistics, a study by Barrot (2017) showed that Cambodia was ranked 8th out of the 10 Southeast Asian countries. Meanwhile, a recent survey of 444 Cambodian lecturers by Eam (2015) found that 65% of them had not engaged in any research activities over the last five years prior to the survey. The lack of research engagement among Cambodian faculty members was also discussed in a survey study by Kitamura, Umemiya, Hirosato and Dy (2016). Heng's (2020) analysis of Scopus database revealed that in the last 10 years from 2010 to 2019 Cambodia produced 3,521 Scopus-indexed

publications, placing it at 8th place among the 10 ASEAN countries.

Despite all of these, there is a new hope for the development of research and publication in Cambodia. In addition to implementing a few research-related policies, over the last 10 years, the Royal Government of Cambodia—through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS)—has introduced a series of research promotion initiatives that are worth mentioning.

In 2015, MoEYS launched a research grant scheme under a USD23 million project called Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP), funded by World Bank. The HEQCIP sponsored scores of higher education staff and lecturers to pursue doctoral and master's degrees as well as certificate courses in Australia. With reference to research, it launched a research-focused scheme, called Development and Innovation Grants, which funded 45 research projects, a few of which resulted in publication in peer-reviewed international journals (MoEYS, 2015). In 2018, MoEYS launched a larger project, also funded by the World Bank. The project is valued at USD92.5 million and aims to promote the quality of teaching and research in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and agriculture. The project has a 6-year grace period (2018-2024), so it remains unclear

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how it will make a difference to higher education research and teaching in Cambodia.

In 2020, two notable and highly welcoming initiatives were introduced. Both were announced in August amid the COVID-19 crisis. One was the introduction of a nationwide research grant scheme alongside a call for research proposals to be funded by the scheme; the other was the announcement on a decision to introduce academic titles (ranking of professors) in Cambodian higher education. The introduction of the research grant, called the Research Creativity and Innovation Fund, is unprecedented. As mentioned in the announcement on MoEYS's Facebook page, three main research areas will be prioritized and considered for funding support. They include digitalization for Industry 4.0, applied agricultural research and 21st century pedagogy research. Likewise, the decision to implement professorial ranking system is a well-received move believed to promote research and publication in Cambodia. Previously, a similar policy on professorial titles has been implemented in two higher education institutions (HEIs), including the Royal University of Agriculture and the University of Health Sciences, both of which are outside the purview of the Education Ministry. The decision to begin giving titles to university lecturers across different HEIs will definitely form a catalyst for the promotion of university research and publication in the country.

According to the announcement by MoEYS, three academic titles will be introduced: Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and (full) Professor. One of the requirements for an assistant professor is to have published at least three articles in national or international journals. For an associate professor, they must have at least five published articles and a book, while a full professor must have at least seven articles and two books in addition to other requirements. These publication requirements are vital as they will provide an impetus for Cambodian academics to pay more attention to academic research and publication.

Overall, despite the pandemic, there is a positive development that gives hope to the future of research activities in Cambodia. As a post-conflict country, particularly one that has undergone prolonged civil wars and atrocities of one of the world's worst genocidal regimes, the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia had to start from scratch in 1979 when the regime collapsed with the deaths of more than two million Cambodians.

Over the last 40 years, Cambodia has transformed itself from a war-torn country to one that has experienced a steady GDP growth averaging 7 percent per annum, enabling it to become a lower middle-income country in 2016. The country aspires to reach an upper middle-income level by 2030 and become a high-income economy by 2050. Therefore, to move forward and to ensure the realization of its development vision, Cambodia must maintain and build on the momentum of these positive developments, increase investment in education at all levels, make greater efforts to build a vibrant reading and research culture and prioritize the development of its human capital.

In short, education and research are vital for Cambodia as it seeks to increase its relevance and competitiveness in the region. Without quality education and research, the prospect for sustainable development and bright future for this Southeast Asian country will be less exciting, if not daunting.

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