

# Building a Research Culture in Cambodian Higher Education: Three Moves in Research Collaboration

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Despite the substantial growth of the higher education landscape in the last three decades or so, Cambodian higher education is still sensitive to undesirable reviews. In particular, the research performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has remained stagnant and sporadic, indicating an unbalanced role between knowledge production and transmission. Simply put, while HEIs are regarded both to construct and distribute knowledge to society (Griffiths, 2004), Cambodian universities have enjoyed their role as the knowledge transmitters only. This current exercise of the higher education model appears to appreciate knowledge as the global legacy and the duplication of facts. As such, students are treated as the consumers of knowledge, and individuals' construction of knowledge has been sidelined. In this fashion, any pursuit of academic latitude is likely to be subjugated by this education system which appears to leave relatively few opportunities for creativity and innovation. Moreover, this propensity of resistance to intellectual generations via research activities has allowed the universities to enjoy generating profits rather than improving education quality (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018).

Against the backdrop of criticisms, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has envisioned transforming Cambodia into a knowledge-based society by 2030 (MoEYS, 2014). Although this prophecy can bring up a new hope for Cambodian scientific aspirants, it seems to be more likely a

propaganda as there is no transparent action in effect yet. In this respect, if building a research culture is the end of Cambodian society, this opinion paper aims to offer some insights on the matter. This opinion paper shall briefly discuss the achievement of higher education and research development in Cambodia before arguing that the research culture in Cambodia can be enriched by considering collaboration as an approach. Acknowledging the substance of a gamut of strategies proposed by other scholars, namely the government policy (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018), university leadership role (Heng, 2020a) and stakeholder collaboration (Heng, 2020b), I view three-moves-in-research collaboration as an eclectic tactic that can be adopted in the Cambodian context and beyond. The purpose of this article is not to debunk the other factors raised by previous scholars but to manifest an overarching trajectory regarding research culture development, drawing upon empirical evidence from different higher education spaces.

## Higher Education and Research Development in a Nutshell

In retrospect, Cambodia has experienced a dark age during the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979), which had destroyed its social infrastructures, education system and intellectuals (Kitamura, Edwards Jr, Sitha, & Williams, 2016). Following the collapse of such regime, the only first university that reopened its door was the Royal University of Phnom Penh

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(Chealy, 2009). At that time, the re-establishment of the education system was mainly dependent on the assistance from the Soviet Union and the then allegedly pro-Vietnamese government under the People's Republic of Kampuchea, signifying an emulation of the Soviet's education model (Howes & Ford, 2011). However, the downfall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s also led to a decline in Soviet and Vietnam's influence (Howes & Ford, 2011), shortly after which the chronic civil war was brought to an end later in the 1990s (Un, Boomsma, & Sok, 2018). Although it may not be the only factor, the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which came to Cambodia to arrange the country's election in 1993 (Howes & Ford, 2011), and the course of such intervention from the international community was also considered a dawn of global neo-liberal ideas and values pervading in Cambodia (Un, Boomsma, & Sok, 2018). Cambodians started to learn English for communicative purpose at schools and in business industries (Howes & Ford, 2011). In 1997, the government reformed its education policy by introducing higher education privatization, which since then resulted in a massive expansion of access and HEIs (Chealy, 2009). Now there are roughly 121 HEIs, 73 of which are private ownership while the total numbers of tertiary students nationwide are about 250,000 (Un et al., 2018). This achievement has indicated the government's commitment to rebuilding the education system (Kitamura et al., 2016 & Un et al., 2018).

However, when this triumph in access and expansion of HEIs is noticeable, both pride and caveats have also ensued. That is, though we have developed an education system corresponding to the national market needs in just three decades, we still have more room to improve in our higher education system. For instance, the numbers of graduates exceed the demands of job markets, while skills are often not aligned with labor markets' favor (Chealy, 2009). In this regard, the government and HEIs should rethink about reinforcing its education

quality and engaging students more in collaborative inquiry-based learning, that can develop students' critical thinking, analytical or communicative skills, all of which are essential for the current job markets. At regional level, Cambodia's higher education system in a bigger setting of job markets – including the regional and international level – is far behind its neighbors and other countries in the region such as Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, South Korea and Japan. These countries have been competing for global reputation in ranking systems and research performances (Williams, Kitamura, & Keng, 2014). This fact is undeniable because Cambodia lacks both human and financial resources, as a result of the Khmer Rouge Regime and the subsequent decades of civil wars, to nurture its education system at all levels.

Together with the subjective education quality, Cambodia also faces challenges on research development and innovations. Many factors have hindered the growth of Cambodia's research culture. This paper, however, will highlight three leading factors, as follows: financial constraint, government policy and individual's mindset. Given the HEI financing, Cambodia strictly follows a financial hierarchy management which is not practically responsive and leaves little space for flexibility and creativity. Also, public HEIs receive a small funding source and have to rely on tuition fees, in which these revenues go to institutional expenditures (e.g., building infrastructure or staff's salary). Thereby, there is a scarcity of capital investment in research activities and innovations (Mak, Sok, & Un, 2019). On the other hand, private HEIs have continued to enjoy profit-making when the government policy regulating HEIs' research performance is absent. This lack of regulation on HEIs' research engagement by the MoEYS is evident in Ros and Oleksiyenko's (2018) research that there is an absence of a concise-and-aligned policy enacted between the government and HEIs to stimulate academics' interests in intellectual pursuits.

In addition, ideological conflicts among government and university officers, lecturers and students present another challenge. Research has indicated the government and the university administrators' belief on research as a trivial matter in this society, in which such an assumption neglects the structural constraints with academics' workloads, insufficient payments, shortage of funding resources and political sensitivities as the barriers to research development (CICP, 2016). The study further argues that the administrators' belief conflicts with the students' perceived value of research. This mentality clash has revealed a gap between young generation of students/ young researchers and old generation of administrators, signifying a research transition in Cambodia (CICP, 2016).

In seeking to develop a research environment in Cambodia, scholars have initiated different strategies. For instance, a research team (CICP, 2016) has proposed three actions:

1. The government should lay out a specific policy on research production of HEIs and offer attractive funding budgets via research competitions.
2. Universities can provide research positions and funding resources and encourage internal-and-external research collaboration.
3. NGOs can take part in HEIs in the forms of research collaboration or training.

In addition to these actions, Heng (2020b) suggests individual intellectuals' commitment to research engagement as another leading factor and calls for recognition of academics' research performance from HEIs and the government. These calls for collaboration from different actors or agencies play vital roles in establishing Cambodia's research environment. However, what has been ignored in any discussions so far is the role of students in research collaboration. Thereby, the next section in this op-ed will elaborate how academics and students can collaborate to develop a research culture in Cambodian HEIs.

### Three Moves in Research Collaboration in Higher Education

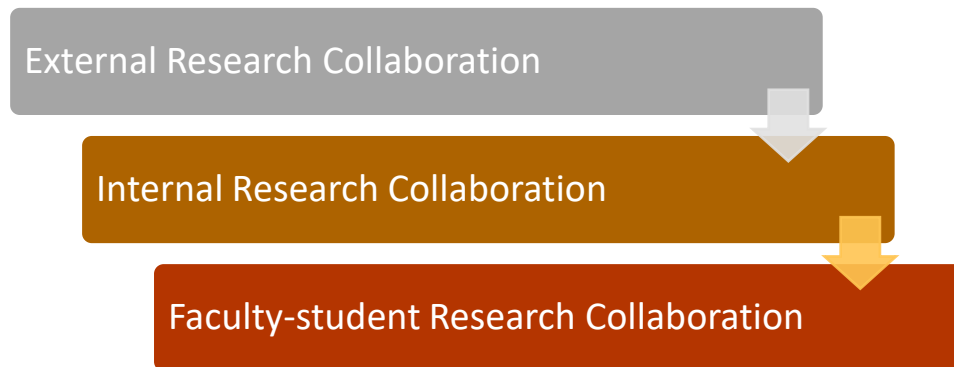
In a disadvantaged society like Cambodia, where several factors preclude research activities, I suggest three moves in research collaboration as the approach to be adapted in HEIs (See Fig. 1). The first one is external research collaboration, in which this kind of collaboration is not uncommon in the academic community. I view this form of collaboration as any collaborative projects conducted between academics from an institution and those outside the Cambodian context. This might sound a bit challenging but does not mean impossible. In fact, we have a small number of scholars or academics who are doing a PhD/MA abroad or hold a PhD/MA from developed countries. The research experience they have gained from their studies and good networks with international researchers have provided them with more opportunities to work on projects with international scholars to build up their research capacity and build a good image of Cambodia. In other words, they should continue doing collaborative research projects after the completion of their studies. Moreover, these scholars can also work with NGOs on local or regional projects. In doing so, they are actively engaged in research and can keep track of what is going on in their respective fields of interest.

In the second move, academics with research experience working with international scholars and MA/PhD holders from overseas play a crucial role in developing research culture by collaborating with other locally-trained lecturers with no or less research experience. This form of collaboration is hardly observable in the Cambodian context. I think the government and the HEIs should offer attractive funding resources to stimulate research activities between these two academic groups. Recently, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as parts of the responding mechanism and recovering strategy, the government has announced an open call by providing a small research grant to public institutions, lecturers and students. However, this announcement,

which does not clearly demonstrate transparent selection procedures (e.g., evaluation criteria, result announcement, or evaluation committees), is less appealing to incompetent or less-research-

experienced lecturers to compete for the grants since they feel like they will not be able to compete with the experienced researchers.

**Figure 1: Three Moves in Research Collaboration\***



*\*Author's Elaboration*

I strongly suggest that future research-grants providers consider research collaboration between overseas-trained academics and locally-trained scholars (with less research experience) as one of the critical criteria in the proposal evaluation. Otherwise, only experienced researchers who are internationally-educated can apply for the grants, and this kind of policy is beneficial to only a handful of people. That is unfortunate for those lecturers who have research aspiration but no opportunity to study abroad to nurture their research capacity. At the same time, the public has pressured them for their lack of engagement in research productivity. Without this form of collaboration, it is hard to expect the rise of research culture in Cambodia.

When the first and second moves<sup>1</sup> have been realized, the third move, which is academic-student collaboration, is essential and practical in the Cambodian context and other similar settings where academics' workloads and inadequate wage demotivate their research commitment and

performance. In this model, under the supervision of their teachers, any individual students or a team of students can work on a project as a part of the academic fulfillments and present their findings to the public at conferences or in academic venues. Many researches on this territory have shown several mutual benefits between academics and students. For instance, students can gain employability skills and attributes (Dickerson, Javis, & Stockwell, 2016) and acquire research knowledge and skills (Harney, 2017; & Webber, Laird, & BrckaLorenz, 2013). With this kind of student collaboration, academics can also increase their research productivities (Sternquist, Huddleston, & Fairhurst, 2018). Unfortunately, HEIs in Cambodia appear to be less enthusiastic in regulating strategies to enhance faculty-student collaboration in research engagement. Only few HEIs, for example, Royal University of Phnom Penh and University of Cambodia, have promoted student research and hosted their own journal for publishing students' research findings. However,

<sup>1</sup> Please be informed that the second and third moves can happen simultaneously. International-educated scholars can collaborate with locally-trained scholars on specific projects. At the same time, they can work with students in the form of thesis supervision or a course project in which a group of students works on a project under the supervision of a research-experienced lecturer.



the lack of teacher-as-co-authorship practice could possibly allow teachers to be care-free in ensuring the research quality.

In fact, there is a number of research and innovative projects produced by honor students in undergraduate programs as well as by Master and PhD students each year in Cambodia. Yet the absence of policy requiring students to publish their research findings in academic outlets such as journals has drawn away student projects as limited to the completion of their degrees rather than for knowledge contribution to society. This inertia of sharing culture of students' projects to be overtly read and evaluated has permitted academics and students to be less rigorous and enthusiastic on the research quality. And thus, the inclusion of research in educational programs is rather at play. Concurrently, this neglect of academic-student engagement in research projects tends to downplay their role in knowledge construction while the acquisition of knowledge, which is dependent on the emulation of that outside the context, is often contextually infeasible and requires justifications.

Finally, if the focus on research development is underestimated by policy-makers at all levels, in the long run, the HEIs in Cambodia might not be able to compete with those near the borders. To cultivate research environment, I propose the three moves in research collaboration as the catalyst for a transformation of Cambodian research landscape. Simultaneously, I am convinced that the focus on student research would drive academics' efforts to be more engaged in research performance. Besides, there should be concerted actions in hosting research competitions and conferences as well as journals that publish academics and students' project findings in both Khmer and English languages.

Developing a research culture in Cambodia, a country that has just recovered from a nearly zero situation, is a conundrum and labor-concerted efforts which requires actions at all levels. In the past thirty years, the government has put a strong

commitment in expanding the scale of the higher education landscape to produce graduates corresponding to the demands of local job markets. Yet, the de facto education model is still anchored in the bedrock of knowledge replication. In this system, individuals' creativity and innovation are likely to be hedged while the students are enslaved by the predetermined learning contents and activities. Situating this concern as a provocative subject, I argue that the higher education system should embrace both knowledge transmission and production. Thereby, this paper has offered an alternative approach in which research culture can be nurtured in forms of collaboration. I believe that this model would allow us to exploit our human resources as much as possible. At the same time, I concede that this model would not come into play without the invention from the government and other relevant stakeholders. The government should lay out a policy regulating HEIs to host journals and monitors the standards of their practices to ensure the quality of the journals. Another way is to enact a policy on student project publication in any academic channels. Indeed, there are a plethora of journals available online but all that is needed is the policy and action. Other incentives such as position promotion or wage increase should not be flouted. NGOs or donors should also work with their preferred HEIs closely to develop research activities in Cambodia.

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