

Education: Key to Making Cambodia Great Again

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Abstract

Education is the backbone of a nation. With quality education, any country can develop its human capital required to drive socioeconomic growth and national development. It is education that enables less developed countries to catch up with their more developed counterparts. This article focuses on Cambodia and its fledgling education system. Drawing on secondary sources, the article argues that education is the key to making Cambodia great again. The article begins by briefly introducing Cambodia's historical context and highlighting its development in recent decades. Next, it delves into the challenges facing Cambodia's education, focusing on key challenges confronting both general and higher education. The article then puts forward a set of suggestions to improve the education system in Cambodia. It concludes that an effective education system is the hope for Cambodia to ensure its prosperous and great future, thereby making itself great again.

Keywords: Education; general education; higher education; challenges; suggestions; Cambodian education system

Introduction

“Making America Great Again” is a catchphrase popularized by Donald Trump, former president of the United States of America. The phrase has been used in other contexts to signal an attempt to return to greatness, particularly for countries that used to have a great past (see, for example, Bouza García & Oleart, 2022; Lamont, 2021; Rajivlochan & Rajivlochan, 2020).

The Kingdom of Cambodia is an excellent example of a country with a great past. Cambodia was an

empire about 1,000 years ago. During the Khmer or Angkorian Empire, Cambodia's territory spanned present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and southern Vietnam (Plubins, 2013). According to Reynolds (2020), “the kings of Angkor ruled over a territory that extended from the tip of the Indochinese Peninsula northward to modern Yunnan province, China, and from Vietnam westward toward the Bay of Bengal” (para. 2). The Khmer Empire – representing Cambodia's greatness – lasted for more than half a millennium (629 years) from the 9th to 15th century (Plubins, 2013).

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Evidence of Cambodia's past greatness is manifested in present-day Cambodia's numerous temples, arts, and other socio-cultural artifacts. Angkor Wat is a telling example. Both archaeologists and modern-day architects have been amazed by the excellent architectural design that forms the structure of the Angkor Wat temple. There are many other temples and temple complexes that suggest the greatness of the ancient Khmer.

Fast forward to the 21st century, Cambodia is nowhere near as great as it used to be. The country is often described as a poor country, a least developed country, a small state, a proxy state, a client state, and an aid-dependent country (see Ear, 2007; Heng, 2020c; Leng, 2017). Much of Cambodia's underdevelopment is the result of its recent past that was fraught with internal and external conflicts. Notably, Cambodia went through the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) – a genocidal regime that decimated nearly two million Cambodians and destroyed the entire social and physical infrastructure and system (Ayres, 1999).

Following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's development was marred by a prolonged civil war that only ended in the late 1990s when Prime Minister Hun Sen pioneered a win-win policy, bringing peace and stability to the country for the first time in almost half a century.

Thanks to its integration into the region and the world, as evidenced by its membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1999, the World Trade Organization in 2004, and other organizations in recent decades, Cambodia has made great strides, transforming itself from a poverty-stricken country to become a lower-middle-income country in 2015 (World Bank, 2021). Cambodia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) jumped from around US\$2.5 billion in 1993 to US\$25.29 billion in 2020. The GDP per capita experienced a sixfold increase over the last 25 years, from about US\$250 in 1993 to around US\$1,500 in 2020 (World Bank, n.d.-b).

With a steady and robust GDP growth averaging 7% annually for the last two decades, Cambodia managed to achieve great success in reducing poverty. The country's poverty rate was 53.2% in 1994; two decades later, it was reduced to only 13.5% (Heng, 2020a). In 2020, it was reported that, under the revised national poverty line, the poverty rates in urban and rural areas in Cambodia were 12.6% and 22.8%, respectively (Nov, 2021).

Despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that saw Cambodia's economic contraction of 3.1% in 2020, Cambodia is determined to work toward realizing its aspirations to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and attain a high-income status by 2050. Although it remains to be seen whether such ambitious goals will be achieved by the proposed timeframes, given the many challenges that the country faces, there is still hope on the horizon.

Drawing on secondary sources, this article aims to discuss key challenges facing Cambodia's education system by focusing on both general education and higher education. The article then suggests ways forward to enhance the quality of the education system to ensure that, through an improved education system, Cambodia will be put on a path to achieve its development goals and transform itself into a great nation again.

Challenges Facing Cambodia's Education System

At present, Cambodia's prosperous future appears to be uncertain. There are numerous issues confronting the country and the prospect of sustainable development (see Chheang, 2021; Ciorciari, 2021; Heng, 2019, 2021a). Key challenges include the perceived democratic backsliding, limited quality of the education system, limited research and innovation capacity, impacts of great power competition, and slow economic performance triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other issues. All of these challenges are exacerbated by the impacts of the pandemic that has wreaked

havoc on all aspects of life in Cambodia since early 2020.

In the education sector, even before the pandemic, many challenges have constrained the development of education in Cambodia (see Heng et al., 2022; Khieng et al., 2015; Kitamura et al., 2016), requiring close attention from all stakeholders to find ways to address the problems and improve the quality of the education system. In the following subsections, we examine key challenges facing both general and higher education in Cambodia.

Key Challenges Facing General Education

Teacher Recruitment and Supply

According to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport ([MoEYS], 2015), “the key factor in student learning is high-quality teachers, while the prerequisite to developing teaching force is high-quality preparation, recruitment, placement, support, and assessment of each teacher with supportive legislative instruments” (p. 3). However, the ability to recruit academically competent individuals to enter the teaching profession appears to be a critical issue due mainly to the perceived low social and financial status of teachers. Despite some improvements in remuneration for teachers in recent years, teachers’ status in society remains relatively low, compared with other professions, especially in the private sector, that can generate better income (Hang, 2018; Prigent, 2016; Sot et al., 2019; Tandon & Fukao, 2015). Hang (2018) mentioned that:

One major obstacle to attracting high-quality candidates is the perceived low social status of the teaching profession across the country. Teachers currently earn salaries that are only 60% of what other professionals with similar education and skills qualifications can earn in the private sector. Many teachers are forced to

take on additional, often low-paid, employment to support themselves, thus lowering both their effectiveness and overall status in the eyes of the surrounding community. (p. 297)

Due to the nature of the teaching profession that is less rewarding and financially competitive, a large majority of teacher trainees who were recruited to receive the training at Teacher Training Centers (TTCs) were mostly those who received grade D or E in the grade 12 national examination (MoEYS, 2015; Tandon & Fukao, 2015). For example, more than one-third of TTCs that participated in Tandon and Fukao’s (2015) survey reported difficulties in recruiting qualified teacher trainees and dissatisfaction with their caliber.

Another pressing challenge facing general education in Cambodia is the insufficient supply of teachers at both primary and secondary school levels due to the high attrition rate and training capacity of TTCs (see Table 1). Every year, the teacher workforce loses more than 2,000 teachers; many of them left the teaching profession completely (Hang, 2018; MoEYS, 2015). Prigent (2016) reported that Cambodia’s education system loses about 3,000 teachers every year due to retirement, resignations, and deaths. These losses account for 5-6% of the entire teacher population. Compared with the training capacity of TTCs, which annually recruits and trains about 5,000 new teachers, the losses are quite substantial (Hang, 2018; MoEYS, 2015), resulting in inappropriate utilization of existing teachers and the use of contract teachers who are often not adequately trained. Even though there are reports of a growing interest of high school graduates and bachelor’s degree (BA) graduates applying to become teachers in recent years due to the continuous rise in teacher remuneration and improved working environments (Sot et al., 2019), the training capacity of TTCs is still limited.

Table 1. Shortages of Teacher Supply in Cambodia

Years	Education System	Requirements	Shortage
2018	Pre-primary	14229	562
	Primary	52948	4040
	Lower Secondary	27824	1309
	Upper Secondary	15668	2717
2017	Pre-primary	12830	564
	Primary	50497	3375
	Lower Secondary	27451	1306
	Upper Secondary	13264	1845
2016	Pre-primary	11413	539
	Primary	48637	2336
	Lower Secondary	27067	909
	Upper Secondary	11684	1289
2015	Pre-primary	10034	499
	Primary	47760	1961
	Lower Secondary	27067	909
	Upper Secondary	10629	681

Source: Adapted from Hang (2018, p. 294)

Inadequate Operational Funding for Schools

Cambodia's public funding for the education sector at all educational levels has continued to increase over the past decade, and the government has committed to further increasing both teacher remuneration and school operational funding (World Bank, 2018). However, the increased funding has never been sufficient to procure necessary resources and supplies for school operations. Kheang et al. (2018) reported a severe shortage of basic learning resources and instructional materials in many Cambodian public schools, especially in rural and remote areas. A recent study conducted in rural primary schools in Cambodia by Ravet and Mtika (2021) found the

same issue. It asserted that the lack of teaching and learning resources makes it challenging to support educational inclusion and quality. According to the World Bank (2018), public schools in Cambodia receive funding from two main sources: School Operational Budgets (SOB) from the government and School Improvement Grants (SIG) from the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), since 2014. Other sources of school incomes include contributions from parents, communities, and non-governmental organizations (World Bank, 2018).

Limited Continuous Professional Development for Teachers

Changing educational needs and reforms have necessitated continuous professional development

(CPD) for teachers in Cambodia at all educational levels so that they remain relevant and competent in delivering their services. Since the last decade, MoEYS has endeavored to critically reform the education sector in many areas, such as school curricula, pedagogical methods, and information and communication technology (ICT) integration, among others (Hang, 2018). Such educational changes have posed significant challenges to in-service teachers while the provision of CPD remains insufficient. Phin (2014) conducted a survey with 173 research participants, including teachers at all educational levels, government officials, researchers, university lecturers, and teacher trainers. The survey found that in-service teacher training in Cambodia was not systematized and offered irregularly and fractionally. The author suggested that well-structured CPD programs were urgently needed. Kheang et al. (2018) also found that in-service teachers in Cambodia received minimal CPD support beyond their initial training. In Cambodia, professional development support for in-service teachers is often driven by educational changes, such as changes in textbooks and new teaching approaches, and only made possible by technical and financial support of relevant development partners, which is limited in both scope and timeframe (Kheang et al., 2018; Phin, 2014; Pich, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). Such professional support is usually for subject leaders who are expected to replicate what they have learned at their respective schools (Kheang et al., 2018).

Weak School Management

Public school directors in Cambodia are often criticized for not possessing sufficient qualifications and skills for effective school leadership and management. As Prigent (2016) noted, due to the politicized and non-transparent appointment process in Cambodia's education system, "many school directors often do not have the leadership and management skills required for teacher oversight and effective school management" (p. 2).

Dy (2017) also mentioned that school leadership positions in Cambodia are recruited from the teacher workforce on the basis of a successful teaching record and the length of service, often without decent leadership and administrative experience. The absence of pre-service school leadership preparation and lack of in-service training for school leaders have also contributed to the weak school management in Cambodia. For many years, pre-service training for school leaders was not available. Instead, short-term in-service training was offered in the form of workshops or seminars. In recent years, MoEYS has recruited potential deputy school directors and other education staff, including teachers who are working at any upper-secondary schools to receive official pre-service school leadership training at the National Institute of Education (NIE). The training which is equivalent to a Master's degree lasts for one year, and graduates from the program are expected to become upper-secondary school directors. To enhance in-service school directors' professional competency, a great amount of money has also been invested in training these education staff. However, effective school management remains a distant goal.

Key Challenges Facing Higher Education

Skills Mismatch

Skills mismatch or shortage are one of the key challenges frequently identified and discussed in relation to Cambodian education, particularly higher education (see Madhur, 2014; Peou, 2017). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) (ADB & ILO, 2015) noted that "there is little doubt that skill shortages are a significant constraint to meeting Cambodia's aspirations for sustained rapid growth and a diversified and higher-value-adding economy" (p. 52). Three major factors were cited to explain the skills shortages. They included school deficiencies, a household decision-making process that favors immediate income generation

over education, and a lack of knowledge of the long-term value of education (ADB & ILO, 2015).

The World Bank (2012) identified skills shortages as having potentially negative impacts on Cambodia's industrial and agricultural development and economic diversification. In particular, it was found that the most severe skills shortages were related to management and supervision skills as well as soft skills such as work attitudes, decision-making skills, and analytical skills. In addition, half of all Bachelor's degree students in 2009/10 graduated with degrees in accounting, finance, and management, while only 1.5% and 0.1% of them graduated with degrees in civil engineering, and science and technology, respectively (World Bank, 2012). A recent survey by Kao (2020) showed that Cambodian students "were more inclined to major in social science than science and engineering-related fields" (p. 49). Peou (2017) also showed that many Cambodian students studied two degrees at the same time to improve their employment prospects – a phenomenon that reflected the "doubtful quality" of Cambodian higher education (p. 31). Even the Education Ministry acknowledged that skills mismatch was a major issue in higher education in Cambodia as "the quality of graduate students does not fully meet the needs of the job market and society" (MoEYS, 2019b, p. 13).

Limited Research Activities and Output

Another area of great concern is limited research activities taking place in Cambodian higher education institutions. Recent researches have shown that the research engagement of Cambodian university lecturers is limited (Eam, 2015; Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b; Ros et al., 2020). Eam (2015), for example, showed that up to 65% of Cambodian lecturers (n = 444) were not involved in any research at all. A survey by Kitamura et al. (2016) revealed similar results; that is, most Cambodian lecturers did not do research. Heng's (2021b) analysis of the Scopus database revealed

that research publications emanating from Cambodia over the past decade (2010-2019) were low compared to those of other ASEAN countries, placing it at 8th among the 10 ASEAN member states.

Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) found that Cambodian lecturers were reluctant to conduct research because of the lack of institutional support and limited social appreciation of research outputs. Because of this uncondusive environment for research, many lecturers resorted to teaching many classes, often at multiple institutions, to generate as much income as possible to support themselves and their families, leaving them with little to consider research. Ros et al. (2020) found similar findings, arguing that Cambodian lecturers' roles and identities revolved around "knowledge consumers" rather than "knowledge producers." Their involvement in research was limited, and if they engaged in research, it tended to be consultancy or policy-oriented research, not academic purpose (see also Heng et al., 2022b).

There are many reasons for the limited research activities and outputs in Cambodia (see Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace [CICP], 2016; Heng, 2020b; Heng & Sol, 2021; Kwok et al., 2010). For example, a scoping study by Kwok et al. (2010) identified seven key challenges to research development in Cambodia. They included: (1) a lack of well-trained researchers, (2) low academic salaries, (3) lack of a well-defined career path, (4) brain drain, (5) limited research facilities, (6) limited budget for research, and (7) ineffective academic leadership. Research by CICP (2016) discussed several key factors influencing research in Cambodia, including the social value given to research, funding, salaries and promotions, research incentives, English proficiency, research knowledge, workloads, retention of researchers, research quality, ethical issues, political sensitivity, and access to academic databases (see Heng et al., 2020 for a detailed discussion of factors influencing research and

research productivity). In addition, Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) found that there were policy misalignments related to professional development for faculty members across different levels, limiting the development of the academic profession in Cambodia. Similarly, Sam and Dahles (2017) showed that there was a disconnection or lack of collaboration among key stakeholders in Cambodian higher education, which severely impeded the development of the sector in general and research in particular (see also Heng & Sol, 2021 for a recent discussion of the challenges to research development in Cambodia).

Fragmented Higher Education Governance

Another important issue that serves as a barrier to the development of higher education in Cambodia is the problem surrounding higher education management. Currently, there are 130 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia which are supervised by 14 ministries and two state institutions (MoEYS, 2022). Of all these HEIs, 82 are privately managed. The fact that there are many ministries overseeing HEIs in Cambodia has created fragmentation in higher education governance. As Mak et al. (2019) noted, “the worrisome fragmentation of the governance architecture and the apparent lack of effort to create a cohesive, overarching higher education system or ecosystem is a major issue in Cambodia” (p. 20). Mak et al. (2019) also noted that there had not been any real attempt to establish a central governing or coordinating body to oversee the development and governance of the higher education sector, perpetuating serious higher education system fragmentation and weak higher education quality.

Although the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) has been established for around two decades, its role has been limited to accrediting foundation year programs. It has yet to formally accredit any institution (Mak et al., 2019). Due to political interference, ACC was placed

under the control of the Council of Ministers, not MoEYS, when it was established in 2003 (Vann & Ziguras, 2017). It was in 2013 that ACC was transferred to be under the supervision of MoEYS; however, ACC’s operation has not been effective in improving the quality of higher education in Cambodia. As Un and Sok (2018) argued, “ACC has arguably achieved quite little in terms of quality assurance and accreditation” (p. 2).

Overall, there are numerous challenges to higher education in Cambodia, making it hard to grow and develop faster. Although the Cambodian government, with support from development partners such as the World Bank, Sida, and Asia Foundation, just to name a few, has made efforts to improve the quantity and quality of teaching and research in higher education, many issues and challenges remain (see Heng & Sol, 2021; Sol, 2021). This requires systematic and collaborative efforts, strong commitment, and clear vision to make a difference to the higher education landscape in Cambodia to ensure that Cambodian students, especially university graduates, are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills required to contribute to socioeconomic development and enhance Cambodia’s productivity and competitiveness in the context of the knowledge-based economy.

Ways Forward to Improve the Education System in Cambodia

Thus far, various initiatives have been put forward to improve the Cambodian education system. In general education, in addition to a number of educational reforms, the government has introduced several key projects, including the Enhancing Education Quality Project (EEQP), the General Education Improvement Project (GEIP), the Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP), and the Upper Secondary Education Sector Development Program I & II. These projects seek to enhance access to secondary school education, support the implementation of school-

based management (SBM), develop the capacity of teachers and school leaders, improve learning facilities and relevance of secondary school education, and effectively respond to any eligible financial crisis or emergency.

In higher education, the government has also made efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning and promote research. In particular, it has introduced two key projects, namely the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HECIP) and the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP). Both projects received loans from the World Bank and were valued at USD 115.5 million in total. HECIP was implemented between 2010 and 2015/16 and was valued at USD 23 million. It aimed to “(a) improve the quality of teaching, management, and research in project-supported entities; and (b) pilot the targeting of disadvantaged students for enhanced retention” (World Bank, n.d.-c, para. 1). HEIP was introduced in 2018 and has a six-year grace period (2018-2024). It is valued at USD 92.5 million and aims to “improve the quality and relevance of higher education and research mainly in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] and agriculture at targeted higher education institutions, and to improve governance in the sector” (World Bank, n.d.-a, para. 1).

Despite these efforts and initiatives at both the general and higher education levels, there is a need for all stakeholders to work together to enhance the quality of the education system in Cambodia in order to ensure that the current and next generations of Cambodian students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to drive socioeconomic development and enhance Cambodia’s competitiveness in the regional and international arena. In putting forward our suggestions to improve the education system in Cambodia, we divide this section into two: general education and higher education.

General Education

Improving Teachers’ Social and Financial Status

Raising the status of teachers both socially and financially is a robust approach to attracting the best individuals into the teaching profession and retaining experienced teachers in the workforce. MoEYS has continued to improve teachers’ remuneration and social benefits in recent years, but the improvements have not been quick and substantial enough to close the income gap with other professions. Teachers at all educational levels are reported to earn less than other professionals with comparable qualifications. To supplement their meager salaries, many teachers accept additional, often low-paid, jobs or provide private lessons for extra money (MoEYS, 2015; Prigent, 2016). This situation has lowered their social status in the eyes of the public and affected their teaching performance (Hang, 2018). With the growing national budget, teachers should be paid a decent wage to ensure their good living conditions and keep them motivated in their profession. Other monetary and non-monetary benefits such as free medical care, professional ranks, family support, special allowance for teachers in rural/remote areas, retirement package/pension, and professional development opportunities can also contribute to enhancing the social and financial status of teachers. Some of these benefits are currently available but limited. Moreover, teachers’ professional values should be further promoted by maximizing their meaningful participation in important social events, public discussions, and policy-making processes, among others. We all agree that quality education is the key to success and prosperity, and teachers play an essential role in educating and shaping the future generation. They are like the powerhouse of the economy and determine how Cambodia’s future workforce will perform. Therefore, they deserve better living conditions, respect, and attention from all stakeholders.

Allocating More Funding to Support Effective School Operations

To support educational inclusion and quality, more funding allocation for school resources and supplies is imperative to establish a conducive environment for an effective teaching and learning process. The lack of textbooks, library books and resources, experimental equipment, relevant instructional materials, and basic school stationery remains a significant issue for many schools, particularly those in rural areas. While continuous efforts have been made to advance equal access to quality education, this important issue must be tackled timely and collectively. More funding is also required to improve some basic school facilities such as libraries, laboratories, computer rooms, teacher workrooms/resource rooms, and hygiene facilities. At a minimum, the teacher workroom/resource room should be equipped with computers with internet access and a printing copier and stocked with regular stationery supplies. This will allow teachers to diversify students' learning experiences and differentiate their instructions to meet different learning needs through varied instructional strategies and activities. In the bigger picture, enhanced school facilities and resource availability will support a more effective school running, so more funding is necessary if a better education quality is to be achieved.

Continuing to Improve Teacher Quality

Substantial research has shown that teacher quality is a key determinant of students' learning achievement (OECD, 2005; Saavedra, 2021). Hence, continuing to improve teacher quality is of vital importance for Cambodia's education system to remain relevant and competitive in the global knowledge-based economy. Improving teacher quality requires comprehensive system-level policies that set out coherent directions for recruiting, preparing, supporting, managing, and motivating teachers. With improving teacher quality as one of the five pillars of reform priorities

(MoEYS, 2019a), MoEYS has already introduced a number of relevant policies, action plans, and initiatives in an ambitious effort to enhance the quality of teachers in Cambodia. Some notable policies and action plans included the Teacher Professional Standards 2016, the Teacher Policy Action Plan 2015-2020, the Teacher Education Provider Standards 2016, the Teacher Career Pathways 2018, and the CPD Framework for Teachers and School Directors 2019. Other key initiatives included the establishment of two Teacher Education Colleges in 2017, the introduction of 12 +4 and BA +2 teacher training programs, and the teacher and teacher trainer upgrading programs. This commitment to raise the quality of teachers in the Kingdom has been widely welcomed. However, some of the policies and initiatives have not been fully implemented yet and are still under ongoing development. This fractional implementation has only benefited those in targeted schools or areas. Therefore, while MoEYS's commitment must be commendable, expanding and accelerating the implementation of relevant policies, action plans, and initiatives is a must-do to ensure that teacher quality in Cambodia is significantly enhanced in response to the pressing need for better education quality.

Expanding the Implementation of the CPD Framework

Achieving education quality in the twenty-first century and the context of Industry 4.0 requires highly competent teachers and the indispensable role of schools in supporting the teaching and learning process. In recognition of that, in 2019, the CPD Framework for Teachers and School Directors was introduced to provide clear rationale, strategies, and action plans for 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2019a). The purpose of the CPD framework is to support teachers and school directors in enhancing their professional knowledge, skills, competency, and effectiveness. It also systematizes how engaging in CPD activities can be linked to career pathways (e.g., promotion,

transfer), remuneration, and other professional benefits. In August 2021, the CPD Management Office of MoEYS published a CPD handbook and the system for CPD credit acquisition, providing a new boost to the implementation of the CPD framework. However, taking a phased approach, the scope of implementation is restricted to only schools and teacher education institutions identified as “having high absorptive capacity for the CPD interventions” (MoEYS, 2019a, p. 9). This phased approach restricts the participation of teachers and school directors who may also have strong CPD needs at other schools. While it may take up to 10 years – as indicated by MoEYS (2019a) – to institutionalize the CPD framework across the country, MoEYS – with its concerned stakeholders – should, in a shorter term, endeavor to expand the implementation of the CPD framework to more schools by analyzing and prioritizing their needs and responses to CPD interventions. Also, in-service teachers and school directors who went through the previous recruitment formula/process may find themselves struggling to respond to the increasing demands accumulated by educational reforms made by MoEYS in recent years. Therefore, the wider implementation of a coherent, comprehensive, and sustained CPD framework will significantly benefit them and, in turn, raise the education quality in the country. As Hang (2018) noted, quality education is often equated with the quality of teachers and school directors.

Higher Education

Improving Curricula and Assessment

To address the pressing issue of skills mismatch among university graduates in Cambodia, a lot needs to be done, and any solutions to this issue require time, consistent efforts, and strong commitment. This is not to mention a need for a clear and realistic vision to make a difference to this important issue that can have profound effects on the future of Cambodia. Notwithstanding the efforts, time, and resources needed to tackle the

skills gap, one way forward is to improve curricula and assessment in higher education. The problem with skills gap revolves around two things. One is that students graduate with limited knowledge and skills that do not meet the demands of the job markets. The other is that they graduate with majors that are not in demand or needed by the industry or private sector that require new graduates with the necessary skill sets to drive its productivity and growth.

Although, to the best of our knowledge, there seems to be little research examining university curricula in Cambodian universities (for notable exceptions, see Petraki & Khat, 2020; Phon & Heng, 2017), we argue that one of the key strategies in addressing the issue of skills gap is to improve course curricula through curriculum reforms. This process is time-consuming and requires concerted efforts from key stakeholders such as MoEYS and HEIs. However, it will be worth the time and effort because an effective curriculum will ensure the attainment of the desired teaching and learning outcomes. Moreover, an improved or updated curriculum will be useful to equip students with knowledge and skills on par with the new developments and the demands of the job market in the context of Industry 4.0.

Concerned stakeholders, particularly HEIs, also need to enhance the quality of assessment in higher education. According to Brown (2004), assessment can be formal or informal and can be divided into two major types: formative and summative. Formative assessment can be defined as “evaluating students in the process of ‘forming’ their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process” (Brown, 2004, p. 6). This type of assessment needs to be “ongoing, frequent, and interactive” in order to effectively assess students’ learning progress, understand their learning needs, and adjust the teaching instructions and approaches to achieve optimal learning outcomes (Sol, 2020, p. 1). Summative assessment, on the other hand, “aims

to measure, or summarize, what a student has grasped, and typically occurs at the end of a course or unit of instruction” (Brown, 2004, p. 6). The goal is not to help students learn but to assess how well they have achieved the learning objectives or a set of objectives to assess their ability. Considering the crucial role of assessment in learning and teaching, it is imperative that the quality of the two types of assessment be improved in the Cambodian higher education context to ensure that students’ competence and performance can be effectively assessed against specific benchmarks or criteria. The goal is to establish a minimum standard for the education quality of Cambodian university students. Hence, those who have met the well-designed assessment requirements will be highly qualified in the job market after their graduation.

Promoting and Supporting Research

As research activities in Cambodia remain limited and underdeveloped, it is essential to find ways to support and promote research. Heng (2020b) argued that to promote academic research in Cambodia, there was a need to increase stakeholder collaboration because concerned stakeholders across the macro/national, meso/institutional, and micro/individual levels played a vital role in making a difference to the research landscape in Cambodia. He stated that:

all actors and stakeholders need to work together in a genuine and constructive manner. Their active involvement and collaboration are of profound significance. The Cambodian government, through MoEYS and other state institutions, needs to lead the change that seeks to enhance a research culture in Cambodia. Educational institutions and relevant actors at the meso level must adapt to changes, both from above and below, and embrace them. Individual academics and researchers need to rise up to the challenges, exercise their agency and commit themselves to promoting research by actively conducting, sharing and publishing it. (p. 4)

Similarly, Nhem (2020) called for more research collaboration among academics and between academics and students. He proposed three moves in research collaboration: (1) external research collaboration (i.e., collaboration between local and overseas academics); (2) internal research collaboration (i.e., collaboration between overseas-trained and locally trained academics); and (3) faculty-student research collaboration (i.e., collaboration between academics and research students). Nhem (2020) also noted that policy interventions from the government and relevant stakeholders to promote research activities were as crucial as the involvement from non-governmental organizations and donor agencies.

To nurture a vibrant research culture in Cambodia, Heng and Rautakivi (2020) argued for the need to establish more local publication platforms, particularly academic journals, to support new or less experienced researchers to learn the ropes of academic publishing. They contended that:

The lack of local journals in Cambodia significantly limits the development of new writers or researchers who may not have the capacity to publish their research in regional or international journals. They may need some publication experience, starting from publishing their works in local journals first. Once their research knowledge and confidence have improved, they can attempt to publish their works in reputable or international journals. (p. 3)

Overall, a lot needs to be done to promote research in Cambodia. As Heng (2021b) argued, the Cambodian government and concerned stakeholders need to address all major barriers that prevent research and discourage Cambodian academics from engaging in it. Heng et al. (2022a) suggested that “greater attention should be given to the role of the social, economic, and political dimensions that shape academics’ lives as well as their motivation, interest, and beliefs about research” (p. 8).

In addition, there is a strong need to develop and implement research-focused policies, including recruitment and promotion policies at both national and institutional levels, to encourage research activities and instill research interest in Cambodian academics and students. There is also a need for individual academics to be more committed to research and understand their crucial role in contributing to the promotion of research in Cambodia. They are the key actors and the hope for research development, so they need to find ways to increase their research engagement and be the change agent in fostering positive social attitudes toward research and scholarly publications (see Heng & Sol, 2021 for more suggestions on how key stakeholders can contribute to promoting academic research in Cambodia).

Effectively Implementing Research and Higher Education Policies

As discussed above, policy interventions are essential to promote research. They are also crucial for improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. As the issues of skills mismatch and limited research activities are still prevalent, the Cambodian government, through MoEYS and other relevant ministries and state institutions, needs to ensure the implementation of policies that aim to promote higher education quality and university research activities. Thus far, MoEYS and other ministries have introduced their respective policies to improve the quantity and quality of teaching and learning in post-secondary education. However, the main issues lie in the implementation of those policies. That is, many policies to promote educational quality are in place, yet the effective implementation of those policies remains doubtful.

As Sok and Bunny (2021) noted, due to “limited national resource, ambitious policy intent and donors’ dependence without national gap-filling investment, Cambodia is known for developing

pretty comprehensive policies, which are not implemented fully” (p. 14). Therefore, in addition to formulating new policies to make a difference to higher education quality in Cambodia, MoEYS, relevant ministries, and other concerned stakeholders need to improve the implementation and monitoring and evaluation aspects of the policies. The goals are to ensure that policies that are introduced and implemented serve their intended purposes well. Effective implementation of policies, however, requires a good understanding of the context and the availability of qualified personnel to successfully carry out projects. As Rappleye and Un (2018) argued in their article on the World Bank’s failure in implementing a policy to improve higher education and research capacity in Cambodia, the root causes of the failure were related to the lack of qualified personnel, particularly those with PhD degrees, and complex procurement processes, which were the result of the Bank’s lack of a nuanced understanding of the Cambodian context.

Despite what has been discussed, we argue that, in the context of Cambodia, policies are essential as they provide directions and roadmaps on what to do and what to expect. Next, it is the final resources that go with the policies. Salaries for public servants, including school teachers and university lecturers, are low, which is about USD 300-500 per month, including basic salary and remuneration (MoEYS, 2019c). Therefore, whenever there are new projects, everyone is interested in the financial aspects or incentives that come with the projects. They would look for opportunities to earn extra income or incentives; otherwise, they would not have much interest in the projects, thereby limiting their participation. Then, it is the personnel who will implement the policies. They need to possess adequate knowledge and skills to implement the policies or manage the projects effectively. Thus, to ensure the successful transition from national or top-level policies to local practitioners or policy implementers, there needs to be some mechanisms or incentives to ensure the

policies are enacted effectively and efficiently (see Rappleye & Un, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has discussed the key challenges facing both general and higher education in Cambodia. It has also provided ways forward to improve the Cambodian education system. To enhance the quality of general education, there is a need to improve teachers' social and financial status, allocate more funding to support effective school operations, continue to improve teacher quality, and expand the implementation of the CPD framework for in-service teachers and school directors. As for higher education, attention needs to be paid to improving curricula and assessment, promoting and supporting research, and ensuring the effective implementation of research and higher education policies.

The article argued that education is the key to making Cambodia great again. In the context of the knowledge-based economy, knowledge is power. It is the engine of economic growth, the catalyst for innovation and transformation, and the hope for a sustainable future. To ensure that Cambodia remains relevant and competitive in the globalized world, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and fast-changing digital technology, it is essential that the current and next generations of Cambodians are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to survive and thrive in such an ever-changing and competitive environment. To this end, an effective education system is the hope and the pathway which Cambodia can move forward toward prosperity and greatness. It is quality education across different levels that will provide a solid foundation for knowledge-driven development and innovation, thereby helping Cambodia to catch up with countries in the region and other parts of the world.

As Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Not only can education unlock human potential, but it can also open the door to creativity and new possibilities. The success and quality of the human capital of a nation undoubtedly depend on the quality of its education. Thus, for Cambodia to set itself on the path to greatness, it needs to first set its education system on the path to quality because quality education will produce quality human capital, which will, in turn, provide realistic hope for the future of Cambodia and its prospects for making itself great again.

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