

# Chapter 9

## Higher Education in Cambodia

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### 9.1 Overview

Cambodia has been experiencing two-digit growth in its economy for the last several years. The remarkable economic growth and political stability undoubtedly bring the country opportunities to revitalize its social sector. Education is one of the prioritized sectors of the country. As a result of integrated efforts, education has been viewed as a success story in Cambodia's reforms. Some figures from the recent history will be taken as examples in the following sections.<sup>1</sup>

#### 9.1.1 Primary and Secondary Education

- In 2001, the Government abolished start-of-the-year contributions in grades 1–9 which resulted in additional enrollment of 0.6 million students. The number of students from the poorest communities has increased by 0.5 million in the past 4 years.
- Primary education expansion (since 2000, enrollment has risen from 2.2 million to 2.7 million): Primary overall net enrollment rate increased from 84% to 91% since 2000 (from 62% to 79% in rural areas with provision of schools facilities closer to home).
- Secondary education expansion (since 2000, enrollment grew 62% from 284,000 to 460,000): Net enrollment rate grew from 17% to 21% with government scholarships for poor, ethnic, and girl students.
- Upper secondary education (from 105,000 to 154,000 in the past 4 years): The government's strategic priority is to expand high-quality upper secondary education in all districts and provinces.
- Increase in the number and compensation of trained teachers (from 42,000 in 1999/2000 to 47,000 in 2002/03 for primary and from 17,800 to 22,700 in secondary)

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<sup>1</sup>Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) (2005a; 2005b).

- Achieved target ratio of one textbook per pupil per subject in primary and lower secondary schools

### ***9.1.2 Postsecondary Education***

- Postsecondary education has developed with the strengthening of the private education sector (20,000 out of 45,000 students in the private institutions).
- Numbers of higher education institutions (HEIs) and degree programs have been increased significantly from 51 HEIs in 2005 to 62 in 2007.

Nevertheless, progress made within the education has given Cambodia both pride and concern at the same time. At a glance, it looks as if higher education subsector in Cambodia is enjoying progress. In fact, however, it is having a silent revolution that needs more care. The fast growth of the number of HEIs may lead to low-quality level of education on the one hand, and large number of degree graduates may not be equally matched with demand at labor market on the other hand. This chapter attempts firstly to capture progress of the subsector and secondly to illustrate issues faced by the higher education system including access, equity, quality, relevance, and governance and management of the system. It is worth mentioning that this chapter narrowly focuses only on higher education within academic stream of the country rather than the whole sphere of postsecondary education.

## **9.2 Structural Features, Scope, and Scale of Cambodian Higher Education**

### ***9.2.1 Overview of the System***

Cambodian higher education is basically separated into two different but interrelated streams, namely academic and vocational. The two streams are under supervision of two different government ministries functioning as in-charge ministries. The academic stream is under supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) while the vocational stream is under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training. In addition to the management and supervision of the two in-charge ministries, numerous specialized ministries also play important roles in making partnership in provision of higher education services. UNESCO (2006) states that there are no less than nine government ministries and agencies providing higher education services in Cambodia. These include:

- MoEYS
- Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
- Ministry of Health

- Ministry of Agriculture; Forestry, and Fisheries
- Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts
- Ministry of Economy and Finance
- Ministry of Religious Affairs
- Ministry of National Defense
- Office of the Council of Ministers

A few other government ministries and agencies are on the preparation for establishing new HEIs with respect to their specialized fields.

Unlike many other countries, Cambodian HEIs were totally abandoned for about 3 years during the Khmer Rouge regime. Reopening of the largest and oldest modern university in Cambodia, the Royal University of Phnom Penh took place after the collapse of the regime in 1979 and significant growth of newly established universities and institutes have been seen from 1997 as a consequence of educational reform that allows private providers to take partnership.

Cambodian HEIs appear to be more specialized but not wide multidisciplinary ones. At present, there is a total of 62 HEIs comprising a mixture of degree-level institutions and sub-degree level institutions (2-year courses) falling into two groups: public and private. The public sector is made up of only 22 HEIs while the private sector consists of 40 institutions.<sup>2</sup> The first private higher education institution, Norton University, was established in 1997 in response to policy shift toward more public–private partnership in educational provision. The establishment of private HEIs was at full swing in 2002/03 (UNESCO 2006). Within these 2 years 16 new HEIs were established to satisfy growing demand for tertiary education in the country.

HEIs in Cambodia are classified into three basic categories, the royal academy, university, and institute or independent specialized school. The number of institutions moving across the categories is hard to determine. Some independent specialized schools and faculties upgrade themselves to universities. Theoretically, in the Cambodian context, the royal academy fulfills a think tank function more than the other categories. Yet, the Royal Academy of Cambodia at present due to the lack of human resources is still pursuing training programs like other HEIs, leaving little room for research activities and thus consultancy.

The Royal University of Phnom Penh holding its prestigious title as the largest and oldest university in Cambodia was reopened for services after the collapse of the rule of the Killing Fields in 1979. The reopening and expansion of the university went beyond the controlling capacity of its management and leadership during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two affiliations of the university– Faculty of Economics and Faculty of Pedagogy – applied to the MoEYS to be new independent bodies under the direct patronage of the ministry. Currently these faculties are the National University of Management, Royal University of Law and Economics, and National Institute of Education. It is worth mentioning here that Faculty of Economics first practically operated with considerable autonomy from the Royal University of Phnom Penh as the Institute of Economics. Later, due to growing roles and func-

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<sup>2</sup>Unpublished statistics of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia.

tions of the institute, the institute further divided into two more independent bodies presently known as the National University of Management and Royal University of Law and Economics. The Royal University of Phnom Penh, National University of Management, Royal University of Law and Economics, and National Institute of Education are now independent and operating equally under the supervision of the MoEYS as their in-charge or parent ministry. Only the old Royal University of Phnom Penh is a multidisciplinary university; the remaining three are specialized ones with focuses on certain academic subjects.

### ***9.2.2 Role of Private Higher Education Institutions***

Until the inauguration of Norton University in 1997, private HEIs were totally absent from Cambodia. With the advent of new government policy in favor of private participation in economic development, the private HEIs have increased their role dramatically and are now the major providers of higher education in the country. Sloper (2004) indicated that in 2004 around 83% of the total higher education enrollment was through private and fee-paying programs.

Amongst 62 HEIs in Cambodia, 22 are public. The remaining 40 are private. The first private university in Cambodia was Norton University, established in 1997. Some other early private investments in higher education of the country include the Institute of Management Science in 1998; the Institute of Technology and Management; and the International Institute of Cambodia in 1999. Since prior to the establishments of these totally private HEIs, some fee-paying programs have been observed within public universities. The fee-paying system built into the public sector is a typical public-private partnership. The programs are considered to be commercial arms of the institutions to earn additional monetary resources for development of the institutions and incentives for their members, especially faculty members.

Both 2002 and 2003 were boom years for private investment in Cambodian higher education. Sixteen HEIs were established within these 2 years. The emergence of many and diverse private HEIs has given the country both enjoyable and painful moments. Within about 10 years of private higher education history, the Cambodian higher education system now hosts various types of providers – local and foreign, as well as profit and nonprofit. There are many weaknesses in this kind of rapid and uncontrollable expansion. An overview picture of HEI establishment reveals that the private sector plays a crucial role in the Cambodian higher education system. Almost double the number of establishments are private-run and private-funded. And this composition remains a trend of the system. Total enrollment in both public and private HEIs has now increased dramatically from a little over 10,000 in 1997 to 97,524 in 2006.

### ***9.2.3 Financing Higher Education***

It is hard to figure out how much Cambodia spends for the higher education subsector. In total, the education sector enjoys about 2% of GDP. A large proportion of the

**Table 9.1** Financing plan for higher education in Cambodia (MoEYS 2005b)

Activities	Costs in Riels millions				
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
1. Institutional support and operation	5,340	5,810	6,300	6,770	7,240
2. Strengthening of monitoring system and quality in higher education	160	190	200	230	260
Resources: Total	5,500	6,000	6,500	7,000	7,500

national budget allocated for higher education goes to staff remunerations and little remains for development of the subsector. Financing plan for increasing enrollment in higher education is based on the budget of institutional support and operation for individual HEIs (MoEYS 2005b).<sup>3</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this book regarding methodology employed by donors to develop education in Cambodia, some donors are keen on a project-based approach while others have shifted to a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp). Advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches are equally found in Cambodia's experiences. With regard to higher education, the subsector has become a priority action program (PAP) since the early stage of the introduction of SWAp, as seen in the 2001 Education Sector Support Program (ESSP).<sup>4</sup> The ESSP describes activities to be undertaken to improve the subsector and highlights budgetary requirement for the implementation of the activities. However, the Royal Government of Cambodia is flexible, accommodating both types of assistances toward the subsector – the project based and the SWAp. The World Bank, a major donor for higher education in Cambodia, is currently on its US\$25 million project-based assistance to help improve quality and efficiency of education. Higher education is a component of the project that has its US\$3 million share covering three subcomponents, namely higher education department improvement; accreditation mechanism strengthening; and Royal University of Phnom Penh library improvement. Despite some hardship at the beginning, currently the project is a major factor bridging Cambodian higher education and regional standard.

### 9.3 Macro-Level Issues of the System

A wide range of problems have been seen in Cambodian higher education. Higher education in Cambodia is currently at its massification stage. Academic ethos and all other professionalism are crucial at this stage. Without critical care, the system can be misled and become profit-oriented and lacking in social responsibility. At the macro level, quality of education, effectiveness, and efficiency of a higher education

<sup>3</sup> See MoEYS (2005b) for more details.

<sup>4</sup> The SWAp was first introduced in 2000 and covered only primary education. With the success of the pilot year, SWAp has been expanded to other subsectors including higher education.

institution largely depend on its managing mechanisms. On-going debates concerning higher education and university governance and management in Cambodia center around at least three main issues. They are:

1. Appropriateness of the use of scarce resources of the country
2. Well-matching with demand at labor market or the relevance of the system
3. The degree of autonomy possessed by each university or the administration at university level

### ***9.3.1 Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Resources Usage***

As presented earlier, financing higher education in Cambodia remains poorly documented. This has largely resulted from either the small portion of budget allocation for the subsector or the unsettled state of the subsector. In-depth study of financing higher education in Cambodia is close to zero. It is very difficult to figure out how budget has been allocated within the subsector, how much the total subsector needs and can absorb in practice annually, and so on.

Public-private partnership within education until now is not implemented correctly as it is supposed to be. Government still sponsors or funds public universities to run academic programs that are well and widely provided in the private sector. Instead of being a partner, state makes itself a competitor for the young private sector. Economics, business-related programs are generally provided well at private HEIs. These programs can also be seen available with government support at public HEIs using national budget. In contrary, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and other unpopular programs are ignored by both sectors.

University all over the world fulfills three basic functions – training, doing research, and providing consultation services. In Cambodia the last two functions seem to be absent in both public and private HEIs. It is very unfortunate that both sectors are competing to provide training and leaving behind the remaining two functions. Literature in this regard suggests that where private sector can take financial responsibility and perform well, government should only regulate and redirect government resources to other important areas where market fails to serve. Yet, it is not the case for Cambodian higher education at present. All public and private HEIs are competing to provide training and the training is for almost the same programs, barring some unpopular subjects and programs.

### ***9.3.2 Relevance***

Apart from weak public-private partnership, school-firm linkage in Cambodian higher education is also at its very early stage. Irrelevance of the system is reflected in graduates who cannot integrate themselves well into the labor market. With very few exceptions, most HEIs do not have tracer studies and, therefore, do not know where

their students go after graduation. This gives the institutions a hard time developing and improving their curriculums to better match the demand at the labor market.

### ***9.3.3 Autonomy and Academic Freedom***

Recent developments in university governance and management have been observed in Cambodia, some for the better and some not so useful. An example of useful change is the decision by the government to create public HEIs as Public Administration Institutions (PAI) – this should guarantee them higher levels of autonomy than in the past. With this status, the university has more authority to manage itself under direction of a governing board rather than by direct supervision of the in-charge ministries. Currently the MoEYS is preparing to grant PAI status to additional number of universities under its supervision. This move is clearly a positive step toward more accountability at the institutional level.

Despite the positive move toward a higher degree of freedom in administrative-related matters as described above, HEIs in Cambodia are not mandated to grant degrees. In general, degrees are conferred by institutions and approved and signed by the MoEYS.<sup>5</sup> Currently, no university degree in Cambodia is valid without the signature and stamp of its in-charge ministry. Delegation of authority to HEIs to confer degrees to their students without signature from the ministry on the diplomas is still under debate in the Cambodian higher education context. The stamp of approval reflects that the hierarchical culture prevalent in the country is hard to change.

Academic freedom is found to be a subset of the human rights situation in Cambodia. The freedom of teaching and freedom of speech is based on the political system and situation. Worldwide experience suggests that social policy could interfere with academic freedom in many ways such as access to information, selection of research topics, report of research results, and expression of opinion in public. But this is not the case in Cambodian higher education. However, role of government in the appointment of state university presidents in Cambodia could be a crucial juncture in the pattern of academic freedom of the current system. In addition to the leadership appointment, method of management and staff appointments is part of academic-freedom interference. Generally these are appointments made by the government with or without narrow open application, evaluation of competencies, and input from the institution themselves.

Many countries of Asia are facing some degree of inadequate system of justice and law enforcement as well as cronyism. Cambodia is not an exception. Insurgency and other social security-related matters as well as the government's responses may lead to threat against academic freedom. Integrity and courage of the university councils or boards as well as administrators are important for their academic freedom. Hence, their selection and appointment process plays an important role. Yet, this process remains unsettled in the Cambodian system. Environment and mechanisms

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<sup>5</sup>This rule applies in case the MoEYS is the parent ministry.

inside the university such as academic senate, free academic debate, and research meetings seem not yet mature in Cambodia.

Judicial system and freedom of the media in the country are important to academic freedom as well. Due to some misconduct of HEIs in the past, the Royal Government of Cambodia has imposed regulation on HEIs advertising on all kinds of media. No advertisement is permitted without prior approval from the government to avoid misleading the public. This consumer protection by the government may affect freedom of HEIs and thus academic freedom to some, if not large, extent.

## **9.4 National Policies and Strategies**

Education remains in the forefront of development policies of the Royal Government of Cambodia. Promises and commitments have been made. Government strategy and policy reforms within the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2006–2010 have been instrumental for the success of the subsector. To overcome the above issues the government has set the following policies:

1. Increased access and equity of enrollment opportunity to realize the Royal Government of Cambodia's pro-poor policy
2. Quality assurance and improvement at both institutional and system levels
3. Strengthened institutional management and development

ESP 2006–2010 strategizes that, to meet the needs of the rapid higher education growth, the Department of Higher Education within the MoEYS shift its role as a control agent toward a provider of professional services in monitoring, analysis, and policy formulation. As a result, key roles of the Department of Higher Education are to:

1. Develop policy and strategy for the higher education sector
2. License HEIs for their operations
3. Assist HEIs to develop academic programs and management tools needed to help meet accreditation standards
4. Improve the quality and efficiency of higher education nationwide

The strategies and policies have given new terrain for Cambodian higher education. The shifted roles and functions of the department is one of the emergent challenges in the management sphere of the subsector. Moving away from routine works toward conceptual ones of the general directorate of higher education within the MoEYS demands better professional capability of staff members at all levels.

## **9.5 Restructuring Programs and Faculties**

The Royal Government of Cambodia has been undertaking massive reform in education to better match educational programs with labor-market demands. Several changes as a result of program restructuring have been evident. First is the



introduction of Foundation Year Study as a significant step in academic program reform of Cambodian higher education. Commencing from academic year 2005/06, all undergraduate students have to take a foundation year program. The program attempts to give students a broad-based knowledge of the four major fields of study, namely: art and humanities, mathematics and science, social science, and foreign languages.

Second is the implementation of a credit and credit transfer system in the Cambodian higher education system. The obsolete year-based system has now been replaced by an academic credit system to encourage student mobility amongst academic institutions and to help part-time students in accumulating credit units. Full implementation of the credit system is, however, not yet undertaken. This may mainly be due to both the lack of capacity in practice and comprehension of the concept. Supporting guidelines, training, and coordination need to be developed, and schools need to function in a collaborative manner for the best interest of the students.

## 9.6 Strengthening Research Capacities

Research is still in a dark stage for Cambodian higher education. The government budget allocated for research activities in public HEIs is relatively nonexistent. Some major universities such as the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the Royal University of Fine Arts, and the Royal University of Agriculture have their research activities carried out with external assistance given by foreign donors and partners. In private HEIs, on the other hand, research activities are almost completely absent. In fact, only few private HEIs have diversified their services by providing consultancy in limited fields.

In general, research capacity has been an underdeveloped area in Cambodian HEIs, both public and private. This may be linked not only to inadequacy of the budget but also other infrastructure such as copyright regulations, research facilities, laboratories of necessary size and scope, and others. The lack of research capacity may also stem from deeper cultural traditions in Cambodia. Some examples of these traditions might be the historically hierarchical society roots in which children are taught by rote and also taught not to question either parents or teachers or any other authority figures. It is not “polite” to question others and questioning is the essence of research at all levels. Furthermore, there is a lack of stimulating reading provided for children in Khmer language, and libraries are a relatively new addition to some urban and semi-urban schools.

Yet, despite the weakness of doing research at university level, the MoEYS shows some desire for moving ahead with research. It has established two research departments named the Scientific Research Department and the Pedagogical Research Department at the ministerial level. Although these two departments have very limited scope and capacity, just the existence of the two departments involved in research activities shows significant recognition of the importance of research by Cambodian policymakers. However, achievement in doing research is

still limited and needs much improvement. The same situation is found in other ministries which are responsible for tertiary education. Most of those who do any research have it done at the ministerial level and with great assistance from foreign counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

The most recent progress in research development is however seen through the execution of the newly signed sub-degree on research fund. This represents government political will in promoting research culture in Cambodia as a whole. The sub-degree attempts to promote research activities in Cambodia by providing financial honorarium to those who are classified by the government as researchers. Nevertheless, some critiques are seen within the selection of the researchers for lack of transparency and without result- or performance-based reward. By and large, members of the Royal Academy of Cambodia are generally granted title as researchers. It is questionable how other individuals who conduct research and produce research findings beneficial for the advancement of knowledge could be officially considered to be researchers like those of the Royal Academy of Cambodia who sometimes produce fewer research results, not to mention the quality of the research work itself.

## 9.7 Quality Assurance

Quality of education is emerging now as a policy concern in Cambodian education. As primary and lower secondary education are reaching remarkable achievements in terms of expanded access through assistance from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the United States Agency for International Development and other donors, revitalizing quality at all educational levels becomes a new central issue for the Royal Government of Cambodia at present. With regard to higher education, in March 2003 Royal Decree No. NS/RKT 03/03/129 visualized improvement of the quality of higher education through establishing the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia. According to the Decree, it is mandatory that all HEIs, local and foreign, operating in Cambodia obtain accreditation status from the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia in order to grant degrees. This official emergence of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia has created a new landscape for Cambodian higher education.

To assure the quality of higher education, Cambodia will practice institutional accreditation by looking at nine areas which are believed to be major quality indicators at the institutional level. These aspects are commonly known in Cambodia as minimum quality standards. They are:

1. Mission
2. Governing structure, management, and planning
3. Academic program

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<sup>6</sup>See UNESCO (2006).

4. Teaching staff
5. Students and student services
6. Learning resources
7. Physical facilities
8. Financial management and planning
9. Dissemination of information

It is worthy of note that the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, the central player in guaranteeing quality assurance, is younger than most of the Cambodian HEIs. It is generally accepted that without greater commitment from all stakeholders, it will be hard for the young Accreditation Committee of Cambodia to carry out its mandatory duties in assuring and monitoring the quality of higher education in the country. One of the major obstacles handicapping the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia from being a high professional accrediting agency is the in-house capacity to carry out professionally its duties. Until now, with the exception of the success of the implementation of the Foundation Year Program, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia has not yet executed its institutional accreditation to any single institution. Despite its efforts in struggling to overcome hardship during the early stage, key fundamental regulations for the execution of the institutional accreditation are not yet available at the time of writing. These would include qualification framework and minimum standards.

With high degree of political will of the government to revitalize quality of higher education, some key donors put their hands into assisting the young Accreditation Committee of Cambodia from the early stage of its existence. Even though all are project-based assistance, it is still vital and helpful for the operation of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia. These donors include:

- National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India
- Commission of Higher Education and Office of National Education Standard and Quality Assurance of Thailand
- Ministry of Higher Education, National Accreditation Board of Malaysia
- The American Embassy to Cambodian and Fulbright Senior Specialist Program
- Asia Pacific Quality Network
- The World Bank
- Japanese International Corporation Agency

The immediate step for the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia secretariat, which is the working body of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, is to smoothly cooperate with the Ministry of Education; Youth and Sports, especially the general department of higher education which is the policy-making body for higher education in the country. The consistency of minimum quality standard and the national policy set by the Ministry is a must. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia itself should be clearly aware of sophistication of skills needed at the labor market and the complexity of, and competition at, the labor market as bases for the establishment of the qualification framework and the minimum quality standard.

## 9.8 Conclusion

To sum up the state of higher education in Cambodia and issues facing the system one can say that until now access, equity, quality, relevance, financing, and governance and management remain the utmost unsolved problems of the system despite the government's and donors' efforts. Participation in HEIs in Cambodia is low by international standards. Enrollment is concentrated in a few academic disciplines, such as business management. Equity issue centers around the situation of the current enrollment patterns showing significant urban/rural and gender disparities. Quality issue is found in underdevelopment of quality assurance systems and the low quality of many programs that allow students to undertake multiple full-time degrees. At the national level, HEIs produce more graduates than the economy can absorb and graduate skills are often not matched to the needs of the country. The governance and management of the system remain fragmented given the ground that many ministries and agencies as well as private institutions deliver higher education services with limited coordination at the national policy level. Management and staff appointments are generally made by the government with a less transparent selection process in the public HEIs. Higher education sector faces a shortage of educational leaders, planners, and managers to fill the position of retiring senior educators.

Nevertheless, education has been a success story and a progressive sector in Cambodia. The above-mentioned issues remain challenges for the next government. It is projected that the number of high school graduates in the next 5–10 years may exceed the absorbing capacity of the current higher education system. The only option left for the next government is to examine and deal carefully between the two – postsecondary or higher education and the world of work. These two worlds are the only absorbing engines.

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