

Stakeholder Collaboration: The Key to Promoting Academic Research in Cambodia

Heng Kimkong*

The development of higher education in modern Cambodia is relatively recent. Following the independence from France in 1953, Cambodia's higher education sector experienced a brief period of development, with the establishment of nine higher education institutions (HEIs) in the 1960s (Clayton, 1998). The development was, however, disrupted by civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s (Un et al., 2017). Much of the country's education system was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) when educational infrastructure was demolished and key educational personnel were killed (Ayres, 2000). In the early 1990s, higher education development in Cambodia was largely driven by bilateral aid, and the government was the predominant provider of higher education (Un et al., 2017). It was only in the late 1990s that the country's higher education sector experienced remarkable transformation when the privatization of higher education was introduced. In 1997, there were fewer than ten public HEIs in Cambodia. The number of HEIs rose to 51 in 2005 and 110 in 2014 (Chet, 2009; MoEYS, 2019). In 2018, there were a total of 125 higher education institutions (HEIs), of which 77 (61.6%) are privately owned (MoEYS, 2019).

Despite an increase in the number of HEIs, the quality and relevance of higher education remain a key issue (MoEYS, 2019). About a decade ago, Chet (2009) wrote that the "fast growth of the number of HEIs may lead to low-quality level of education," causing skills mismatch among graduates. He noted that key issues confronting Cambodian higher education were related to "access, equity,

quality, relevance, financing, and governance and management" (p. 164). Many of these issues still exist today (see Un & Sok, 2018), limiting the prospects of higher education development in the country. According to the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2019), recent notable achievements in the higher education sector include: increased student access to higher education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects; establishment of new STEM-focused HEIs; increased higher education staff; and formulation of some higher education policies, including Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 and Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond. However, the quality of education and the efficiency of governance and management in higher education are still key challenges facing the subsector (Mak et al., 2019; MoEYS, 2019).

There are also other challenges discussed in recent literature. They include, among others, limited utilization of ICT and technology used in classrooms (Richardson et al., 2014); pervasive graduate skills mismatch (MoEYS, 2019; Peou, 2017); limited stakeholder involvement (Sam & Dahles, 2017); low academic salaries, brain drain and lack of well-defined career tracks (Kwok et al. 2010); inequality in accessing higher education (Chea, 2019); limited government budget and university funding for research (CICP, 2016; Kwok et al., 2010); policy misalignment across the three—national, institutional, and individual—levels (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018); and limited academic research involvement among lecturers (CICP, 2016; Eam, 2015).

***Heng Kimkong** is a co-founder of Cambodian Education Forum, a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Education at the University of Queensland, Australia funded by Australia Awards.

Current State of Academic Research in Cambodia

It is commonly believed that academic research in Cambodia is still underdeveloped, with empirical research showing that Cambodia lags behind many countries in the region in terms of research and publication (Barrot, 2017; Heng, 2020a; Nguyen & Pham, 2011). For example, based on the total number of publications indexed in the Scopus database in the last decade, Cambodia was ranked 8th among the ten Southeast Asian countries (Heng, 2020a). A recent study by Eam (2015), furthermore, showed that about 65% of 444 Cambodian faculty members surveyed did not involve in any research at all. Although recent developments have provided a new hope for the development of a vibrant research culture in Cambodia (Heng, 2020b), there are numerous barriers that Cambodian researchers and academics have to overcome (see Heng et al., 2020 for a review of factors influencing research engagement of academics in developing countries).

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges such as low academic salaries and limited funding for research, there are other issues that impede the development of academic research in Cambodia. Limited academic freedom is one; lack of research incentives and requirements is another (see Heng, 2020c; Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Other inhibiting factors include limited research knowledge, skills and experiences; vague research policies or absence of such policies; inadequate infrastructure and facilities supporting research; limited social appreciation of research; and teaching overloads; among other factors (see CICIP, 2016; Keuk, 2015; Kwok et al., 2010; Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019). Low salaries have forced most, if not all, university lecturers to teach or work at multiple institutions at the same time (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Some moonlight as part-time lecturers at three to four institutions within the same week. Others work full-time at one institution and teach part-time at another or two other universities. This is not uncommon as

full-time academic employment is rare in private universities in Cambodia (Un et al., 2017).

Overall, it is common knowledge that the landscape of academic research in Cambodia is far from well-defined. This is concerning as the country aspires to become a knowledge-based society and aims to improve its education system to produce human resources that can compete regionally and globally (MoEYS, 2019). The prospect of developing a strong research culture in Cambodia is, moreover, constrained by the limited state funding for research and the emphasis on teaching by all higher education institutions and most individual academics who need to teach to generate income to support themselves and their families.

Stakeholder Collaboration as the Key to Promoting Research

To promote academic research in Cambodia, all stakeholders across the three different levels—macro, meso and micro—have pivotal roles to play. They share interrelated roles and have power and agency to effect change and make a difference to a research culture in Cambodia. To achieve a common vision of fostering and promoting research, these actors must work together and actively engage in reciprocal relationships that center around research-promoting initiatives, projects and activities.

At the macro or national level are the government, the Education Ministry and relevant state institutions responsible for policy formulation. These actors must have a clear vision on how to move the country forward in terms of research. In addition to formulating and overseeing the implementation of research promoting policies, they must ensure that research funding, competitive research grants and research-based recruitment and promotion schemes are in place.

In recent years, there have been numerous efforts by the government to improve research activities as evidenced by the provision of research grants; however, more research-focused initiatives and policies are needed to foster the development of a

vibrant research culture. No doubt, it is a long way to go for research in Cambodia to flourish, but at this stage any positive developments, albeit small or short-lived, need to be acknowledged, maintained and enhanced.

At the meso or institutional level are the educational institutions, research institutes and think tanks. This is where the national research policies are enacted or implemented. Institutional research policies can also be developed and implemented at this level. Actors at this level plays highly critical roles in shaping the research landscape and ensuring that researchers or academics are actively involved in research and publication.

To nurture an institutional environment conducive for research, at least three elements must be present. First, it is research funds and incentives. The incentives can be monetary and/or non-monetary. Second, research requirements or expectations must be in place to motivate academics and researchers to conduct and publish research. Third, a community of research practice (Murray, 2012; Wenger, 1998) needs to be developed within the institution. This research community is vital for the provision of mentorship and research support, including emotional and peer support. It helps to foster an institutional research culture supported and strengthened by research-engaged individuals or groups.

At the micro or individual level are individual academics and researchers. They are the key actors who should have the agency to engage in research regardless of external or structural constraints. However, the agency of these actors is generally shaped by different forces, including their own perceptions of and attitudes towards research, institutional and governmental support, and social appreciation of research, among others.

To help promote research in Cambodia, individual academics and researchers must seek ways to exercise their agency or take advantage of the power of collective agency by working together with other academics, researchers or any individuals/entities

interested in promoting research. These actors need to have strong commitment and intrinsic motivation. They also need to have a strong desire to contribute to the academic community and society. However, it is important to note that the research performance of many actors at this level tends to hinge upon actors at the meso and macro level. Thus, both emotional and financial support are needed to encourage individual academics and researchers to work harder and be more research-engaged. In addition, the whole society needs to appreciate, value and respect the role and contribution of those operating at the micro level as well.

All in all, as the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. Likewise, it takes all concerned stakeholders across different levels—national, institutional and individual—to work together to nurture and promote a vibrant research culture in Cambodia. Putting the blame on any particular actor or stakeholder for the modest development of research is not going to bring about any positive change. Active stakeholder collaboration is the key to nurturing and promoting research.

Conclusion

The way forward for a well-developed research and publication culture in the Kingdom of Cambodia is stakeholder collaboration—active involvement among actors across the three levels: national, institutional and individual. Engagement and support from other stakeholders such as the industries, development partners and donors are also essential and should be sought (see Sam & Dahles, 2017). At present, given the status quo and the limited research capacity of Cambodian HEIs and academics, the government—with support from development partners, donors and the private sector—must take the lead by stepping up its efforts and introducing more research-promoting initiatives and policies in addition to the current ones.

It is crucial to start somewhere to build momentum. When the momentum is created, it needs to be sustained and increased. This scenario will unlikely

be feasible unless all concerned stakeholders understand and embrace the value and significance of building a healthy research and publication culture. When actors at all levels come together and work to achieve a common goal (i.e., cultivating a vibrant research culture), Cambodia will, sooner or later, see a flourishing research culture that gives hope to the country's aspiration to become a knowledge-based society and a high-income country in the next few decades.

In sum, 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.

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Building E, University of Puthisastra, #55, Street 180-184, Sangkat Boeung Raing, Khan Daun Penh



info@cd-center.org |



(+855) 10 950 456



www.cd-center.org



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