

# Promoting Research in Cambodia: The Role of Policy Intervention, Academics and Other Key Stakeholders

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In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of Cambodia's aspiration to become a knowledge-based society. This goal aligns with the country's long-term goals to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050. With less than 10 years for Cambodia to work toward achieving its upper-middle-income goal, there are uncertainties regarding how this development goal can be achieved (Heng, 2022). According to the World Bank (n.d.), for example, Cambodia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was USD 1,512.73 in 2020, down from USD 1,643.12 in 2019, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To become an upper-middle-income country, Cambodia needs to boost its GDP per capita to be between USD 4,046 and USD 12,535. However, the pandemic has led Cambodia's economic to face contraction for the first time since 1994, falling by 3.1% in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). The economic fallout has affected the prospects of sustained economic growth that Cambodia had enjoyed over the past two decades, thereby raising concerns about Cambodia's ability to achieve its upper-middle-income goal by 2030.

To ensure sustainable development and enhance the prospects of prosperity and competitiveness, Cambodia needs to pay attention to many important issues that shape its economic growth, political stability, and innovation capacity. While many issues deserve attention from the Cambodian government and concerned stakeholders, research activities

and research development need to be prioritized and given full attention. Through human capital development and research, Cambodia will be able to enhance its competitiveness in the global knowledge economy.

This article discusses the role of policy intervention, individual academics, and other key stakeholders in promoting research in Cambodia. The article aims to contribute to policy-oriented discussion regarding steps and strategies to promote academic research activities within the Cambodian higher education context and Cambodia at large.

## The Role of Policy Intervention

Policy intervention is essential for research activities and research development. Research policies provide directions and roadmaps for implementation and practice. Since the 2010s, the Cambodian government, through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, has introduced several key research-related policies such as Policy on Research Development in the Education Sector (2010), Master Plan for Research Development in the Education Sector 2011-2015 (2011), Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 (2014), and Higher Education Strategy 2021-2030 (2021). These policy documents are crucial in emphasizing the importance of research and improving the research landscape in Cambodia. However, they are by no means sufficient to make a significant difference to a research culture in the Kingdom as a host of issues remains unaddressed (see Heng et al., 2022a for a recent discussion of key challenges

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facing higher education research in Cambodia). For example, the policy on the professorial ranking has yet to be fully implemented although it has been introduced since the early 2010s (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2013). National or institutional policies that outline the requirements and/or incentives for research and publication are either absent, unclear, or newly developed. These factors, along with other barriers (see Heng et al., 2022a; Heng & Sol, 2021), have considerably impeded the development of research in Cambodia.

To promote university research, it is essential that policies on research or professional development across different levels – national, institutional, and departmental – are in alignment. Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) have shown that there is a serious misalignment when it comes to policies on professional development in Cambodian higher education. This absence of policy coordination has served as barriers to research development within Cambodian universities, which has in turn thwarted the development of academic research in Cambodia. Therefore, greater attention needs to be paid to the implementation of national research policies and the gradual introduction of reforms to institutional research policies and practices (Heng et al., 2022b).

Although several public universities such as the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Royal University of Agriculture have recently formulated their research policies and 10-year strategic plans (2021-2030) to promote faculty research (see, for example, Chet, 2019), it is only the beginning, and the success of the implementation of these policies and strategic plans remains to be seen. Sok and Bunry (2021) have noted that “Cambodia is known for developing pretty comprehensive policies, which are not implemented fully” (p. 14). This raises the question of effective policy implementation as the enactment of policies is often constrained by the lack of financial support and qualified personnel, let alone other issues such as the lack of interest and involvement from concerned stakeholders

(see Sam & Dahles, 2017; Un & Rappleye, 2018). Thus, better strategies, greater efforts, and more substantial commitment are required to ensure the effective implementation of research policies and other relevant policies in order to foster a healthy research culture in Cambodia.

### **The Role of Individual Academics**

Academics are at the centerpiece of research activities and research development. They have tripartite roles related to teaching, research, and service, and their research roles are significant for innovation, knowledge production, and socio-economic growth. In the context of knowledge-based economy, where knowledge is the engine of both productivity and competitiveness, the ability to produce, distribute, and use knowledge is essential (World Bank, 2007).

As I have written fairly extensively on how individual academics can contribute to promoting research in Cambodia (see Heng, 2019; Heng, 2020a, 2020b; Heng, 2021; Heng & Sol, 2021), I strongly believe that in the context of Cambodia, where national and institutional environments are far from conducive for research (see Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b), the roles of academics and their agency are vital. Not only can academics serve as a role model and inspiration for their peers, students, and the young generation of Cambodians, but they can also contribute to promoting research through various forms of research engagement activities. For example, as Heng (2020b) has suggested, individual academics can explain to their students the value of research and teach them how to read, use, and conduct research. They can also endeavor to be active in research and publication to promote research interest among relevant stakeholders, particularly their colleagues and students. In addition, they can establish and/or participate in a community of practice within their institution, in which research capacity building, collaboration, and mentorship are the key activities. All of these activities, however, require effective

leadership and a strong research commitment, interest, and agency.

In line with the above suggestions, Heng and Sol (2021) have emphasized the role of academic agency and commitment in promoting research in Cambodia as follows:

... the academic agency is critical in the context of scarce resources and insufficient support for research such as Cambodia. In other words, to promote research in Cambodia, it is essential that academic staff be committed to research. They need to be driven by their strong desire to contribute to knowledge and society. If they are committed and highly motivated, they are more likely to spend their time and energy conducting research and writing for publication. (p.17)

Thus, it seems that while policy intervention is essential, the crucial role of individual academics could not be overlooked. Without the commitment from the academics, it is less likely that the research activities and research performance of Cambodian universities will develop substantially and sustainably. It is the academics who are the driving force of university research activities and, therefore, research policies, strategies, or plans need to consider their needs, challenges, and realities in order to ensure effective implementation and positive outcomes (Heng et al., 2022a).

### **The Role of Other Key Stakeholders**

Other relevant stakeholders also have vital roles in promoting research in Cambodia. While the roles of policy intervention and individual academics are essential to make a difference to the research landscape and research culture in Cambodia, the roles of other relevant stakeholders such as higher education institutions (HEIs), private sector, development partners, think-tanks, non-governmental organizations, philanthropists, and the academic community are undoubtedly of critical importance.

Pou (2020) has argued that concerned stakeholders “must continuously assist Cambodian

researchers to fulfill their mission and overcome challenges such as lack of exposure to the right knowledge and methodological aspects of research” (p. 4). Similarly, Heng (2020a) has noted that educational institutions and research institutes have a pivotal role in motivating academics or researchers to be actively engaged with research. These actors need to contribute to creating a conducive environment for research by considering the crucial role of research funding and incentives, research requirements or research performance indicators, and a community of research practice.

Writing about the progress and challenges of academic research in Cambodia, Heng and Sol (2021) have argued that HEIs play an indispensable role in promoting research. They need to develop a clear institutional research policy to provide guidance on how research is incentivized and required as well as how academic staff are recruited and promoted. A clear research policy will be helpful in delineating the expectations or requirements for research and the consequences of not meeting certain research requirements. With a clear policy on academic promotion based on teaching and/or research performance, a culture of meritocracy informed by key performance indicators can be promoted. At the same time, HEIs need to create a conducive environment for research by providing academics with research time and space, research funding and support, and research capacity building in the form of workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs.

Heng and Sol (2021) have also argued that the private sector has a vital role in promoting research. The authors have suggested that private sector needs to increase its involvement to support Cambodian HEIs in their research endeavors. Given its key roles in providing training and funding opportunities, private sector can offer internships, scholarships, sponsorships, or fellowships to university students or academics to support them to conduct research. It can also support research awareness-raising activities such as science fairs

or research-focused career fairs. In addition, it can also promote research by prioritizing applications from students or applicants with research experience when it comes to recruitment and other work-based learning opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships (Heng & Sol, 2021).

It has been found that researchers from the Global South context like Cambodia face many problems that prevent them from actively engaging in research (see Heng et al., 2022a). In order to promote research in Cambodia and similar national contexts, Heng et al. (2022a) have 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). Hence, considering the overwhelming barriers to research in Cambodia, it is imperative that all concerned stakeholders should work together to create enabling conditions for research and for academics and researchers to feel the need to increase their research engagement and productivity.

### Concluding Remarks

Promoting research in a resource-deficient context like Cambodia is not easy, yet it is not an impossible task. What is needed first and foremost is a set of policy interventions to provide directions and pathways for research development. When clear and research-focused policies, including policies on research incentives and requirements, are in place, it will be less challenging to motivate individual academics and researchers to enhance their research engagement and outputs. Other key stakeholders, including higher education institutions, private sector, development partners, and research institutes also need to increase their roles in promoting research activities and pushing research forward.

When all relevant stakeholders share the same vision of promoting research and transforming Cambodia into an education hub and a knowledge-

based society, there will be a reasonable hope that a research culture in Cambodia will gradually take shape and gain strength. It is definitely a time-consuming process to build a strong research culture in a country like Cambodia that has lost much of its intelligentsia due to the genocide and civil war. Nonetheless, with strong commitment, clear vision, effective policies, and active involvement and participation from all key stakeholders, a healthy research culture in the Kingdom will be well developed and flourished.

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