

Continuing Professional Development for University Teachers in Cambodia: Impediments and Solutions

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Teaching is one of the most vital careers in the world. It enables literacy and knowledge development from a young age until a person can fully depend on themselves. Many governments have significant budgetary allocations for their education sector and teachers. This allocation encompasses the provision of basic training at the tertiary level to train pre-service teachers to be teachers and advanced training for in-service teachers to improve their teaching knowledge and skills. Advanced training is a form of continuing professional development (CPD). It seeks to ensure that teachers are adequately informed by the demands of the changing needs in modern times. However, CPD has not always been easy to implement (Saric & Steh, 2017). It is faced with numerous challenges from personal issues to policy-based challenges that often limit teachers from acquiring more training. This commentary aims to discuss various impediments to the provision of CPD for university teachers in Cambodia and provide solutions to address the issues.

Overview of CPD for University Teachers in Cambodia

CPD for teachers is necessary because it helps them improve their teaching competencies. It is quite common that teachers, including those at universities in Cambodia, view CPD as an important component for career advancement. However, the provision of CPD programs in many Cambodian

universities depends on the availability of funds from development partners and donors (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). One major professional development project was the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP), which was funded by the World Bank and run from 2010 to 2017. One component of this project offered scholarships to Cambodian university teachers to pursue their studies overseas, particularly in Australia. Another higher education project, called the Higher Education Improvement Project, is being implemented to improve teaching and research in higher education, particularly in the field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and agriculture (Heng & Sol, 2021, 2022).

Many Cambodian universities do not have specific requirements for their teachers to attend CPD. They also tend to not have effective mechanisms to incentivize those who have attended CPD programs. In addition, they do not usually have sufficient budgets or resources to provide regular CPD opportunities for their teaching staff although they are required to encourage CPD among teachers in order to achieve excellence in teaching, research, and management (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS], 2014). In fact, there are many obstacles to the successful provision of CPD in Cambodian higher education. These obstacles can be related to personal factors, limited career

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opportunities, an unfavorable work environment, a weak education system, and a poor CPD design.

Personal Factors as an Obstacle

Previous research has sought to understand Cambodian university teachers' views about the various obstacles to CPD. Key barriers to CPD that were identified included conflict with work and conflict with family commitments, inadequate incentives for CPD participation, additional expenses for participating in CDP, and a lack of university support (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018; Tao et al., 2018). Conflict with work schedules is a major barrier to CPD since teachers must balance their teaching responsibilities and participating in CPD activities.

In Cambodia, many university teachers teach at multiple educational institutions to earn additional income to supplement their low academic salary (Chhaing, 2022; Heng et al., 2022a, 2022b). Due to this, many university teachers hardly have time for other activities, including research and CPD. They simply focus on teaching as much as possible to earn supplementary income, commonly paid by the number of hours that they have taught (Heng et al., 2022a). Therefore, they do not have the time and motive for partaking in CPD activities to improve their teaching and research capacity.

Lack of Career Opportunities as an Obstacle

There are also obstacles related to the lack of career opportunities after attending CPD. Many teachers expect that there will be opportunities, such as career promotion or wage increment, after attending CPD. However, stagnation in the same position and wage has discouraged many teachers from participating in CPD. In addition, many teachers have experienced the challenges of having little support from their universities (Tao et al., 2018). Many Cambodian teachers claimed that CPD was helpful for them to deliver better lessons in the classroom. However, participating in CPD does not guarantee job promotion or pay raises. This has influenced the laxity of some teachers to

be content with their existing level of knowledge and skills (Phin, 2014).

An Unfavorable Work Environment as an Obstacle

Over the years, difficult working conditions have been a significant barrier to CPD for university teachers. The teaching environment is faced with a lack of incentives, support, and teaching and learning materials, as well as respect from university leaders and community members (Tao et al., 2018). Cambodian teachers reported a challenging and unrewarding work environment as an obstacle to their CPD (Sot et al., 2022). Many of them were expected to survive in such an environment and be able to produce teaching excellence. These demotivating aspects have negatively affected teachers' identity, efficacy, and professionalism (Jones & Nagel, 2022). Some teachers found it difficult to attend more training while the work environment remained the same. They also felt demotivated when there were no visible or measurable outcomes for their hard work. In fact, an unfavorable work environment undermined a notion that teaching is a desirable and noble profession. As a result, many university teachers in Cambodia left their careers to seek a better and more supportive work environment outside of the university setting (Chhaing, 2022).

A Weak Education System as an Obstacle

Various systematic challenges have also been identified as significant impediments to teachers' CPD. According to the International Institute for Educational Planning (2011), Cambodia's education system is fragile, characterized by poor leadership, inadequate learning facilities, limited administrative capacity, and inadequate budgets. It was also found that policy misalignment was prevalent in the Cambodian higher education context, making it difficult for university teachers to improve their professional development (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). The Cambodian higher education system also lacks mechanisms and

incentives to encourage and help teachers improve their professional practice (MoEYS, 2018).

Poor CPD Design as an Obstacle

Poor CPD design can also become an impediment to CPD for university teachers. Some CPD programs do not take into account what the teachers need, whether they are available and able to attend. They sometimes happen without clear information or guidelines. Also, they are often not offered on a regular basis or well planned. Instead, they tend to be offered based on what is available or when the management team is free to attend them. This is usually the result of difficult working conditions, systematic challenges, and conflicting interests in CPD (Jayasuriya & Majid, 2022). Poorly designed CPD reflects budget constraints, lack of qualified facilitators, volatility, and logistical challenges. It can also indicate a misunderstanding between policymakers and donors about who teachers are, what they do, and how they should learn (Petraki & Khat, 2022). Poorly designed CPD tends to occur on a short-term basis and reveals a disconnection in policies related to teacher recruitment, assessment, retention, support, and compensation (King, 2018).

Possible Solutions

To address the above-mentioned challenges, a lot needs to be done. First, as universities have a pivotal role to play, they should establish clear plans for CPD for university teachers, for example, by having quarterly workshops for CPD. They should also ensure the availability of CPD resources, particularly online CPD resources, to allow teachers to engage in CPD on their own time and at their own pace. In addition, it is important for universities to ensure that university teachers are provided with flexibility to attend CPD. To this end, CPD activities should be provided at the weekend or during term/semester breaks so that many teachers can participate in them.

Second, universities should address the lack of opportunities for teachers after their participation in

CPD by ensuring that those who are committed to professional development are given opportunities to move up in their career ladder or teaching rates/wages. When teachers can see the benefits resulting from their participation in CPD, they will become more interested in it, which in turn increases their interest in and commitment to CPD.

Third, it is important to ensure that the CPD planning process involves all stakeholders, including teachers, universities, and education officials. Collaboration between concerned stakeholders will ensure that university teachers are well informed about CPD training sessions and such CPD opportunities are in line with their capacity development needs.

Fourth, it is imperative to provide mentorship opportunities by pairing experienced teachers with newer ones so that both parties can have opportunities for mentoring and learning from one another. Mentoring programs are essential to support less experienced teachers or researchers to develop their knowledge and skills.

Last but not least, it is important to encourage research and publication activities among university teachers. When university teachers engage in research and try to publish their work, they will stay current in their field and can provide valuable contributions to the academic community. After all, as Heng (2020) argued, university teachers “have a crucial role to play to contribute to the development of research and the cultivation of a research culture in Cambodia” (para. 7). Thus, providing CPD for university teachers, including helping them build their research capacity, is essential to promote teaching quality and research activities in Cambodian higher education.

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


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