

Special Essay

## Higher Education and Its Research in Cambodia: For What and for Whom?

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### <Abstract>

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Cambodian higher education and its research<sup>1)</sup> were developed not only recently, but also unevenly. The first modern university was established only in 1960, and higher education and its research were expanded briefly focusing on Cambodianization within the larger nation-building project after the independent in 1953. This process was interrupted by the first civil war (1970-1975), a war that spilled over from Vietnam War and was completely shut down by the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). Higher education remained underdeveloped during the second civil war (1979-1991). Thus, only fairly recently has higher education and its research become an important pillar of Cambodia's development strategy, a connection forged under the influence of the logical correlation between innovative knowledge of higher education and its research and the construction of a knowledge-based economy and society. This paper will explore the development of higher education and its research in Cambodia after the end of the second civil war, focusing on how that affects the indicator of innovative knowledge and development in term of for what and for whom.

This paper will be divided into six sections. 1) briefly presenting the historical background of Cambodia, 2) outlining the current situation of Cambodian higher education and its research, 3) exploring the

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relationship between Cambodian higher education, including its research, and its development by trying to answer: what and who is Cambodian higher education and its research for?, 4) attempting to answer how did Cambodian higher education and its research arrive at their current status, 5) examining what is the future direction of Cambodian higher education and its research might be, and finally, 6) providing personal concluding remarks that suggests an alternative future direction of Cambodian higher education and its research.

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## 1. Historical Background

Cambodia experienced the golden age during the Angkor Empire of which the Angkor Wat is a magnificent, albeit mute testimony. Nearby Angkor Wat are the Ta Prohm (1186) and Preah Khan (1191) temples which served as the centers of higher learning (Eam *et al.* 2022). However, as Altbach (2004) argues, in Asia, these centers were abandoned or destroyed and replaced with modern higher learning institutions associated with the name University introduced by colonial project. In Cambodia, the case is quite different from other Asian countries, France did very little in term of promoting higher education and research in Cambodia, though some sorts of higher learning institutions were introduced by French colonial authority (1863-1953) under the “civilizing mission”. Actually, the first Cambodian modern university, Royal Khmer University (now Royal University of Phnom Penh) was established in the 1960s, modeled after the French and was tasked to promote the Cambodianization project for nation-building, 7 years after gaining independence from France. From that point forward, higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs) were expanded across the countries.

Unfortunately, this project had a short life as Cambodia underwent a series of dramatic and painful tragedies since the late 1960s. First, this development of higher education and its research was interrupted by the first civil war (late 1960s-75); a war that was a spill-over from the American-led Vietnam war. The more recent, and admittedly the most detrimental, was instigated by Pol Pot’s revolution in April 1975, which came to be

known as the Khmer Rouge regime. During this autocratic rule, Cambodia suffered extreme social and political violence. All existing political and social institutions, including education, were arbitrarily dismantled and social services were dissolved. The Khmer Rouge regime was a massive experiment in social engineering where the urban population was driven into the countryside and virtually the entire population was forced into intensive agricultural activities with a heavy workload, little food, and almost no medical care. By the time the regime collapsed after Vietnamese military intervention in early 1979, approximately 1.7 million Cambodians had died of starvation, overwork, execution, and disease. It is important to note that the primary target for the Khmer Rouge were the educated class; the more educated, the more threatening. Research suggests that 75% of teachers, 96% of university students and 67% of all primary and secondary pupils were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime (Ayres 2000). Throughout the 1980s, Cambodia continued to suffer from the second civil war,<sup>2)</sup> with that war actually continuing until 1998, the year that Cambodia achieved complete peace. Consequences of decades of civil wars and genocide resulted in devastated economy and social services, including education.

With the change in the world political order, due to the fall of the former USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and the driving force of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, the superpower patrons of the Khmer factions and Khmer fractions themselves agreed to talk on peace. As a result, the Paris Peace Agreement was signed on 23 October 1991 by the four factions, ending the civil war and bringing peace to Cambodia. It also allowed the United Nations to play a decisive role, most notable on political affairs culminating in Cambodian first democratic general election in 1993. However, United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC 1991-93) did virtually nothing to support higher education and its research, despite its large operational fund during that time, amounting to over USD 2 billion.

Since then, Cambodia has moved from civil war and insecurity to peace and political stability, from socialist and communist ideology and one political party to liberal democracy and multi political party, from planned

economy to market economy and finally from isolation to international and regional integration. These moves were hastened with foreign assistance and international support, providing new opportunities for Cambodia to rebuild the country, including the education system. It is within this context that this paper attempts to look closely into the development of Cambodian higher education and its research, focusing on the central question of: for what and for whom do they serve?

## **2. Current Landscape of Cambodian Higher Education and Its Research**

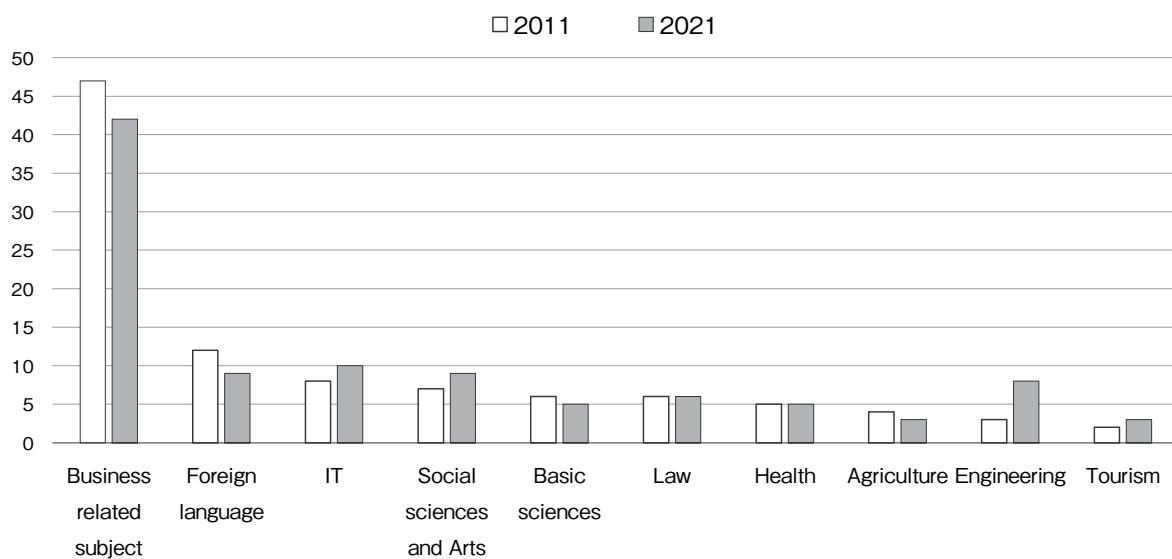
Between 1979 and 1991, higher education was supported by the socialist bloc states. The ultimate operational goal was to supply limited graduates to the required public sector planned professionals and planned economy to rebuild the nation and public services after the genocide. Such ultimate operational goal was still in place during the operation of UNTAC between 1991-1993. Most of the HEIs at that time worked closely with donors and foreign universities partners, focusing mostly in term of capacity building programs, especially in foreign languages. Even after the 1993 general elections which led to the newly established coalition government (led by two major parties: Cambodia People Party (CPP) and Royalist party (FUNCINPEC)), higher education and its research were not a priority of education reform agenda at the national policy level. But a series of national workshops were organized to discuss how to reform higher education and its research. Also, several studies were commissioned by donors to study higher education and its research situation and way forwards.

In 1997, the national higher education taskforce was formed with the support from the multiple donors and produced the first comprehensive higher education reform framework for the first time under the title “Cambodia’s National Action Plan for Higher Education” (Sloper and Mook 1999). The event of July 05, 1997, an unfortunate brief military fighting in the heart of Cambodian capital city, Phnom Penh, between the two political parties of the coalition government (CPP and FUNCINPEC) had delayed any serious intent to systematic reform (Peou 2000, Roberts 2001). Yet, a notable

development was in 1997, when privatization of the higher education reform agenda in “Cambodia’s National Action Plan for Higher Education” gathered momentum. This new initiative, influenced by the intensification of globalization and the spread of neoliberalism, allowed private sector to run HEIs and public HEIs to offer fee-paying programs for those students who could afford to pay.

Since that moment, Cambodian higher education experienced radical transformation. It has moved from “limited and elite access” to “mass” higher education, in terms of number of HEIs and student enrollments. The number of HEIs skyrocketed from 8 in 1997 to 130 by 2022. During the same period, the number of public HEIs soared from 8 to 48 while the number of private HEIs from 0 to 72. There was a sign of deconcentrating away from the country’s capital as HEIs exist almost in all provinces and also the present of international HEIs and satellite campus from overseas. The gross enrollment rate increased from 1% in the early 1990s to 15% in 2021. In absolute terms, between 1993 and 1997, the number of students in these 8 public HEIs were roughly about 10,000. The number has soared quickly, especially since 2005 where the number of students tripled. Then the number is mushroomed reaching around 200,000 students in 2021. Out of these, 86% enrolls in bachelor program, the rest is divided into associate degree program and graduate programs (MoEYS 2022). It is important to note that the majority of these students enrolled in public HEIs.

In term of enrollment by field of study, there is no significant pattern change according the available data. In bachelor program, most of the student enroll in business related subjects, followed by computer science, (IT) and foreign languages. A notable change is the increase of enrollment in engineering program recently (see Figure 1). This pattern is also observed at the graduate level. Among students pursuing master and doctorate degree, 73% and 88% majored in Social Sciences <sup>3)</sup>, 10% and 5% majored in Human Studies, 10% and 1% majored in Natural Science, 4% and 1% majored Agricultural Science, 2% and 5% majored in Engineering and Technology respectively. While there is 1% of student pursuing master’s degree majored in Medical and Health Sciences, there was no doctoral enrollments in this field of study (MoEYS 2022).

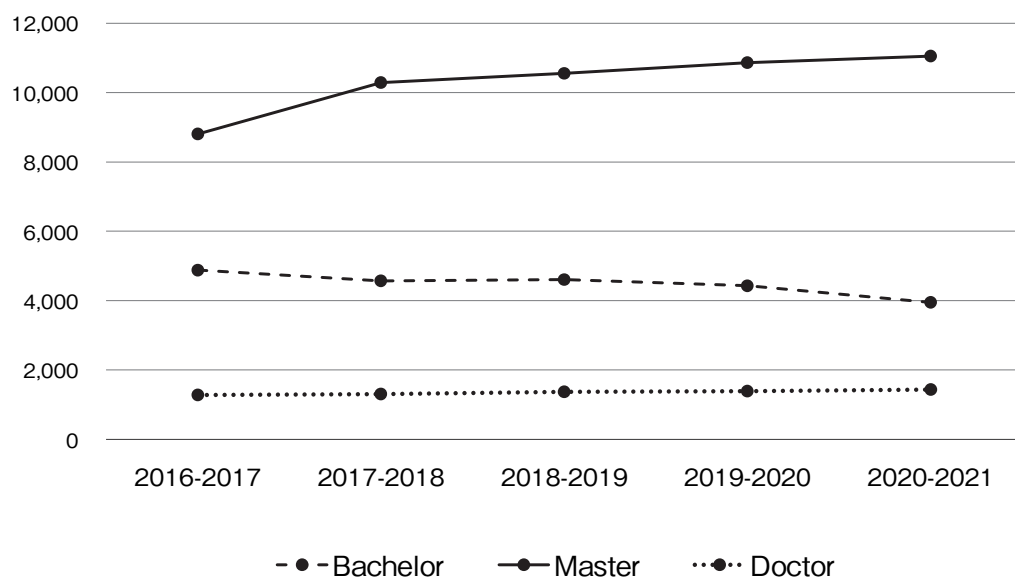


Source: MoEYS 2022

Figure 1 Student Enrollment by Field of Study (Bachelor Program)

In term of number of staff, by 2021, the total number of educational staffs are 16,438. However, this number needs to be interpreted carefully as this number include both academic, administrative and management staffs. Further, though the number of educational staff increases annually (see Figure 2), the increase does not response proportionally to the soaring number of students and their qualification remains a critical concern as less than 9% are holding a doctorate degree and a significant proportion, around 24% are still holding bachelor degrees (MoEYS 2022). This raises a concern over the quality of higher education as well as its relevancy of the educational program to the need of the society, the point that this paper will look into closely in the following section.

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Source: MoEYS 2022

Figure 2 Number of Staffs at HEIs between 2016-2021

At the system level, higher education in Cambodia is facing various critical issues both in term of governance and finance. In a nutshell, there is no overarching legal framework to guide its development. The system is very fragmented as 130 HEIs are under the supervision of 16 ministries/government agencies and there is a lack of cooperation among them. At each ministry/government agency, the visible role is to regulate HEIs rather than steering the helping to develop due to the its immature supervising capacity and lack of a clear supporting mechanism as well as the issue of finance. This is also applicable to the case of quality assurance agency called Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) established in 2003 placed under the Council of Ministers that was seen as ineffective, so it was subsequently moved in 2013 to be under MoEYS where its effectiveness remained to be seen.

At the institutional level, public HEIs are governed by a small governing board in which all members are appointed by government except one member who represent HEIs staff and for private HEIs, the board is generally dominated by the owner or main shareholders. Most of the board members lack of diversified expertise in academic affairs. At the leadership and management level of HEIs, usually there is a lack of career path and

preparation to these positions and some were appointed by circumstances. In term of accountability and transparency, there is an ongoing reform, especially for public HEIs towards more autonomy under the status of Public Administrative Institute (PAIs) while government still plays a lazier-fair approach towards private HEIs. However, this autonomy is not operating in the vacuum: public HEIs are under the supervision of the two parental ministries. In matters of finance, they will be under the Ministry of Economy and Finance, while in academic matters, they are under MoEYS. <sup>4)</sup>

In term of physical infrastructure, campus and building in general are small, especially in Phnom Penh and facilities including classroom, library and laboratory and supporting services for students and faculty remain underdeveloped and very limited as they have not been effectively developed in response to the growing number of students. Though HEIs are actively developing their strategic plan to upgrade and improve these issues, their strategic plan does not response to the financial health of the institution, and especially financial plan and management are still trapped within an annual operational plan where multi-years plan and block grants that need to support the strategic plan are virtually absent. Internal quality assurance not only suffers from this unhealthy financial arrangement, but also from limited and inexperienced staffs.

Research, especially academic research, is not at the core of university daily performance, especially in the case of private HEIs. Since 2009, there have been a few studies attempt to map the research capacities of Cambodian university. It should be noticed that the root of research culture and practices at universities is academic in nature. But Cambodian universities, as noted by Eam (2018), seem to engage in research in an opposite direction – starting from commissioned and mostly applied kinds of research, or at best in collaboration with foreign researchers before having its strong academic research culture in place. This is also reflected in the observation made by Rappleye and Un (2018) in regard to research proposal done by HEIs under a World Bank led project:



The proposals were not research, but more ‘classic’ development-style implementation projects. It seemed the HEIs had misunderstood the purpose of the programme. Initially, it was posited that perhaps as a result of so many years being told what to do by foreign development agencies, researchers were afraid to ‘think for themselves’. Upon follow-up consultations within universities, however, the problem was recognised as far more severe: few HEIs had any idea what research meant... The Ministry later informally estimated that some 50% of the proposals for the DIGs had been written by foreigners working within or somehow connected to Cambodian universities (in at least three cases the grant proposal was sent out of the country, written entirely by a foreign friend/associate, then sent back and submitted to the Ministry) (Rappleye and Un 2018: 11).

Consequently, research performance in Cambodia remains low and HEIs research output still lacks behind non-HEIs such as think tank and government’s affiliated research institutes. It is important to note that in Cambodia non-HEIs are still the leading research institutes, but unfortunately most of them are carried out by foreign researchers and the issues of spill-over effect need to be further investigated. In this sense, research performance at HEIs needs to catch up with research performance at non-HEIs, especially those affiliated with government institutions. For example, in 2015, HEIs registers only 178 researchers compared to 233 researchers based at government institutions (Eam *et al.* 2022: 45). Further, Cambodian researchers at HEIs need to catch up in term of research output with their foreign researcher counterpart that based at non-HEIs. However, in the last few years, the situation has been improved as reflected in the growing number of academic research publication in peer review publishers and there is a positive sign in which four leading public HEIs remain actively producing research output, and one emerging private HEIs. These outputs are mostly produced by Cambodian researchers (see Table 1). Still, scientific and technical journal articles <sup>5)</sup> remain small, increasing from 12 in 2000 to only 148 in 2018 <sup>6)</sup> and are still dominated by foreign researchers.

Table 1 Research Output by to 13 HEIs in Cambodia in 2019 and 2022

Institution & Researcher	Year			
	2019		2022	
	# of document	# of author	# of document	# of author
Institut Pasteur du Cambodge (Non-HEIs) (Mostly foreigner)	625	812	238	274
Ministry of Health Cambodia (Non-HEIs) (Mostly foreigner)	349	414	163	174
<i>Royal University of Phnom Penh</i> (Majority Cambodian)	<i>219</i>	<i>342</i>	<i>112</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>University Of Puthisastra</i> (Majority Cambodian)	-	<i>143</i>	-	<i>28</i>
KHANA (Non-HEIs) (Majority Cambodian)	-	100	-	30
Wildlife Conservation Society (Non-HEIs) (Mostly foreigner)	-	41	-	16
<i>Institute of Technology of Cambodia</i> (Half-half)	<i>134</i>	-	<i>73</i>	-
National Institute of Public Health (Virtually Cambodian)	-	32	-	24
<i>Royal University of Agriculture</i> (Virtually Cambodian)	<i>94</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>University of Health Sciences</i> (Mostly foreigner)	<i>37</i>	-	<i>13</i>	-
Cambodia Development Resource Institute (Non-HEIs) (Majority Cambodian)	36	-	25	-
Hopital Calmette (Non-HEIs) (Majority Cambodian)	34	54	39	60
Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Non-HEIs) (Mostly foreigner)	32	-	23	-
National Institute of Education (Virtually foreigner)	31	31	1	1
Centre for Livestock and Agriculture Development Cambodia (Non-HEIs) (Mostly foreigner)	-	20	-	3
National Institute of Statistics (Non-HEIs) (Majority foreigner)	-	16	-	13
Cambodian Chemical Society (Virtually Cambodian)	-	5	-	4
International University (Majority foreigner)	15	-	14	-
Prekleap National College of Agriculture (Half-half)	6	-	3	-
University of Battambang (UBB) (Virtually Cambodia)	2	-	3	-

Source: Author's own investigation into who are the authors of the documents from Scopus data

The systematic challenges faced by researchers and HEIs to promote research remain substantially unchanged until recently. The following points is observed by Eam (2018) and Thun (2021), like other Cambodian social phenomenon, its research entities exist in some forms on the surface, but without a resilient and stable foundation. This is due to several larger issues:

- 1) issue of academic and research culture in which Cambodian HEIs is a teaching-oriented, not a research-oriented institutions. Consequently, there is a lack of recognition and promotion for researchers.
- 2) issue of research competencies which can be manifested in the lack of faculty member holding doctoral degree, and especially lack of qualified and committed researchers holding doctoral degree at HIEs.
- 3) issue of public funding where virtually research grant is absence. This issue is also manifested in many forms such as lack of incentives for researchers, lack of necessary supports for researchers at the institutional level such as providing materials for experimentation, laboratories, data analysis software, subscription to journal outlets, travel costs for researchers.

The lack of public funding not only affects the research performance at HEIs, but also leads to a high turnover of research staff and significant difficulties in sustaining the long-term commitment of young and talented researchers. In their 2016 study, Pou *et al.* (2016) had also noted that many of the capacity building program at HEIs had led to loss of staff rather than the expected enhancements of performance. In the context of low salaries and limited funding for faculty members and researchers, there was a brain drain of qualified Cambodian researchers out of HEIs towards more profitable foreign organizations or organization funded by external fund or private companies, though they expressed that they become tired of running after job but this is what they have to do as a way of “trying to secure their livelihoods” (Bernath 2021: 11).

Further, the remaining research at HIEs generally are not strategic and well-coordinated. The lack of core funding and long-term funding has several problematic implications. Researchers are “always running after money” or “go where the money is”, which limits their capabilities to focus

on setting their own, long-term research strategy and agenda. His interview with the director of a research institute reveals that this situation: “...does not leave room for research agendas to emerge, for us to reflect upon what we, as Cambodian researchers, think the research agenda should be for Cambodia (Bernath 2021: 11)”.

What is interesting to note about Cambodian research capacities, as observed by Eam (2018), is a clear tendency that most research works are in the form of donors-funded, commissioned or consultancy projects or policy-oriented conducted by government agencies or “local think tank”. Consequently, he argues advanced mechanisms that transform those outputs into economic, social and cultural benefits obviously do not exist. On the one hand, these research outputs are generally not academically peer reviewed and so may not reach the quality expected by international academic community, raising the question of validity of research. On the other hand, these research outputs are not neutral: they follow the agenda of the funders. The research priorities should be determined by the capable local researchers who have the contextual knowledge that allow them to have a clear insights and visions for their areas of expertise, but this is not the case of Cambodia. Virtually, all funding for research at HEIs coming from outside and most often having research question and design at the partner research institutes or foreign consultants and Cambodian researcher’s role is nominal collaborator at best, but most frequently just assists in data collection and translation of the research tools, raising the question of soundness of research. The soundness of the research is also affected by the research design influenced by political climate as well as the mission of each research institutes affiliated with government agencies. The issue of politics is actually the core issue – perhaps not the only one, but the most important as noted by Netra (2014).

In Cambodia, while “lack of resources”, “lack of institutional support” and “lack of infrastructure” may be seen as technical and institutional issues, access to resources, facilities, infrastructure, and institutional arrangements conducive to research career and capacity development are all the result of political decisions about who gets what, when and how (Netra 2014: 4).

### **3. Cambodia Higher Education and Its Research: For What and for Whom?**

The role of higher education and its research in both personal, social and national development has been well documented. For development practitioners, higher education and its research improvement has become one prescription for developing countries who would like to improve themselves or catch up with other developed countries. The current common vision of catching up in term of development is measured by the economic prosperity, usually under the narrow indicators such as GDP growth, GDP per capita growth, income status and poverty reduction. Looking closely into these indicators, since 1990s, Cambodia has been performing quite impressively. On average, its GDP growth registers at around 7%, except during the global pandemic of Covid 19. In term of GDP per capita, the growth is from US\$ 254 in 1993 to US\$ 1,643 in 2019.<sup>7)</sup> What is the most celebrate moment for economist is the year 2015 where Cambodia graduated from low-income country status to lower middle-income status. It seeks to become upper middle-income country by 2030 and high-income country by 2050. This aspiration is actually going along well, according to the assessment made by Asian Development Bank who argues that though Cambodia is poor but on its way to become one of the new tiger economies of Asia.<sup>8)</sup>

In term of social aspects, physical infrastructures are used to indicate the level of development. The improvement in these areas is even more impressive since 1990s, though there is still a need to make them better. For those who lived in Cambodia in 1980s and are still alive today the changes are impressive and, indeed, we should celebrate such improvement. Improvement in physical infrastructures would comprise a long list, but we will highlight a few key items in the following Table (see Table 2).

Table 2 Infrastructure Development Indicator

No.	Infrastructure improvement
1	From a rural and agro-country to a rapid urbanized, industrial and services
2	From earthen road to paved road and concrete roads
3	From poor paved road to good paved roads
4	Highway & national road is extended massively across the country
5	From no bridge across majority rivers to many bridges across the major
6	From no flyover to flyovers
7	From no skyscraper to skyscrapers
8	From quiet streets to heavy traffic full of cars and motor cycles
9	From no ITC to better ITC infrastructure
10	From less safe/improved water sources to safe/improved water sources
11	From no/unreliable electricity to a quite stable electricity
12	From no cell phones and TVs to more cell phones and TVs in one's hand and house
13	From dilapidated roof materials to hard permanent roof materials
14	From traditional & street food to modern & Western life style

Source: Author

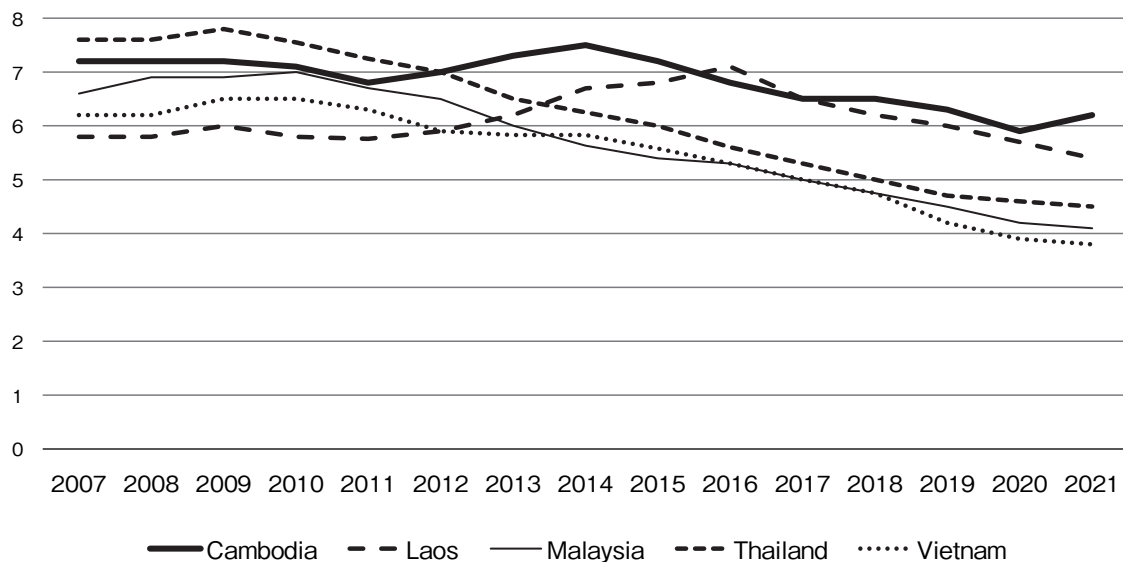
On an individual level, obtaining higher education degree is viewed as the key towards success, especially for escaping from poverty and social mobility. In fact, there seems to be a correlation between growth enrollment in tertiary education and GDP per capita growth. Also, the poverty rate declined from over 50% in the early 1990s to around 17.7% in 2019<sup>9)</sup> and this happened in the geographical areas, mostly urban, where access to higher education is increasing substantially (see Table 3). It is important to note that 90% of the remaining poor are living in rural areas.

Table 3 Persons Aged 25 Years and over by Educational Attainment and Geographical Domain

Percent	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Cambodia	1.8	2.2	2	2.2	2.6	2.9	3.5
Phnom Penh	11.8	15	12.7	14.1	15	11.4	14.8
Other urban	2.4	2	2.8	2.8	3.9	7	6.2
Other rural	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.8	1

Source: <https://nis.gov.kh/index.php/en/2-uncategorised/11-cambodia-socio-economic-survey-tables>

However, there is a problem. While poverty is declining, inequality is widening reaching the value of 30.8 in 2012.<sup>10)</sup> Using the uneven economic development indicator,<sup>11)</sup> Cambodia performance is very uneven comparing to other ASEAN countries (see Figure 3).



Source: <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/compare-countries/>

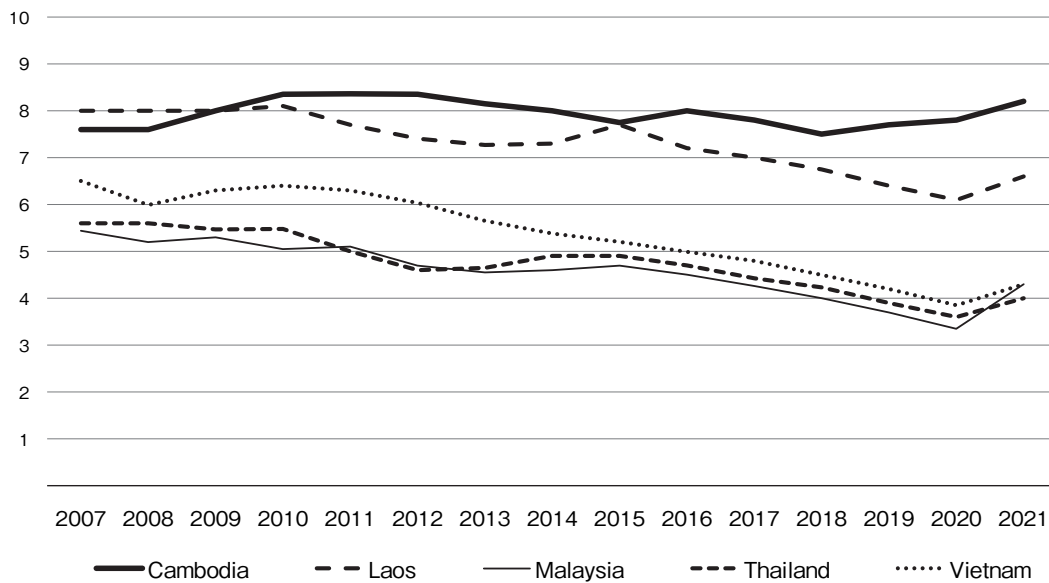
Figure 3 Uneven Economic Development in Selected ASEAN Countries, 0 (high) - 10 (low)

Anecdotal evidence and media also indicate that the gap between the poor and the rich is continuing to widen both between urban and rural, and within rural and urban communities themselves:

Cambodia is urbanising fast... but the gulf between rich and poor is widening. Not everyone can share these opportunities. “The urban poor are the most pressured by the rapid real estate development.”. Although the city appears modernised, “you can see inequality appearing everywhere in Phnom Penh now.” More than 25,000 families live in 277 impoverished settlements around Phnom Penh: most own no land and could be forced out by development (Wengkiat 2019).

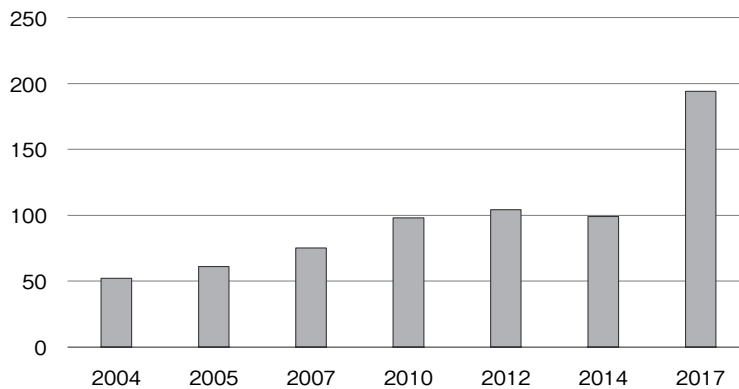
Further, Cambodian rapid growth still continues to occur within the context of the institutional constraints measured in term of state capacity to provide public services <sup>12)</sup> (see Figure 4). Furthermore, other indicators paint a different story. For example, the number of prisoners continues

increasing (see Figure 5). There is also a long list of missing other social and moral aspects such as incidence of violence, food poisoning, safety and security, respect for human dignity and lack of cultural conservation program both tangible and intangible repeatedly reported in media. There is also social fragmentation measured in term of factionalized elites (see Figure 6) that still experienced power struggles, political competition and political transitions. These may, in the long run, threaten peace and political stability as well as weakening people’s potentiality which is the foundation of national development.



Source: <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/compare-countries/>

Figure 4 Cambodia: Public services index, 0 (high) - 10 (low)

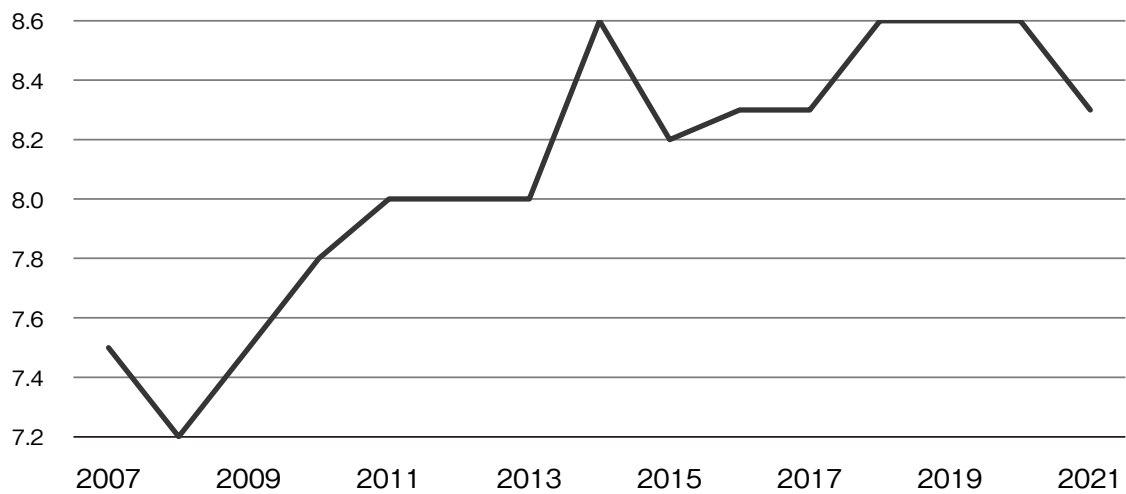


Source: <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Cambodia/prisoners/>

Figure 5 Cambodia: Number of prisoners per 100,000 people, 2004-2017



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Source: [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Cambodia/factionalized\\_elites\\_index/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Cambodia/factionalized_elites_index/)

Figure 6 Cambodia: Factionalized elites index, 0 (low) - 10 (high)

All of these problems point to the fact that within the dominant discourse of higher education and its research for economic growth and for social mobility, there is no attention paid to the question of who benefit from economic growth and what is the meaning of social mobility in Cambodian context. Research conducted by Sen (2020) though with limited number of participants can be generalized across Cambodia. This research finding plus anecdotal evidence reveal that no matter what background they are “the financial security of their own family and their personal wellbeing, *material comfort lifestyle and the enrichment themselves* <sup>13)</sup> was where the purpose of their social mobility journey ended (sen 2020: 269)”. Majority of the highly educated person hardly think about and engage in activities to contribute to the broader collective good of the community and the society at large. A good example of this is seen in the case of medical care and treatment. For Cambodians who can afford high class medical care and treatment, they choose to fly to Europe, US or Singapore. Middle-income family will fly or take a bus to either Thailand or Vietnam. For those who cannot afford anything means they have no choice, but be treated locally, most often with the unsatisfactory services.<sup>14)</sup>

## 4. How and Why Did We Arrive Here?

### 4.1 Higher Education and Its Research Policy: Public Expenditure

The discussion on who and what higher education is for invites us to go back to the old long debate about public good and private good of higher education. Ahren and Vincent (2013), who have both resided in Cambodia for the long-term, note that Cambodia's response to the public-private good question seems to fall in the private good arena. In other words, there is a view held by the government that higher education is a private good, and thus not primarily the responsibility of government. This seems to be the unstated but real policy. This is reflected in the absence or no specific higher education policy formulated by MoEYS before 2006, leading Luise Ahren claims that higher education in Cambodia had a life of its own. Also, Neth Barom, the former vice-rector of Royal University of Phnom Penh, argues that higher education went through a silent revolution, i.e., it has changed but not as the result of explicit policy (Un and Sok, 2022). Upon closer inspection, however, there were two factors driving this "silent revolution" the tension between on the one hand the influence of neoliberal agenda (privatization) and, on the other hand, capacity building programs supported by various bilateral donors and academia (though in small scale) to particular faculty members and institutions.

Since 2006, higher education has been asked to reform in response to reality of intensified neoliberalism through globalization/regionalization, especially to improve country's competitiveness both in term of products and productivity and internet of things since Cambodia became the member of the Association of South East Asian Nations and World Trade Organization. That is, higher education is seen as the most important response to immediate and long term need for economic growth and development, focusing on the employability and growing labour market demand. All of these are addressed through the nearly 20 years of the continuous three policy objectives in the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2006-10, an update ESP 2009-13 and ESP 2014-18. The three policy objectives in these documents are 1) expanding access and improve equitable access through supply-side expansion and target disadvantaged

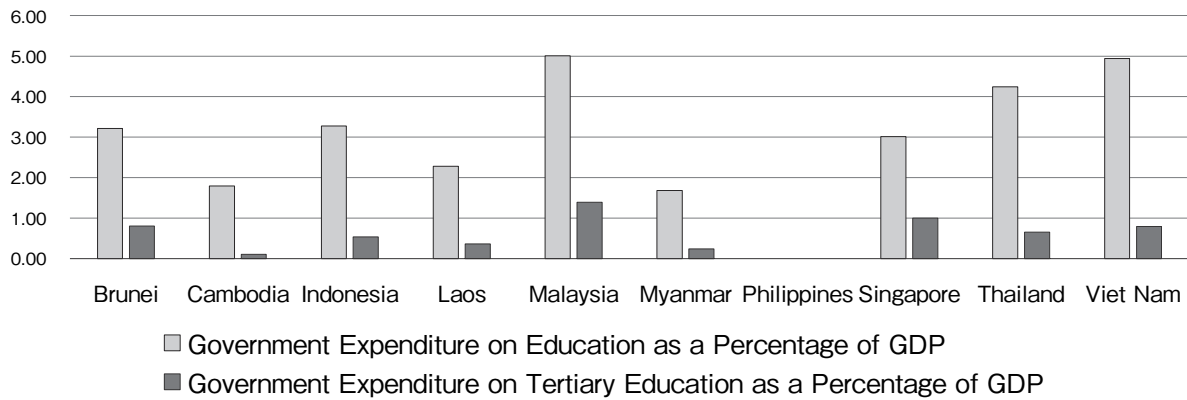
group, 2) addressing the issues of quality and relevance of the higher educational program with the focusing regional/international mobility and private sector, 3) improving governance and finance in an attempt to make the system more effectiveness and efficiency, especially in terms of more and more privatization, the focus has become more towards corporate style of governance of the university, creating the so-called entrepreneurial university.

Since 2010, MoEYS has been attempting to promote research which can be seen in the introduction of policy on Research Development in Education Sector (2010) and Action Plan for Research Development in Education Sector in 2011-2015 and the establishment of Education Research Council in 2014 based at MoEYS.

The three higher education objectives and research promotion schemes continue until today under the current ESP 2019-2023, but were framed along the Sustainable Development Goals framework; 1). ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and 2) ensure effective leadership and management of education staff at all level through developing regulation on full-time academic staffs, inter-ministerial regulation on the establishment of research fund and its implementing guideline and inter-ministerial regulation on human resource development plan and on financial planning and management. However, the effectiveness and efficiency of these policies has upon higher education and its research is rather limited due to two reasons; 1) MoEYS has limited capacity to implement the policy <sup>15)</sup> and 2) the most critical issue is limited public budget to support the policy implementation.<sup>16)</sup>

In term of government expenditure on education and expenditure on research & development measured in term of percentage of GDP, though there is slightly improve from 0.5 and 1.7 in 2002 to 0.12 and 1.9 in 2015 respectively, this spending is much lower comparing to other ASEAN countries (see Figure 7). Further, out of the government expenditure on education, the allocation to higher education is very low, never reaching above 7% between 2008 to 2012 (Sok *et al.* 2019). Comparing to other neighboring countries, Cambodia spends much lesser per tertiary student measured in term of percentage of GDP per capita. The most important

thing that is totally absent is the discussion about the efficacy of these policies and budget allocation in term of for what and for who it will serve.



Source: Eam *et al.* (2022)

Figure 7 Government Expenditure on Education and Tertiary Education in Selected ASEAN Countries

## 4.2 Higher Education and Its Research: Donor-led Project Intervention

Within this context, one wonders how did Cambodian higher education and its research arrive at their current status? As mentioned, higher education and its research before 2006 had a “life of its own”. There was not much project intervention by the government at the system level to improve or promote them due to limited funding and capacity. What happened at the institutional level is mainly driven by the bilateral cooperation between HEIs and their overseas partners and varies across institutions. This cooperation was mainly driven by individual faculty who graduated from overseas through their networks or were ‘discovered’ and ‘picked up’ by overseas partners to implement their projects.

In fact, despite the impressive economic growth during the last decades, Cambodia remains an aid dependent country. Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has received \$20.68 billion in foreign aid <sup>17)</sup> of which about 1.5 billion has gone to supporting education related projects.<sup>18)</sup> Donors, usually calls Development Partners within Cambodian policy-making circle, were classified into five clusters according to different types and terms of

assistance; 1) UN related agencies like UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, UNDP and ILO were engrossed in education rehabilitation and in promoting child-friendly approaches and education for all, 2) International financial institutions such as the World Bank and ADB played vital roles in tertiary education and its research mostly with concessional loans and grants, 3) EU works to implement financial management reform, and it also made grants available to support various educational activities through non-governmental organization (NGOs), 4) bilateral partnerships with the biggest and most active being Japan and Sweden, other small countries includes Spain, Switzerland, UK, USA, Australia, Canada, Czech republic, Finland, Ireland and Netherlands. They also made grants available to support various NGOs working on education, and 5) emerging donors/non-DAC countries also played a significant role in Cambodia, including China and South Korea which are the two biggest, followed by Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. These clusters are an addition to the discussion made by Kaewkumkong (2020).

Zooming into donors' support to education policy related projects, according to the Cambodia ODA database, there are only four donors (ADB, France, UNICEF and UNESCO). Yet these donors focus inclusively on general education with only UNESCO focuses on higher education and research, but dealing with it marginally. Between 2006 and 2022, there are 19 donors supporting higher education and research, amounting to nearly US\$ 320 million. Of that, the World Bank accounted for nearly US\$ 120 million along with other three big donors, Sweden (US\$ 10 million), Korea (US\$ 7.9 million)<sup>19)</sup> and Japan to established two Teacher Education Institutes, one is in Phnom Penh and other is in Battambang. Among these donors, it is only the World Bank who tackles the higher education and its research at the system level and nation-wide.

Despite the promise to promote aid effectiveness by donors during the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, the research finding by (Sam 2016) reveals that:

Though the government and development partners have become close partners, forming a synergy to push the wheel of the sector forward in terms of policy, despite the conflicting views – in practice, donors remain

more influential in decision making *e.g.* to select which aspects are to be invested first (authors' addition) *due to their greater technical and financial support capacity* (authors' emphasis in italics) (159).

Most studies about aid dependent countries indicate that donors are more powerful in proposing or even forcing poor developing countries to adopt the neoliberal reform agenda, especially at the point of deciding whether or not to lend aid with conditionality or at the time that there are no local capacity/strong institutions (Bräutigam 2000). Within this context, it is mainly the neoliberal higher education agenda items that get funded.

In the case of Cambodia, one study found out that since 1993, most projects are donor-driven in their identification, design and implementation, to the detriment of capacity development (Godfrey *et al.* 2002). Take for example, the World Bank negligence of the many aspects in the National Action Plan for Higher Education, a project that funded by AusAID, France and USAID and the World Bank between (1996-1999). The World Bank picked up and funded only what its consultant reported in that Action Plan; that is to introduce the privatization and reform to address the 'labour market' demand and 'mismatch' between higher education and market. This focus led to the call for a tracer study to inform curriculum design and development as well as pedagogy to deliver the curriculum.<sup>20)</sup> The issue of this narrowness as observed by Cambodian scholar, Chet Chealy, is that some professions (which are) needed for social and national development are neglected in order to serve what are often short-lived global market forces (Chet 2006).

After more than two decades, the World Bank's attitude is largely unchanged. Take, for example, The World Bank negligence of its support to the production of Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond (MoEYS 2018). The Roadmap is not only focusing on economic growth, but also broader societal issues. It was the first attempt to go forwards through learning to contextualize the intervention and changing the development discourse. In what one of the Cambodian top higher education technocrats calls "a move away from Cheese to Prahok".<sup>21)</sup> The majority of team members who composed the report are Cambodian (only one foreigner worked on this Roadmap). However, it turns out that this

Roadmap laid out a course that no one travelled upon.

The World Bank not only fails to buy-in the Cambodian higher education roadmap, a product of its own sponsorship, but it even tries to close the door, when it designs higher education project intervention. Other donors such as European, Scandinavian countries and even France or Japan having difficulty to work alongside the World Bank.<sup>22)</sup> As a result, these donors are working bilaterally with each institution, for example, France (Inalco) with Royal University of Fine Arts, Sweden (Sida) and Korea (KOICA) with Royal University of Phnom Penh and Japan (JICA) with Institute of Teacher Education (Phnom Penh and Battambang).<sup>23)</sup>

The reason why the World Bank can play a dominant role is due to its ability to self-proclamation as the “Knowledge Bank”. As noted by Wade (1996).

The World Bank enjoys a unique position as a generator of idea about economic development. The Bank’s ability to frame the debate rests on, 1) its ability to influence the terms on which low-income countries gain access to international capital markets, 2) a research and policy budget far larger than that of any other development organization, and 3) its ability to attract global media coverage of its major report (Wade 1996:3).

In the case of Cambodia, the Bank drives the narrative that “Cambodia’s future prosperity will depend on diversifying its economy, rising higher on global value chains”.<sup>24)</sup> The underlying cause of this poor economic diversification and low productivity is the mismatch between higher education supply and market demand. The following is evidence of that, as taken from the World Bank’s seminal work on higher education entitled “Putting higher education to work: Skills and research for growth in East Asia”.

### **Poor diversification in Cambodian higher education**

Nearly 60 percent of all tertiary students study business, social sciences, or law, but fewer than 25 percent are in agriculture, education, engineering, health, or the hard sciences, even though many of these latter sectors provide – and will continue to provide – the most jobs. For example, fewer than 4 percent of students enroll in agriculture,

even though the sector accounts for 29 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and supports the livelihood of 59 percent of the population. What accounts for this extreme polarization?

Recent evidence suggests that most students select their subject based on the advice and wishes – and, to a lesser extent, interest – of their family rather than on their own future labor market prospects, opportunities, and outcomes. A 2008 survey on youth employment reported that only one in five graduating secondary students based their decision on what to study on the job market; 7 of 10 followed their parents' advice. In the same survey, only one of three university and vocational training students chose their field of study because of market need. (Among university and vocational student respondents, 59 percent chose their field because of an interest in the subject.) Lack of information seems to be one reason for these decisions, and students know little about demand for higher-level skills. No labor market information systems survey labor market demand, and estimates of current or future demand for university graduates are lacking. In addition, there is no reliable tracking of the employment outcomes of recent university graduates.

The mismatch between graduate supply and demand has serious economic and social implications for Cambodia, such as high structural unemployment, with a pool of university graduates seeking jobs but without the skills demanded by employers. The mismatch can also constrain productivity and economic growth because employers fill positions with poorly qualified (and less productive) workers or scale back their growth ambitions. It can also stifle a country's attempts to diversify its sources of growth.

Cambodia can take some immediate steps in filling the information gaps. The government and universities could undertake tracer studies of university graduates and follow their employment experience. The results would provide information on the demand for skills for all jobs and those requiring higher skills and then signal overall graduate unemployment levels and supply-demand mismatches in particular fields. Additionally, universities could review their course curricula and



teaching practices to better equip students with the types of skills employers demand. (World Bank 2014: 68)

In its World Development report 2020, the World Bank emphasis the role of global value chains (GVCs) that “...powered the surge of international trade after 1990 and now account for almost half of all trade. This shift enabled an unprecedented economic convergence: poor countries grew rapidly and began to catch up with richer countries.”<sup>25)</sup> It is through this framing that the World Bank is able to launch its higher education intervention in Cambodia. At the level of overall system intervention, since 2000, only the World Bank has taken the lead. First, it started with a small project trying to put all HEIs under one coordinated mechanism, through sponsorship of the establishment of ACC between 2000-2003. This led to a full-scale system intervention through its ever first large project in the history of Cambodian higher education and its research call “Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project” (HEQCIP) with the amount of USD23 million (half grant, half loan) originally designed to be implemented between 2010-2015. There were four components of the project; 1) Fellowship and Capacity building, 2). Research (Development and Innovation Grant), 3) higher education management and information system for monitoring and evaluation purposes, and 4) governance, management and financing higher education reform. However, during the implementation, due to a highly flawed design, the project implementation faced a host of challenges. In fact, the project had to extend well into 2017 to finally get some closure.

In fact, despite closure, it was undoubtedly a failed project. As Rappleye and Un (2018) make it is clear that the project failed because the Bank so glaringly misunderstood the Cambodian context.<sup>26)</sup> Nonetheless, from the World Bank perspective, the project was successfully implemented.<sup>27)</sup> With self-proclamation, the World Bank without even a bit of self-reflection, introduced a second bigger intervention project Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP) designed to be implemented between 2018-2024 (USD90 million loan and \$2.5 million government counter fund). The project design is aiming to consolidate its neoliberal agenda,<sup>28)</sup> focusing on

promoting STEM + Agriculture, consisted of three components; 1) improving teaching and learning (measured in terms of updated curriculum that links to labour market in partnership, most preferably with overseas universities), 2) improving research (measured in term of number of research outputs, both basic and applied and linking to industries and policy measured in term of number of patent registration and proto-type or product produced), 3) improving institutional capacity (measured in term of its entrepreneurial capability).

Our colleagues also concur that the current style of running HEIs in Cambodia with its inheritance from the colonial style of management is being invaded by cooperate managerialism, and its goal is completely shifting away from nation-building towards economic determinism of the role of higher education and its research (Eam *et al.* 2022). What is lost is the dimension of value transformation and social purposes.

## **5. What Future for Cambodian Higher Education and Its Rsearch?**

### **5.1 Pursing Unfinished Project by the World Bank**

The neoliberal higher education agenda is concerned with not only how the growth can be sustained, but also with how to increase the growth rate. Under such a logic, any alternative discourse is pushed aside. For these neoliberalists, current economic growth is not yet derived from a well-conceived economic development strategy. It seems that economic growth and development and physical infrastructure improvement resulted from exogenous factors; 1) the return to normal economic activities when peace and security were reinstalled, 2) the inflow of foreign aid, and 3) the introduction of economic reform programmes – macroeconomic stability and economic liberalization (massively supported by donors). Looking closely into the foundation of the economic growth during the last decades, one can see its narrowness; based on few economic sub-sectors such as the garment industry, services related to tourism, construction (especially residential projects) and, more recently, agriculture exports and assembling industry. It is important to note that the productivities of Cambodian workers are still low comparing to its neighboring countries such as

Vietnam and Thailand (Asian Productivity Organization, 2020). The underlying cause is, according to the business association, the skill shortage and skill gap. That is, there is a widespread belief that there is a bottleneck to transform Cambodia from an agro-county into a trade-oriented economy with prosperous industrial and service sectors during the past decades: gap and lack of skilled labor.

This skill shortage and skill gap are usually measured in terms of enrollment in higher education and its research in the field of STEM related subject and measured by its ranking in different global indexes. For example, in terms of Global Knowledge Index, Cambodia ranked 90 out of the 138 countries with a score of 41.7 well below the average and a modest performer in terms of its knowledge infrastructure (UNDP, 2020, p. 41). The Global Innovation Index 2020 also reveals that Cambodia ranks low at 110th out of 131 economies and the performance in the area of Human Capital & Research ranks 122 out of 131 economies. In terms of Innovation Inputs, Cambodia continues to be behind other economies as reflected in the decrease of Cambodia rank from 103th in 2018 to 117th in 2020. Consequently, relative to GDP, Cambodia is performing below expectations for its level of development.<sup>29)</sup> Solving this issue is only through education. As Piketty (2014: 306-7) argues “In the long run, the best way to reduce inequalities with respect to labor as well as to increase the average productivity of the labor force and the overall growth of the economy is surely to invest in education.” This is the dominant argument. In Cambodia, the major proponent of this logic is the World Bank; *i.e.* “Education raises human capital, productivity, incomes, employability and economic growth (World Bank 2018: 38)”.

## 5.2 Is there Any Consequence?

If such logic is fully operationalized and realized, Cambodia is perhaps a perfect example of what Klein (2007) described as an attempt by capitalists to create an ideal free-market economy through development aid provided. She argued that in the context of this economic shock therapy the winners are narrow groups that will often do very well by moving into luxurious gated communities. At the same time, the losers are the large section of

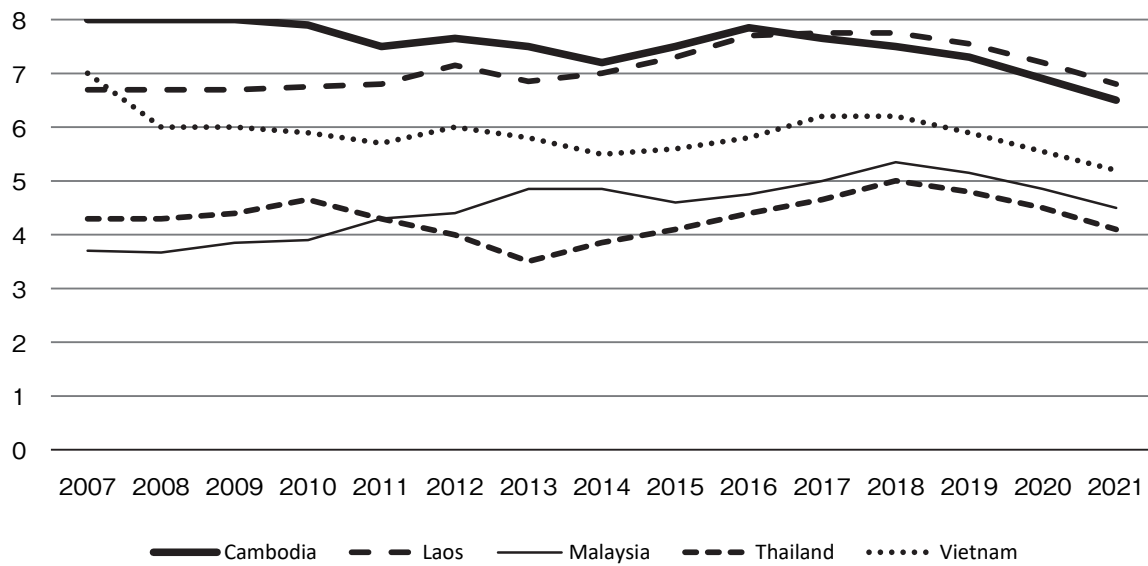
the population who are left with underfunded and therefore decaying public services.

Other critic also points out that the World Bank's approach to education development cooperation in developing countries that based on neoliberalism as well as the STEM focus oriented education program have had an adverse impact on society as a whole as well as on the education systems in particular (Yoo 2019). Actually, there are multiple consequences derives from the adaptation of neoliberalism as well as the STEM focus oriented education program. The following set of consequences has been observed.<sup>30)</sup> The first set of consequences is environmental: despite United Nation warnings as early as 1972 about an impending environmental crisis, there has been little action taken and now the world stands on the brink of irreparable loss of life and nature due to the belief in utilitarian system promotes the cult of endless consumption (consumerism) and thus endless production backed by tech-science advancement. At the core of this logic is the growth-oriented development, where strong competitive strategies, supported by socio-economic system and institution, either among individuals or nations, is the operating principle (from liberal capitalist economy). This principle is taught and learned from early ages through the existing systems of education and schooling, and these systems are being progressively tightened to focus only on business and entrepreneurship and STEM to produce more marketable products and services. A second set of consequences might be deemed cultural: indigenous philosophical-cultural systems to organizing society and life have been nearly wiped out and cut short in their development due to the STEM and tech-scientism focus oriented of education system. Around the globe, not only Cambodia, there is an intensive cutting back of any social or cultural education programs not directly linked to tech-science and business entrepreneurship, programs which ultimately take markets and consumption or practical value as the referent point. A third set of consequences are structural: growing inequality in term socio-economic conditions between Western who promote these ideologies and non-Western countries who follow these ideologies and within the country due to the adaptation of the intrinsic value of the Self in both Western and non-Western countries. This is where

individual issues are concerned as social issues to be addressed. Yoo (2019)'s analysis on the Bank's educational policies and activities also reveals that they have not had a substantial impact on poverty eradication, even though poverty eradication is one of the two goals the World Bank aims to achieve. The pro-growth policy, pursued by the Bank's perception that poverty will automatically decrease as a result of the economic growth, is considered to have intensified inequality (Yoo 2019: iii-iv).

Finally, a common phenomenon is observed worldwide, 'a growing priority on the Self, but one destined to live a life of loneliness (or to use a Japanese word "*hikikomori*", a 'modern hermit').<sup>31)</sup>

Another misleading global development agenda, international quality and standard and patent, promoted by the World Bank through pushing HEIs to be partnership with overseas institutions. Reaching or not, the idea of catching up and become international status and quality and having its research output registers for patent is now become the core of Cambodia universities vision and mission as witnessed by joint degree programmes and international exchanges, programmes using foreign languages (especially English) as a medium of instruction, increasing foreign experts and expats holding positions in HEIs, regional quality assurance engagement and above all curriculum and textbooks imported from overseas. But forget to ask a deeper question: what does internationalization mean for Cambodia? Is the brain drain as we see it (see Figure 8) is the aim of Cambodia's attempt to internationalize its higher education and research? Also, using the yardstick of whether there is any new contribution to knowledge by patents because a key social benefit from private invention is the spillovers from new knowledge. The study by Hazel Moir (2008) found out that the large majority of currently granted patents produce no benefit to society. Such a question and lesson are virtually absent in Cambodia.



Source: <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/compare-countries/>

Figure 8 Human Flight and Brain Drain  
in Selected ASEAN Countries, 0 (high) - 10 (low)

### 5.3 Is there Any Alternative Development Discourse?

So, the question is beyond economic and material prosperity and private good, is there any alternative development discourse? If the answer is yes, what are they? And, if so, why are these alternative development discourses absent in Cambodia?

This critical stance towards the current higher education development discourse by no means implies that economic prosperity should not be one of the outcomes of higher education and its research. A flourishing higher education sector is one in which students receive a quality education with which they are well-equipped to realize their personal and professional ambitions. However, the role of higher education within society is much greater than simply churning out qualified graduates for this economic logic. Rather than defining the ‘what for’ of a university education within ever more fine-tuned parameters and key performance indicators, we would like to stress the university’s central role as a place for personal growth, creativity and freedom. Instead of just enabling students to realize their ambitions or sometimes dream about an illusive vision, the university should also pro-actively help define what meaningful ambitions and vision could look like (Un and Boomsma 2019: 17-8). We wholeheartedly concur

with Mackler when she writes that;

“Ideals of the university have to be articulated and rearticulated because the university, even as it is often stridently defined as distinct from them, exists within societies and cultures that change”. (Mackler 2010: 177)

In order to appreciate the value of higher education within society, we need to treat it as an integral part of the latter, not just as a diploma mill. Universities should not simply ‘produce’ graduates for society but are part of an intricate texture of changing socio-economic circumstances and cultural horizons of this society. Especially in a country like Cambodia, where there is barely a university as public sphere of note in Habermas’ terminology (Habermas, 1991), it is paramount to think of higher education in this holistic sense.

Within this holistic sense, on the global level, we have countries such as Bhutan who rather actively promotes Gross Domestic Happiness (GDH), instead of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In Scandinavian countries, they try to promote new development discourse beyond Human Development Index and GDP such as the Social Progress Index, Youth Progress Index <sup>32)</sup> and Good Country Index. Rather than emphasizing traditional measurements of success like income and investment, the Social Progress and Youth Progress Index use the same set of 53 social and environmental indicators,<sup>33)</sup> but measure different targets, to create a clearer picture of what life and society is really like for everyday people. The index doesn’t measure people’s happiness or life satisfaction, focusing instead on actual life outcomes in areas from shelter and nutrition to rights and education. <sup>34)</sup> The Good Country Index simply reports on each country’s external impacts, positive and negative, outside its own borders to measure what each country on earth contributes to the common good of humanity.<sup>35)</sup> Though it does not measure what happening in one particular country, that country must have within its border the capacity to do so, thus an indication of a good country for people within its border to live. The Good Country Index uses 35 indicators. <sup>36)</sup>

## 6. Concluding Remarks

### 6.1 Why Little Change in Development Discourse?

The emergence of Cambodia from civil war in the 1990s is coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and rise of Asia and its influence from outsiders with same global agenda/ ideologies. This discourse brought about through the hiring of foreign and local consultants/advisors who buy into neoliberal ideologies and practices when the influx of aid flooded into Cambodia. The Cambodian policy makers through capacity building programs, overseas study tours for “Best Practices” and overseas degree programs sponsored by donors also request, accommodate and assimilate the donors’ agenda very well. This is because they do not have other academic resources to consult with beyond this neoliberal agenda/ ideologies.<sup>37)</sup> So, when discussing policy, the dominant discussion has only focused on “HOW” to implement the policy. It has not focused on “FOR WHAT” and “FOR WHOM”, i.e., what goals the education policy and research aim to achieve and whom it is intended to serve. Perhaps there’s a strong belief that the ultimate development goal is right – what needs to be debated is the process (for more detail see Un and Sok 2022).

From a cultural translation perspective, the result is a one-side view of realities in Cambodia: overly economic blind to social, moral, and existential dimensions, always constrained within a set of assumptions about the World originating in the Neoliberal West. This is also noted by Eam (2018) who questions the socio-cultural impacts of the research in Cambodia. Observation made by Boud and Lee (2005) also applies to the case of Cambodia. The intensified pressure from government, in the Cambodian case from the World Bank’s projects, to improve performance in research education has made itself increasingly felt within university structures and internal policy imperatives in recent year, but there remains a clear lack of public discourse on pedagogy of research education.

Reform has, to date, only focused on form (governance and accountability) for effectiveness and efficiency. What is missing is the crucial discussion around content, the efficacy, i.e., the necessary normative discussion about who and what goals development is designed to serve. Reform needs to



be understood in terms of content, efficacy. Instead of *re-form*, we need *re-contenting*.

## 6.2 How Can Development Discourses Be Re-contented in Cambodia?

As long as the Cambodian higher education sector does not educate its students to be able to critically reflect on major societal issues from a local perspective, the Cambodian society will remain under the influence of the neoliberal agenda. Can Cambodia stand up by herself to philosophize and re-content the development discourse? The answer to this question is definitely NO. In the age of interdependent and interconnectedness and in the age where ideas flow freely and easily, especially through internet revolution, Cambodia cannot survive, philosophize and re-content through isolation. The social and political engineering experimentation of this kind of isolation during Khmer Rouge period led to an ultra-nationalism in which millions of lives were lost. Also given Cambodian current capability (both finance and human), Cambodia still needs support from foreign friends, especially among intellectual circles. But who are the real friends in terms of mutual interest through sincere support and dialogue?

Though a real friend is hardly to find, we also notice it is not impossible.<sup>38)</sup> A friend of mine once wrote “As you both know, I quit the job [at a multilateral institution]... I don’t want to work for the [institution] and make money and have privilege when it is not the best for Cambodia”. For such as a real friend to come to Cambodia, it depends whether Cambodia has such a like-minded thinker, so that he can consider as his real friend too. Such a like-minded thinker is also hardly to find in Cambodia. Besides, the critical critique on the “HOW” development projects are implemented, mostly focusing on corruption and nepotism, there is virtually no Cambodian intellectuals who are exercising the capability to look upon the current social, economic and political transformations critically. The absence of public funding, the absence of public universities as a public sphere and the running after donors’ money limit the systematic engagement in and feedback to policy formulation and debate through academic research intensive and critical perspectives is one issue faced by Cambodian intellectuals, but the most critical issue is that majority of

Cambodian population, including scholars were brutally cut off from their own history and 'traditional' intellectual resources during the Khmer Rouge. As such, Cambodian citizens and scholars today fail to see the inevitable consequences of neoliberal agenda, and instead embrace this agenda wholeheartedly.

There seems to be a vicious cycle in Cambodia like an egg and chicken in this situation. Where to move on from here, though? This concluding remark is not ended in the negative and pessimistic opinion. There must be a need to re-think and re-engage to break this vicious cycle. I propose a workable proposal for re-content higher education and its research in Cambodia, but keep in mind that any process of re-contenting will inevitably be on-going and open-ended, but within the immediate context of the present Cambodian situation:

At the national level, the re-content process should address a wider range of graduate attributes and its research agenda. These attributes would include:

- 1) between economic growth and development on the one hand and nation-building (addressing social fragility), social justice and democratization (having a sense of fair share of benefit and fair share of burden), and revitalization of tradition on the other hand,
- 2) between private good on the one hand and public good on the other hand,
- 3) between private fund on the one hand and public fund and endowment fund from philanthropists on the other hand.

This wider range of higher learning will lay the foundation for future re-contenting cycles of Cambodian higher education and its research.

At the institutional level, the process of re-contenting its governance and management should also address a wider range of management and academic issues:

- 1) between corporatized leadership and management style on one hand and public sphere and academic community culture on the other hand,
- 2) between treating faculty members as taxi cap (part-time teaching) and

teaching oriented on one hand VS professional/educators as change agents and critical research oriented on the other hand,

- 3) between curriculum that focuses on skills and employability on one hand and disposition toward public good, social justice and deepening the democratization process and revitalization of tradition on the other hand,
- 4) between utilizing pedagogy and research as tools to mastering knowledge and skill on one hand and critical thinking and reflection on the other hand.

Finally, at the personal level, addressing the issue of quality and meaning of life in the context of impossibility of fully eliminating the self-interest. What the re-contenting process needs to address is only through answering question such as to what extent that the self-interest principle of neoliberalism can contribute to a more equal and harmonious society?

## Notes

- 1) Here we will focus mainly on public higher education as a system and its research and not research conducted by private company or think tank or other government's affiliated institutions, though sometimes there is no clear cut between them in reality. For private higher education, virtually research activity is absent as it is a teaching-based institution only.
- 2) Between the Phnom Penh government backed by an occupied Vietnamese army and former USSR aid with the Khmer Rouge and the other non-communist resistance factions funded by China, the United States and the other Western counties along the Cambodia-Thailand border.
- 3) At the graduate level, mainly in education, administration and management, and business-related programs as they are classified under the social sciences category.
- 4) For more detail of governance and finance both at the system and institutional level see: Un and Sok 2018, Un *et al.* 2018, Sok *et al.* 2019a, Sok *et al.* 2019b, Sok *et al.* 2009c.
- 5) Scientific and technical journal articles refer to the number of scientific and engineering articles published in the following fields: physics, biology,

chemistry, mathematics, clinical medicine, biomedical research, engineering and technology, and earth and space sciences.

- 6) (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IP.JRN.ARTC.SC?locations=KH>, 2022.5.20)
- 7) (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?view=chart&locations=KH>, 2022.5.19)
- 8) (<https://www.adb.org/news/features/here-comes-cambodia-asia-s-new-tiger-economy>, 2022.5.19)
- 9) (<https://www.adb.org/countries/cambodia/poverty>, 2022.5.19)
- 10) (<https://www.worldeconomics.com/Inequality/Gini-Year/Cambodia.aspx>, 2022.5.19)
- 11) The Uneven economic development indicator considers inequality within the economy, irrespective of the actual performance of an economy. The higher the value of the index, the higher the inequality in the country's economy.
- 12) The public services indicator refers to the presence of basic state functions that serve the people. This may include the provision of essential services, such as health, education, water and sanitation, transport infrastructure, electricity and power, and internet and connectivity. On the other hand, it may include the state's ability to protect its citizens, such as from terrorism and violence, through perceived effective policing. The higher the value of the indicator, the worse the public services in the country.
- 13) The italic is the author's addition and emphasis.
- 14) (<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/health-care-feud-finally-laid-rest>, 2022.5.19)
- 15) By the time of this writing, General Directorate of Higher Education, MoEYS, still employed and looking for Technical Advisors to support its project implementation. Actually in 2021, there were 15 technical advisors in MoEYS (MoEYS 2022).
- 16) Recently, MoEYS is trying to introduce a research grant to improve research, but it limits only to write and produce textbooks for university students in Khmer language. It is too early to say anything about this ongoing project and its future direction. Government just established a National Council of Science and Technology, and Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation, it is also too early to see how they can move forwards giving the limited public funding for these newly established agencies.
- 17) (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Hun-Sen-s-Cambodia/Aid-to-Cambodia-tops-20bn-but-democratic-society-still-far-off>, 2022.5.19)

- 18) Cambodia official development assistance database. ([http://odacambodia.com/OwnReport/make\\_own\\_report.asp#none](http://odacambodia.com/OwnReport/make_own_report.asp#none), 2022.5.19)
- 19) Cambodia official development assistance database. ([http://odacambodia.com/OwnReport/make\\_own\\_report.asp#none](http://odacambodia.com/OwnReport/make_own_report.asp#none), 2022.5.19)
- 20) For more detail see Un and Sok (2022).
- 21) Prahok is Cambodian traditional salted and fermented fish paste, usually of mudfish. This metaphor is used to indicate that finally Cambodia is able to take ownership on the development discourse.
- 22) Similar observation is also made by Euld *et al.* (2019).
- 23) At the time of this writing, a personal conversation with people working closely with donors' circle indicate that Asian Development Bank, whose previous work focusing on technical and vocational training, is considering to enter into higher education. With this new actor, there is a hope that the rule of game would change.
- 24) (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2019/10/30/cambodia-reducing-poverty-and-sharing-prosperity>, 2022.6.1)
- 25) (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2020>, 2022.6.21)
- 26) Though limited only to the component 2, "Development & Innovation Grant" of the project, the anecdotal evidence indicates that it is actually failed in all components, except the ability to spend all project budget (for more detail see Rappleye and Un (2018)).
- 27) This is measured solely on disbursement rate, and there are no other alternative criteria for the successfully evaluation.
- 28) In the mid of project implementation, it is important to note that there is a call for to include social sciences and humanities by both Ministry of Economic and Finance and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport leading to the marginal reallocation of fund to reform three social sciences and humanities programs at Royal University of Phnom Penh, but with the aim to support and make STEM graduate more effectively and efficiently; addressing what the private sectors call the lack of soft skills including team work, critical thinking, work ethics.
- 29) ([https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo\\_pub\\_gii\\_2020/kh.pdf](https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_gii_2020/kh.pdf), 2022.6.2)
- 30) ([https://grant-fellowship-db.jfac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/fs1904\\_ul\\_fr\\_en.pdf](https://grant-fellowship-db.jfac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/fs1904_ul_fr_en.pdf), 2022.6.2)
- 31) ([https://grant-fellowship-db.jfac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/fs1904\\_ul\\_fr\\_en.pdf](https://grant-fellowship-db.jfac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/fs1904_ul_fr_en.pdf), 2022.6.2)
- 32) Progress is defined as the capacity of a society to meet the basic human needs of its citizens, establish the building blocks that allow citizens and

communities to enhance and sustain the quality of their lives, and create the conditions for all individuals to reach their full potential.

33) These indicators are classified under the three broad dimensions: Basic Human Needs, Foundations of Wellbeing, and Opportunity. Within each dimension, there are four components that further divide into thematic categories.

34) For more information, (<https://www.socialprogress.org/index/global>)

35) For more information, (<https://www.goodcountry.org/index/about-the-index/>)

36) These indicators are classified under seven broad dimensions: Science & Technology, Culture, International Peace & Security, World Order, Planet & Climate, Prosperity & Equality and Health & Wellbeing.

37) Nearly all of the historical scholarly work on Cambodia focuses on two subjects: *Ankor Wat* and the rise/fall of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). Contemporary research also focuses almost exclusively on two subjects: democratization or development policy (human rights, rule of law, corruption and nepotism). Whether historical or contemporary, virtually all studies are underpinned by one common, yet banal assumption: if everyone plays their appropriate role the prescribed policies will lead Cambodia society to development – science, industrialization, and a consumption-based market economy. The naïve hope that the final stage of human progress is just around the corner is unproblematized. Also, in Cambodia’s schools and colleges today, conversations amongst diverse ideological or ethical perspectives are sidelined by the narrow pursuit of “human capital”. This human capital actually serve the limited population around the urban and formal economy and do not often serve the national development needs and the larger population. Under the new neoliberal economic focus, higher education reform gears its graduates for economic growth and the global development agenda.

38) There is a promising project which is supported by Swedish government’s bilateral program with RUPP as it potentially gives the freedom for re-contenting. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the Cambodian side can see the opportunity to re-content.

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## カンボジアにおける高等教育

— 誰のための、何のためのものか —

リアン・ウン

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### ＜要 旨＞

カンボジアの高等教育およびその研究は、最近になって発展したもので、昔から恒常的に発展してきたものでもない。1953年の独立後、高等教育とその研究は、カンボジア近代化という一大国家プロジェクトの中で一時的に広がり、1960年に最初の近代的な大学が設立された。しかしこの機運は20年以上にわたる内戦によって中断され、さらにクメール・ルージュ政権（1975-1979）の発足により完全に停止した。第二次内戦（1979-1991）の間も高等教育は発展することはなかった。高等教育とその研究がカンボジアの発展戦略の重要な柱となったのはごく最近のことである。高等教育とその研究による革新的な知識が、知識基盤型経済社会の構築と論理的な相関関係にあるとされ、このような状況が築かれたのである。

本稿では、「何のために」「誰のために」という観点から、第二次内戦終結後のカンボジアにおける高等教育とその研究の発展が、革新的知識の指標にどのような影響を与えてきたかを検討する。本稿は6節から構成される。第1節では、カンボジアの歴史的背景を簡潔に紹介し、続く第2節ではカンボジアの高等教育とその研究の現状を概観する。第3節では、カンボジアの高等教育（研究）とその発展の歴史との関係を明らかにし、「何のため、誰のためのカンボジアの高等教育とその研究なのか」という問いへの解を探る。第4節では、カンボジアの高等教育およびその研究はどのようにして現在の状況に至ったのかを、第5節ではカンボジアの高等教育およびその研究の将来の方向性はどうかを、第6節ではカンボジアの高等教育およびその研究の将来の方向性への示唆で結ぶ。

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