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## Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Cambodia



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### Higher Education System Development

Cambodia is a poor but emerging economy, and its attempt to build a postindependence modern state was short-lived and bumpy. After 1953, the country enjoyed relative peace, stability, and progress for 17 years, before plummeting into protracted wars, a genocide, and foreign occupation and embargo between 1970 and 1991. Since 1993 it began to rebuild itself after immense destruction, with injection of huge foreign aid followed by the first postwar general elections, and has now become a capitalist “quasi-democracy,” with significant, yet questionable, economic development and social progress.

The turbulent history has a severe repercussion for its higher education (HE) development. Before 1953, few higher education institutions (HEIs) existed; hence, afterward the country started to erect HE virtually from scratch, with a peak of eight HEIs in the 1960s before plunging into wars and genocide. The Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) has the most disastrous effect on HE since HEIs were arbitrarily shut down and

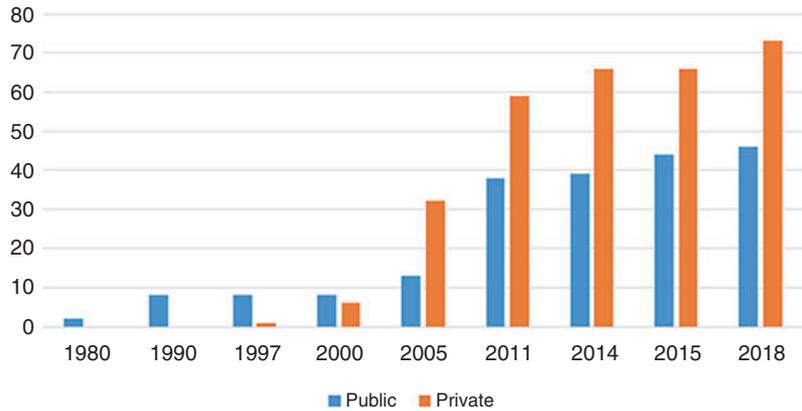
the educated were targeted, and when the regime ended, most of the rest fled the country, leaving subsequent regimes with few capable human resources (Wan et al. 2018).

Between 1979 and 1991, HE was supported by the socialist bloc states, and public investment was limited. Some specialized public HEIs began operation to supply graduates to the public sector. Even after the 1993 elections, HE was not a number one priority, and in the 1990s, it was predominantly driven by external support mainly to expand language education (English and French) and to support several studies, resulting in some reports on HE reforms (Denham 1997; Sloper 1999). The July 1997 unfortunate brief fighting between the two major ruling parties (see Peou 2000; Roberts 2001) had delayed any serious intent to reform.

Yet, a notable development was in 1997 too, when privatization was initiated, allowing businesses to operate private HEIs and public HEIs to offer fee-paying academic programs. Since then HE has experienced significant, yet worrying, transformation. It has moved from “limited access” to “mass” education, in terms of HEI, lecturing staff and student numbers. HEIs skyrocketed from 8 in 1997 to 121, of which 73 are private (see Fig. 1), and the gross enrollment rate increased from 1% in the early 1990s to 16% in 2014–2015 and 11% in 2016–2017 (Mak et al. forthcoming). In absolute terms, between 1993 and 1997, there were around 10,000 students per annum. The number has soared quickly,

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**Fig. 1** Number of HEIs in Cambodia (Source: Department of Higher Education, MoEYS)



reaching 219,069 (43.69% female) in 2015–2016, of whom 10.84%, 79.49%, 8.55%, and 0.56% were enrolled in associate, undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral programs, respectively. Fifty-eight thousand nine hundred eighty-eight students graduated in 2015–2016 (MoEYS 2018) (see also Fig. 2).

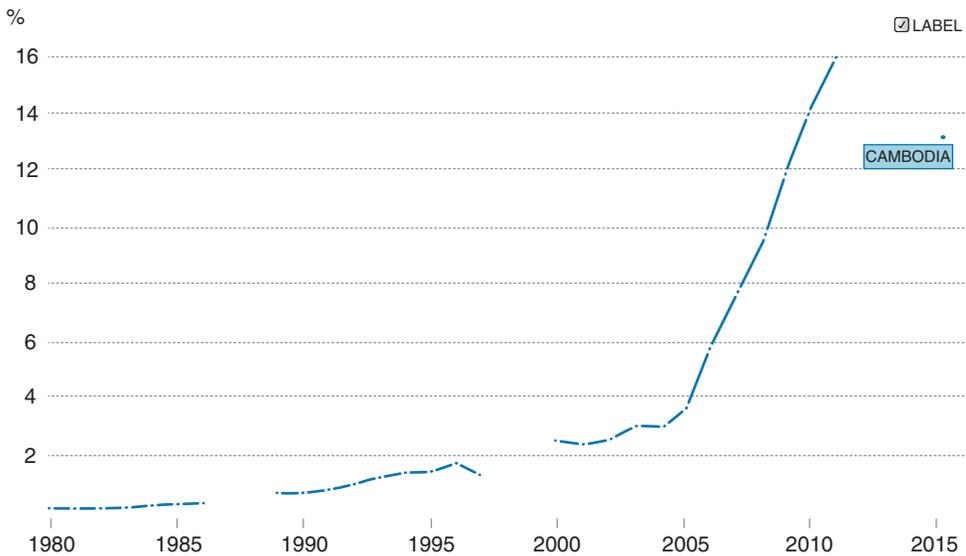
The rapid increases in HEIs, lecturers, and students with little state supervision and funding raise the concern about education quality and relevancy to labor market and national development needs and result in oversupply of graduates in certain areas, mainly business-related, and undersupply of graduates in STEAM-related majors and for the public service sector. That students commonly enroll in multiple programs (usually two) is noteworthy; a common combination is IT/English and a “specialized” major.

## Higher Education Governance

System-level governance is fragmented and umbrella institutions are nonexistent. By law, the Supreme National Council of Education shall be established to guide overarching education development, but this has not yet materialized. HEI supervision falls under 16 ministries: 73 under MoEYS, 25 under MoLVT, and the rest sparsely spread among others. While the two big ministries supervise over two-thirds of the HEIs, which are competing to produce similar graduates (as there is no clear-cut operational definition of what is academic and vocational/technical and hence

division of labor), there are no permanent coordinating bodies between them. HE management is directly supervised from the center, and provincial line departments and district offices are not involved. The “academic stream” is governed by the General Directorate of Higher Education (GDHE) of MoEYS, with its two departments, the Department of Higher Education (DHE), in charge of associate and undergraduate programs, and Department of Scientific Research, overseeing graduate and postgraduate programs and research, and the “technical and vocational stream” by the General Directorate of Technical and Vocational Training of MoLVT. The Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) has significant control over financial management and government funding.

Another important body is the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), a young accreditation agency established in 2003. While some countries in the region give accreditation agencies a buffer status, ACC is a governmental agency. It was previously housed under the Council of Ministers (CoM) over a decade. A major reform occurred since 2014, from when firstly its secretariat and then its reshuffled governing board (or committee) have been affiliated with MoEYS. ACC has arguably achieved quite little in terms of quality assurance and accreditation. So far, it has only accredited foundation year programs (which is currently pending) and is yet to accredit any institution, let alone to move toward program-level accreditation. In the past 3 years, it has “pilot assessed” some four-dozen HEIs,



**Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Cambodia, Fig. 2** Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, both sexes (%) (Source: <http://uis.unesco.org/country/KH> as of 30 April 2018)

pending formal institutional accreditation to kick-start in late 2018. Its impact on quality perception is not promising too (see Chet 2009; Un and Sok 2014; Vann 2012). The future direction of public HE is also being placed under the newly established body in 2014, when the Rector Council of Cambodia, comprised of 18 public HEIs with the task “to strengthen cooperation and development amongst and to improve education quality in Cambodian public HEIs” was established. The council still needs to do more to live up to its mission and goals (Un and Sok 2014; Mak et al. forthcoming).

Public and PAI HEIs are run like government agencies, with top administrators directly accountable to supervising ministries. Although a board of directors (BoD) exists at many public HEIs and all PAI HEIs, institutional power often rests in the rector of a university or director of an institute. Such boards are usually headed by a prominent political figure from the technical supervising ministry (up to a minister or even a deputy prime minister for some HEIs) and comprise mainly of representatives of concerned ministries, with no or few external representatives and minimal staff representation, although there is a slight variation across HEIs in terms of member

composition and size (Chan et al. 2008; Sok 2016; Mak et al. forthcoming). Besides the elected staff representative(s), other nonelected members are appointed by the respective ministries. Governing boards are established as a stand-alone body with no permanent secretariat and affiliated committees, crippling the boards from meaningfully fulfilling its mission. Board meetings at some HEIs are often infrequent, and such meetings are often conducted to update and review activities executed by university/institute administrators rather than to set vision and strategic directions and mobilization of external funding (authors’ personal communication with experts and those involved in BoD meetings). Paradoxically, while the law restricts the presence of political appointees in such boards, it is common to see their presence.

An attempt to devolve more institutional power to public HEIs was the introduction of Public Administrative Institution (PAI) system in 1997 (revised in 2015) and to HEIs in 2003. The decree and associated sub-decree to establish a PAI HEI, inter alia, mainly stipulate the establishment and functions of the governing board and financial management. However, the reform is slow and selective. As of 2010, only ten HEIs

had been granted the status, and many public HEIs are reluctant to become PAIs, for fear of stringent financial control from the government and loss of government subsidy. Each PAI HEI sub-decree categorically requires it to have a BoD as the highest body for policy directions and to which the rector/director is accountable. The sub-decree, among others, stipulates BoD composition and selection process and responsibilities of the board and rector/director. Even with this reform, the board composition is still government centric and small and narrow in representation. Their board members (except for staff representatives) and administrators at all levels are still appointed by the government. Touch et al. (2014) suggest that PAI HEI institutional governance is generally a business as usual – i.e., top-down, centralized, and lacks broad participation from staff and concerned communities.

Public and PAI HEIs have quite limited, albeit variable, codified institutional autonomy and devolution of authority at the institutional level, although they have significant (de facto) power. The limited autonomy manifests in the institutional structure, line of accountability, and processes in decision-making: for example, small boards making up mainly of government representatives and appointees; establishment, modification, and nullification of HEIs and dependent faculties/units and programs approved by the government; all levels of administrators being appointed by the government and civil servants and accountable to the government; and centralized decision in certain key areas (especially those to do with money) to the university/institute level.

In terms of academic freedom, HEIs have considerable autonomy in curriculum designs, mode of instruction, student admission and research policy, awarding degrees, and so forth, although the curriculum and any revision must be approved by supervising ministries in form. Staff and students have substantial academic freedom, although in practice some degree of self-censorship exists, and institutional power has tilted toward university/institute administrators, especially the rectors/directors. While academic and personnel management (i.e., curriculum and on-contract staff) has been quite decentralized to

the faculty and department levels at respective HEIs, financial management is centralized, and there is little authority authorization to dependent faculties/units in this matter.

Institutional autonomy in personnel (i.e., civil servant) management is quite restricted. Besides the wage-earning (non)teaching staff, all other staff are civil servants; hence, their selection, appointment, promotion, and firing must conform with the Law on Common Statutes of Civil Servants, and their remuneration is determined and paid for by the government. In principle, when an HEI needs full-time civil servants, it must submit a proposal to its supervising ministry, and once it is approved, in principle, the ministry is responsible for organizing an exam to recruit and then appoint them. Promotion and firing of civil servants shall be processed up to the ministerial level too (Un and Sok 2014; Mak et al. *forthcoming*).

Financial autonomy is quite restricted too, especially over the management of government budget. Government budget allocation is done through line-item budgeting and political/historical funding model, and it must be approved by the MEF and supervising ministry. Expenditure and procurement shall comply with rules and regulations issued by the MEF, with large packages generally managed by the technical supervising ministry (Ting 2014; Touch et al. 2014; Mak et al. *forthcoming*). There are complaints about slow fund disbursement and inflexible budget reallocation in principle, even among PAI HEIs (authors' communication with experts and HEIs). At the institutional level, revenue management is generally handled at the university/institute level, with little meaningful devolution of such authority to dependent faculties/units and little participation from faculty members. In this sense, at many HEIs, even very small expenditure of a few hundred dollars needs approval of the rector and/or vice rector for finance.

Public and PAI HEIs, however, have significant power (de facto, for public ones), especially to manage the self-generated revenues and on-contract services. The self-generated revenue is put in HEI-managed accounts in a private bank, and they have the decision-making power on how to spend it, including to hire and pay on-contract

staff, top up civil servants for extra classes/work, purchase study materials and office equipment, etc., as they see fit, with little involvement of or approval from the government. With the revenue, they have complete control over the management of casualized contract staff – both academic and nonacademic and on-contract services (mainly teaching) they purchase from the civil servant staff. At some HEIs, the on-contract staff forms a majority of the staff. While teaching staff (on-contract and civil servants) are paid in hourly wages, office holders, including the top administrators, and governing board members (at many HEIs) are paid monthly salary top-up with other benefits. At HEIs where the boards are functional, such top-up is approved by the board, while at those that are not fully functional, such is decided upon by the top administrator(s) themselves. Institutional governance via institutional statutes and regulations is yet to be meticulously codified or even formalized at the HEI level, leaving significant decision-making power to certain individuals or groups, and management by committees is currently an alien notion (see Un and Sok 2014; Wan et al. 2018; Mak et al. forthcoming).

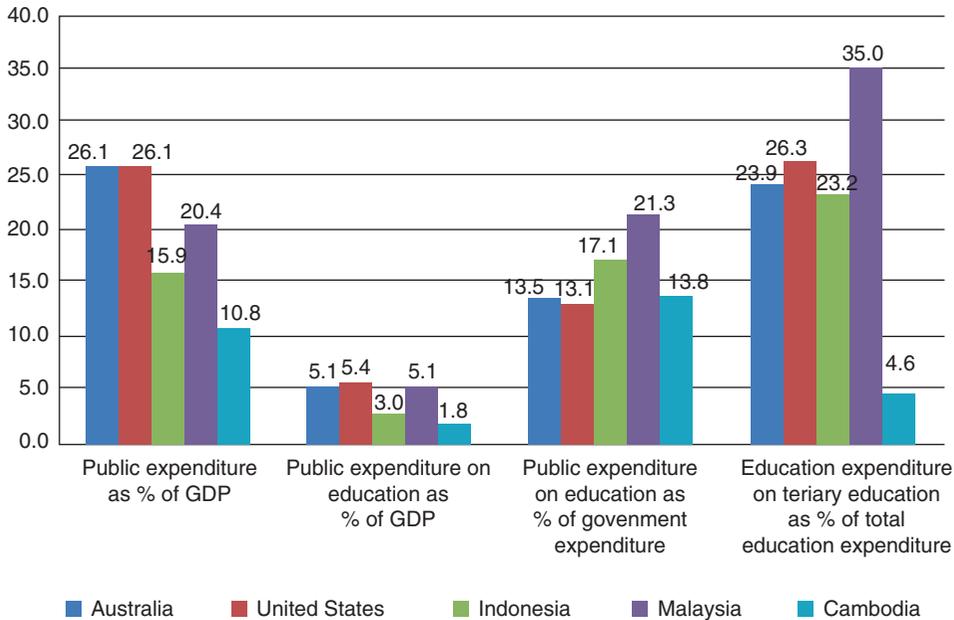
Cambodia does not have a law or specific sub-laws on private HE, and stipulations about private HE are seen briefly in the Education Law and various sub-laws. Within this context, private HE must undergo the same legal governance requirement as in the case of public HE. Private HEIs formed an association called the Cambodian Higher Education Association in 2004 with only 13 members, but now increasing to 98 members including non-tertiary institution with the mission to strengthen private higher education quality through exchange of information and ideas and promotion of members' interests. The association has conducted a number of activities each year, although its contribution to higher education quality enhancement is not known, albeit questionable to some (Feuer 2016). Within this context, private HEIs are generally profit-oriented family businesses and run like a private enterprise, perhaps a main difference between them and other registered large private companies being that they are yet to pay corporate taxes; no law exists to regulate how they manage the profits too.

Governing board members of private HEIs usually comprise shareholders, a few invited prominent figures (usually with prominent political positions), and few staff and student representatives, and private HEIs must inform the supervising ministry of the board composition regularly. Some members are appointed or elected pro forma with little rigor in (s)election, and the boards are reportedly dominated by the shareholders. The day-to-day institutional management is the responsibility of hired administrators, and (deputy) rectors/directors are selected and appointed by the board and are paid in monthly salary. Like public HEIs, they can devise their curriculum, with pro forma approval from concerned ministries, award degrees, set admission policy, etc. They have complete control over financial arrangements and expenses and personnel and administrative management with virtually little meaningful oversight from the government. While administrative staff often work full time, lecturing short-term, contracted staff are often casual hourly wage earners, and many are staff of public agencies and HEIs. Overall, the management of private HEIs is mainly in the hands of the business owners and their relatives, who usually sit on the board and/or run key positions within the HEIs themselves.

## Finance/Funding Systems

Cambodia's government expense on HE is one of the lowest in the region in any methods of measurement. In the 1990s, MoEYS spent on average 2% of its education budget on higher education, and this has increased modestly to around 4% in 2013 and 9% in 2016 (see also Fig. 3). The latest expenditure on higher education was estimated to be much less than 0.1% of GDP – compared to the world average of some 1% (Mak et al. forthcoming). Per-student expenditure is very low too (Table 1).

Although the figures below may not accurately reflect the reality because many HEIs are not under MoEYS, existing data indicates that HE receives little in absolute terms. Between 1994 and 1999, approximately \$4.5 million was spent



**Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Cambodia, Fig. 3** Education expenditure in Cambodia (Source: Ting 2014)

**Higher Education Systems and Institutions, Cambodia, Table 1** Expenditure on education in Cambodia

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Government expenditure on education										
As % of GDP		1.67	1.53	1.51	1.56	2.02	1.9			
As % of total government expenditure		8.39	7.71	7.68	7.54	9.91	9.09			
Government expenditure per student (in PPS)										
Primary education		117.03	119.27	129.43	148.12	165.84	174.38			
Secondary education										
Tertiary education		205.96	162.52	139.68						

Source: <http://uis.unesco.org/country/KH> as of 30 April 2018

on HE; it was around \$4 million in 2005, slightly over \$10 million in 2012, and \$6,928,267 in 2016 (excluding civil servants' wages) (Ting 2014; MoEYS 2016; Mak et al. forthcoming). A few large public HEIs based in Phnom Penh the authors interacted indicate that the government funding forms some 10–30% of their annual expenditure, while the other 70–90% is covered by self-generated budget, mainly through fee-paying academic programs. Other smaller and provincial public HEIs have much larger share

of the expenditure covered by the government and much less revenue from tuition fees and other sources (Ting 2014; Mak et al. forthcoming).

Since 2000, funding consists of “current budget” (commonly referred to as non-PB) and “priority action program.” The latter was created to protect the education sector from budget cuts and recently renamed “program budget” (PB) (vs. non-PB). Non-PB covers recurrent operation costs such as civil servant salaries, basic

utilities, and other costs. PB supports activities aiming to improve teaching and learning qualities such as mission to workshops, student scholarship subsidy, and classroom renovation. PB expenditure has increased quite significantly, and there is a slight decrease in non-PB expenditure, which signals a move toward a purely program-based budgeting, planned to introduce in 2015 (Ting 2014; MoEYS 2016). Capital budget is often funded by foreign donors directly to respective HEIs and hence varies from HEI to HEI. Records of capital and recurrent budgets supported by the government are sometimes unclear.

Since 1997 the government has granted scholarships (mainly “free seats” and a small amount for living stipend for some of them) annually to high school leavers (currently standing at some 4000–5000), through merit and quota-based allocation. An amount of \$130 per scholarship student per year to cover tuition fee is often paid directly to select public HEIs. However, an increasing trend is that public HEIs that can generate significant revenue are requested to cover the scholarship awardees (i.e., tuition fees and stipends) via their self-generated budget, and private HEIs offer merely the “free seats” to the scholarship recipients. For fee-paying programs, different HEIs charge different tuition fees, but on average, students pay \$280 per year. The real cost has been decreasing, resulting from a race-to-the-bottom competition to attract students as all HEIs depend heavily on student fees for operation. Fees charged by selected private HEIs can be as low as \$100 per year for an undergraduate degree, compared to over \$600 in 1997 (Orivel 2009; Ting 2014) and currently charged by prominent public HEIs.

Staff salaries represent the largest share of expenditure: 55% for public and 53% for private HEIs surveyed. For private HEIs, another large expenditure (15% on average) is on renting campus buildings. Limited fund is spent on libraries, laboratories and student services, and research and development (R&D) (Ting 2014). With little R&D funding from the government and HEIs themselves (and other funding sources), some staff at selected prominent HEIs are only involved in R&D as collaborators or consultants in projects

funded by external sources (Kwok et al. 2010). R&D funding from the government is, however, slowly emerging. From 2010 to 2015, through a project funded by the World Bank, \$5.5 million was allocated as competitive grants to select HEIs for R&D activities, and 22 HEIs received such grants to conduct 45 projects. Since 2015, the MEF has earmarked \$1 million each year for MoEYS to allocate for research activities; however, the fund has so far been used for other purposes by MoEYS rather than to foster the university research culture, and financial operation mechanisms for such fund are yet to be adopted. Selected public and private HEIs have allocated a small amount of their self-generated budget for research and innovation too, although at some HEIs, the actual execution of this budget is opaque or nonexistent, at worst (authors’ communication with selected HEI administrators).

### **Academic Profession, Students, and Administrative Staff Finance/Funding Systems**

Teaching personnel and their involvement in institutional management are critical for HE expansion and assurance of quality and relevancy to the society and economy. Yet the increase in teaching staff is not proportionate with the increase in students, resulting in larger class sizes, bigger staff-student and student-laboratory/library ratio, more shifts at many HEIs, and at a compromise of quality. While teaching staff increases around twofold (13,502 in 2017–2018), student number increases over five times in the past decade, and like many students who study at more than one HEI, many of them work at more than one place. Staff recruitment seems to be quite stagnated in the last couple of years too. Another growing concern is staff under-qualification and limited opportunity for self-improvement such as in new andragogy and exposure to international experience. Teaching staff with doctoral degrees is very small (7.54%). The majority holds a master’s degree (69.23%), and undergraduate degree holders are substantial (23.51%) (MoEYS 2018). Such statistical figures for administrative staff are

unavailable, yet anecdotal evidence suggests that their qualifications are not promising too. Institutional management by the academic board and faculty-level council and associated committees at all HEIs, be it public, PAI, or private, is an alien concept, let alone practice, in Cambodia, and this has generally relegated the teaching staff to take up mainly/solely teaching portfolio, with little involvement in research and community services and hindered the development of institutional academic culture and rule-based governance and institution (Un and Sok 2014; Mak et al. *forthcoming*).

Teaching staff at public HEIs are full-time civil servants and centrally recruited as discussed earlier. To recruit them, HEIs must request to their supervising ministries; then the ministries will conduct the exams. In principle, they are competitive, although gender equity (and other factors) is considered. Since 1997 public and PAI HEIs can recruit on-contract (non-) teaching staff, and they have sole authority in the recruitment process; private HEIs likewise have such discretion. MoEYS has set certain eligible criteria for lecturing staff which is that they must hold higher levels of qualifications, one of which is a master's degree/undergraduate degree with at least 3 years teaching experience and a doctoral/master's degree with at least 5 years teaching experience to teach in bachelor's and master's programs, respectively. Doctoral programs are limited in number, although recently joint doctoral programs with overseas HEIs are under arrangements at some HEIs.

Civil servants' salary is low, although it is rapidly increasing over the years and is paid directly from the treasury to their respective private bank accounts. Currently, the salary and allowances are on average \$160 dollars (DHE as cited in Ting 2014), although this varies slightly, depending mainly on civil servant ranks and classifications. Teaching staff and some administrative staff can, however, earn more extra income from teaching in fee-paying programs or a private HEI, usually paid per hours and varies based mainly on qualifications; competent staff can also earn extra through consultancy work and/or external research collaboration.

In 2013 the Decree on Professoriate was enacted, albeit not yet in force. Currently, all teaching staff (except for some at two universities) are simply classified as lecturers. Once the decree is implemented, there shall be three ranks of professors, assistant, associate, and full, and teaching staff with master's degrees can apply for assistant and associate professorship positions; those applying for full professorship must have PhD degrees. Employment history (mainly teaching) and publications are two key criteria for appointment and promotion.

HE is mainly a teaching industry, and staff involvement in R&D and administrative work is limited. Due to a lack of clear academic rank systems, career paths, and academic and research culture, teaching staff focus chiefly on teaching to get as much pay as possible. ACC caps the maximum teaching hours at 24 hours per week, although some teach 30 hours plus and at multiple HEIs, leaving little time for research and community services. This limited involvement in research is clearly illustrative in publications Cambodia produces. According to the International Science Ranking, between 1996 and 2012, Cambodia produced 1556 articles. There was a slight increase in 2012, as 226 were written by Cambodians – albeit not necessarily by university lecturers (Sok 2014).

Private HEIs and fee-paying programs at public HEIs set up their own enrollment criteria: the main (mostly, only) criterion being a high school certificate for undergraduate programs or a certification of Grade 12 completion for associate programs, regardless of disciplines. The criteria for scholarship programs at public HEIs are generally more rigid, determined by respective HEIs, and may differ across programs. Until a few years ago, students sat in competitive entrance exams; this has been discontinued at almost all public HEIs or programs, and selection is based on overall Grade 12 score and score on selected subjects and other considerations such as gender, geographical location of residence, and poverty for bachelor's degree programs. This selection is managed by DHE.

For non-scholarship students, the access to higher education both public and private depends

on the individual purchasing power, the ability to pay the fee and to bear the living expenses. As a consequence, a majority of students enroll in business-related subjects along with other two popular fields of study, namely, English language and IT. Enrollment in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)-related and creative and liberal arts fields of study is relatively lower. There has been significant increase in female students over the years, at 43.69% of the gross enrollment in 2015–2016 (MoEYS 2018). Over the past decade or so, there has been a consensus that postsecondary students and graduates have been concentrated in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia, and few other large urban provinces. According to a few studies which mainly received information and feedback from the private sector and less so the training providers, many graduates are reportedly underemployed and lack adequate competence to perform in their job (mainly in the private sector) as the skills and knowledge they acquire from HEIs do not respond to the current labor market need. The studies do not examine their contribution to broader national development, including the public sector, social progress, and citizenship building, as such studies were conducted by private firms or individual(s) and which were mainly commissioned or funded by development agencies interested in promoting neoliberal economy. Public debate or discussion in this area is currently muted too. Labor force is mainly to fill up “low-to-medium-skilled jobs” for all sectors, and new recruits and existing employees lack, in order, technical, socio-emotional, and cognitive skills (see Bruni et al. 2013; Chhom and Madhur 2015; HRINC 2010; Lonn and Khieng 2015). Interpreting in this narrow way, the current mainstream Cambodian higher education is recommended to be diversified more into the direction of STEM and TVET (technical and vocational education and training) with a focus on delivering graduates and less so other products to serve the economy, especially the so-called private sector.

## Other Main Issues

Another big issue is teaching and curriculum. Teaching is generally rote-based and teacher-centered with little opportunity for the teachers to enhance their skills and andragogy and exposure beyond their respective institution(s). In many instances, curriculum (or even syllabi and textbooks) is copied from other institutions of better standing, without consideration of local contexts and needs. Textbook writing or compilation is much less frequent and is not incentivized, and for a majority of courses, the teachers simply adopt a foreign language textbook. Distance education, curriculum innovation, and research and library facilities need vast improvement, especially toward solving the private labor market need (economic prosperity), social/public issues (social progress), and the need of the students and local communities. Internationalization needs more attention too. While some countries in the region take proactive approaches to internationalization, Cambodia does not properly regulate foreign investment on HE and adopts a laissez-faire approach to this matter.

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