

Country profile: Cambodia - Executive summary

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Executive Summary

The higher education context

Following years of disruption due to civil war and regime change, the Cambodia higher education system suffers from significant gaps in capacity, quality and overall coordination. In the late 1990s, policy changes allowed higher education institutions to be privatized and to enrol students on a fee-paying basis. This led to the unregulated growth of higher education institutions and a focus on enrolment numbers and profits rather than academic excellence and a robust culture of research.

However, since the Millennium, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has made progress towards improving the quality of higher education. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia was established in 2003, funded by a grant from the World Bank, and a Royal decree on professorship ranking was also promulgated in January 2013, based on academic qualifications, publications and professional contributions to their institutions and society. The Higher Education Department at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) developed the Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 in 2014, and a related MoEYS five-year Educational Strategic Plan, 2014-2018 includes higher education. Cambodia's membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is also providing a motivating force for the reform and improvement of the higher education sector.

Cambodia has been successful in addressing gender disparities in education in line with its Millennium Development Goal commitments. There are increasing numbers of female students, particularly at undergraduate level, but fewer women at graduate level and in faculty and leadership positions. Girls and women do face more barriers than their male counterparts in pursuing higher education and academic and research careers.

The Ministry of Education Policy on Higher Education Vision highlights the mismatch between education and employment, particularly relating to fostering the growth of the Cambodian economy and integration into ASEAN. It is recognized by many in government and higher education institutions that teaching and curricula need to be reformed to be more relevant and to better reflect the needs of the growing labour market and to help Cambodia transition towards middle-income status. Teaching within higher education is mainly by lecture, and teachers are constrained by long teaching hours, low pay and a lack of exposure to alternative pedagogy.

Online learning is at very early stages in Cambodia, but it is a growing initiative within the ASEAN region through the ASEAN Cyber University project. The Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC) has an e-learning centre and are learning to develop online courses and materials. The courses developed are currently providing "flipped" learning, whereby the lectures are put online to be accessed prior to the class so that practice and discussion can take place during the class.

Research access

While institutions in Phnom Penh are relatively well provided for in terms of libraries, the services provided by the libraries vary. Some of the institutions are well set up with computers, books and e-resource access, and others have older libraries, limited computer access and out-of-date publications. Libraries do have access to e-resources although access is varied and limited. There is generally a lack of investment in libraries by institutions, library staff are demotivated, and faculty and library rarely work together effectively. Language is often a barrier to access research, with many of the resources and e-resources in libraries being in French or English while the majority of university courses are taught in Khmer.

Internet is still slow and unreliable in many of the universities, but the ITC is now responsible for the CAMREN project, which started in 2012. CAMREN will link to the Trans Eurasia Information Network (TEIN 4), a large-scale research and education data and communications network for the Asia-Pacific region. Active membership of CAMREN is currently low, with only four universities, including ITC, accessing the network. However some services are beginning to be provided through CAMREN, including online courses.

Research demand

The research agenda in Cambodia has been driven by international donor interests and funds, and much of the research has been conducted by international consultants with Cambodian researchers working as research assistants and interpreters. Government investment in research development in Cambodia has been negligible, although in recent years there is evidence of increasing government commitment to research. The government development framework, the Rectangular Strategy, sets out the intention to develop science and policy within the country to transform Cambodia from an agricultural-based to an industrial-based economy. 0.2% of GDP has also been allocated towards research with an emphasis on science and technology. Research is included in the 2016-2030 Strategy on Higher Education in Cambodia.

The majority of universities are currently run as teaching rather than research institutes. Most universities do not yet have a clear research policy or institutional mechanisms to promote the quantity and quality of faculty research and there are relatively few faculty members with PhDs and research backgrounds. Currently only ITC has an operating research department comprising 30-50 researchers (80% with a PhD, but only 5% women). ITC is developing a policy for providing professorships to faculty conducting research. However, while there is a lack of an existing research culture in higher education overall, there is recognition of the importance of research and initial steps or commitment to prioritize a research agenda. The Higher Education Department is keen to improve research capabilities in higher education, and universities are planning to develop research frameworks and policies. The promotion of the importance of research within institutions is often led by younger, motivated faculty who have studied overseas and been exposed to a research culture.

Sharing and communicating research and knowledge

With limited research being conducted in Cambodia at academic level, there are few quality academic journals. Only one journal, The Cambodian Journal of Natural History, is cited as being a good-quality, peer-reviewed journal. Universities do publish non-peer reviewed journals or small bulletins and newsletters to provide an opportunity for faculty and students to publish their research. Again, with exposure to journals in the ASEAN region, Cambodian institutions are keen to improve their journal publishing standards.

With a limited range of academic journals in Cambodia, most research is published in international or regional journals. However, publication output is limited. Faculty members often have little incentive to publish currently as there are no financial rewards or promotion structures and teaching takes up the majority of their time. Research that is published is often part of research on donor projects and so is driven by external agendas rather than university agendas.

University communications such as websites tend to be outdated and research is not well disseminated. However, there are several well-known forums for communicating research in Cambodia and an increasing number of regional research forums.

Research for national development

The extent to which research is currently informing the national development agenda is limited. A lack of government investment in research in the past has meant that the research agenda has been very much linked to the global development agenda and led by the international development players such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. As a hybrid authoritarian country, the production and communication of what may be perceived as controversial research has often been challenging for the government and there have been instances of a certain amount of censorship. However, there are indications that the Cambodian government and development partners are looking at ways to strengthen governance and research capacity in key ministries, agencies and higher education institutions.

There are various research bodies that have responsibility for conducting policy research for government, but capacity and funding is often limited. Research institutes like the Cambodian Development Resource Institute (CDRI) play a key role in conducting policy research, but they also encounter problems in getting government policymakers engaged with research processes.

There are a range of higher-level policy forums, such as the Government Donor Coordination Committee and the Sectoral Joint Technical Working Groups, which are the main mechanisms for bringing together the different sectors of government, civil society and the donor community on a regular basis to discuss and input into development policy. Other fora for enabling research to influence policy include the Development Research Forum, established by the Cambodian Development Resource Institute (CDRI) in 2007 with the intention of bringing together Cambodian institutions and networks that undertake development policy research.

Existing development partners

Compared to primary and secondary education, there are fewer development partners engaged in support to higher education or research. Bilateral aid has tended to provide scholarship programmes, support to specific departments within institutions or collaborative research projects. Regionally, Cambodia's membership in ASEAN is reshaping the future of higher education and providing opportunities for reform including curricula review, assessment standardization, e-learning and greater mobility of students and teachers. It is also providing more access to funds from other ASEAN nations including Korea and Japan. China is also expected to be moving into education.

Sida is in the process of entering in to a five-year cooperation agreement with Cambodia to work on ICT infrastructure and capacity for e-learning, research access and online journals. The World Bank Higher Education and Quality Improvement Project is a USD 23 million five-year project that began in 2011 and will complete in 2017. It has included capacity building, research grants, scholarships and monitoring and evaluation. France has also supported Cambodia higher education since 1991 through a cooperation programme of technical support.