The politics of higher education in Cambodia

Cambodia is facing major challenges arising from its membership with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the new economic power house established in 2015. The AEC, in promoting the free flow of financial and human capital within its boundaries, will have far-reaching impacts on the labour markets in and across its member states. To keep pace with other countries in the AEC, the Cambodian government has turned its attention to Higher Education (HE) development to promote economic growth. As higher education is emerging as a sector of national strategic importance, it acquires significant political involvement.

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CAMBODIA IS STRUGGLING to establish a feasible tertiary education sector, wearing the scars of the destruction of its entire education system during a decade of civil war in the 1970s. The Khmer Rouge’s destruction of education, its Peace Accords in 1991 and the UN-led general elections in 1993, bilateral development assistance from multiple developed countries poured into the country from Australia, USA, Japan, and China, and the World Bank.5 The tiered system of education Institutions (HEIs) were heavily reliant on bilateral educational assistance from developed countries, and as a result foreign dominance over higher education was more pronounced than in other Southeast Asian countries.6 The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, which is dominated by the long-time communist ruler, was the first to offer extensive assistance to Cambodian HEIs in a wide range of knowledge areas. However, this support came with stipulations. Recipients such as the Institute of Technology of Cambodia were required to use French as the medium of instruction. Unsurprisingly, though, French left as the English language enjoyed growing popularity among young Cambodians. The story goes that students happily apply for French scholarships only to enrol in English language programs upon receiving the funding.7 US academic institutions also stepped up their collaboration with Cambodian HEIs, which eagerly adopted the American curriculum and programs of study.8

Commercialisation in higher education

The Americanisation of the HE sector in Cambodia coincided with the first major wave of international assistance to Cambodia in the mid-1990s, which unleashed the privatisation of the sector, allowing public HEIs to charge tuition fees and for private HEIs to open their doors.8 French HEIs, foreign-based religious groups, private investors and international NGOs established themselves in Cambodia to compete for student enrolments.9 As a consequence, the Cambodian HE sector soon entered a phase of rapid, largely unregulated, expansion.

Currently, the Cambodian HE sector counts 39 public and 62 private HEIs with over 250,000 enrolments, only 15,000 of which in postgraduate degree programs.10 While all Cambodian HEIs deliver undergraduate programs, only a few large HEIs offer postgraduate programs. Consequently, enrolments in undergraduate programs have shown a sharp increase since 2010 while enrolments in postgraduate programs are stagnating. The growth in HE is most pronounced in the private sector where enrolments exceed public university enrolments at all degree levels.11 While the increase in the number of HEIs and enrolments appears impressive in view of the ‘scorched earth’, after decades of civil war and foreign occupation in the 1970s and 1980s, Cambodia – with a HE gross enrolment rate of about 13 per cent – still holds the lowest rate in the AEC.

The low participation rate, while concerning in itself, is a symptom of more severe issues smouldering under the surface of the Cambodian HE enrolments. The most pressing issues – chronic lack of government funding, the absence of staff development and trivialisation of curricula – casts a shadow on Cambodia’s HE, while leading in terms of economic growth in the region, persistently fails to adequately nurture its HE sector. Public HEIs are grossly under-funded and hampered by centralised ministerial control.12 In 2013, the government’s total annual educational expenditure amounted to about 2 per cent of GDP while public higher education expenditure received only 0.1 per cent of GDP.13 A large portion of the HE budget is spent on staff remuneration, leaving hardly any funding for staff development, quality assurance, or improvement of educational infrastructure. For the latter, Cambodia public HEIs still depend on support from international partners and donors such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.14 Public HEIs have increasingly become dependent on student tuition fees as their major source of income, funding them in direct competition with private institutions.15 Consequently, issues of quality and relevance continue to affect the sector. Efforts to raise enrolments often lack external funding or quality standards, notwithstanding government efforts such as the establishment of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia in 2003 – to act as an external quality body and promote quality.16 Most Cambodian public and private universities do not apply admission requirements beyond the results of the final national high school examinations. However, widespread corruption in the school system, where underpaid teachers are susceptible to payments from students in exchange for (passing) grades, does not bode well for school diplomas as an adequate indicator of academic qualification.

The pressure of increasing student numbers in both public and private HEIs inevitably affects academic staff. Salaries in the public sector are by far the lowest in the region, less than USD 300 per month for a full-time university lecturer, insufficient for a family’s basic needs. Therefore, public university lecturers have to take on additional part-time teaching in private institutions to make ends meet. Research is virtually absent from Cambodian universities. Unsurprisingly, few academics hold PhDs from Cambodian universities.17 Those who do, find hardly any incentives to assume leadership positions in academia. Academic relevance, or the lack thereof, is also detrimental to the HE sector. Curriculum changes regarding the requirements and preferences of foreign donors or investors or, conversely, are dictated by commercial interests. The knowledge and skills provided in universities do not match the needs of the Cambodian labour market. Unemployment among Cambodian graduates is soaring.18 Responding to student demand, both public and private HEIs focus on commerce, economics and IT. Business Studies is the most popular program among Cambodian students as their expectation is that a business degree guarantees a well-paid job in an air-conditioned office. However, employment in these areas is saturated, while the labour market is in desperate need of qualified graduates in science, mathematics, agriculture and health.19 From a lack of government funding, public univer- sities are unable to increase enrolments in science programs as the required facilities (equipment, laboratories and qualified staff) are insufficient to absorb more students.

Political predicament

Returning to the guiding question of why Cambodia, despite rapid economic growth, remains unable to lift its HE sector out of the vicious circle of underfunding, under-performance and underdevelopment? The short answer is: politics. The HE sector in Cambodia is an arena for the ruling party to bestow favours, rewards, and prestige on those who support it. Through this autocratic HE sector, the Cambodian government is able to assert autonomy of HEIs to govern themselves or academic freedom to push the quality of education. Public academic institutions are under centralised control, including the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports and 11 other ministries and government agencies. The government has granted the status of HEIs to the Cambodian universities, while many state public universities, apparently to provide them with greater autonomy in academic and financial issues.20 However, the political parties and parent ministries are actively involved in making important decisions in the administration of these PMUs, and public HEIs in general. Promotion to senior academic leadership positions is subject to party membership. There are myriad examples of highly qualified staff who have been demoted because they refused to pledge their allegiance to the ruling party. Furthermore, curricula and course content are scrutinised for subjects related to human rights, social justice, democracy, transparency and good governance, and critical debates are banned in Cambodian HEIs.

Similarly, private HEIs are not exempt from party politics. An estimated 50 per cent of the private HEIs are established by returnees from France, the United States, Canada and Australia.21 The role of returnees in Cambodian private life is controversial because, in the eyes of many Cambodians who lived through the terrors of the Pol Pot regime and the Vietnamese occupation, they either represent conservative forces attempting to re-establish traditional Khmer society or are engaged in foreign hegemony interests.22 Most importantly, returnees are under suspicion of disloyalty to the ruling party because many support the opposition, if not overtly, then covertly.23

Behind the shimming façade of Cambodia’s sustained GDP growth is a narrowing but persistent gap between the new middle classes and the urban and rural poor, a gap that is sustained by an education system that is in dire need of reform. Higher education, in particular, lags behind. Much of Cambodia’s HE sector is commercially driven and fails to support the development of a viable domestic economy. For the ASEAN common market to incentivise the Cambodian HE sector to catch up with standards in the region, it would also have to interfere with Cambodian politics, which, in view of the delicate power balance revolving around the unresolved South China Sea issue, is most unlikely.

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References


