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CAMBODIAN HIGHER EDUCATION DIVERSITY: TOWARDS DIFFERENTIATION OR HOMOGENEITY?

Introduction

Over the past decades, the global expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs), in terms of access and type of further education, has been unprecedented and represents a true revolution in postsecondary education (Altbach 2017). This massification of higher education results in ever more complex service provision and greater diversity among HEIs. More pressing in developing countries is the divergence in expectations of the quality, outputs and roles of HEIs. At present, HEIs exist in 19 of Cambodia's 25 provinces and Phnom Penh. Fifteen different government agencies supervise a total of 121 HEIs, making governance and quality control a daunting task. Education-job mismatch means that the skills graduates acquire in their study programs bear little relevance to the technical skills, knowledge and attitudes required by employers, enterprises and society at large in the 21st century (Khieng, Madhur and Chhem 2015). It is generally agreed that most HEIs in Cambodia focus on teaching, with scant attention paid to research, innovation



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and industrial engagement. In this regard, one can argue that all Cambodian HEIs, particularly universities, are the same type of institute: a teaching university.

Cambodian HEIs, both public and private, face tremendous challenges, including a lack of funding, poor quality teachers, weak administration, and increased intensity from regional and international integration of higher education and economies. In addition, the

Khieng Sothy, senior research fellow, Leng Phiom, research fellow, and Chhem Rethy, executive director, with assistance from Tek Muytieng, research assistant. Please cite as Khieng Sothy, Leng Phiom and Chhem Rethy, with Tek Muytieng. "Cambodian Higher Education Diversity: Towards Differentiation or Homogeneity?" *Cambodia Development Review* 21 (4): 1–7.

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government has high expectations of how HEIs should contribute to national development; their roles are outlined in Industrial Development Policy 2015–25, Cambodia’s National Science and Technology Master Plan 2014–20, and Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond.

Despite rapid growth in the number of HEIs and sharp rise in enrolments, there is little evidence that these developments have laid the foundation for a diverse higher education system that fulfils the various (and sometimes differing) needs of students, employers, the economy and the country as a whole (Schubert, Bentley and Goedegebuure 2016), an issue that is prevalent across the Asia Pacific region. This has raised a serious question of whether the rapid expansion of Cambodian HEIs over the past two decades has resulted in a diverse system with homogenous (or similar) programs or a differentiated system in which a wide range of courses and qualifications have been provided, in response to the newly emerging and differing needs of students and society. From a policy perspective, this lack of a clearly categorised system of higher education has posed a big challenge for the government, particularly when it comes to providing support for research or quality improvement. Likewise, international partners seeking to engage and support local HEIs often have inadequate information about their orientation and quality.

This paper reviews the different types of Cambodian HEIs, arguing that the expansion of Cambodian higher education has experienced institution diversity without much differentiation, particularly at the program and course levels. It begins with a discussion of the importance of higher education diversity. Next, we discuss the legal framework and previous research on the mapping of higher education diversity and the classification of HEIs. We then discuss the most recent trends in diversity at HEIs. This is followed by a brief review of the gaps in previous approaches to higher education diversity, classification and typology in Cambodia. We conclude by raising some questions and proposing some directions for future research.

Why does higher education diversity matter?

Amid the growth and expansion of higher

education worldwide, the benefits of diversified and differentiated systems of postsecondary education have been well documented (van der Wende 2008; van Vught and Huisman 2013; Varghese 2014). In the words of Goedegebuure et al. (2017, 8):

More diverse systems tend to perform better because they meet diverse student needs, are better equipped to stimulate social mobility through different access points and progress pathways, are better linked to labour markets that increasingly require different types of graduates and allow for more cost-effective delivery of both education and research through specialisation.

Similarly, from a governance and policy perspective, van der Wende (2008, 52) asserts that “diversity is as important as autonomy in order to achieve wider access and higher quality”. Evidence suggests that the benefits of higher education diversification can only be achieved when there is differentiation at both institutional and program levels. Hence, some commentators caution that diversity without differentiation or overdiversification, including mission drift and unproductive competition between private higher education providers, could lead to “subprime degrees” (Ford 2013) and “reputation race” (van der Wende 2008).

Adding to complexity in higher education is that the diversity and classification of HEIs have evolved, intentionally or not, to become the rankings used by governments to pit their HEIs against each other in “the global knowledge race” (Altbach 2012, 27). On a positive note, these rankings are used by students and their parents to select HEIs, by HEIs to benchmark performance, and by governments to allocate funding and other resources. Many developed countries and emerging economies have joined the ranking race to develop so-called world-class HEIs.

Position in global rankings, however, does not always bode well for universities with limited resources. This is because rankings indicators are biased towards the Anglo-American system and its context, and might not be useful for assessing HEIs in non-Western societies. Rankings or

classification in higher education can result in the unequal distribution of resources, with top-tier or world-class research universities receiving more funding than the rest. For instance, teaching is a core mission of HEIs, but most international rankings do not consider teaching performance as a metric. In many countries, this has resulted in mission drift as more institutions compete for research funding (van der Wende 2008). What principally matters are the subjects HEIs offer: sciences, engineering and medicine receive the most attention in the rankings, marginalising social sciences and humanities. The top 100 universities account for just 0.5 percent of over 18,000 HEIs worldwide, or 0.4 percent of global tertiary enrolment (Altbach and Hazelkorn 2017), meaning overemphasis on the rankings would ignore wider education needs. Overall, the debate about diversity in higher education is not whether it is a good thing, but rather what type and level of diversity a country should aim for: systemic, institutional or programmatic? It is critical to ask whether diversification has led to differentiation and meaningful human resource development that fits the societal development needs of that country (van der Wende 2008).

In sum, the main purpose of higher education diversification is to create alternatives to traditional universities, such as vocational and technical schools, polytechnics, short-cycle higher education institutions, and community colleges. These TVET institutes' mandates were to produce quality and skilled workers to meet national labour market demands (Chhem 1997; Phan 2015). Another purpose is to increase the options available to students and match higher education to students' ability, preferences and needs (Machado et al. 2008).

Cambodia's higher education development: Towards diversification or homogeneity?

Cambodia Education Law defines HEIs as "centers for education and study, which provided the specialised education and training levels after general education (secondary education)" (RGC 2007, 16). The number of HEIs has grown from eight, mostly in Phnom Penh, in 1996 to 121 located in 19 provinces and the capital in 2018. Six in every 10 HEIs are private. The number

of enrolments has increased significantly in the last two decades from 13,464 students in 1996 (World Bank 2010) to over 217,840 in 2015-16 (MOEYS 2017), accounting for about 12 percent of the 18–23 age group. Even with this growth, Cambodia has the lowest tertiary enrolment rate in the ASEAN region and is still below the massification threshold of 15 percent defined by Martin Trow (2007).

Recent research indicates that many licensed universities do not meet the technical requirements for university status (Ford 2013, 15–16). A year after his appointment as education minister in 2013, Dr Hang Chuon Naron called for a partial moratorium on issuing licences for new HEIs, stating that the main role of a university should be to "train people who can [then] find jobs... Otherwise you cannot call them universities, you can call them factories to produce diplomas" (Brito 2015, 1). Many of the institutes in question are private, commercially oriented and focus on business majors, ignoring the much-needed skills in agriculture, science and technology. This misalignment between university orientation, education quality and socioeconomic development (Chet, Ford and Ahrens in press) has attracted significant attention and investment from the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and the private sector. This process implies both vocationalisation of higher education and academicisation of TVET.

The recent spate of support and resources for Cambodian higher education development can arguably be described as diversification in postsecondary education. Theoretically, diversification has several connotations. It can mean "a drift towards vocational or employment-relevant courses, allowing for flexibility of study programmes" (Varghese 2014, 17). In national higher education, it refers to "the growing variety of its aims and operations" (Varghese 2014, 26). Another form of diversification is the expansion of HEI campuses to provincial centres in response to increasing demand from different groups of clientele and locations (Ford 2006).

Academic dialogues and comments on diversity fall short of providing empirical and systematic data; no studies that directly investigate higher

education diversity in Cambodia have been reported. Although some studies suggest diversification (Chhem 1997; Ford 2006), it is not clear whether this diversification contributes to differentiation, a concept which Altbach et al. (2017, 22) refer to as “a strategy and coordination with useful distinctions made between institutions based on their purpose”. According to an earlier study, “irrelevance and low diversification of curriculum and instruction” are major reasons for the existing skills mismatch (Phan 2015, 77). In this case, the narrow range of business studies programs offered by many HEIs suggests homogeneity (Ford 2013; ADB 2012).

All this raises the question of whether government efforts to develop higher education diversity has resulted in program and course differentiation that serves the needs of different groups of students or homogeneity across HEIs, despite the different types of institutions.

Cambodia’s diversity and classification of HEIs

We start this section by discussing the legal definition of HEIs, followed by a critical review of the literature (Chhem 1997; Phan 2015; MOEYS 2017; Sam 2017) on the diversity, classification and typology of Cambodian HEIs.

Legal framework

The 2007 Prakas on Conditions and Detail Criteria on the Establishment of Higher Educational Institutes classifies HEIs into three categories: academies, universities and colleges specialising in particular fields. The main role of the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC) is to conduct research and provide postgraduate degree programs. But, the lack of adequate resources may result in tension between its dual roles as a research centre and the duty to teach massive number of students. One report proposed a review of the RAC to clarify its function as an HEI and its future status (Innes-Brown 2006). Article 6 of the 2002 Sub-decree on Criteria for the Establishment of University states that the “Educational structure of a university is a combination of various colleges and departments to provide training program up from the level of Bachelor with a minimum duration of three (3) years or more than that”; Article 7 states that

“A university shall consist of 3 colleges” (arts, humanities and languages; mathematics and sciences; and social sciences) and at least two other colleges that offer certain specialisations (RGC 2002, 3). However, many of the existing HEIs do not meet these requirements.

Diversity studies

Diversification of the postsecondary education system can be traced back to efforts in the 1960s to tackle universities’ output deficiencies (Chhem 1997, 49). Diversity was then synonymous with the establishment of professional educational institutions, the aims of which were to align education with labour market needs and to provide alternatives for students not accepted by the university system. Chhem’s (1997) attempt to propose a classification and typology for Cambodian higher education in the mid-1990s faced many difficulties due to its hybrid system that has adopted French, Russian and more recently American and Australian models – a legacy of the strong foreign influences in recent history. Yet, analyses have associated Cambodian higher education with an “elitist system” (Kerr 1979), “production milieu and an intellectual mould” and “a power university” (Jacques Drèze and Debelle 1968). In this regard, professional and technical orientation was prioritised over liberal arts education, perhaps due to the belief that “an education that does not prepare graduates for the workplace is doomed to fail, especially in a poor country with limited human resources” (Harbison and Myers 1964 cited in Chhem 1997, 87).

In the 2000s, another classification attempt was commissioned by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (Innes-Brown 2006). The report tentatively suggested three broadly defined tiers of HEIs, ranging from higher quality HEIs in tier 1, those with “variable quality and resources” in tier 2, and HEIs that “failed to mature as tertiary institutions” in tier 3. Some of the main criteria used were governance and financing, quality assurance, research output and influence, international orientation and language of instruction. However, the dimensions and justifications made in the classification are problematic because it is both “unfair and unrealistic”, the author acknowledged. Despite

its limitations, the report has played a significant role in the development of Cambodia's Education Country Profile, an initiative of the Department of Education of Australia. A review of the Country Profile in 2017 revealed that little has been updated to reflect the status of Cambodian higher education. Other Australian government agencies and higher education institutions appear to have relied mainly on the Education Country Profile to make decisions about the qualification standards of Cambodian HEIs and students and therefore the acceptance of students from Cambodia at Australian HEIs, and the placement of students from Australia at Cambodian HEIs.

Hardly any other reports specifically map higher education diversity in Cambodia. A few scholars (Phan 2015; Sam 2017; Chan et al. 2008) and policy documents (MOEYS 2017) discuss diversity topics indirectly and anecdotally. Sam's (2017) analysis of institutional governance classifies HEIs into three types: public administrative institute (PAI), private HEI and public HEI. PAIs are characterised by decentralised institutional governance, private HEIs by top-down (or starfish) governance, and public HEIs by centralised (or spider-web) governance.¹ Another research study in 2015, titled "Envisioning a Higher Education System for the 21st Century: Cambodia", proposed a two-tier system with only a few universities serving the elite and the majority of HEIs (polytechnics and TVET institutes) serving vocational and professional training needs (Phan 2015, 294). In 2017, a government-driven document (MOEYS 2017) on the Higher Education Roadmap 2030 and Beyond envisioned a tiered system of four ideal HEI types (Table 1). The ministry aims to have all HEIs classified based on this typology by 2025 and a "functional tier system implemented by 2030" (MOEYS 2017, 24). Despite their emphasis on the importance of a diversified higher education system, none of these reports delved into how institutions should be differentiated.

¹ This complex governance system where there are private HEIs and fee-paying programs within public HEIs is a challenge for establishing an ideal typology, which should be for one system and one country.

Table 1: Proposed four-tier hierarchy in higher education

(1) technical institute and community college
(2) specialised university
(3) comprehensive university
(4) research university

Source: MOEYS 2017

Efforts to highlight program diversity across HEIs include a Directory of Higher Education Institutions in Phnom Penh (Chan et al. 2008) and a larger national Institutional Guide (MOEYS 2016), both of which provide descriptive information about tertiary programs to help students choose which major and career path to pursue, with the hope of minimising skill mismatch by better responding to market needs.

Conclusion and further research

Since these first attempts to study diversity or classify Cambodian HEIs, there have been remarkable changes in terms of new HEIs, quality improvement albeit uneven, and governance and financing. With such rapid and unregulated growth of higher education and the nascent research into its diversity, there is a strong argument for further analysis and investigation of this field. There are many important questions and issues that the literature cannot answer. Beyond the main question of how diversified the system is, another critical question is whether HEIs respond to students' aspirations for further education.

The findings and insights from diversity studies will be critical for many stakeholders in higher education: education leaders, teaching and professional staff, policymakers, industry groups, and international development partners. Eventually, HEI clientele will also benefit from in-depth analysis of higher education diversity, including program orientation. It will also bridge the knowledge gaps in theoretical understanding on how to manage higher education diversity (or homogeneity) in a developing country that is pro-growth and has liberal market policies, but remains largely dependent on international assistance. Perhaps the challenges facing diversification are best summed up by a recent analysis:

[Postsecondary education] is passing through a period of anarchy, being diversified by a wide range of purposes and clientele and seemingly beyond the capacity of any government to manage these changes well. The way forward is to turn that anarchy into a coherent and integrated system of good quality postsecondary institutions but that will take enormous political will, budget and, most importantly, time. (Altbach, Reisberg and de Wit 2017, 13)

The following issues warrant further investigation through empirical research and debate.

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- What does diversity in higher education mean? Why does it matter?
 - What theoretical perspectives can we use to explain diversity in higher education? What factors affect diversity? How can diversity be measured?
 - What are the international experiences of mapping higher education diversity?
 - Does the higher education system respond to the specific education needs for industrialisation and Cambodia Vision 2030 towards realising a knowledge-based economy?

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