

Higher Education Development

The Government is undertaking major initiatives to promote the quality and efficiency of higher education in Cambodia. Dr. Luise Ahrens and Dr. Frances Kemmerer summarise the background, status, and current strategies for subsector development.*

Background

Cambodia occupies a special status even among post-conflict nations. The extraordinary turmoil of the second half of the 20th century seriously undermined the socio-economic fabric and institutional framework of the nation, and no sector was more affected than education. The Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979 engendered tragic loss in every sector of Cambodian society. An estimated one-to-two million men, women and children died, including untold numbers of teachers and other professionally trained individuals. School buildings and other physical infrastructure not actually destroyed were abandoned and neglected during the period. Thus even after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979 it was very difficult to renew the process of nation building. Within the education system, only a handful of qualified higher education faculty people survived and the damage done to higher education continues to be played out in the formation of new teachers and the flow of ideas upon which the entire system depends. Moreover, Cambodia's gradual transition to a market economy since 1989 has placed important new demands on higher education institutions.

For these reasons there has been an intense focus on the higher education subsector since 1990. Subsector studies have all documented both the need for a viable strategy for reform and concurred on a surprising number of specific recommendations. The recommendations of the major studies are summarised below. These include a UNESCO-supported Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MoEYS) study (RGC and UNESCO 1994); an Asian Development Bank supported study (RGC and ADB 1994); the donor supported *National Action Plan (NAP)* (NHETF 1997); and a World Bank funded study (Zhang 1997).

Academic Programme Quality and Relevance

1. Improve the quality of the teaching faculty through provision of opportunities for advanced degrees
2. Revise programmes to respond more efficiently to national economic and social needs

3. Institute a credit unit system to facilitate student transfers
4. Produce local instructional materials in a systematic manner

Resources

1. Increase the resources to public institutions through a cost sharing system consisting of government subsidies, student fees, and government loans/scholarships for students
2. Establish a financial management system in institutions that is characterised by transparency and accountability
3. Revise student financial aid policies to improve access and equity for women and disadvantaged but able students

Organisation and Structure

1. Create a legal framework for higher education
2. Develop a national plan for education
3. Redefine the roles and responsibilities of government and institutions with greater autonomy for the institutions
4. Reform admissions and examination systems
5. Rationalise faculty numbers and assignments
6. Expand access through encouraging private institutions, part-time programmes, distance education, or public campuses outside Phnom Penh

The National Action Plan, built on a host of highly focussed studies of the issues identified in the 1994 sector studies, was submitted to Government in April of 1997. Before the Council of Ministers could endorse the Plan and send it to the National Assembly for formal consideration, the NAP process was overtaken by the events of July 1997. Peaceful elections in July 1998 signalled the possibility of renewed formal progress in higher education. In March 1999, MoEYS convened a workshop on higher education, attended by representatives of all higher education institutions (HEIs) and other Cambodian stakeholders. The workshop endorsed many of the NAP recommendations but implementation of its recommendations was delayed by ongoing debate over management and finance issues.

Even as the debate continued, the World Bank in 1999, at the Government's request, made available technical assistance to lay the groundwork for the much needed quality assurance and institutional financial management systems. The success of this work led, in turn, to a Government request for financial support to assist in the creation of a legal/regulatory framework for higher education, the development of a system of accreditation and quality assurance, and the strengthening of financial management systems in higher education.

At the same time, the MoEYS in the *Education Strategic Plan 2001-5* and the *Education Sector Support Programme 2001-5* articulated the Government's commitment to the NAP recommendations. Objectives for the next five years therefore include: a new legislative framework, a more efficient and transparent admission

* Dr. Luise Ahrens is an advisor to the Royal University of Phnom Penh and Dr. Frances Kemmerer is an adviser to the Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

system, increased capacity of the teaching faculty, enhanced programme relevance, a new quality assurance and accreditation scheme, and improved institutional governance through the addition of boards with broad-based representation. Implementation of the objectives will be financed through categorical government grants and through partnerships among government, parents and students, and donor grants and loans. The MoEYS also expects 100% expansion of the sector by 2005, with the private sector capturing 85% of the growth.

Status of the Subsector

In academic year 2000-2001, the higher education system comprised five public universities, three semi-independent specialised institutes or faculties, and six recognised private higher education institutions. These institutions served approximately 25,000 students.

The summary statistics shown in the table, however, do not capture the fluidity of the system. First, new institutions of varying levels of quality are opening each month and secondly, recognised institutions are expanding the numbers of programmes offered. In the absence of an accreditation system, "recognition" remains as much a political as a technical process.

Many public institutions remain dramatically under-financed as government subsidies are negligible and, rather than charging fees of all higher education students, sharp divisions between fee-paying students and the unfunded-scholarship students are maintained.¹ This fragmentation within institutions results in enormous financial and managerial inefficiencies as budgets remain decentralised to the faculty level and teacher time and

other resources are not maximised. It also negatively impacts teacher incentives as teachers in fee-paying programmes receive salary supplements, while teachers in scholarship programmes receive only their civil service salaries.

Both the number of new higher education institutions and the expansion of public fee-paying programmes indicate a strong social demand for higher education. With the number of students exiting senior secondary school expected to quadruple over the next 10 years, the number of places in higher education will need to expand four-

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fold to 100,000 simply to maintain the current high school/higher education transition rate.

It can be argued that even if the four-fold increase is achieved the higher education system is too small to meet the development needs of the country. The gross enrolment rate in tertiary education is

1.2%, compared to an average of 20.7% in ASEAN countries and 5.1% in low income countries worldwide (see Table 2). The lack of highly skilled people is a severe constraint on development in the public and private sectors, and results in a heavy dependence on expensive foreign technical assistance. For example, within the education sector fewer than 5% of teachers have a university degree. There are only 58 physicians and 136 nurses per 100,000 people; yet the University of Health Sciences plans to graduate only 192 health workers in 2001; this in a country with some of the worst health indicators in the region. The Royal University of Agriculture will graduate only 104 foresters, aquaculturists, or agriculturalists; and the Cambodia Institute of Technology will graduate only 78 technicians.

Table 1. Higher Education Enrolments 2000-2001

	Total	Percentage of Women	Percentage of Scholarship	Percentage of Scholarship for Women
Public				
Royal University of Agriculture	815	12%	91%	12%
Royal University of Fine Arts	519	23%	100%	23%
Royal University of Phnom Penh	4705	26%	53%	32%
Maharishi Vedic University	423	6%	86%	4%
National Institute of Management	8526	36%	8%	30%
Institute of Technology of Cambodia	268	6%	77%	7%
Faculty of Law & Economic Science	3196	23%	25%	26%
University of Health Sciences	852	26%	100%	26%
Private				
Norton University	3619	23%		
Institute of Technology and Management	543	26%		
Faculty of Management & Law	612	22%		
Faculty of Washington D.C.	281	32%		
Institute of Management and Economics	195	22%		
International Institute of Cambodia	329	28%		
	24982			

Note: Preparatory course enrolments are not included

Source: Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Department of Higher Education, 2001.

Table 2. Selected indicators, 1997 (or closest year available)

	Per Capita GNP (US\$)	Gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education	Number of tertiary students per 100,000 inhabitants	Public expenditure on education as a % of GNP	Public current expenditure per tertiary student, as a % of GNP PC	Adult illiteracy
Cambodia	280	1.2	85	2.9	29.9	63.7
Vietnam	330	6.9	678	3.0	87.8	7.4
Thailand	2,720	22.1	2,252	4.8	26.7	5.3
Malaysia	4,550	11.7	1,048	4.9	57.3	14.3
ASEAN		20.7		3.8	49.4	9.0
East Asia and Pacific		15.2		3.5	49.9	10.5
Low-income countries		5.1		3.7		43.0

Source: Table analysis from RGC, MoEYS, and World Bank 2001.

The imperative for growth and development of higher education is clear. Cambodia currently depends on a large contingent of expatriate technical advisors to fill middle and upper level management roles. It must begin to generate greater numbers of highly skilled people to assume leadership positions in Government and the private sector. Moreover, it must develop a cadre of people who will be able to deal creatively with issues associated to environmental management, poverty alleviation, provision of education and health care, growth and globalisation.

If Cambodia's pattern of development is to follow that of its neighbours, this will imply a large expansion of the higher education system during the coming decades. The enrolment rate in higher education in Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia grew rapidly (Figure 1) as each country approached its economic "take off" point (Figure 2). By 1997 the gross enrolment rate was 22% in Thailand, 12% in Malaysia, and 7% in Vietnam. Rising incomes and growing labour market opportunities fuelled demand for higher education in those countries. A steady supply of skilled graduates, in turn, helped to ensure that the economies continued to grow and develop. In Cambodia the combination of economic growth and the projected doubling of the number of 18-23 year olds in the next 25 years would lead to demand for tens of thousands of new university places if enrolments expand from just 1% to 5% of the university age population.² The role of the private sector in the provision of education will likely grow. And Cambodian universities

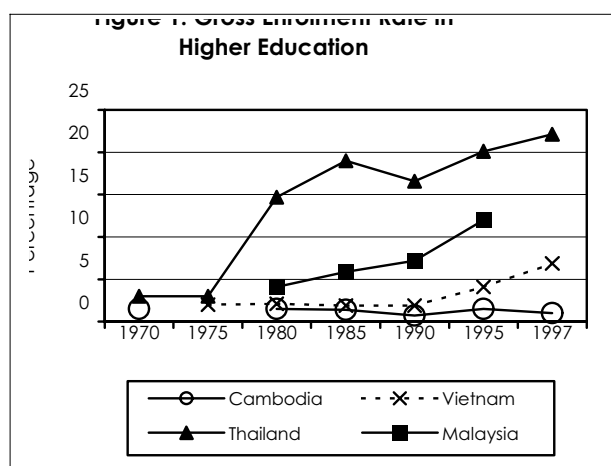
should gradually enter "the world academic system," with a common set of definitions, academic and management structures, and a freer flow of students and staff across borders.³

Strategies for Expansion and Development of the Tertiary Education System

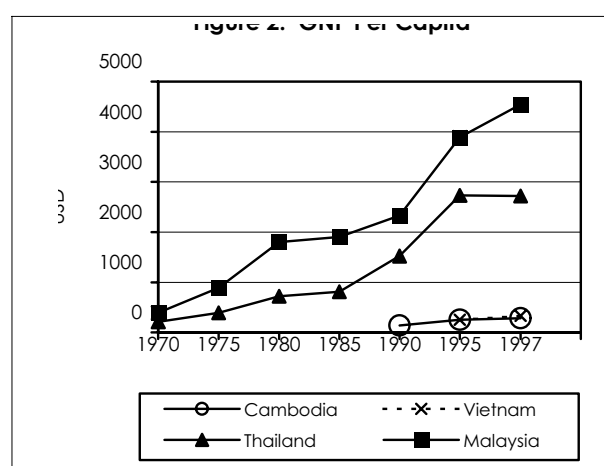
If the rationale for higher education investment and development are obvious, viable strategies for change, in the past, have proved elusive. The Royal Government of Cambodia now, however, has determined that a legislative framework is the foundational step that needs to be taken in order to implement the various directions for development that have been advocated over the years (RGC 2001a; RGC 2001b). Financial resources required for higher education improvement and reform are significant and without legal support, both donors and government would find it hard to make the investments needed in the sector. Government has indicated that priorities for the education budget are for basic education and non-formal education, although present budget support for tertiary civil service salaries and Priority Action Plan tertiary spending will remain at the same levels; this is an even greater incentive for the regulation and rationalisation of tertiary spending.

The Royal Government of Cambodia asked the World Bank for assistance in the design of a legal framework and areas to be addressed are as follows:

1. Higher education needs to be situated within the legal framework of Cambodia and within the education



Source: Figures and analysis from RGC and World Bank 2001b



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sector. It belabours the point to say that without a quality tertiary education system, rationalised to meet both developmental and societal needs of Cambodia, there cannot be improvement in any of the other educational sectors. In the long term, an overall “education law” is to be developed: higher education is the first step in the legal process.

2. An accreditation committee is required that will assist the various higher education institutions (HEIs) to begin quality assurance processes both within the institutions and among the various HEIs, both public and private, that comprise the tertiary system in Cambodia. Minimum standards need to be established so that current institutions as well as groups/persons desiring to establish institutions have some guidelines within which to operate. There is no doubt that the system must and will expand to meet increasing needs; how it expands in terms of quality and systemic convergence are the issues that need to be addressed. Future students need to know what they are getting when they enter the system, and public information about quality issues is key to their capacity to choose the institutions they want to enter.
3. Systemic regulation is needed in order that transfer among institutions is possible. Transfer assumes basic coherence in credit systems, assessment policies, admissions standards, length of school year, etc. It also presumes that HEIs, that are called “universities”, are indeed what they are called. Lack of clarity in this matter of definition creates problems in the regulatory systems required for a system of higher education. For example, there must be no confusion between a technical-vocational institution that provides skill training and an Institute of Technology that provides a Bachelor of Science in engineering. In addition, there is a need to relate the programmes offered in HEIs to the market and to the needs of Cambodia. These sometimes-conflicting demands have to be debated in the public forum and the institutions need to be responsive to the expressed needs of market and country.
4. Management and finance within the HEIs in Cambodia are significant support systems that need to be addressed. Governing Boards, transparency of financial transactions, fee-scales, clear job descriptions and related appointment of personnel—all have been raised as issues needing clarity and direction in the law. The beneficiaries of such clarity are the students and the institutions themselves. The HEIs are seeking greater autonomy; good management of personnel and finance, acknowledged through public reporting and sharing of information, are key to this process.
5. As seen earlier in this article, the legacy of the past decades in Cambodia is the reality of a tertiary teaching service that is, for the most part, lacking the degrees and competence to lecture at the level required. Limited access to professional resources, such as books, periodicals, and INTERNET, minimal re-training courses, out-dated degrees and teaching methodologies, low salary scale and poor incorpora-

tion of the few well-trained staff have all combined to limit the development of even the best of the teachers in the system. It is not a lack of goodwill that holds people back, it is a lack of salary and clear criteria for and rewards for performance, a lack of academic planning linked to additional training, and a lack of opportunities for rigorous study in this country, and the small number of opportunities to study at foreign universities.

6. These issues will not all be addressed at the same time and with the same intensity by the new legal framework. But it is the hope of the Royal Government of Cambodia that the new higher education law will provide the foundation on which a high quality, responsive system for tertiary education can be developed and sustained. With a good higher education system, the admirable human resource efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia will be assisted and their efforts made fruitful.

Endnotes

- 1 Government now determines the number of scholarships it places at each public institution. However, government subsidies do not cover the true cost of providing instruction to these students.
- 2 The population of 18-23 year olds is projected to grow from 983,000 in 2000 to 1,805,000 in 2025. An increase in the gross enrolment rate to just 5% would therefore translate into the need for approximately 90,000 university places, up from approximately 10,000 today.
- 3 For a fuller discussion of trends and a detailed description of the development of higher education in several Asian countries, see Gerard and Mak 1997.

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