

Higher education in Cambodia: Engendered, postcolonial Western influences and Asian values

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សង្ខេប

ស្នាដៃស្រាវជ្រាវនេះមានគោលបំណងកំណត់រកនូវការជះឥទ្ធិពលជាប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រ ពីខាងក្រៅប្រទេសលើវិស័យអប់រំខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់នៅកម្ពុជា និងរបៀបដែលឥទ្ធិពលនេះ ប៉ះពាល់តម្លៃប្រពៃណី និងទស្សនៈវប្បធម៌សង្គមក្នុងប្រទេស។ ការសិក្សានេះផ្តល់នូវ ទិដ្ឋភាពរួមនៃការជះឥទ្ធិពលបច្ចុប្បន្នពីប្រព័ន្ធអប់រំបែបសេរីភារូបនីយកម្មនៃបណ្តា ប្រទេសលោកខាងលិចមកលើការអប់រំខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់នៅកម្ពុជា។ ដោយផ្អែកលើការ រំលឹកទ្រឹស្តីបែបវិភាគលម្អិត ការសិក្សានេះរកឃើញរបៀបដែលតម្លៃប្រពៃណីនិងការ ប្រតិបត្តិជាប់ទាក់ទងគ្នាជាមួយឥទ្ធិពលទំនើបមកពីក្រៅប្រទេស។ ការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ រកឃើញថា ការលេចឡើងនៃគំរូប្រព័ន្ធអប់រំបែបកូនកាត់គឺជាប់ទាក់ទងនឹងសង្គ្រាមរ៉ាំ រ៉ៃនៅកម្ពុជា បានកើតឡើងតាមរយៈរបៀបវារៈអភិវឌ្ឍផ្សេងៗគ្នា ដោយឆ្លុះបញ្ចាំងនូវ ការតស៊ូប្រកបដោយតម្លៃប្រពៃណី កេរតំណែលវប្បធម៌ និងប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រ។ អត្ថបទ ស្រាវជ្រាវនេះលើកឡើងនូវគំនិតគោល ៗសម្រាប់គោលដំហរគោលនយោបាយ កំណែទម្រង់ខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់ដោយឆ្លុះបញ្ចាំងពីគំរូកូនកាត់នេះដែលតស៊ូមតិសម្រាប់ឥទ្ធិពល វប្បធម៌ប្រពៃណីនិងឥទ្ធិពលប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រដែលត្រូវបានលើកកម្ពស់ទន្ទឹមនឹងការជំរុញ ភាពទំនើបកម្ម។

Abstract

This research identifies the external historical influences on higher education in Cambodia and how this has affected local traditional values and socio-cultural perspectives. It provides an overview of the major contemporary Western neoliberal influences in this context. A critical review of the literature explores how traditional values and practices have interacted with these modern external influences. The paper finds that an emerging hybrid model has evolved in post-conflict Cambodia, formed via different development agendas, reflecting a struggle with traditional values, cultural heritage and history. The paper outlines a policy position for higher learning reform reflecting this hybrid model that advocates for traditional cultural, and historical influences to be promoted alongside a drive for modernization.

Keywords: higher education, Asian values, engendered postcolonialism, Western influences, Cambodia

Introduction

In post-conflict states, regime change may only show *“the gap between the new emerging discourses and old persistent practices”* (Fimyar, 2008, p. 572). This contextual reality can exhibit national instability, dependence on foreign aid, weak state institutions, and corruption that inhibits social, economic, and political transformations. Hence, higher learning models are linked to historical and political environments, as well as the socio-cultural context. From a transitional socio-political perspective, higher education policies and practice have become the terrain of competing interests that often manifests as political symbolism (Jansen, 2002).

Models from the developed countries, such as the USA, UK, France, and Australia have strongly influenced the development of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Asian nations, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore;

as well as developing Asian economies, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. This influence has been exerted as a result of colonization, as well as structural adjustment policies linked to overseas development assistance. Academic literature has focused on identifying whether Asia has its own higher learning model (Arnové, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2013; Kim., 2010; Marginson, 2011; Selvaratnam, 1988). While Marginson (2011) suggests that this does not exist, others claim that Asian has developed a hybrid system of higher learning (Jung, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2013; Lingard, 2018; Sen, 2019). According to Sen (2019), hybrid systems are defined by *“... the sustainability of externally imposed ideas and values, and for the seriousness of the government’s embrace of these ideas and values. ... the embrace of new/foreign-imposed principles is pulled back by the continuity and persistence of the legacies and practices of the previous regimes.”* (p. 11).

Nonetheless, all of the listed countries represent a ‘Western’ education model has profoundly influenced local systems across the globe since the end of Second World War, most recently in South-East Asia (Altbach, 2009). How each nation follows an indigenous process of forming such a hybrid model varies depending on specific local histories and cultures. This study assumes that contemporary higher education in Cambodia is a hybrid of Western and Asian values and that each national culture is unique. It explores how certain traditional Asian values have interacted with Western values in the case of Cambodia.

Asian higher education has been highly influenced by Western values and structures, specifically Anglo-Saxon culture. However, its indigenous processes differ. Yang (2013) suggests that the fundamental failure of non-

Western societies to effectively build local higher education systems stems from a history of colonialism and the global diffusion of the European university model. Modern universities are Western-oriented and lack links to indigenous academic traditions. Jung (2018) notes that the higher education model in Asia is a hybrid model. Interactions between global powers and the advancement of multifaceted ideas and culture have since caused this model in each national context to become more diversified. A range of higher education reforms have emerged with respect to governance, methodologies, research culture, and financing.

The hybrid process is culturally perceived to have a strong foundation that *'has established its history, values, process and goals'* (Tierney (1988) under many cultural influences at the departmental, institutional, and national levels. Tierney (1988) emphasizes that one can succeed in understanding the multidimensional interaction of cultural influences in the development of higher education systems, only after learning how shared goals have also interacted. Hence, it is essential to conceptualize higher education systems in the South East Asian context within a framework of local knowledge about practices of developing higher education policies before external influences can be explored.

Several external powers have influenced higher education in Cambodia through both colonization and overseas development assistance (Ayres, 2000; Sam, Zain, & Jamil, 2012). This includes influence from socialist bloc states (i.e. The Soviet Union, Vietnam, and China), French colonial power, and the dominant US educational model (Ayres, 2000). The level of outside influence has differed over time, which makes it difficult to conceive a simple dichotomy

of external and Cambodian values. For instance, Chinese Confucianism, emphasizing decision-making by seniors, human relationships, and respect for authority, remains a strong cultural influence (Jung, 2018). On the other hand, since the 1950s, Cambodian higher education has experienced dramatic growth, as well as decline and revival from a *'ground zero'* in the 1980s.

The Cambodian government has set a Higher Education Vision 2030 and Roadmap 2017-2030 to inform the development of policies and practices for higher education. These include a vision *'to develop human resources with excellent knowledge, skills and moral values'*; and a mission *'to develop an accessible higher education system that is diverse, internationally-recognized, and conducive to teaching, learning, and research'*; as well as goals regarding *'quality and relevance, access and equity, internationalization and recognition, and governance and finance'*.

This paper identifies the historical influences on Cambodian higher education based on traditional Angkorean values, as well as overview of major, contemporary Western influences. It will elaborate how the Cambodian higher learning system has historically evolved via the interaction of national traditions with external influences. This highlights that the inclusion of the cultural dimensions of traditional socio-cultural values in Asian and Cambodian history is crucial for higher learning reform for the nation. It may be able to respond to the commercial exploitation of educational businesses and hinder potentially problematic practices.

Research Methodology

This research utilizes a critical literature review, adopting a post-positivist epistemology meaning that the research is based on qualitative analysis as a research methodology, supported by secondary data. Based on an interpretivist paradigm, the author responds to various journal articles and policy documents. The paper is divided into five main sections. The first describes the development of the higher education system in Cambodia from a historical perspective. The second analyzes the educational value of Angkorean heritage, Asian values and debates about their impact on higher education in Cambodia. The third illustrates the similarities and differences between Western and Cambodian higher education models. The fourth presents the current impacts of the adoption of Western higher education models on Asian universities. Finally, the paper discusses the indigenous response of the Cambodian higher education sector to Western higher policies and practices at institutional and individual levels.

Results and Findings

Higher learning development in Cambodia: a historical perspective

Cambodian higher education was influenced early by Indian and Chinese merchants and missionaries, who traded goods along the Mekong River. This occurred via the means of education or the dissemination of religion (i.e. Brahma or Hindu) (Sam et al., 2012). This historical anecdote of external influence on the education system is common with Africa, where Grigorenko (2007) noted:

“Early accounts of the first direct educational influences from outside can be traced back to religious missionaries ... Various religious missions were the first to establish and support schools and initiate and promote studies of indigenous languages.” (p. 167).

The country first established two universities during the Angkorean period in the 12th century, with 18 individual doctoral degrees for cultural and religious intellectuals, and around 740 university teachers, heavily based on the foundations of Brahma and Buddhism (Sam et al., 2012). In the presence of the Angkor Wat temple heritage, Cambodia is believed to have built a unique, sophisticated tradition, values, norms, and culture. This period marked the peak of the Angkorean era, where the Cambodian (Khmer) educational system developed rapidly and attracted students from neighboring countries. Under the wise national leadership of Indradevy, the queen of King Jayavarman VII (1181-1220), two universities were established, located in Preah Khan temple (Vat Cheysrey) and Taprohm temple (Raja Vihear), respectively. During 12th century, Cambodia was a most powerful kingdom within the Southeast Asian region, comprising 1081 ancient temples nationwide (Sam et al., 2012).

By the 15th century, the glorious period of Angkor had declined dramatically. Some scholars claimed that ineffective adaption to prolonged droughts in mainland Southeast Asia during transition from the Medieval Climate Anomaly to the Little Ice Age; along with social vulnerabilities, led to the this failure (Evans et al., 2007). According to Duggan (1996), Cambodian higher learning institutions were closed at this time due to civil wars and

invasions from neighboring countries. Duggan (1996) notes that *“Cambodia has experienced a troubled history since the demise of the Khmer Empire. It is not a well-known history when compared with Western knowledge of Cambodia’s neighbors. Indeed, the image of Cambodia in Western thought roughly coincides with French intervention in Khmer affairs in the nineteenth century”* (p. 363). During the 17th century, the French invaded Cambodia as well as other neighboring countries. Under colonization (1863-1953), the French tried to transform the traditional Cambodian education system into a modern or Western form by importing the French education model. Nascent archaeologists and researchers claim that Cambodian culture reached a sophisticated level during the Angkor era and became an empire in Asia that disseminated influence among neighboring nations (Sam et al., 2012).

The post-colonial period after 1953, demonstrated the lasting influence of the French system of education administration, largely due to the existing bureaucrats, administrators and human resources that were either educated in France, or within the French colony (Ayres, 2000; Sen, 2019). Unfortunately, the nation, a site for ideological competition between socialist bloc states and those from the West, fell into the Cold War in 1970, when the Prince with ruling power was defeated in coup-d’état by Western-backed opposition. During this period, the national higher education system was heavily destroyed as part of the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979, when all forms of educational institutions were closed.

Between 1980 and 1996, Cambodia went through a rehabilitation stage and the higher education system was rehabilitated under the support of communist bloc countries, such as Russia, Vietnam and Eastern Europe

(Kitamura et al., 2016). The implementation of a higher education sector in Cambodia during this rehabilitation stage was not prioritized and higher education institutions (HEIs) were left to operate with poor resources, in terms of both infrastructure and human capacity. Foreign donors implemented scholarship schemes for sending students to study in communist bloc states such as Russia, Vietnam, and China. Since this period, education and human resource development has become a dominant discourse in the development agendas of donors and development partners, notably the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (Duggan, 1997).

The rehabilitation period attracted greater external influence from socialist bloc countries, as well as the French administrative model. In contrast, Chinese influence focused more on social values and norm, and the orientation of leadership in Cambodia (Ayres, 2000). This orientation has contributed strongly to a culture of educational leadership and governance, specifically following the Confucian tradition of the 19th century. For instance, both French administration and leadership, as well as Chinese Confucianism, with its emphasis on seniority-dominated decision-making, human relationships, and respect for authority, remain as strong cultural influences.

The privatization of Cambodian higher education emerged in 1997, when the first private university, Norton, was established (Sen et al., 2013). By 2019, there were 125 higher education institutions (77 private) in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2019, p. 40). Between this time and the 2016/17 academic year of 2016-2017, university enrolments increased by over seventeen times, from 10,000 to 174,142 students (Sen, 2017). While Cambodian universities have adopted a neoliberal ideology, individual rights and social reform have been

compromised by an emphasis on free-market competition. Chealy (2009) and Sen (2012) claim that several issues continue to affect the Cambodian higher education sector, including a lack of coordinated governance, with both communist versus pro-Western ideologies, as well as a shortage of professional staff.

The debates with respect to Angkorean heritage and Asian values

According to Barr (2000), the conceptualization of ‘Asian values’ stands on three dimensions: paternalism, authoritarianism, and elitism. These dimensions are emphasized through two key features: family-focused communitarianism and state-focused communitarianism. Barr (2000) argues that ‘*familial communitarianism*’, which can be identified in the semi-democracies of Singapore and Malaysia, emphasizes the important role of the family, as a priority source of social good and authority; while ‘*republican communitarianism*’ is a form of totalitarianism that gives sole power to the state.

There have been debates on whether ‘Asian values’ exist, and if they have contributed to the development of the contemporary Asian higher education sector. Altbach (1989) notes that there is not an Asian academic style. However, an Asian country such as China has unique, long-term traditions with respect to higher education (Yang, 2013). Cambodia has an even longer history since the Angkorean empire, with its blooming education period (Sam et al., 2012). The Confucian model, embedded in Asian higher education, may be observed through several institutional structures including: a strong national structure, large private capital investment, and high

competition through strict assessment structures (Marginson, 2011). While it is undeniable that Asian higher education has been strongly influenced by Western culture and development models, differences in cultural perspectives remain, especially with respect to network-based for jobs among senior academics (Jung, 2018).

According to Kim (2010), one can identify Asian values as *'cultural orientations, beliefs, norms, or attitudes, unique to the Asian region that form these bases of their political, economic, and cultural institutions and processes'* (pp. 317-318). Several heritages such as magnificent temples, landscapes, and all forms of styles and architecture remain indispensable pieces of evidence as pride in Asian values, existing at a different level of society and in different regions. One example of these values is the Confucian tradition Asian people often maintain in daily life and work. Confucian philosophy is well-known around Asian countries for preaching the conduct focused on an upright life, which has powerful relevance to norms and values within contemporary society (Kim, 2010). In a reciprocal way, the immediate consequences of hardship in life may occur once one breaks norms and values set within this philosophy.

Many Asian people believe the philosophy of Confucius is upright dharma (i.e. thought for enlightenment pathways). Asian social lifestyles, including, social etiquette, academic outcomes, and learning approaches are influenced by Confucian philosophical beliefs (Park, 2011). Similarly, Kim (2012) noted that Asians have unique traditions, culture, and a way of life, which are different to other global cultures. According to Goh (1994), Asian values have *'a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and*

hardworking people, strong moral values and family ties' (p. 417). Collectivist values have also been prominent within Asian society. As cited in Jung (2018), Russell and Shin (2006) describe the two key characteristics of Asian values as *'respect for hierarchy and concern for collective well-being'* (p. 174).

Throughout the period of economic growth in the 1990s, core Asian values such as familism, communalism, authority orientation, a strong work ethic, and education were largely well-identified. Values such as discipline in the workplace, saving, being responsible, having social support, giving priority to collective goals, and family-centred attitudes are key values in Asian society (Kim., 2010). Thus, most Asian people respect and practice Buddhist prescriptions together with the philosophy of Confucius in their daily life, as they consider that this is the pathway to harmony and a bright future in life.

Several debates have emerged with respect to the Asian higher learning model. The main theme for this debate is whether Asia has pioneered a higher education model. Altbach (1989) maintains there is no academic development model among Asian nations, rather a range of modernization reforms, under the influence of the Western higher education models. Asian countries, however, are perceived to have their traditions and a unique culture of higher education development. For instance, Yang (2013) argues that Asian nations have initiated long-held traditions of higher learning, which are different from those in the West. They are unique with respect to higher learning being orientated towards local culture, society, and a natural definition of humans; as well as human relationships amongst the population.

While the debate remains open, Yang (2013) notes that the most successful Western export throughout the world is the idea of a modern

university. The distinction of 'East' and 'West' has been used as a value for judgement with respect to the typology of higher education models. De Barry and Chaffee (1982) suggest that this distinction has led to a differentiation between Asian or Western higher education models being typecast as '*Asian backwardness and Western superiority*'. This convergence of values within Eastern and Western education models has resulted from past colonial experiences and the recent influence of globalization, which has transformed the world system in a range of transactions, such as institutional governance, curricula, academic culture, and English language use (Altbach, 1989). These transactions include economic changes towards global market competition and the internationalization, or global benchmarking of education standards (Han & Jarvis, 2013).

The adoption of practices from the Western higher education model are intertwined with an existing variety of local educational traditions, values, cultures, and societies. This is obvious when considering powerful Asian economies, including Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan; higher middle-income countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines; and lower-middle-income nations, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV); and how they grown with respect to fundamentally different contexts. Despite common priorities, with respect to conforming with international trends; namely, internationalization, CLMV nations have not produced the activities and output that constitute a strategy for successful educational quality reforms (Hill et al., 2019).

Major challenges facing CLMV countries attempting to move towards strategic reform and modernization may be identified through unique

authentic differences from the Western world, namely geographical context, history, culture, and human capacity. Hill et al. (2019) notes that *“systems and regulatory structures, traditionally designed for national activity, are ill-prepared to support international engagement. Key examples of this include a lack of credit transfer systems and a lack of resources and infrastructure”* (p. 11). Duggan (1996) also notes that *“Cambodia has experienced a troubled history since the demise of the Khmer Empire. It is not a well-known history when compared with Western knowledge of Cambodia’s neighbors. Indeed, the image of Cambodia in Western thought roughly coincides with French intervention in Khmer affairs in the nineteenth century.”* (p. 363). Therefore, the higher education system in these nations is rooted and dependent on history, socio-cultural aspects, as well as political and economic development pathways.

In this context, we may ask whether a dichotomy exists between Asian and Western values in Cambodian higher education. As higher learning first occurred in Cambodia in the glorious period of the Angkor era in the 12th century (Sam et al., 2012), Cambodia must have had a unique traditionally-oriented higher education model. Modern higher education was then introduced into Cambodia during the French colonial period between 1863 and 1953. The significant distinction between the importation of the French model and the Western model of higher education is that the former was based on suppression through colonization, and the latter was systematically constructed through rehabilitation, under the guise of various ideologies: globalization, aid dependency, and neo-liberalism.

Higher education models from the West have now reached the periphery of South-East Asia. Altbach (2009) claims that these educational models have taken root in all Asian universities. These countries now find themselves without their own university models, nor Asian academic models (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 2012). This has resulted from the influence of Western industrialized economies and curriculum models. The process of forming such hybrid models inevitably reflects an interaction between the external and internal interests as *“this process not only stresses greater interaction with external or Western values, but is also deeply concerned with the traditional values, institutions, and practices”* (Chan et al., 2017, p. 1805).

The root of these hybrid models has been formed through a history of colonization (Arnove, 2008). Complex historical struggles that arose from the dynamics and tensions between hegemonic global models and the local contexts of political, economic, and socio-cultural needs have formed a new hybrid model of education amongst periphery nations. Such interaction has grown rapidly, as a result of Western success in transmitting neoliberal ideologies and mass higher education systems through global marketization, by which global agencies utilize powerful technological tools (Huang, 2007). Through a range of mechanisms, developing nations conform to structural adjustment policies and development assistance, through scholarship programs. Chan et al. (2017) notes that, *“hybridization does not take place naturally but is a painful and hesitant process as a result of social-cultural constraints and structures”* (p. 1806).

Countries in Asia, including developing economies like Cambodia, have managed to enhance autonomy in their university systems to incorporate

fundamental aspects of local needs and realities. Shin et al. (2016) claim that despite substantial evidence of influence related to the Western models, Confucian tradition is seen as commonly shared amongst Asian higher education systems. Likewise, the interaction amongst Asian cultural heritage, Western dominance, economic development, and the emergence of globalization has played a dynamic role in shaping East Asian higher learning models (Neubauer et al., 2013). Therefore, contemporary higher education models in Asia have been formed through negotiation for space and elements, by which models have evolved within the local contexts, despite the dominant influence from the West.

Given the contemporary hegemonic power from Western higher education models, educational policy formation in developing nations, specifically Cambodia, often reflects an exclusive Western ideology. Bhabha (2012) maintains that the notion of a hybrid model is the product of the struggle and resistance that has occurred between the powerful colony and local culture. Under globalization, these processes have become imperfect because of politics and the complex conditions that lie within the concept of hybrid models (Rizvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006). While higher education models in Asian nations have been recognized as substantially influenced by the West, they have also been intertwined with local needs and the implementation of local policies and practices.

Cambodian and Western higher education models

The organization and structure of the Cambodian higher education system has some similarities with the Western model, particularly in terms of

the policy agenda focused on hardware. The level of government control in Cambodia is more pronounced in state universities than private ones. For state institutions, it is the responsibilities of government, represented by each ministry to supply staff, salaries, and basic operation fees, while the universities charge fees through private programs. Another similarity is the neo-liberal agenda, where universities are left to their own devices to generate income to support their operation on a competitive basis in terms of attracting students and private funding (Sen, 2019; Un, Boomsma, & Sok, 2018). Other similarities include the types of institutions and the system of an academic year. Additionally, institutional structures, including vision and mission statements, departmental structures, the division of disciplines, facilities, governance, management and administration are similar to those found in the higher learning model of the West (Sen, 2019). These similarities include the level of government control, the type of institutions, and the systems of privatization and corporatization.

Differences emerge in the structure of Cambodian higher education system. The system is complex and governed discretely by parent ministries, under the central power of the Royal Cambodian Government. Current there are 16 parent ministries that supervise universities, none of which have the sole authority to supervise the 125 existing HEIs, 48 of which are public universities (MoEYS, 2019, p. 40). According to Sen (2012), a number of ministries in Cambodia are authorized to run and operate the HEIs, due to the relevance of their expertise in relation to the curriculum and potential for their human resources and facilities to contribute towards educational programs. Nonetheless, higher education policy formation and practice is initiated,

supervised, and directed by the MoEYS. Further, Cambodian universities are heavily influenced by the political economy of structural adjustment, led by overseas development assistance. The dependence of each Ministry on foreign aid tends towards corporate worldviews amongst policy elite and capitalist stakeholders. Teaching curricula, as well as instructional and research methods, show greater differences rather than similarities. For example, about 90% of lecturers have never published an academic paper and there tends to be a “*teaching-oriented*” rather than “*research-oriented*” culture (Chen et al., 2007).

The biggest difference of all is the existence of a network-based academic job market, where unqualified and unprofessional investors claim power and authority to own, govern, and direct universities, particularly in the case of private institutions. Un et al. (2018) noted that “*the rise of corporate culture at public universities: the institutional focus lies on managerialism to achieve and maintain efficiency and effectiveness rather than promoting academic intellectual inquiry and an academic culture of collegiality and esprit de corps.*” (p. 6). Through this practice, the long-term needs of academic society, social justice and social-democracy have been heavily undermined. Powerful university owners exercise power to recruit or expel academic professionals on the basis of profit maximization and enrolment targets, rather than the public good.

The overall character of academic culture in Cambodia is oriented towards academic networks. Chen et al., (2007) mentions that teaching quality in Cambodia is poor in terms of qualifications, teaching methods, and teaching and research experience. There is limited support for university

hardware and software, or the funding of buildings and human resources in the government budget. This occurs even though the university system as a whole has been reformed towards a governance structure of benchmarks, oriented towards the modern university system of the West. Cambodian higher education is deficient in terms of both academic and non-academic support services. The sector is financed at *'only 0.05 per cent of GDP'* (the World Bank, 2012, cited in (Sam et al., 2012, p. 121).

Overall, academic culture is quite different in Cambodia, compared to Western universities. It is quite common to identify a culture of work that emphasizes seniority, authority, interpersonal relationships and collective well-being within Cambodian universities. While cultural knowledge takes longer to change, scientific knowledge can change faster without requiring time to be embedded into an existing culture (Schelkle, 2000). As Western ideas have not been embedded into the local understandings and practices, problems arise when integrating Western and local ideas within Asian universities.

Impacts of Western higher learning models on Cambodian universities

The West has influenced Asian higher education models by forcing them to conform to standards of massification, privatization, accountable governance structures, internationalization, and benchmarks of world-class universities (Shin and Harman 2009). While the university development model of the West has increased rapidly in influence, the Asian higher learning model faces several reform challenges. The governance structure within Asian

nations has evolved to one of '*decentralized centralization*' as a result of decisions made at the national level, despite policies that transfer the administration of these functions to lower levels (Sensenig, 2011). It is described as a form of governance, where the government allocates university funding through evaluation-based budgets (Sensenig, 2011).

Moreover, internationalization has been increasingly promoted in the Asian higher education sector. Implications with respect to global university rankings has persuaded Asian universities to conform a set of criteria, which implies the adoption of a particular university model, especially in terms of curriculum, faculty management and leadership styles. However, it needs to be questioned whether this contributes to national development pathways, namely for the benefit of society at large. Shin and Harman (2009) note that the current goals of the global internationalization of higher education is led by certain interest groups, established by the OECD under a benchmarking system of incentives and sanctions. Under the influence of globalization, however, most universities in developing economies, reflect a situation of having low capacity, which is framed as needing to catch up to a neoliberal agenda such as the new PMS from the West.

From a social justice perspective, the university system has been largely undermined by corporate worldviews held by higher education policy elites and investors. In this regard, academic freedom, quality, and the true value of education value have been largely ignored, in preference for free-market competition and profit-maximization (Lingard, 2018). For instance, the emergence and rapid expansion of a quality benchmark-setting framework to align universities with regional and global standards based on OECD

longitudinal data analyzing ten countries. Announcing Japan and South Korea as representative of Asia, threatens the social justice and well-being of individuals in society at large (Shin & Harman, 2009). Lingard (2018) notes that the emergence of actors in the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) project as a new non-state policy actor. Educational business networks, such as the British owned publication and assessment network, Pearson Education, have undermined the essence of social democracy and justice across the international community.

Therefore, how the higher education policy reform agenda is adopted at the local and global scale, in terms of promoting the true value of education and knowledge creation for enhancing social justice, becomes of increasing importance for addressing widespread social problems. Emerging academic problems include an increase in authoritarianism, racism, environmental degradation, and other policy dilemmas. That is bringing universities towards a corporate worldview will tend to expand the gap between economic growth and well-being for all individuals (Singh, Gray, Hall, & Downey, 2018). An emphasis on the role of the private sector and the new public management principle is intended to prepare the Cambodian higher education system to serve dominant market interests. Un et al. (2018) noted that *“in Cambodia, this neo-liberal trend has fused with the politicization of higher education. Both commercialization and politicization prevent universities from properly functioning as a public sphere”* (p. 6). These influences from Western higher education models have also tended to gear the Cambodian higher education model towards privatization, international competitiveness, student choice, and producing low-quality skills within graduates.

Under neoliberalism, education practices are driven by the market, with a focus on competition and individualism. This supports and encourages national and international standardized, high-stakes testing, i.e. ‘*best practices*’ (Noblit & Pink, 2016). The Cambodian government has reformed higher education policies to conform to international standards aimed at strengthening efficiency and quality. Several policies have been reformed, including by the government cabinet and the Ministry of Education, namely the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) (RGC, 2014a); the Higher Education Vision 2030; and the development of a Cambodia human resource (MoEYS, 2014a, 2014b). These policies have been reformed in response to demands from the labour market, and the agenda of development partners. A range of policies related to specifically science, technology, engineering, creative arts and mathematics (STEAM) subjects have been developed as a strategy towards strengthening the role of universities in respond to the needs for development through regional and global integration (MoEYS, 2014a, 2014c; RGC, 2014a, 2015).

From the perspective of the education system, Cambodia has made a remarkable improvement since the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). Such achievements include, 1) the existing modern university system and the establishment of quality assurance body; 2) a five-year budget to promote research culture and a policy on Research Development in the Education Sector; and 3) a Master Plan for research development and several key Policies for higher education development, such as the Higher Education Vision 2030.

From a cultural perspective, there is a huge contrast in terms of academic culture amongst instructional staff and the evaluation of

performance. While universities in the West focus on research publications, research culture is almost ignored within Cambodian universities. In the Cambodian higher education system, a *'teaching-oriented'* culture dominates over a *'research-orientation'*. Of note, 90% of lecturers at Cambodian universities have never published an academic paper (Chen et al., 2007). While the neoliberal agenda within the Cambodian university system has resulted in some positive changes, the ideology has been strongly criticized in terms of the deterioration of essential higher education values such as, academic freedom, social justice and social democracy and reducing inequality (Singh et al., 2018).

A shift towards neoliberalism in the higher education sector of many Northeast Asian countries has brought about radical changes in five key dimensions including the multi-faceted retreat of the state, enhanced roles of private investment and entrepreneurialism within universities, enhanced international competition and internationalization, application and acceptance of neoliberal ideologies, and a shift to a curriculum focus. Several issues remain within higher education, with respect to responding to present social, economic, political, and cultural needs at national, regional, and global levels. These include a plurality of authorities, regulatory regimes, inadequate capacity of actors, and a skills mismatch (Sen et al., 2013). As education is believed to play an important role in promoting the social, cultural, political, and economic development (Chen et al., 2007), current neo-liberalization policies in Cambodia may have positively impacted some of these aspects in the short-term. However, the nation requires a more critical development

direction, as the share of economic growth, and welfare distribution has become more inequitable.

The indigenous response to Western higher education trends

In response to growing complexity, the Royal Government of Cambodia has undertaken numerous efforts to reform and strengthen the higher education system through different institutions such as the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia; Educational Policymaker Team; and the National Strategic Development Plan 2014-2018 (RGC, 2014b). The Education Law has also been more rigorously enforced to balance the quality and quantity of education providers (Chealy, 2009), as well as matching skills development to national policies (MoEYS, 2014a; RGC, 2012, 2013). However, problems in the Cambodian university systems prevail (Sen et al., 2013). Since a wave of privatization in the mid-1990s, the number of Cambodian universities has increased almost tenfold, from less than 16 to 125 institutions between 1997 and 2019 (MoEYS, 2019). Other accomplishments include new policies, such as the Cambodia Higher Education Vision 2030, and Industry Development Policy 2015-2025; the emergence of research culture; the foundation of a capacity for planning, monitoring, capacity building; and growing regional and international cooperation within university networks.

Overall, the growing number of university graduates has responded as expected via the NPM framework of neo-liberalization. Meanwhile, the rapid growth in the number of universities reflects the dependence of the Cambodian higher education sector on expansion, given that the current capacity for improving quality is quite insufficient (Cambodia HRINC, 2011).

This tends to lead the higher education sector into neglecting the long-term needs of the nation, as well as weakening the system as a whole (Chealy, 2009). There is a clear need for higher education to be restructured, with respect to a research culture, quality teaching, and the well-being of all intellectuals and students.

Conclusion

This article reveals that the Cambodian higher education system has been shaped by the integration of external influences with national traditions. Historical cultural values and educational traditions have been integrated within a modern educational system. The French higher education model first shaped this hybrid model, which was formed as a result of the dominance of French colonization. Current Western values influence higher education in Cambodia through the conflict between new policies, local practices and socio-cultural contexts. Many aspects of higher education in Cambodia have already changed as a result of regional and global benchmarks. The Cambodian system has made a remarkable progress, after essentially starting from scratch in the 1980s. From a long-term social development perspective, the university system has been undermined by corporate worldviews amongst elites and investors in the sector. From a cultural perspective, there is a huge contrast between the academic culture of institutional leaders, practitioners, and instructional staff, regarding their professional capacity and mindset influenced by the colonial and civil war history.

The dichotomy between local historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts are less significant with respect to education policy for the core

development components of universities. In this case, policy reform generally focuses on academic programs, research and consultancy, post-graduate scholarships, research, instruction and learning, management, human resources management, finance, infrastructure and facilities, student services and development (Hussin & Ismail, 2009). This paper focuses on the cultural dimensions of both Asian and Cambodian history, traditional values, and socio-cultural aspects. Inclusion of this cultural dimension may enhance the effectiveness of education policy reforms.

It is essential that the development of higher learning policy and practices incorporates local cultural elements. These have been embedded into the way of life of citizens over centuries and exist in the form of religious beliefs, values, norms, and lifestyles, as well as the local environment and infrastructure. The idea promoted is that modernizing higher learning systems cannot transform the indigenous models but they instead form hybrid models. This process of hybridization cannot ignore local socio-cultural conditions when new policies are implemented. It is important to consider what contribution local values contribute to teaching, research and social engagement in higher education. Awareness of traditional values will assist in the formation of regional models and collaboration, with respect to higher education reform in post-conflict states moving forward.

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Brief Biography

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