

Editorial: The internationalization of higher education in Cambodia

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To cite this article: Chet, C. & Un, L. (2019) The internationalization of higher education in Cambodia. *Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research (CJBAR)*, 1(1), 06–15.

In the era of globalization, the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become a prevailing trend (Hong, 2018). A global commitment to take advantage of this trend to reduce disparities in educational quality between developed and developing countries was endorsed at the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE) (UNESCO, Paris, 5-8 July 2009). An important driver towards this aim has been the development of education policies in Asian countries with rising populations, such as India, the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, and Malaysia focused on HEI internationalization. Other countries in the region such as Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong and Malaysia have responded to these policies by transforming themselves into international and regional hubs for higher education, exporting education services to neighbouring countries such as India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea (Ng, 2012). Global demand for higher education services is rapidly increasing. Asian countries will represent 70% of this demand by 2025. The booming

economies of China and India are key drivers of this growth, representing over half of the demand from Asia (Bohm et. al., 2002). At the same time, the internationalization of HEIs is playing a role meeting socio-economic development needs in each country in light of globalization trends (Qiang, 2003).

Knight (1993) refers to this process as ‘integrating an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of HEIs’. However, in practice, it also represents the commercialization of research and postsecondary education. There is increasing global competition for the recruitment of foreign students among wealthier countries as they seek to build an international reputation for the provision of higher education services as a way of generating export revenue (Ibid.).

In Cambodia, there has been a remarkably strong international influence on local HEIs since the end of a prolonged civil war in the 1990s. Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, a period of transitional government under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), and the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, the Royal Government of Cambodia has gradually increased its engagement with market-driven regional and international integration as a tool of socio-economic development. As a result, institutional teaching and research partnerships between HEIs in Cambodia and other countries have also gradually increased.

Howes & Ford (2011) describe both opportunities and challenges for HEIs in Cambodia related to this change. The most challenging aspect has been harmonizing or integrating foreign influences with local higher

education needs. The number of HEIs in Cambodia has increased remarkably: from 14 in 1998; to 97 in 2012; and 121 in 2017 (MoEYS, 2017). Over 80% of these institutions have been established in the last 15 years. This has had critical implications for the quality of higher education services in Cambodia (Sen, 2013). In response, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) developed the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 focused on developing the human resources in Cambodia required to transition from a lower-middle income country to an upper-middle income country by 2030, and a developed country by 2050 (MoEYS, 2014a). Additionally, the Policy on Higher Education (2030) has established a long-term vision of building a quality higher education system that produces excellent knowledge, skills, and moral values for working and living in an era of globalization and a knowledge-based society (MoEYS, 2014b).

There is no doubt that the internationalization of HEIs is an important factor in developing the human resources required to meet Cambodia's future labor market needs. However, to date, only a few HEIs in Cambodia have had the capacity to participate in the international higher education sector. The oldest and largest academic institution in Cambodia, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), is one institution that has been able to take advantage of improved academic standards through international cooperation (see Figures 1 & 2). In an era where globalization and the information economy has increasing influence, it has become important to move toward a knowledge-based society, where socio-economic development is planned and harmonized internationally. The internationalization of HEIs will play a key role in this change in Cambodia

through: (1) the internationalization of the curriculum, where international standards are applied to course content; (2) proficiency in foreign languages, enabling cross-cultural exchange; (3) the internationalization of research efforts through collaborative research between national and foreign institutions; and (4) internationalization by extension, where the administrative functions of HEIs are benchmarked to international standards (Barragan Codina & Leal López, 2013).

Internationalization forms part of RUPP's strategic plan to enable the institution to compete both regionally and globally. Achieving international standards for higher education is an important prerequisite for meeting local needs for socio-economic development. The International Relations Office (IRO) at RUPP has implemented this agenda through improving communication channels with international partners. RUPP has collaborated with other universities globally through: (1) student exchange programs, (2) foreign language training, (3) exchange programs for academic and administrative staff, and (4) engaging with programs designed to improve education and research output, such as: international collaboration on research projects; participating in international symposiums, seminars, and meetings; as well as sharing information through articles published in international peer-reviewed journals.

To date, RUPP has international partnerships with 147 HEIs across 20 countries (Figure 3). The highest proportion of these partnerships (24.5%) is in Japan, followed by South Korea (17.0%), China (12.9%), Thailand (10.9%), France (5.4%), Vietnam (5.4%), and the USA (4.8%). Moreover, in 2017, RUPP supported 1,306 students to participate in international exchange programs.

As a result, 497 international students from 18 countries studied at RUPP, while 809 Cambodian students from RUPP studied in 20 countries in regions across the globe, with the support of financial assistance from international HEI partners. Faculty members across all RUPP faculties cooperate internationally to conduct research in the science and the humanities focused on both the Cambodian, regional, and international context. Presenting at international conferences has provided benefits to RUPP faculty members and students such as increasing their breadth of knowledge, professional engagement with associates with different social and cultural values, and the development of mutually-beneficial relationships between Cambodia and other nations.

Figure 1. International students studying at RUPP



Figure 2. RUPP students on exchange to other countries



Source: RUPP, 2017

Figure 3. RUPP's international partnerships



Source: RUPP, 2017

Yun (2014) has outlined how internationalization activities are supporting RUPP to modernize its academic standards. Yet, various challenges including the lack of a comprehensive strategy for international partnerships, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of appropriate skills and knowledge have limited the effectiveness of these policies. To address these challenges, Chet (2009) has suggested that higher education reforms are required in relation to the financing and governance of Cambodian HEIs including international accreditation, an improved curriculum, and technological innovation.

In 2019, RUPP will aim to develop new international partnerships with universities in China, Europe, and the USA. The accessibility of Cambodian education services to international students will be improved through initiatives such as English language delivery of courses in a range of disciplines. Other activities aimed at building an enabling environment for collaborative research with world-class universities will also be implemented. RUPP will encourage faculty members to conduct activities focused on developing international partnerships, such as organizing field trips to Cambodia for international students, as well as participating in international conferences and training events. The internationalization strategy of the RUPP is about much more than developing Memoranda of Understanding with international HEIs. International collaboration will help RUPP to establish an environment where mutually beneficial international partnerships are created that enhance the socio-economic development of Cambodia.

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