




Challenges and developments in university research in Cambodia: a case study of two universities

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Abstract

In recent years, university research in Cambodia has seen new developments and potential transformations although many challenges remain. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with 22 Cambodian academics, this study shows that the development of university research in Cambodia is constrained by various challenges and barriers to research, preventing Cambodia from promoting higher education internationalization and transforming itself into a knowledge-based society. The study highlights key challenges that limit possibilities for further positive developments of higher education research and suggests the need for policy reforms to make a difference to the university research landscape in Cambodia. The study also points to the broader issues of North-South knowledge divide and calls for national and institutional initiatives to support Cambodian academics and empower them to enhance their research engagement. Finally, the study discusses implications for future research.

Keywords University research · Cambodian academics · Higher education · Challenges · Developments · Cambodia

Introduction

The development of higher education in Cambodia is relatively recent. Cambodia's modern learning system began during the French colonization (1863–1953) when France established the first higher education institution in Cambodia in 1947 (Pit & Ford, 2004). After gaining independence from France in 1953, Cambodia, led by the late King Norodom Sihanouk, began to develop its education system, particularly the higher education sector. By the end of the 1960s, there were nine higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia (Clayton, 1998). However, after a brief period of peace and national development, Cambodia fell into prolonged civil war when King Sihanouk was ousted from power through a military coup led by General Lon Nol who later formed a pro-US government. Throughout the 1970s, Cambodia experienced one of the darkest

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periods in its modern history, suffering a genocide from 1975 to 1979 when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975 (Ayres, 2000). The Khmer Rouge regime wanted to transform Cambodia into an agrarian utopia, destroying social infrastructure and executing Cambodians believed to have been influenced by foreign thinking and ideologies. Almost two million Cambodians (nearly a quarter of Cambodia's then population), particularly professionals and intelligentsia who were the target of execution, perished during the regime (Ayres, 2000).

According to Ayres (2000), during the Khmer Rouge, “school buildings, condemned as vestiges of the old society, were abandoned and left to decay or were used as ammunition factories, silos, or prisons” (p. 119). Similarly, Clayton (1998) noted that the Khmer Rouge “destroyed 90 percent of all school buildings, emptied libraries and burned their contents, and smashed nearly all school laboratory equipment” (p. 6). As a result, Cambodia emerged from the Khmer Rouge regime with almost nothing as its social and physical infrastructure was virtually destroyed (Chandler, 2008).

Throughout the 1980s, Cambodia was occupied by Vietnam that had helped to liberate it from the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. During that period, four factions engaged in power struggle in Cambodia, jeopardizing any prospects of meaningful peace and development (Ratner, 1993). Cambodia's education during the 1980s was influenced by the Soviet system. Cambodian students were sent to pursue their higher degrees in Soviet and countries in the eastern blocs. It was only after the United Nations–sponsored election in 1993 that Cambodia was open to the world, began the national building process, and started its regional and international integration by joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and other organizations (Clayton, 2002).

Cambodia's higher education system saw remarkable transformation in the late 1990s when the privatization of higher education was authorized by the government (Un & Sok, 2018). In 1997, private universities were allowed to establish, and public universities could offer fee-paying degree programs. Following that reform, student enrollment in higher education skyrocketed, increasing about twentyfold over the last two decades, from around 10,000 students in the 1990s to around 219,000 in the 2010s (Un & Sok, 2018).

The number of HEIs has also mushroomed, from eight in 1997 to 121 in 2018 (Un & Sok, 2018). Cambodia now has a total of 130 HEIs, 82 of which are privately owned (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), 2022). Among all HEIs, 82 (63%) are under the supervision of the Education Ministry; the rest are supervised by 15 other ministries and state institutions (MoEYS, 2022). Higher education enrollment in the academic year 2020–2021 were 198,363, 49.6% of whom were female students. There were a total of 16,438 higher education staff (21.4% were females), with only 8.74% of them holding a PhD (MoEYS, 2022).

This study is aimed at examining university research development in Cambodia, focusing on challenges and new developments in research in recent years. The study draws on in-depth interviews with Cambodian academics selected from two Cambodian universities. Investigating the challenges and new developments in university research is essential as the findings would shed light on what needs to be done to foster a vibrant research culture in Cambodian higher education. The findings would also broaden our understanding of academic life and the research environment in developing societies like Cambodia which aspires to transform itself into a knowledge-based society (MoEYS, 2019). Such an understanding is useful for both policy formulation and initiatives to support researchers in Cambodia and other Global South contexts to increase their ability for knowledge creation and dissemination.

North-South knowledge divide: a conceptual framework

In the global knowledge production, the world is divided into two main spheres: Global North and Global South. Despite accounting for only about 15% of the world population in 2014 (Haub & Kaneda, 2015), Northern countries in North America and Europe produced almost 70% of scientific publications in the world (Soete et al., 2015). From 2005 to 2014, Northern countries spent an average of 1.44% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on research and development, while Southern countries spent only 0.38% of GDP (Blicharska et al., 2017). According to the World Bank (2020, cited in Albanna et al., 2021), there were 4351 researchers per million population in Northern countries while there were only 713 in the Global South in 2017. Moreover, on average, Northern countries produced 35,000 scientific and technical journal articles per country in 2018, compared to 9700 for Southern countries.

Blicharska et al. (2017) provided a number of explanations underlying the North-South knowledge divide. For example, researchers from the Global North tended to have greater capacities and opportunities to pursue research because they had greater access to research funding, resources, and investment; were more familiar with the requirements for research grants; and had greater command of English—a language of science and academic publication. On the other hand, researchers from the Global South tended to be disadvantaged in many respects when it came to research and knowledge production. They had limited access to research resources and facilities, worked in an environment where scientific traditions tended to be lacking, and faced prejudice and biases in publishing their research in English (Canagarajah, 2002; Blicharska et al., 2017).

In his seminal work on the geopolitics of academic writing, Canagarajah (2002) argued that researchers from the Global North had significant advantages over their counterparts from the Global South as the latter tended to face numerous challenges of both discursive and nondiscursive nature, such as conforming to academic conventions with which they were often less familiar (i.e., discursive) and facing inadequate resources for research (i.e., nondiscursive). Altbach (2003), Demeter (2020), and Heng et al. (2022a) also noted that Global South scholars, unlike their peers in the Global North, encountered many challenges and problems, mainly related to resource inadequacy, which constrained their capacity to conduct and publish research.

Conceptualization of university research

According to the Australian Research Council (2018), research is “the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings” (p. 10). Although research has been perceived differently by academic researchers (see Brew, 2001; Heng et al., 2022a), its main purpose is to “increase the stock of knowledge” and to “devise new applications of available knowledge” (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015, p. 44). Cummings (1998) noted that research is fundamental to the tripartite role of universities in teaching, research, and service, leading many countries across the world to embrace the shift from teaching-oriented to research-intensive universities—a phenomenon that has begun since the mid-19th century.

As universities play a central role in producing new knowledge needed to support national and global innovation systems, research produced by universities (i.e., university research), either in the form of basic or applied research, has been increasingly recognized (Altbach, 2008; Breznitz, 2014). This recognition has fueled the need for universities, including those in developing countries, to undertake reforms, including higher education privatization and corporatization, to ensure that they can keep up with the ever-changing demands of society (Mok, 2013; Shore & Wright, 2016; Wan et al., 2019). However, there remain various challenges to the development of research systems and knowledge production in Asia (Horta & Mok, 2020), Africa (Hayward & Ncayiyana, 2014) and across the developing world (Fussy, 2019).

Horta and Mok (2020), for example, argued that despite their rapid technological and economic development, East Asian countries and universities faced a number of challenges that included, among others, the need to navigate tensions between local and international priorities and between the indigenous and Westernized forms of knowledge. Lee and Wan (2020) argued that many universities in Southeast Asia, influenced by neoliberal ideologies, have adopted reforms to improve effectiveness and efficiency, yet their level of autonomy varied across and within countries, while their development is constrained by various social, cultural, and historical factors. Fussy (2019) also noted various challenges to university research, such as unsupportive academic career paths, heavy teaching loads, and insufficient resources for research, which were prevalent and more pronounced in developing countries than in developed ones.

To promote university research in developing countries, a lot of factors need to be considered. Heng et al. (2020) provided a good summary of key factors affecting the research engagement and productivity of academics in developing countries. The factors were divided into national, institutional, and individual levels, which included national research policies, institutional research culture, and research collaboration, among other factors. Pornsalnuwat (2014) emphasized the importance of cultural factors and support from the government and the private sector. Likewise, Tien (2016) discussed influential factors related to economic growth, culture, and politics, in addition to various individual and institutional factors. Fussy (2018) recommended categorizing universities into research- and teaching-intensive universities and introducing “a research performance-based funding system” (p. 1583) to encourage competition and research excellence among universities and academics. Overall, as there are many challenges to university research development in developing countries, efforts should focus on addressing the challenges and creating a conducive environment for research. Key strategies may include, among others, promoting reading and writing culture (Fussy, 2019), building academics’ research capacity and implementing a competitive research funding scheme (Heng, 2023), introducing research promotion strategies and projects (Mok, 2013), and promoting stakeholder collaboration (Sam & Dahles, 2017).

University research development in Cambodia: challenges and progress

Research has shown that numerous challenges prevented the development of research and higher education in Cambodia (see Mak et al., 2019; Heng et al., 2022a; Sam & Dahles, 2017). For instance, Mak et al. (2019) noted that higher education governance in Cambodia was fragmented, as up to 16 ministries and state institutions oversaw the operation of

all the 130 HEIs. Sam and Dahles (2017) found that different stakeholders in Cambodian higher education—the government, development partners, HEIs, and industries—had limited collaboration, impeding the advancement of the higher education sector. Heng et al. (2022a) provided a recent review of the challenges facing higher education research in Cambodia. Key challenges included a shortage of academics with PhDs, skill gaps among university graduates, weak education quality, policy disconnection across different levels, limited social appreciation for research, limited funding for research, lack of academic career tracks, and limited academic freedom, among others. It was however noted that “low academic salaries, heavy teaching loads, and the absence of academic career pathways” were the most important barriers to research (Heng et al., 2022a, p. 3).

Despite the challenges, there have been some remarkable progress in Cambodian higher education in recent decades, particularly in terms of institutional expansion and higher education access. As mentioned above, since the late 1990s, the Cambodian government has promoted higher education massification by introducing the privatization of higher education (Un & Sok, 2018). Since then and especially the early 2000s, the number of HEIs has skyrocketed and student enrollment has significantly increased. There are now 130 HEIs that enroll around 200,000 students and employ approximately 16,400 staff (MoEYS, 2022).

In terms of university research, significant progress has also been observed. Heng (2020) argued that there was new hope for academic research in Cambodia. The argument was based on the Cambodian government’s efforts, albeit not substantial, to encourage research activities over the past two decades and particularly recent initiatives to promote teaching quality and research in higher education through higher education projects, such as the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (HEQCIP) and the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP), supported by the World Bank. In addition, positive developments were seen in the increasing presence of annual research conferences and forums, as well as the establishment of new Cambodia-based academic journals, such as *Cambodia Education Review*, *Insight: The Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research*, *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, and *Cambodian Journal of Education and STEM* (Heng & Sol, 2021). It was noted that 17 new academic journals were established, and many research-supporting initiatives were introduced in Cambodia over the last decade (Heng & Heng, 2023).

In light of the recent progress that appears to offer hope for university research development in Cambodia, it is imperative to examine empirically how the research environment in Cambodia has developed and what remains to be done to support Cambodian academics to enhance their research engagement. Drawing on in-depth interviews, this study is aimed at addressing one research question: What are the challenges and new developments in university research in Cambodian higher education?

Methodology

Research design

This study is designed as a qualitative case study, informed by constructivist views of knowledge and realities (Crotty, 1998). It is understood that realities are multiple and socially constructed through interactions between the researcher and the research participant (Crotty, 1998). This study design is suitable for investigating a phenomenon of interest

“in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). In this study, the central phenomenon being investigated is the challenges and new developments or transformations in university research from the perspectives of Cambodian academics.

Research setting and participants

The study took place at two Cambodian universities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital city. Both universities were selected due to two main reasons. First, they were among the leading public and private universities in Cambodia, so academics from these universities would be the most suitable candidates to discuss challenges and developments in university research in Cambodia. Second, the selection of these universities was also based on reasons of convenience and accessibility because the researcher had studied or worked there. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) noted that one of the advantages of being an insider-researcher investigating a familiar environment was “an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth” (p. 9). To prevent potential bias resulting from this positionality, however, the researcher used reflexivity throughout the study (Cope, 2014).

The first university is a public university (coded as University A) housing five faculties and employing approximately 450 full-time staff. The second university is a private university (coded as University B) that has six colleges and four schools, employing almost 200 full-time staff. Both universities offer a variety of degree programs from bachelors to doctoral degrees, but the private university does not offer degrees in natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, and physics), which is common among private universities in Cambodia.

Purposive and stratified sampling strategies were employed to select the participants for the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In selecting the participants, the researcher considered their gender, academic qualifications, teaching experience, positions, disciplines, and their interest in participating in the study. This stratified sampling allowed for the selection of participants from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, which was important for data triangulation and gaining valuable insights into the research topic under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Participants who held leadership positions were selected through purposive sampling. As a result, a total of 22 Cambodian academics were selected for semi-structured interviews.

The interviews were conducted face to face in 2019, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia and globally. Of the 22 academics, 11 (50%) were based in a public university, four (18%) were female, 10 (45.4%) had a PhD, and eight (36.3%) held administrative or leadership roles, such as vice rector, faculty dean, or research coordinator. Their work experience ranged from 2 to 25 years. The participants were coded as P1 (i.e., Participant 1), P2, P3, and so on to protect their identities. The profiles of the research participants are shown in Table 1.

Data collection and analysis

This research is part of a larger study that employed document analysis, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews to collect data to understand the research practices of Cambodian academics. In this article, data from semi-structured interviews were reported as they were closely related to the phenomenon under study—the challenges and new developments in university research in Cambodia. The interviews were conducted in Khmer, the researcher’s and research participants’ native language, allowing the

Table 1 Profiles of the research participants

Participant code	Gender	Position	Qualification	Experience	Discipline*	Type of institution
P1	Male	Vice Rector	PhD	15–20 years	Social science	Public
P2	Male	Dean	PhD	15–20 years	Soft discipline	Public
P3	Male	Dean	PhD	20–25 years	Hard discipline	Public
P4	Male	Dean	PhD	15–20 years	Soft discipline	Public
P5	Male	Lecturer	PhD	15–20 years	Philosophy	Public
P6	Male	Lecturer	Master	10–15 years	Education	Public
P7	Female	Lecturer	Master	5–10 years	English language	Public
P8	Male	Lecturer	Master	10–15 years	Computer science	Public
P9	Male	Lecturer	Master	5–10 years	English language	Public
P10	Male	Lecturer	Master	15–20 years	Chemistry	Public
P11	Male	Senior Lecturer	PhD	10–15 years	Environmental science	Public
P12	Male	Dean	PhD	5–10 years	Social science	Private
P13	Male	Dean	Master	20–25 years	Social science	Private
P14	Male	Dean	PhD	5–10 years	Social science	Private
P15	Male	Research Coordinator	PhD	2–3 years	Social science	Private
P16	Male	Senior Lecturer	PhD	5–10 years	Political science	Private
P17	Male	Lecturer	Master	10–15 years	Education	Private
P18	Male	Lecturer	Master	10–15 years	English language	Private
P19	Female	Lecturer	Master	5–10 years	Business	Private
P20	Female	Lecturer	Master	5–10 years	Law	Private
P21	Male	Lecturer	Master	4–5 years	Business	Private
P22	Female	Lecturer	Master	5–10 years	Business	Private

*To protect the participants' identities, broader terms such as hard discipline (biology, physics, mathematics) and soft discipline or social sciences (business, law, philosophy) were used.

participants to express themselves clearly and easily. The interviews lasted between 27 and 70 min and were audio-recorded with the participants' written informed consent. All recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher who is proficient in both Khmer and English and has been an English lecturer for around 10 years. The transcription process began immediately after each interview was conducted and followed transcription procedures suggested by Richards (2003).

To facilitate data analysis, all the interview transcripts were imported from Microsoft Word into the qualitative software NVivo 12 for coding and analysis. The coding process involved both deductive and inductive coding as they are mutually complementary (Gibbs, 2007). The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis consisting of six steps such as (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Specifically, the interview transcripts were read and reread several times to identify key thematic categories.

Strategies to ensure research rigor and credibility of qualitative research, such as extended engagement in the field, member checking, data triangulation, and reflexivity, as suggested by Houghton et al. (2013), were followed. Ethical considerations were also strictly observed, especially in terms of the voluntary participation and anonymity of the interviewees. Based on the data analysis, three major themes were identified from the dataset. They included (1) contested understanding of research, (2) precarious environment for research, and (3) new developments in university research.

Findings

Contested understanding of research

One of the key challenges to research that emerged from the data was related to a contested understanding of research held by the Cambodian academics who participated in this study. When asked about how they understand research, many participants emphasized that research was conducted to discover something new, broaden knowledge, apply existing theories in new contexts, and solve problems. For example, two of the participants said:

For me, research is an activity to find something you want to know, to expand your existing knowledge, and to discover new things. (P4, Dean, social science)

I think research is finding something new or improving what we already have. I think research is important as it contributes to knowledge and can improve the institution. It can also benefit society or the world. (P9, Lecturer, English language)

Another participant shared his understanding of research as follows:

For me, research is activities to find something you want to know, to expand your existing knowledge, and to discover new things, or activities of exploring, investigating, asking, examining, checking to find solutions to a specific problem. (P5, Lecturer, philosophy)

These views of research show that many Cambodian academics who participated in this study understood the meaning and significance of research. However, they were also those who appeared to have a limited or even contested understanding of research. They viewed their teaching preparation activities as research by assuming that all the reading and

searching activities they did to prepare for their classes were research. For instance, one academic (P19, Lecturer, business) said that her research activities were mainly involved with reading books or articles on the internet to prepare for the courses she taught. Another academic had a similar understanding of research:

I think [teaching preparation] is part of research as it aims to develop further knowledge on a certain topic. (P18, Lecturer, English language)

This less critical understanding of research was called into question by other participants who stated that teaching preparation activities could not be equated with research. They argued that in the Cambodian context it was common to assume that teaching preparation activities such as reading relevant teaching material online or in print were research. As the following conversation excerpts illustrated, there was contestation in how research was understood:

Conversation excerpt 1

Researcher: Do you consider a lecturer's preparation for classes a research activity?

P9: No, it's just preparation for teaching. In our context, these preparation activities are considered research. If we consider a Western definition of research, teaching relies on research. After we have done research, we can teach what we have found. We teach based on what has been known and researched.

Conversation excerpt 2

Researcher: What does research mean to you?

P7: For me research is not just about finding information. It's broader than that. We have to find a gap in the literature and try to fill it. Some research aims to develop a theory or solve problems...

Researcher: When an academic prepares for their classes, do you consider that a research activity?

P7: I think it's just personal searching, not research. To me research involves a problem, a review of literature and data collection.

This contested understanding of research may stem from the fact that, in the Khmer language, the words "search" and "research" have similar meanings, thereby the two words, search and research, are often conflated to mean "research." As one participant argued:

A class preparation activity is not research. It's just a search for something. In our context, going to the library and searching for documents are considered research. (P21, Lecturer, business)

This finding suggests that some Cambodian academics did not have a clear understanding of research as they tended to equate reading or searching for relevant materials to prepare for their teaching with research. This uncritical view of research may have influenced their attitudes toward research and their ability to engage in it.

Precarious environment for research

The data analysis revealed many barriers that created a precarious environment for Cambodian academics to engage in research. When asked about what prevented them from conducting research, the participants pointed to a set of challenges that served as major barriers to their research endeavors. These challenges included a lack of state and institutional funding for research, lack of incentives for research, lack of institutional research requirements, and other challenges linked to academics' own circumstances preventing them from engaging in research. Major challenges to university research raised by the participants are summarized in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, the challenges to research frequently mentioned by the participants were various factors of national, institutional, and individual nature. For example, some participants emphasized the lack of national funding for research and the lack of academic promotion systems that could serve as a vital source of motivation for research engagement. As one participant said:

The government and MoEYS have talked a lot about the needs for research promotion but, in reality, there is no discussion about how researchers are rewarded or recognised. We must have motivation schemes. At present, MoEYS does not have professorial titles for academics who conduct research, so there must be policies and implementation with transparency in order to promote and sustain research. (P2, Dean, soft discipline)

Other participants highlighted the issue of limited academic freedom that they believed had affected Cambodian academics' research engagement. As one academic who was a faculty dean said:

Because of the lack of policy, researchers are reluctant to conduct research on certain topics. Even though academics in my faculty want to do it, I will not allow them to do it because who knows what will happen? (P3, Dean, hard discipline)

Many academics who participated in this study also lamented that they did not have the motivation to conduct research because there was limited support for research (if any) provided by their institutions. One academic from the public university acknowledged some financial support in the form of a research grant from his institution; however, he could not compete for it due to his limited research experience. He said the following during our conversation:

Conversation excerpt 3

Researcher: How does your university support and promote research?

P6: The university is encouraging. It has research grants for academics to compete for, but only experienced researchers can win the grants. New researchers cannot. The university should reserve some grants for new researchers, but it did not do that. As a result, new researchers will not compete for the grants because they already know they will not win. They will not spend time writing proposals to compete for it.

The participants from the private university, however, said that there were no research funds or grants available for them. As one academic put it:

Table 2 Major challenges to university research in Cambodia

No.	Major challenges	Exemplary quotes
1	Lack of state funding for research	I think MoEYS has engaged in a number of reforms, but the main challenge is finance. In all ministries, as I know, the sustainable source of financial budget is only for administrative and payroll expenses. The budget for research is very slow and limited. (P16, Senior Lecturer, political science)
2	Lack of academic promotion	There should be a clear career structure with clear policies on promotion and evaluation schemes. MoEYS has to encourage the implementation of the policy on academic promotion. (P15, Research Coordinator, social science)
3	Lack of academic freedom	Politics prevents real academic research. Researchers cannot write about sensitive issues. They can't go deeper into a topic. (P12, Dean, social science)
4	Lack of financial incentives and support	As of now, there is no incentive for publication... There is no support [for research]. (P1, Vice Rector, social science)
5	Lack of institutional research requirements	... research is not required of them as a university academic, so it's optional for them. Each year there are only a few academics who do research [in my faculty]. (P2, Dean, soft discipline)
6	Lack of time for research	I think the problem is time. I have the ability to do [research] but I don't have time. (P20, Lecturer, law)
7	Limited research knowledge and experience	All these factors (e.g., lack of time and research experience), together with my limited knowledge about research, demotivate me to engage in research. (P22, Lecturer, business)

Yes, there are [plans to promote research at University B], but it's just verbal encouragement. There are no policies or rewards for research. There is no financial support for publication. (P15, Research Coordinator, social science)

Another academic shared the same view regarding the absence of financial support for research at the private university. The following conversation illustrates this point:

Conversation excerpt 4

Researcher: How does University B encourage lecturers to engage in research?

P19: There is only verbal encouragement, but there is no real encouragement (i.e., financial support) for research and publication...

Researcher: Is there any research policy?

P18: We have a research policy, but the practice is different. We do not have research funds... There is a policy to encourage and promote research, but there are no specific mentions of funding and rewards.

A number of academics also highlighted the lack of institutional requirements for research that they believed created an environment in which research and publication were not part of academics' job responsibilities. As a result, many, if not most, Cambodian academics focused their energy and attention on teaching as it was the primary source of their monthly income. As shown in Table 2, research was not required; academics could choose to do research or not depending on their preferences and interests.

In addition to these structural barriers, the participants also acknowledged personal challenges concerning the research deficiency of many Cambodian academics; that is, they believed that Cambodian academics generally lacked the necessary research knowledge, skills, and experience that could enable them to effectively conduct research. One academic who was a faculty dean at the public university, for example, said:

Another issue is to do with the knowledge of our researchers. We cannot compare ourselves with researchers in other countries as we have just started after the civil war. We are still young in research. We lack the advanced skills [for data collection and analysis]. (P3, Dean, hard discipline)

Other participants, irrespective of their institutions and disciplines, candidly revealed their limited research knowledge. Some of them said the following:

I know there are research grants [available for competition] but I don't know how to get them. I want to join any teams so I can learn [to do research] but no one can support me. (P 8, Lecturer, computer science)

The main challenges are related to my knowledge. I have a master's degree so my research knowledge is limited. (P10, Lecturer, chemistry)

... my limited knowledge about research demotivates me to engage in research. If I have good knowledge about research, even if I have little time and money, I will still be able to do it. Now whenever I start to do research, I get stuck. (P22, Lecturer, business)

Overall, the findings showed that Cambodian academics operated in a precarious environment that prevented them from engaging in research. Their research interests and

endeavors were considerably constrained by the structural barriers and their own deficiencies. The various challenges related to national, institutional, and individual factors, as summarized in Table 2, formed formidable barriers to their research and knowledge production activities.

New developments in university research

Despite the many challenges and barriers to research, which limit Cambodian academics' research engagement and productivity, the data analysis revealed new developments and transformations in university research in Cambodia at both national and institutional levels.

New developments at the national level

At the national level, there were some developments that provided new hope for university research in Cambodia. For example, based on a review of relevant research and policy documents, there were new policies, initiatives, and projects that have been introduced to promote university research activities. Since the early 2010s, the Education Ministry has introduced some key research-related policies to promote research in Cambodia. These included Policy on Research Development in the Education Sector, Master Plan for Research Development in the Education Sector 2011–2015, Policy on Human Resource in Education Sector, Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030, and Higher Education Strategy 2021–2030 (Heng & Sol, 2021). These policies are significant in providing a roadmap for promoting research in Cambodian higher education and Cambodia at large. For example, one of the goals of the Master Plan for Research Development in the Education Sector 2011–2015 was to develop the capacity of Cambodian researchers and HEIs via the provision of research grants and scholarships (MoEYS, 2011). As a result of this policy, a national research grant scheme was offered under the HEQCIP project (MoEYS, 2015). The Higher Education Strategy 2021–2030, likewise, is aimed at increasing the number of action research linked with socioeconomic development by five times, in addition to ensuring that 50% of Cambodian university graduates will be equipped with the knowledge and skills required for the job market (MoEYS, 2021).

Moreover, MoEYS has introduced two notable higher education projects, namely, HEQCIP and HEIP, to promote capacity building, higher education governance, teaching and learning, and research. HEQCIP, implemented from 2010 to 2015 (extended to 2017), was valued at US\$23 million, while HEIP, valued at US\$92.5 million, has been implemented since 2018 and will complete in 2024 (Heng & Sol, 2021). Both projects are funded by the World Bank through grants and credit.

These two projects have arguably paved the way for a renewed interest in research among Cambodian academics. During the implementation of HEQCIP, for instance, there were 45 research projects supported by research grants, called Development and Innovation Grants (MoEYS, 2015). These research grants were unprecedented and ground-breaking. For instance, as one component of HEQCIP, the Development and Innovation Grants received USD3.5 million to fund 45 research projects led by researchers from 24 private and public Cambodian universities. Although there were criticisms about the effectiveness of this grant scheme and HEQCIP per se (see Rappleye & Un, 2018), there was a sense of success among relevant stakeholders including policymakers (MoEYS, 2015).

As for the HEIP project, it is too early to assess its effectiveness as the project is being implemented. However, available information published in the media and on relevant

university or ministry websites showed that there were some positive developments in the research space in Cambodian higher education (see, e.g., Amaro, 2018; Sen, 2018). For example, 53 research projects have been funded and implemented at five target public universities that have received a total investment of almost USD15 million from HEIP (Chhoeuth & Heng, 2022). There are also ongoing research activities taking place at other HEIs and schools as a result of the implementation of HEIP.

New developments at the institutional level

Although not many participants were aware of the existing national research policies, they knew about the recent efforts made by their institutions to promote faculty research. At the institutional level, for example, several academics from the public university spoke about the introduction of competitive research grants made available by their institution. Although the research grants might not be available in subsequent years after they were first introduced, they welcomed this new development. As one participant who was an active researcher noted, there had been a new push for research in the public university (University A) in recent years. He said:

... there is a lot of encouragement from the university (i.e., University A). The university had some research grants as well as some support from the World Bank. At least there is a trend toward the promotion of research. Research begins to grow now... Moreover, the university also begins to invest in research. In terms of a historical timeline, this event (i.e., the provision of competitive research grants) is an emerging trend. (P11, Senior Lecturer, environmental science)

Another academic who was a dean, echoing P11's statement, said:

With the research funds made available [by the university rector] to support the establishment of a journal and promote research, together with some support from the (Education) Ministry, research begins to grow and sustain. (P2, Dean, soft discipline)

However, in the private university (University B), there appeared to be no new developments in research, although a few academics pointed out that the university leadership had a true intention, albeit without specific supporting mechanisms, to promote faculty research. One faculty dean, for instance, said that the university president was trying to promote research. He said:

During meetings the university president has mentioned the importance of research. He wishes to promote research, but there are no specific mechanisms such as academic promotion schemes to promote research. Thus, the university wishes to promote research, but there are no specific plans or mechanisms to motivate academics to conduct research. There are no funds for research. (P14, Dean, social science)

Other academics spoke about the establishment of a research office to oversee and promote research activities within the private university; nonetheless, the research office itself was not well-functioning. One academic said:

[At University B], there is a research office, but it does not really function well, as intended. There's a lack of teamwork and lack of supporting research staff. Moreover, the duties and responsibilities for the person in charge of the research office are still

not clear. He or she is overloaded with numerous work responsibilities. There's a lack of focus on research. (P13, Dean, social science)

Another participant said that he had never heard anything about research conducted by his colleagues at University B. He went on to emphasize that there were also no research activities taking place at other Cambodian universities for which he had worked. He said:

So far, no university has ever asked me to do research. There is no mention of research in the [employment] contract. I've never heard anything about research. It's silent. I wonder about it too. There's neither incentives nor encouragement [for research]. (P17, Lecturer, education)

He added that:

I know some academics who write [locally published] books and only those who are PhD students [engage in research], as they need to publish to meet their course requirements. I have never heard anything from other academics. At other universities, it's even worse. No one I know talks about research.

Overall, the findings show that, despite the various challenges and barriers to research, there has been some recent progress in Cambodian higher education that can be seen to usher in new developments and transformations in university research in the country.

Discussion

This study showed that Cambodian academics had contested understandings of research. Although some of them were in a good position to conduct and publish research, others appeared to lack the necessary skills and knowledge to meaningfully engage in research due in part to their limited understanding of research. Some participants might have probably believed that they were research-engaged academics because they considered their usual preparation for teaching, such as searching for and reading materials on the internet, to be research. This limited understanding of research may have influenced their research engagement. In other words, their perceptions of what constitutes research may have affected their ability to conduct research, let alone publishing it. These findings are in line with Heng et al. (2022a) who found that Cambodian academics had “mixed, varying, and contesting conceptions of research” (p. 4). That is, although many academics understood research as “knowledge-broadening activity,” “an activity or process of discovery,” “the application of old concepts or theories in new contexts,” and “a problem-solving activity,” some assumed that reading relevant materials, either offline or online, to prepare for their teaching was research (Heng et al., 2022a, p. 4).

The study also found that Cambodian academics' research engagement was fundamentally constrained by the precarious environment that was by no means conducive for research. As the findings revealed, there were numerous barriers and challenges to research that were typical of research environments in the Global South contexts as discussed in previous research (Canagarajah, 2002; Demeter, 2020; Fussy, 2019). These barriers were related to various factors across the national, institutional, and individual levels that influenced academics' research engagement and productivity (Heng et al., 2020). For example, the lack of state funding for research may have prevented many Cambodian universities, particularly private ones, to disregard research as their core mission. Kwok et al. (2010) previously found that research was not a core mission of Cambodian universities because

most of them “function primarily as teaching institutions” (p. 9). The findings of the current study shed more light on this issue, and considering the limited research engagement of Cambodian academics, it is difficult for Cambodian universities to transition to research-oriented universities.

The lack of clear academic promotion systems at both national and institutional levels, as well as the limited space for academic freedom, lack of institutional support, and lack of institutional research requirements, may also have served as key factors that discouraged Cambodian academics from committing their time and energy to research and scholarly publication. These findings are consistent with previous studies which showed that Cambodian academics were discouraged from conducting research due to limited appreciation for their research output and the lack of career development prospects resulting from their research performance (Kwok et al., 2010; Heng et al., 2022b; Oleksiyenko & Ros, 2019).

In addition, the key individual-level factors, such as the lack of time for research and lack of research knowledge, as found in this study, are common inhibiting factors for research engagement and productivity. Recent research about academic life in Cambodia and elsewhere in the Global South contexts has painted a bleak picture for research as academics in these less developed education systems operate in an environment that is far from conducive for research (Fussy, 2019; Heng et al., 2022b; Nguyen, 2013). For instance, academics in Cambodia generally teach from 8 to 10 classes, equivalent to 24–30 h of teaching time per week (Heng et al., 2022b). They are often paid on the basis of the total number of their teaching hours with a teaching rate from as low as US\$6 to around US\$20 per hour (Heng et al., 2022b; Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018). Academics in other education systems in the developing world were reported to face similar problems regarding the lack of time and the overload of their teaching responsibilities. For example, research emanating from China (Bai et al., 2013), Malaysia (Sanmugam & Rajantran, 2014), Tanzania (Fussy, 2019), Thailand (Crocco, 2018; Pornsalnuwat, 2014), and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2013; Tien, 2016) has all shown that academics in these countries had to teach many hours, with some engaging in moonlighting activities. This prevented them from committing to research activities, which has in turn thwarted their universities’ efforts for academic and institutional mobility and internationalization.

Nonetheless, the present study revealed somewhat positive developments in university research in Cambodia as the Cambodian government has made efforts to promote Cambodian academics’ research activities in order to improve research performance of Cambodian universities. The new developments in research identified by this study are consistent with those observed by Heng (2020) and Heng and Sol (2021) who argued that there was new hope for academic research in Cambodia. The new developments and transformations are, however, far from surprising given the impact of globalization, the rise of higher education internationalization globally, and the regional trends for higher education reforms (Mok, 2013; Wan et al., 2019). For instance, research about higher education in Thailand (Fry, 2018), Vietnam (Gillen et al., 2021; Phan & Doan, 2020), and the broader Asian region (Horta & Mok, 2020; Phan & Fry, 2021) has revealed new developments in higher education systems in these contexts. These developments have influenced the global trends toward developing research universities or world-class universities in Asia and Latin America (Altbach & Balán, 2007) and globally (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

Conclusion and implications

This study has explored university research development in Cambodia through in-depth interviews with university academics. The findings showed both key challenges to research and new developments in the research space in Cambodian higher education. The new developments could be argued to bring about transformations in university research and foster mobility and internationalization of Cambodian higher education. The study also highlighted Cambodian academics' unclear and contested understandings of research that may have constrained their research engagement and productivity. It brought to the fore the precarious higher education environment that could not be considered conducive for academic research development.

Although the study revealed a positive light that could provide hope for the development of university research in Cambodia, such new developments and transformations in university research should not be taken for granted, given the overwhelming barriers to research, as identified in this study. There is, therefore, no room for complacency for concerned stakeholders in Cambodian higher education at all because the national research environment in Cambodia seems to be far from functioning, and any hope for fundamentally positive and sustainable research developments needs to be considered with great caution.

This study is unique in presenting new findings that reflect recent developments in university research in Cambodia; however, the findings point to bigger issues related to the geopolitics and inequalities in knowledge production and dissemination. In this sense, at least two implications can be drawn from the findings of the current study. First, the study sheds light on considerable barriers to the research engagement of Cambodian academics, preventing them from meaningfully participating in the regional and international academic communities. These findings are useful for policy formulation and strategic planning for improving university research in Cambodia and other similar contexts. Second, the study underscores the perpetuation of the North-South knowledge divide, primarily driven by the disparities in resources and opportunities between countries in the Global North and South. Thus, regional and global efforts are needed to address the inequalities in knowledge production and exchange.

The case of academic life of the Cambodian academics as revealed in this study emphasizes the need for relevant stakeholders in Cambodian higher education to work together to find practical solutions to the various challenges that limit the possibility of a higher level of research engagement of Cambodian academics. One important strategy is to introduce and implement national and institutional research policies that clearly outline the requirements for research and publication as well as conditions for academic recruitment, promotion, remuneration, and retention. When research-oriented policies across the national, institutional, and departmental levels are aligned and effectively implemented, supported by adequate provision of research infrastructure and resources, there will be genuine hope for the sustainable development of research in Cambodian higher education.

This study also suggests the need for policy reforms that are aimed at making a difference to the university research landscape in Cambodia. The reforms should focus on establishing clear academic career pathways, increasing the number of academics with PhDs, improving higher education governance, and finding solutions to the issues concerning low academic salaries and lack of funding for research. In addition, there is a need for research capacity building and research mentorship programs to enhance Cambodian academics' research capacity and develop a new generation of local researchers who can contribute to research productivity in higher education in Cambodia.

Finally, the present study is not without limitations. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the findings may not be generalized beyond the context of the current research. Future researchers, therefore, need to expand the scope of the study to include academics in other types of universities and HEIs, including private or public specialized universities, provincial universities, and teacher education institutions. Research that are aimed at conducting a national or large-scale survey to understand research practices of Cambodian academics would be worth considering. Future studies that adopt mixed-methods approaches are also needed to shed more light, in both quantitative and qualitative manners, on the nature of academics' research engagement and the development of university research in developing societies. Such studies are important in advancing our understanding of academic life and research development in the Global South contexts.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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