

Cambodia

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I. Brief Description of the Cambodian Higher Education System

Cambodia's higher education institutions are made up of two main categories: universities and TVET institutions, which are sometimes termed "institutes" or "independent schools."¹ The former are supervised by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), while the latter are supervised by the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MoLVT). Besides these two main ministries, twelve other ministries and agencies oversee the work of higher education institutions in Cambodia. Within the MoEYS, the General Department of Higher Education (GDHE) supervises work on tertiary education. The GDHE's specific department, the Department of Higher Education, develops policies and strategies for higher education, licenses higher education institutions for their operations, and assists in the development of academic programs and management tools for accreditation processes. Another department, the Department of Scientific Research (DSR), covers the master's and doctoral degree programmes.²

Government politics play a vital role in the administration of Cambodian universities, especially since political parties and ministries are actively involved in nominating officers in public higher education institutions. Moreover, ministries have the absolute rights in issuing and certifying diplomas (university diplomas are not valid unless they carry the signature and stamp of the university's parent ministry, and the institutions themselves are not granted this right).³

Number of higher education institutions

As of 2013 (latest figures available), there were 88 universities in Cambodia, 54 of which were public and 34 of which were private.⁴ (The first private university was founded in 1996, following the government's plan to expand higher education.) These institutions offer majors in nearly one hundred subject areas, ranging from foreign languages, to health science, engineering, agriculture, tourism, business management, law and economics.⁵ A government decree from 2002 set the criteria for an institution to be recognised as a university. The criteria include a requirement for universities to have three mandatory faculties and at least two other faculties; in practice however, many Cambodian universities fail to meet these standards.⁶

In the TVET sector, Cambodia has 14 formal institutions that are under the supervision of the MoEYS. The TVET institutions offer qualifications ranging from certificate courses to diploma level courses to bachelor degrees.⁷

¹ UNESCO Bangkok and SEAMEO. 2006. *Higher education in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.

² Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2015. *Cambodia Education 2015*. Phnom Penh. <http://www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/sr/edu2015.pdf>.

³ Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2013. *Anatomy of Higher Education Governance In Cambodia*. Phnom Penh. www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/wp/wp86e.pdf.

⁴ OECD. 2013. *Cambodia*. Structural Policy Country Notes. <https://www.oecd.org/site/seao/Cambodia.pdf>.

⁵ UNESCO. 2010. *UNESCO national educational support strategy*. unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001880/188018e.pdf.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNESCO. 2013. *Policy Review of TVET in Cambodia*. unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002253/225360E.pdf.

Separately, the National Institute for Education (NIE), an institute based in the capital Phnom Penh, trains upper secondary school teachers, six Regional Teacher Training Colleges (RTTC) train lower secondary school teachers, and 18 Provincial Teacher Training Centres (PTTC) train primary school teachers.⁸

Enrolment

The MoEYS reported that in the 2010-11 academic year, there were 173,264 undergraduate students (at universities and some TVET institutions), 20,719 associate degree students (TVET institutions), 981 doctorate students and 12,887 masters students. Taken as a whole, this combined figure is approximately twice the enrolment of only five years before.⁹ The surge in student enrolment has led the MoEYS to declare “considerable progress” in higher education¹⁰; however, objectively, student enrolment still represents only 16% of the total college-age population.¹¹

In the 2010-11 academic year, 56,419 students commenced their studies in a bachelor’s programme at a university in Cambodia, while in a different data set from 2012-13 on all higher education institutions in Cambodia, it was recorded that 150,336 students were enrolled in private universities, and 105,455 were enrolled in public universities.¹²

For the TVET sector, 6,035 students were enrolled in the 2010-11 academic year in all levels of the formal TVET institutions under the supervision of the MoEYS.¹³ In addition to universities, colleges, and formal TVET institutions, there are also non-formal TVET programmes, carried out through 22 Provincial Training Centres, 157 Community Learning Centres, NGOs, Women’s Development Centres, 750 private businesses, and small businesses¹⁴. The number of students who graduated from these non-formal TVET programs at the tertiary education level between 2009 and 2013, according to Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), was approximately 34,000.¹⁵

A brief history of Cambodia and its higher education system

The Royal University of Phnom Penh, the first modern university in Cambodia, was established in 1960. Until 1997, all higher education institutions were public under a tuition-free system (it was in 1996 that

⁸ UNESCO. 2010. *UNESCO National Educational Support Strategy*. unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001880/188018e.pdf.

⁹ Rany, Sam, Ahmad Nurulazam Md Zain, and Hazri Jamil. 2012. "Cambodia's Higher Education Development in Historical Perspectives (1863-2012)". *IJLD* 2 (2). doi:10.5296/ijld.v2i2.1670.

¹⁰ "Higher Education". 2016. *MOEYS*. Accessed June 28. http://www.moeys.gov.kh/en/education/higher-education.html#.Vcxam_mqqko.

¹¹ "Gross Enrolment Ratio, Tertiary, Both Sexes". 2016. *World Bank*. Accessed June 28. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR/countries>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ UNESCO. (2013). *Policy Review of TVET in Cambodia*. unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002253/225360E.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2015. *Cambodia Education 2015*. Phnom Penh. <http://www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/sr/edu2015.pdf>.

the establishment of private higher education institutions was finally permitted, and so was the charging of tuition fees in both public and private institutions).

Under Prince Sihanouk, who tried to transform Cambodia into an industrialised and modern state upon independence from France, spending over 20 per cent of national spending on education, fifteen universities and institutes were founded, focusing mainly on “Buddhist socialism”. However, after Prince Sihanouk was dethroned in 1970, the resulting Khmer Republic took to the United States’ ideologies, dominated by concepts of capitalism and democracy. The fight against the Viet Cong and the Khmer Rouge at the period also led to the death of over 600,000 citizens, the destruction of seven universities and institutes, and the fleeing of almost 200 foreign lecturers (Chhum, 1973). After the Khmer Rouge took control in 1975, the education system fared even worse: more students and lecturers were killed, almost 90 per cent of educational facilities and their documents were destroyed. The following Vietnamese occupation, from 1979 to 1991, saw more support for higher education, albeit still mainly for a socialist revolution. Tertiary students were required to study subjects related to socialism, and with financial and technical support from the Soviet government, Cambodian higher education saw the development of engineering majors and more agricultural mechanics. Many students studied abroad in Soviet bloc countries at this time. By 1991, only five universities, compared to 15 during the earlier reign of Prince Sihanouk, were functional.¹⁶

Major Contemporary Issues

Relevance to labour market: Cambodia’s greatest issue in higher education at the moment is a skills mismatch between labour market demands. In 2007, only 10 per cent of university graduates found a job. In 2009, approximately half of total university students majored in Commerce, believing that a degree in business studies would give them comfortable positions upon graduation.¹⁷ However, the field was already saturated with graduates. Cambodia needs more graduates in science, mathematics, agriculture and health, and fewer graduates from business studies, economics and information technology.¹⁸ The Cambodian government is not keen to support programmes in the needed fields because they would require a greater contribution of the national budget.¹⁹

Lack of resources: Related to the fragmented government structure, resources for higher education are used ineffectively. The various ministries sometimes perform overlapping work, leading to a waste of resources. Sen Vicheth and Ros Soveacha (2013) have judged privatisation of higher education in Cambodia as “an absolute necessity” because the government is not sufficiently capable of providing high-quality tertiary education.

Women’s access and accommodation: Women still account for only a small amount of enrolment in higher education institutions in Cambodia. One the main reasons is infrastructural: there are usually no student dorms in Cambodia, but men can find a safe apartment for rental or stay at monasteries, while women

¹⁶ Rany, Sam, Ahmad Nurulazam Md Zain, and Hazri Jamil. 2012. "Cambodia’s Higher Education Development in Historical Perspectives (1863-2012)". *IJLD* 2 (2). doi:10.5296/ijld.v2i2.1670.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UNESCO. 2013. *Policy Review of TVET in Cambodia*. unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002253/225360E.pdf.

¹⁹ Rany, Sam, Ahmad Nurulazam Md Zain, and Hazri Jamil. 2012. "Cambodia’s Higher Education Development in Historical Perspectives (1863-2012)". *IJLD* 2 (2). doi:10.5296/ijld.v2i2.1670.

cannot.²⁰ With over 80 per cent of Cambodians living in rural areas and needing a place to stay once they begin their studies in a city, women find housing to be problematic and therefore do not enrol in universities.²¹ Certain foundations are providing women with dormitories, but the numbers are still too few to make women's presence a norm in universities.²²

Teaching quality and research capacity: Only a few Cambodian teaching staff hold PhDs. For instance, two universities regarded with high regard in Cambodia, the Royal University of Law and Economics and the Royal University of Phnom Penh, saw less than five percent of teaching staff with PhDs, in 2011.²³ The monthly salary for a fulltime university lecturer can be as little as US\$130, which is insufficient to meet the needs of a family,²⁴ and, consequently, many lecturers feel compelled to hold positions at multiple institutions to make a living. As such, there is insufficient time for the lecturers to devote to a single institution.²⁵

II. Financing Higher Education in Cambodia

In 2012, the Cambodian government spent approximately 0.05% of its GDP on higher education, with a greater percentage of the GDP being dedicated to primary education.²⁶ This higher education budget is divided into two sub-budgets: the Recurrent Budget, which addresses salaries, utilities and non-salary expenditure, and the Program Budget, which covers teacher, student and institutional development. Because of limited funding, the government allows public higher education institutions to run private classes to generate additional fees to support their operations²⁷.

The following table presents the cost of higher education in Cambodia, in US dollars. Where information could not be found online, phone interviews were conducted by the author with Cambodian students to ascertain figures.

Table 2. Cambodia Higher Education Expenses Borne by Parents and Students, First Degree, Academic Year 2014-15 (latest available data) - Instructional expenses for one academic year

[Figures given in US dollars. While the official currency in Cambodia is the Cambodian riel (KHR), all significant financial transactions in Cambodia are priced and paid for in US dollars. This situation is a

²⁰ "Higher & TVET". 2016. *UNESCO Bangkok*. Accessed June 28.

<http://www.unescobkk.org/education/resources/resources/education-system-profiles/cambodia/higher-tvet/>.

²¹ "Equal Access to Education for Women in Rural Cambodia". 2011. *The Asia Foundation*.

<http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2011/03/02/equal-access-to-education-for-women-in-rural-cambodia/>.

²² "Leadership Centers for Women". 2016. *Harpwell Foundation*. Accessed June 28.

<http://harpwellfoundation.org/center/>.

²³ MoEYS. 2011. *Education Staff Statistics by Current Status, Cadre, Qualification and Age Group National*. Phnom Penh. <http://www.moeys.gov.kh/~moeys058/images/moeys/indicator-and-statistic/324/hrmis-statistics-2010-2011.pdf>.

²⁴ *Handbook for Civil Servants*. 2010. Ebook. 1st ed. Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia.

²⁵ Rany, Sam, Ahmad Nurulazam Md Zain, and Hazri Jamil. 2012. "Cambodia's Higher Education Development in Historical Perspectives (1863-2012)". *IJLD* 2 (2). doi:10.5296/ijld.v2i2.1670.

²⁶ World Bank. (2012). *Putting Higher Education to Work: Skills and Research for Growth in East Asia*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

²⁷ Rany, Sam, Ahmad Nurulazam Md Zain, and Hazri Jamil. 2012. "Cambodia's Higher Education Development in Historical Perspectives (1863-2012)". *IJLD* 2 (2). doi:10.5296/ijld.v2i2.1670.

remnant from the time of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which administered post-war Cambodia from 1992 to 1993.]

NB. Fees given as for Cambodian citizens

	Public		Private	
	Low cost ²⁸	Medium cost ²⁹	Low cost ³⁰	High cost ³¹
Tuition fees	\$250	\$450	\$300	\$3,000
Other fees	\$20	\$40	\$400	\$500
Books, etc	\$15	\$25	\$25	\$50
Subtotal instructional expenses	\$285	\$515	\$725	\$3,550
Lodging	\$240	\$600 ³²	\$240	\$1,800
Food	\$1,400	\$1,400	\$1,700	\$2,800
Transport	\$100	\$300	\$100	\$300
Other personal expenses	\$150	\$300	\$150	\$300
Subtotal cost of living expenses	\$1,890	\$2,600	\$2,190	\$5,200
TOTAL	\$2,175	\$3,115	\$2,915	\$8,750

Student fees account for more than eighty percent of the total funding for higher education.³³ Prior to 1996, students enrolled at public universities did not pay tuition, but following 1996, Cambodia's public universities began to admit fee-paying students in addition to students receiving scholarships from

²⁸ Taking the lowest-cost programs at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, one of the oldest and largest universities in Cambodia; RUPP. (2014). *Student Life course fees*. Retrieved 24 August 2015: http://www.rupp.edu.kh/studentlife/?page=course_fees

²⁹ Taking the highest-cost programs at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, one of the oldest and largest universities in Cambodia; RUPP. (2014). *Student Life course fees*. Retrieved 24 August 2015: http://www.rupp.edu.kh/studentlife/?page=course_fees

³⁰ Taking the average of programs at Chenla University, considered a cheaper private university in Cambodia: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/lift/if-you-put-money-university-are-you-guaranteed-get-it-back>

³¹ Taking the average of programs at Zaman University, ranked among Cambodia's most expensive universities; Zaman University. (2015). *Tuition & Fees*. Retrieved 24 August 2015: <https://www.zamanu.edu.kh/content/tuition-fees>

³² "For Phnom Penh's College Students, Dorm Life Often Means Rooming with Monks". 2013. *Next City*. <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/for-phnom-penhs-college-students-dorm-life-often-means-rooming-with-monks#>.

³³ Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2013. *Anatomy of Higher Education Governance in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh. www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/wp/wp86e.pdf.

MoEYS.³⁴ Since 1999, three quarters of students in universities have been paying tuition fees.³⁵ There is fear that the high dependence on student fees, which suggests that the Cambodian university system supplies a service that it believes its students will buy, not necessarily the service that the country needs, will lead to the collapse of the higher education system.³⁶

International donors have a large role in supporting Cambodian higher education institutions. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank, in particular, fund the system. The ADB currently has a US\$25 million project that assists in increasing the quality of education in Cambodia, with \$3 million allocated specifically to higher education. The ADB is targeting three specific areas of Cambodian higher education: improving the human resources department; strengthening the accreditation system; and improving the library of the Royal University of Phnom Penh. The World Bank carried out a US\$23 million project, ending in 2014, to provide innovation grants and offer scholarships.³⁷

III. Financial Assistance

Although student fees play a major role in university funding, there are no student loans offered by the Department of Higher Education³⁸ or the MoEYS because of a general lack of funding.³⁹ Loans are provided through banks or universities directly. Each university and bank has its own rules concerning loans. Many universities consider not only the candidate's qualifications, but also the financial standing of his or her family. Depending on the needs of the student, loans are given out over a period of four years, or by each semester. Some universities still do not have a loan program in structure because they simply do not have the funds.⁴⁰ Pen Sithol, the director of the Department of Standards and Accreditation in the Council of Ministers, was unable to state how many higher education institutions have student loan programmes (an issue of data collection of the decentralized system), but offered that the number was probably limited because of Cambodia's weak job market, which encourages lenders to doubt the students' future ability to repay the loan.⁴¹

Although Cambodian banks are increasingly offering student loans, many still do not because of concerns that students will not be able to repay.⁴² Like universities themselves, banks fear that the students will not be able to find a job after graduation. Some even fear that the loan recipients will not graduate. And as such, many banks prefer to give loans to only students who have completed at least two years of study, believing that the drop-out potential during the first two years can still be high (and if a student drops out,

³⁴ Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2010. *Scoping Study: Research Capacities Of Cambodia's Universities*. Phnom Penh: CDRI. <http://www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/sr/sr5ae.pdf>.

³⁵ ISEAS. 2011. *The Cambodia Forum*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

³⁶ Cambodia Development Resource Institute. 2013. *Anatomy of Higher Education Governance in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh. www.cdri.org.kh/webdata/download/wp/wp86e.pdf.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Chan, Sovannara and Chann Tet. 2010. "Where Are The Student Loans?". *Phnom Penh Post*. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/lift/where-are-student-loans>.

³⁹ Wilkins, Emily and Odom Sek. 2014. "New Loans Bring Risks, Rewards For Aspiring Students". *The Cambodia Daily*. <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/new-loans-bring-risks-rewards-for-aspiring-students-54736/>.

⁴⁰ Chan, Sovannara and Chann Tet. 2010. "Where Are The Student Loans?". *Phnom Penh Post*. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/lift/where-are-student-loans>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Wilkins, Emily and Odom Sek. 2014. "New Loans Bring Risks, Rewards For Aspiring Students". *The Cambodia Daily*. <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/new-loans-bring-risks-rewards-for-aspiring-students-54736/>.

it is unlikely that he or she will be able to later find a job to finance the loan repayment).⁴³ Some potential bank lenders also believe that tuition fees are not high enough to justify loans (university studies cost an average of USD\$1,600 for four years,⁴⁴ but can cost as low as USD\$300 per year, while the Cambodian GDP per capita is USD\$1,084⁴⁵). Some lenders give student payment options: pay nothing during studies, and start repaying monthly after graduation to reimburse both the capital and the interests; repay interests monthly during studies, and repay capital after graduation; or repay monthly immediately to reimburse both the capital and the interests. Banks usually give loans of no more than USD\$30,000, with typical interest rates of about 1 percent to 1.8 percent. If graduates are unable to repay the loan, they may lose the collateral, often a piece of land owned by their parents.⁴⁶

⁴³ "Student Loans Remain A Heavy Risk For Lenders". 2010. *VOA*. <http://www.voacambodia.com/content/student-loans-remain-a-heavy-risk-for-lenders-101555193/1355255.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "GDP Per Capita (Current US\$)". 2015. *World Bank*. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

⁴⁶ Wilkins, Emily and Odom Sek. 2014. "New Loans Bring Risks, Rewards For Aspiring Students". *The Cambodia Daily*. <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/new-loans-bring-risks-rewards-for-aspiring-students-54736/>.