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Community engagement in the planning and building of an advanced higher education system in Cambodia

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To clarify:

The concept of community engagement refers to the link of different community groups that have stakes in quality education.

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Problem statement

The Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) genocide and decades of complicated politics that followed have left Cambodia with **diminished cultural capital**.

- For Cambodia to rebuild its education systems will require models that make it possible for the stakeholders to evaluate the impacts of their work relative to each other's goals, and learn from this experience.
- This is well-understood by policy makers, who recognise the need for appropriate integration of education and research into the community.
- The present study concerns itself with the processes that Cambodia's higher education institutions are designing in order to engage the community so as to facilitate a better embedding of the country's education policies and programs within the broader needs and values of the people.

The aim of the present study is to inquire about the strategies that the leading universities in Cambodia are setting up in order to rebuild the community of Cambodia and, as a result, assert their leadership role in the society.

Research Questions

The study focused on three main following questions:

1. How do the leading universities plan their **vision** for addressing higher education reforms?
2. What **strategies** emerge from these plans?
3. What aspects of **planning show to be missing** and how can they be addressed?

Methodology and research design

- **Participants:** Directorate General of Higher Education of Cambodia (DGHE) and Academics holding executive positions.
- **Research site:** One of the key public universities of Cambodia
- **Intellectual model:** The study analysed these plans by drawing on Burawoy's [2] vision of modern universities. Implications are discussed from the perspective of the societal and cultural problems that globalisation creates for many regions of the world.
- The study is part of a reflection process, in which the DGHE and the participating academics engaged, in order to review their interpretations of the needs of the higher education system in relation to their own university context.

Burawoy's (2011) vision of modern university
All sections must talk to each other to inform one another

	AUTONOMY Academic Audience	HETERONOMY Extra-Academic Audience
Instrumental knowledge	PROFESSIONAL	POLICY
Reflexive knowledge	CRITICAL	PUBLIC

- Burawoy's view is that the job of universities is not primarily to prepare people for jobs, but to create a critically reflexive society able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century and able to move forward intellectually and socially. The following explain the descriptors in those tables:
 - Policy engagement and advocacy
 - Building critical identity of universities
 - Building expert community & relevant capital
 - Public visibility

Findings

Findings

Table 1: Mapping the needs of participants in relation to Burawoy's (2011) model a of public university

Policy advocacy	Identity as perceived by others	Building expert community & relevant capital	Public visibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Innovation • Teaching & Learning • Service Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Innovation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop national/international networks and partnerships • Teaching & Learning • Service Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Innovation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure research interaction with external organisations • Engage with alumni across all sectors of society to expand connections and share expertise • Increase PhD level appointments • Teaching & Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure continual quality improvement of programs through annual report and thorough 5-year program reviews • Enhance employers' involvement in curriculum review • Service Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage short-term/professional training • Improve staff supervision capacity to increase students research capability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research & Innovation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize Annual Talent competition (Engineering Competition & Fair, Computer Program Competition) • Encourage participation to national and international talent competition (Computer Program Competition) • Raise the profile of Department/Faculty through targeted innovation forums for key stakeholders (government, academic, and industry) • Teaching & Learning • Service Learning

Question 1: How do the leading universities plan their **vision** for addressing higher education reforms?

- The participants' response to question 1 mainly followed the structure outlined in the Cambodian Higher Education Roadmap (MoEYS, 2017) which means that the descriptors were presented as policy objectives, rather than concrete strategies for their implementation.
- Nospecific strategies emerged from the responses but mainly a list of “things to do” aligned with performance indicators for each goal.

COMMENT

- Possibly, the implementation strategies will be addressed by the different sections of the university. However, the participants' responses make no mention of this.

Findings

The following observations were made in relation to the research questions.

The authors have identified three key focus areas as leading the reform:

1. Teaching and Learning,
2. Research and Innovation, and
3. Service Learning (building capacity).

In each of these areas, the framing principles are:

1. Internationalisation
2. Regional competitiveness
3. National and cultural relevance
4. Industry-applicability

Question 2: What **strategies** emerge from these plans?

- No clear strategies for implementing the policy objectives emerge from participants' responses.
- In Table 1, there is no data in the “**Policy advocacy**”-column. In other words, the authors found no information that would refer to activities specifically oriented toward long-term strategy development that would build and impact on policy knowledge.
- The category of “**Identity** as perceived by others” has very few entries, only in the Research and Innovation focus area. Each of the strategies proposed by the respondents centres on building synergies between institutions (and industry). No specific strategy is mentioned for identifying the strengths of the university and, therefore, the process for their reinforcement or development.
- The category of “**Building expert community & relevant capital**” is the most populated with information spanning over all three focus areas of development. **In the Research** and Innovation area, **no specific strategy was identified that would specify the themes and legitimising their value** to Cambodia and the university. **Teaching and Learning** area focused no information is provided **how exactly the university community is expected to build its expertise that is relevant to their own context**. In the **Service Learning** area, the capacity-building strategies also fail to address **the local relevance of the professional development activities to be provided**.
- The category of “**Public visibility**” is addressed only in the area of Research and Innovation. The proposed strategies include a range of activities, such as competitions, publications, stakeholder forums, and patent applications. No specific strategy is proposed for identifying those in a way that would **strengthen the status of the university** in the eyes of the public.

Question 3: What aspects of **planning are shown to be missing** and how can they be addressed?

- The analysis revealed a number of strategic gaps that need addressing for universities to assert their relevance in their local and global communities.
- The key problem is the **absence of a vision that would position the needs identified by the study participants within the larger context of the needs of Cambodia and its people.**

Discussion

The results of the analysis in the course of this study have helped to raise a number of important questions:

- What are the qualitative indicators in relation to which Cambodia is developing its education reforms?
- How exactly are Cambodian universities planning to gauge progress on the local, national and international scale?
- What mechanisms do the universities in Cambodia intend to develop for approaching international partnerships as equals, not as “help recipients”?
- How do the universities in Cambodia protect themselves against importing foreign problems that are disguised as both help and solutions?”.

Discussion

- All these questions represent different facets of the same problem: when institutions do not have mechanisms for understanding their own problems, foreign institutions will supply their understandings.
- Partnering with foreign institutions may not necessarily leave Cambodia in a better place. When unchecked, partnerships with foreign institutions may result in “the dispossession of their own societies under globalization, which results, in developing countries, in ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ death”.
- In the area of Research and Innovation, the authors suggest establishing growth plans that draw on the Strategic Plans of specific institutions that also speak to the regional and global policies of the country.
- Establishing a research management structure (Research Office) in each university would be important.
- Establishing an academic body that would coordinate the relationship between universities and the Directorate General of Higher Education is another priority.

National Advisory
Research and
Teaching Council

University Strategic Plan

Central Research Office
Providing general direction for
development

Research Centres
Providing disciplinary direction

Graduate Schools
Linked to Research Centres

Local and global
context

Figure 2: A research management structure for higher education institutions

Thank you