



Community Engagement in the Planning and Building of an Advanced Higher Education System in Cambodia

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Abstract

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. In order to inquire about those processes, the authors engaged with one of the key higher education institutions in Cambodia that is being impacted by the current reforms. On the basis of the data provided, the findings of the study revealed a multitude of gaps that may need addressing if the reforms are to strengthen the role of the universities in Cambodia as education and community leaders.

Keywords: *community engagement, higher education reform, impacts of globalisation;*

1. Introduction

The Khmer Rouge genocide of 1975-1979, and the subsequent political turmoil, has left Cambodia with diminished cultural capital and resources as countless people responsible for the transmission of cultural and educational heritage were murdered, educational institutions were closed, and the traditional links between different layers of Cambodian society were broken. There is growing empirical evidence showing that, unlike interstate conflicts, which often mobilise national unity and strengthen societal cohesiveness, violent internal conflicts weaken the social fabric, divide the population, undermine trust and the norms that underlie cooperation and collective action for the common good. According to a World Bank funded study by Colletta and Cullen [3] it has been established that even if other forms of capital are replenished, "economic and social development will be hindered unless social capital stocks are restored". The evidence points to the relevance of social capital to the sustainable development of countries: "Social capital refers to the internal social and cultural coherence of society" and "Without social capital, society at large will collapse, and today's world presents some very sad examples of this" [4]. In light of this evidence, rebuilding of the community emerges as a central component of Cambodia's higher education reforms.

This is well-understood by policy makers, who recognise the need for appropriate integration of education and research into the community. However, it is not certain how well the universities will approach the task of rebuilding the community. As Cambodian higher education institutions look to the developed countries for direction and expertise, it is not clear how they plan to draw on community input, and interactions between the various layers of Cambodian society and stakeholders, in order to facilitate a better embedding of the country's education policies and programs within the broader needs and values of the community. It is in this sense that "community engagement" is framed in this study. 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.

2. Research questions

The study focused on the 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

3. Methodology and research design

The authors engaged the Directorate General of Higher Education of Cambodia (DGHE) and academics holding executive positions in one of the leading universities in Cambodia to assist in the task of mapping the needs of their university to meet the higher education reform objectives specified by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) [6]. The study analysed these plans by

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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.

4. Findings

4.1 Question 1

Three key focus areas were identified as leading the reform: Teaching and Learning, Research and Innovation, and Service Learning (building capacity). In each of these areas, internationalisation, regional competitiveness, national and cultural relevance, and industry-applicability were the framing principles. In terms of experiences that need to be provided for each of these key areas of development, the participating university academics focused on factors that help modernise higher learning, integrate understanding of community needs, global trends and interest, and industry experience into research and learning, and support innovation in research. Attainment of these objectives was seen to be subject to appropriate funding and policies that generate an atmosphere of inclusion, transparency and empowerment.

4.2 Question 2

No clear strategies for implementing the policy objectives identified by the participating academics emerge from their responses. In order to obtain a better understanding of the strategic relevance of the ideas proposed by the participating respondents, the authors turned to the work of Professor Michael Burawoy, sociologist, well-known for his work on the current state of universities around the globe. Following Burawoy [2], the authors organised the data provided by the participating respondents according to the categories that, according to Burawoy, reflect the four functions of a modern university. Underlying Burawoy's vision is the view that the role of universities is not primarily to prepare society 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 advocacy – This category relates to universities engaging in policy-sponsored as well as policy-advocacy activities.
- Identity as perceived by others - This category refers to universities building their expertise identities that are based in interdisciplinary dialogue in order to support the critical role that universities are to play in the public sphere.
- Building expert community and relevant capital - This category refers to universities building their own expert communities and accountability processes.
- Public visibility - This category refers to the need for universities' deep engagement with the broader community.

Table 1 presents the pattern in the data.

- 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, respondents included improvements in infrastructure, community- and synergy-building, the need to fund and support thematic research areas. No specific strategy was identified for identifying the themes and legitimising their value to Cambodia and the university. Teaching and Learning area focused on technical aspects of training, such as staff engagement in policy decisions or accreditation. 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.

Table 1: Mapping the needs of a university in relation to Burawoy’s [2] four functions of a modern 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

4.3 Question 3

The analysis revealed a number of strategic gaps that need addressing for universities to assert their relevance in their local and global communities. In other words, missing is a vision that would make the specific strategies identified by the universities both relevant and sufficient.

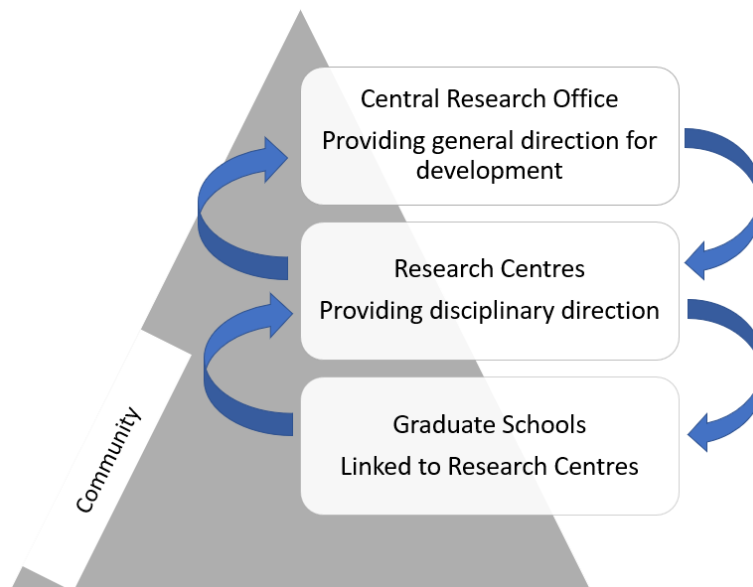
5. Discussion

The results of the analysis conducted in the course of this study have helped to raise a number of important questions. Among them, “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”?”, and, last but not least, “How do the universities in Cambodia protect themselves against importing foreign problems that are disguised as both help and solutions?”. 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. It follows that 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” [6]. 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. In addition, establishing a research management structure (Research Office) in each university would be important. A Research Office would oversee research-related activities and would offer coherence to all those activities. This coherence would come not from objectives listed in a shopping list manner. Instead, it would come from the strategic planning that links research to all aspects of education reform of the university. In this way, implementation of the reform becomes a project that the university undertakes, not a series of disconnected lessons, to be one day connected by someone else, endowed with the job of designing the future by looking into a rear vision mirror. As shown in Figure 1, at each level, the Research Office is linked to different layers of the research community, each with different responsibilities. In order to ensure coherence and information flow, it is proposed that academics appointed at the highest level of the structure should also be involved in



every other level of activity by virtue of their commitments as researchers (in discipline- or problem-focused research centres) and as graduate mentors (graduate school level). In addition, an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) would need to be established in each university to assure quality and for research to inform teaching.

Figure 1: A research management structure for higher education institutions



6. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper made it evident that the two-dimensional implementation plan presented by the study participants required another level of preparation in order to embed its strategies within the broader set of goals and tasks that characterise the functions of a public university. An implementation plan that does not refer directly to the strategic plan of the university makes the interests of the university unclear. This can be remedied, the authors argued, with appropriate governance structures.

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