

HIGHER EDUCATION
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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CHAPTER 1

HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Lorraine Pe Symaco

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Higher education in Southeast Asia has developed considerably over the past decades. Marked with economic and socio-political differences across countries, the role of higher education in development is common. As one of the most compact and culturally diverse regions of the world with a population of over 692 million (Worldometer, n.d.), a more regional push for the higher education sector and markets is seen through initiatives such as the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) which advocates for a free movement of professionals across the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 as a political and economic alliance and now consists of 10 country members, with observer status for Timor-Leste. Despite the diversity found across countries in the region, common themes relating to higher education issues are prevalent. Issues of quality, access and equity, governance, financing and employment, among others remain at the forefront of higher education development in Southeast Asia.

This book brings together country experts in higher education, with each chapter focussing on the relevant issues facing individual countries. Shared goals for quality and access relate to linked SDG ambitions for the sector as highlighted in each chapter. This book covers nine country members of the ASEAN and Timor-Leste, making for the most comprehensive reference work on higher education in Southeast Asia to date.

The following section will outline the distinctive themes discussed in each chapter.

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Quality in higher education is a shared issue in all country cases. In Cambodia, this links to concerns of governance, strategic finance and human resources management which often point to an inefficient system characterised by bureaucracy. Rising from the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian–Vietnamese War, the country's higher education has expanded since. Say Sok and Rinna Bunry however report on the need for a more goal-oriented strategy in higher education, accompanied by transformative leadership, noting how the highly centralised civil service system limits attracting the best talents for higher education governance. And while access in the sector has increased in absolute terms, concerns in terms of access for the marginalised remain a challenge.

In discussing higher education in Lao PDR, Nanludet Moxom and Richard Noonan likewise point out the issue of quality as it relates to financing and governance. The low budget given to higher education institutions (HEIs) undermines research performance, among others. Concerns of late budget delivery also often mean unspent monies which end up being sent back to funding sources. The highly centralised system also results in less autonomy while meritocracy in leadership appointments is often lacking. Gaps in terms of access to basic education also bear consequences in terms of higher education enrolments, with the country showing rates well below most ASEAN countries. Nonetheless, education support for the disadvantaged and female students is forwarded by the government to help with access concerns.

Higher education in Vietnam exhibited rapid growth in the early 2000s with a gross enrolment rate rising from 9% in 2000 to 29% in 2019. Le-Nguyen Duc Chinh and Martin Hayden report gender equality in the education system as supported by mandated laws in the country, though some gaps are evident in post-graduate studies and STEM enrolment (both favouring males). Also, despite the expansion of higher education in Vietnam, access to the sector is behind other ASEAN nations, with enrolments falling behind Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. Student loans are available to those seeking tertiary education but are said to be insufficient and repayment is difficult to achieve upon graduation. Management and autonomy are also concerned in the sector where public HEIs are managed by varying ministries and autonomy may mean focusing priorities on finance generation over other concerns.

Higher education in a fragile and post-conflict context is investigated by Mark Brown for Myanmar and Margie Beck for Timor-Leste. The military coup of 2021 and the COVID-19 pandemic held consequences for the higher education sector of Myanmar, hampering possible medium-term progress made from 2011 when a nominally civilian government was put in place. Universities as an avenue for public discussion and resistance in the country continued well after the coup but serious challenges remain in terms of achieving related SDGs such as quality and access to higher education. The cost of higher education for rural students and the inability of persons with disability (PWD), among others, to access the sector remains a significant problem. The damage to the higher education sector due to the ongoing civil war is also yet to be fully realised.

Timor-Leste has the youngest higher education system in Southeast Asia, with the first university opening in 1986 during Indonesian rule. Since its independence in 2002, the sector has grown substantially, now with over 20 accredited institutions. Quality and access are concerns in the country. The push for quality has resulted in an initial licencing and accreditation of HEIs in 2008, also, access to tertiary education beyond the larger cities of Dili or Baucau has set in motion the provision of this in other municipalities. Nonetheless, issues relating to quality such as graduate-job market mismatch and the need for qualified academic faculty staff persist. Also allotted country observer status at the ASEAN, the country aims for full membership wherein initiatives in the higher education sector (e.g. ASEAN's MRA) may help it.

With more than 3,000 HEIs, Indonesia has the largest higher education system in the region. Apart from the challenge of ensuring quality in such a large system, access relating to quality concerns is prominent given the concentration of HEIs granted autonomy in Java Island. Nurdiana Gaus notes the need to further quality in the sector through increased internationalisation, autonomy and effective leadership. The political manifestation in terms of choosing the best person to lead universities is seen through the 35% vote of the education ministry for Rectors, bearing consequences in choosing the most eligible to lead. The race to world rankings of the country's HEIs also displays the increasing neoliberal approach of the system, yet questions in terms of its contribution to quality continue given among other things, the lack of funds allotted to research and development, and rising predatory publication in the country.

Next to Indonesia, the Philippines has the second largest higher education system in the region with over 2,000 HEIs and 3.4 million students. The country's young median age of 25 also exhibits the importance of higher education. Despite this, a gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education of 34.89% shows the country trailing behind its ASEAN neighbours. Alicia Orosa and Lorraine Pe Symaco note the concentration of HEIs in Metropolitan Manila and its surrounding provinces relating to access concerns, and the significant concentration of enrolments in public institutions despite a more pronounced private system (1,729 HEIs). The latter may carry significant effects on funding mechanisms, especially with the newly enacted law which institutionalises free tuition (and other fees) in public institutions. The move to quality linked with internationalisation is also manifest in the push for transnational education, although the ability to implement remains a challenge.

Higher education in Malaysia has exhibited increased access and supply through the Private Higher Education Act of 1996. Cheong Kee Cheok also notes the criticisms of affirmative action through the New Economic Policy introduced in the 1970s which continue, pointing to the differential and segregated university intake in public HEIs. The shortage of STEM graduates is also detrimental to the country's push for developed status, in addition to the lack of autonomy, thus stifling academic freedom and the political hold inherent especially in public HEIs. The mismatch of skills of graduates to that demanded by the industry is also a concern alongside the low female participation in the labour force, both issues bearing economic implications for the country.

As the most highly ranked university system in Southeast Asia, Singapore places importance on its higher education system being attuned to the needs of the future. One such focus is on digital transformation as discussed by Shien Chue, through curriculum and pedagogy, and educating the workforce through professional learning modules on digital transformation. Revamp in the curriculum also reflects the emphasis on producing job-ready graduates via greater links with industries. The introduction of more weighted aptitude-based university admission in 2020 also highlights the efforts by the government to push for greater flexibility in education pathways. Nonetheless, balancing the expectations of formal certification of graduates and the ability to realise learning and applied focus in training is needed.

Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that was not officially colonised yet still has a degree of Western influence and international orientation in early universities. Oliver S. Crocco and Sukanya Chaemchoy discuss the challenges in the sector which include bureaucracy and administrative fragmentation, in particular where various ministries offer higher education services making central coordination difficult. Quality is also an issue when gauged with international rankings, showing below-average performance of local universities. Issues of skills mismatch among graduates are also present, alongside language proficiency in English. Government initiatives to address such concerns are provided to help rise to these challenges.

CLOSING REMARKS

Despite the varying higher education systems in the region, the move towards a more sustainable sector is envisioned in all countries through improved quality, access, equity, governance, autonomy and better market orientation. Rising to the needs of modern times, a more adaptable and flexible curriculum and a more student-centred and critical-based assessment are favoured. Alongside the contemporary demands of higher education, ensuring an equipped system able to respond to emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic is at the forefront of Southeast Asian government policies with the push for a more innovative and accessible higher education for all. Even with the different levels of achievements in the tertiary sector as manifest in the chapters in this book, the common goal of guaranteeing the role of higher education for human capital formation and broader development of countries is underscored. It is hoped that towards this goal, a more integrated and robust Southeast Asian higher education will emerge.

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CHAPTER 2

HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines five systemic issues that are at the core of the development of Cambodia's higher education sector. These are goal-oriented sector and university development strategy, transformative institutional leadership, strategic human resource management, strategic financial management, and achieving Goal 4.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. A goal-oriented strategy is fundamental, with its implementation carefully monitored to ensure a focus on quality. Transformative institutional leadership is, therefore, necessary, as is the need for strategic human resource and financial management practices that support the strategy.

Keywords: University development strategy; transformative leadership; strategic human resource management; strategic financial management; systemic university transformation; Cambodian higher education

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Cambodia dates back to the Angkor period when two important learning centres were established at the Preah Khan and Ta Prohm Temples (in modern-day Siem Reap) to support Hindu religious scholarship (Tao & Kao,

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2023, p. 8). These institutions fell into disarray when Buddhism became the preferred belief system of the nobility. Buddhist pagodas sprinkled across the country became the new centres of basic and religious education. Under French colonial control, from 1964 to 1953, the need for higher education provision was overlooked. It was not until the period of the People's Socialist Community (*Sangkum Reastr Niyum*) between 1954 and 1970 that a need finally began to be identified, and higher education development started. However, from 1970 to 1975, with the Lon Nol regime progressively losing control of the country, the higher education sector suffered neglect. Then, from 1975 to 1979, under the Khmer Rouge regime, all higher education institutions (HEIs) were closed or destroyed, with many scholars killed or fleeing Cambodia to save their lives (Ayres, 2000). Some sector recovery occurred between 1979 and 1991, mainly with support from the Soviet Union and Vietnam. However, it was not until the early 1990s that significant foreign aid enabled the process of recovery to become more sustained. Noteworthy developments in 1997 included the establishment of the first private university and the granting of more autonomy to a selected number of public HEIs by giving them the status of public administrative institutions (PAIs). Since the early 2000s, public HEIs have received significant financial assistance, initially primarily from bilateral sources and recently through funding obtained from the World Bank (Sok & Bunry, 2021b). Investment in private HEIs from the owners and students has been substantial.

The higher education sector has changed significantly since the 1990s. There are now many more HEIs in Cambodia than at that time. In 1996, there were only eight public HEIs. By 2024, there were 169 HEIs, 91 of which (accounting for about 60% of all enrolments) were privately owned. Public HEIs are supervised by as many as 17 ministries or ministerial agencies, though most are under supervision by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) (17 public and 73 private HEIs) or the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) (36 public and 18 private HEIs) (MoEYS, 2024). Most HEIs in Cambodia are located in Phnom Penh, the national capital, though now there are HEIs in all provinces.

The higher education student population increased from 13,465 (including 2,140 females) in 1996 to 284,599 (including 148,757 females) in 2023. Most (83.3%) students in 2023 were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs. A further 11.6% of all students were enrolled in two/three-year associate degree programs, 4.6% were enrolled in master's degree programs, and 0.5% were enrolled in PhDs.

Around 70% of all bachelor's degree enrolments in 2023 were in social sciences and humanities majors, and 31% were in STEM-related majors, amongst which enrolment in natural sciences and mathematics accounted for 12%, computer sciences 32%, engineering 29%, agriculture 10%, and health sciences 18% (MoEYS, 2024). According to UNESCO statistics, there were 7,401 students studying abroad in 2021, with the most popular destination countries being Australia, the United States, France, Vietnam, and Thailand. The number of international students enrolled in study programs in Cambodia is small but increasing (Sok & Bunry, 2021a).

The number of academic and general staff members has also been increasing. In 1996, there were 1,247 employees in the higher education sector. By 2023, the

number had risen to 21,329 (including 5,117 females). As many as 4,817 of these employees had a bachelor's degree, 10,335 had a master's degree, and 1,968 had a doctorate (MoEYS, 2024).

There are four foreign branch campuses: the Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, the Raffles International College (Tek & Leng, 2017), the East Asia Management University, and the De Montfort University. Nagoya University has also established a satellite campus at a few public HEIs. No official records of joint degree programs offered with foreign providers or programs taught in foreign languages exist. However, in a survey of 15 HEIs conducted in 2017, 3 had twinning arrangements with foreign institutions, and 14 had international joint degree programs. The number has increased substantially in recent years. There are some programs that use English as the medium of instruction (Sok & Bunry, 2021a), and this is increasing.

The higher education sector remains at an early development stage and faces many challenges. The government's national university development strategy is not taken seriously, and strategic management at the institutional level is weak. University leadership is typically characterised by command and control rather than a transformative model for long-term institutional and social development. The sector is preoccupied with administrative and regulatory compliance regarding academic, personnel, and financial management matters, with little attention paid to long-term vision, strategic goals, strategic university management, and transformative university leadership.

This chapter examines five strategic issues relating to the development of Cambodia's higher education sector. These concern the need for a goal-oriented sector and university development strategy, transformative institutional leadership, strategic human resource management, strategic financial management, and achieving Goal 4.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addressing these topics, the authors draw on published and unpublished materials, together with their knowledge of and experience within the sector over several decades.

A GOAL-ORIENTED UNIVERSITY STRATEGY

Traditionally, there has been an absence of strategising in Cambodia's higher education sector. Public HEIs have tended simply to reproduce the aspirations expressed in the strategic plans of their relevant supervising government ministries. Sok and Bunry (2021a) have reported how these aspirations are too ambitiously written, excessively lofty, and poorly connected with realistic strategies or measures for their implementation. Where expressed, implementation measures are often vague and imprecise, with no accountabilities assigned or timelines specified for their attainment. In addition, institutional plans tend to lack any reference to the investment funds required for their implementation. In this regard, public HEIs function like branches of government administration (Mak et al., 2019a). The articulation of aspirations of private HEIs is often similarly lofty and ambitious, without clear performance targets, and adequate investment. The need for a goal-oriented development strategy for the sector is urgent.

The kind of goal-oriented strategy required is one that expresses specific targets to be achieved across the sector within a declared timeframe (Yates, 2004). Individual HEIs would then set the targets specific to their role and strengths, with the attainment of these targets carefully monitored. This process would require adequate institutional investment and ongoing mentoring for the change agents within HEIs who are responsible for its success. Without such mentoring, HEIs will develop slowly, with inadequate care for quality and relevance to national development (Sok & Bunry, 2021b). Being strategic also involves mandating inter/multidisciplinary academic collaboration among supporting units and across academic and research programs.

The Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE) within MoEYS has been experimenting with developing this kind of long-term strategising. Working with six public HEIs, it has created a *Development Strategy for 2021–2030* and a similar long-term strategy for the participating HEIs. The strategy, which aims to improve the quality of teaching, research and institutional governance, focuses on producing programs that meet national and international standards and research programs that can promote development and innovation. Achieving international standards requires development of quality academic programs and the promotion of research for development and innovation.

The *Development Strategy for 2021–2030* provides an explicit blueprint for developing the institutions selected for inclusion. It focuses strongly on identifying a shared vision, mission, and set of goals and articulating relevant strategic implementation measures. It takes account of a 4Es leadership framework (i.e. envision, enable, empower, and energise) (Yates, 2004) and the World Bank's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. Goals are measurable, and responsibility for their attainment is assigned to the institutional governing board and senior executive managers. Regarding the 4Es, envisioning involves having a clear goal for the future. Enabling entails having appropriate organisational structures, functions, tasks, tactics, and standards. Empowering includes having a 10-year results framework, an M&E system, human resource development, and strategic budget planning. Energising involves developing individuals' annual result agreements, performance evaluations, career pathways, and system sustainability. In addition to measures implemented under the *Development Strategy*, various interlocking operation systems including internal quality assurance and results-based public investment programs, are being developed and piloted.

While this endeavour looks promising, its success cannot yet be assessed. Its success will inevitably depend on university senior leaders' and managers' collective commitment and capability to steer the implementation and sustain proactive support from politicians and senior technocrats. The latter will play essential roles in close monitoring and providing sustained investment, mentorship, and support for this critical reform agenda.

Poor execution of strategic plans by public HEIs has been enabled by weak monitoring and evaluation and internal quality assurance processes. The execution of strategic plans has not been regularly monitored, and timely corrective actions have not always been taken. Mechanisms to monitor and evaluate achievements have been absent, and the tools for monitoring and evaluation have