

# THF Working Paper

Working Papers Series No.1 /2021

---

## Cambodian Public Higher Education in 2040: Potential Scenarios and the Need for Transformative Leadership

**Say SOK**

*Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia*

**Rinna BUNRY**

*Department of Higher Education, Cambodia*



The  
**HEAD**  
Foundation

## **Cambodian Public Higher Education in 2040: Potential Scenarios and the Need for Transformative Leadership**

Say SOK and Rinna BUNRY<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

For Cambodia, not much has changed in its effort to transform public higher education in the past 20 years, and there is little synergistic effort to strategise higher education development to serve the national aspiration for economic development and social progress. Perhaps with the exception of quantity (i.e., increasing number of students, lecturers, academic programmes, and higher education institutions), quality and relevance are still a big concern, and the contribution of higher education to the national development aspiration of a middle-income economy by 2030 and an advanced society by 2050 seems next to impossible. If higher education development is still left to take a natural course and if there is little endeavour to systematically strategise its development to gear it towards fostering the national development, there is little chance that Cambodia will produce adequate skilled, well-rounded talents and advanced innovation to achieve its national agenda. This article presents the scenarios of higher education development in the next 20 years and argues for transformative leadership as core to driving the development of an advanced university system to boost economic development and social progress.

### **1. Introduction**

It is 2040. Samnang, an elder son of Dr Sambo and Dr Sabay, is talking to the Admissions Office of a public university about his enrolment in the School of Advanced Medical Sciences in this globally renowned university, famous for its science and technology programs. When Samnang was conceived, the parents-to-be had discussed the future of their yet-born son and had planned to send him for overseas tertiary education. Twenty years later, they are glad to see him enrol in a prestigious joint degree programme locally in Cambodia on a partial scholarship from the government and matching subsidy from a medical firm.

Whether this hypothetical situation of a globally renowned university will be a reality in 2040 relies on what Cambodia does now to establish an advanced tertiary education system — one that can support the nation to achieve the dream of a high middle-income country by 2030 (“Vision 2030”) and an advanced society<sup>2</sup> by 2050 (“Vision 2050”).

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors’ email: Dr. Say SOK can be contacted via [saysok@gmail.com](mailto:saysok@gmail.com) and Ms. Rinna BUNRY can be contacted via [rinnabunry@gmail.com](mailto:rinnabunry@gmail.com).

David Chandler, the renowned historian and scholar of modern Cambodia, once said Cambodia usually defies logics; therefore, writing about what will happen in the future is rather a wild prediction. Despite this caveat, the authors attempt to paint the potential scenarios of what Cambodian (public) higher education may hold in the next 20 years, based on what has happened in the sector in the past 20 years and their decade(s)-long experience. To enable higher education to produce optimal impact to serve as a core driving force for national development needs transformative leadership at all levels within the higher education.

## **2. Some major development in the past 20 years**

The following presents a brushstroke summary of the development.

Viewed against its dark past, limited resources, and limited state capacity,<sup>3</sup> Cambodian higher education has achieved fairly impressive growth, especially in quantitative terms and expansion of access. This is made possible mainly by the improved individual purchasing power and adoption of a cost-sharing programme in the backdrop of a neo-liberal economy and laissez-faire state.<sup>4</sup> However, there are concerns, especially in terms of academic programme quality and relevance of the programmes to the needs of the nation; limited expansion of the university missions beyond teaching; poor collective university leadership and management; and the ability of higher education to catapult the nation to achieve its national aspiration of an advanced society in Asia.

In absolute numbers, the gross enrolment for higher education has increased nearly tenfold, increasing from 28,080 students in 2000 to 223,221 in 2010 and 201,910 in 2020. In 2020, the gross enrolment stands at 10.75 per cent. If this enrolment is left to natural growth, by 2040, the country may have 510,758 students.<sup>5</sup> Despite these promising figures, there are numerous concerns. The enrolment is relatively low,<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Or a high-income country, by the government's conceptualisation. However, we contend that an advanced society shall aspire to achieve not only economic development but also social progress. For social progress, please refer to <https://www.socialprogress.org/> as of 24 April 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Chang Da Wan, Say Sok, Morshidi Sirat, and Leang Un, "Governance of Higher Education in Malaysia and Cambodia: Running on a Similar Path?" *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 7, no. 1 (2018): 49–63; David M. Ayres, *Anatomy of a Crisis: Education, Development and the State in Cambodia, 1953–1998* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> However, in the past decade, the government has been trying to steer the development of the sector with large project investments supported by the World Bank. How things will unfold is just emerging, and there are both promising signs and major concerns.

<sup>5</sup> Authors' calculation based on the average annual growth rate of 8.75 per cent for the past 20 years.

<sup>6</sup> For example, compared with the two high-middle income countries in ASEAN (Malaysia at 44 per cent; Thailand at 46 per cent), or even Vietnam (23 per cent), on the required graduates to produce an advanced economy and society in the next decade or decades. Leang Un and Say Sok, Higher Education

and it is more inclined towards non-science and non-technology programmes. There is especially high enrolment in the low-cost business and language undergraduate programmes,<sup>7</sup> whereas the country will need more skilful, well-rounded scientists, technologists and innovators at all degree levels to drive its economy, expand economic activities, and maintain social progress.<sup>8</sup> This development happens against the backdrop of little proactive counselling on and steering of major orientation, rigid enrolment schemes, and low national investment to expand enrolment in key majors in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and other priority programmes in the social sciences and humanity such as public policy, philosophy, and social work.

Data on faculty and staff also indicate promising albeit gradual and “natural” evolution. The number of faculty and staff (full-time and part-time) has increased from 2,397 in 2000 to 10,711 in 2010 and 16,676 in 2020. To serve the projected enrolment of 510,558, we will need 17,025 full-time faculty members<sup>9</sup> and a comparable number of support staff in 2040. With generous financial support, especially from bilateral sources and expansion of local graduate programmes, we can observe the improvement of terminal degrees the faculty and staff hold: 64 per cent hold master’s degrees and 8 per cent doctoral degrees.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in absolute terms and relative to more prominent higher education institutes (HEIs) in the two high middle-income countries in ASEAN, i.e., Malaysia and Thailand, and even Vietnam, the number of faculty and staff in Cambodia with PhDs is very low.<sup>11</sup> Besides, because the mission of Cambodian universities is predominantly teaching,

---

Governance in Cambodia: An Update, *Internationalization of Higher Education — Policy and Practice*, 2018 (special issue).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Annual Congress Report* (Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> According to a report by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for example, Cambodia would need some 35,000 engineers and 46,000 technicians between 2012 and 2018 to maintain its annual GDP growth of 6 to 8 per cent until 2020. See Srinivasa Madhur, *Cambodia’s Skill Gap: An Anatomy of Issues and Policy Options* (Phnom Penh: CDRI, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Authors’ calculation based on the requirement of lecturer-student ratio of 1:30 as set in the Prakas, or edict, on conditions and details for licensing higher education institutions. See Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, “Prakas on Conditions and Details for Licensing Higher Education Institutions,” 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, *Annual Congress Report* (Phnom Penh: MoEYS, 2019). This is a large jump in the past two decades. There are no disaggregated data by terminal degrees that faculty and staff had obtained in 2000; at the time, a majority of the faculty and staff held bachelor’s degrees and few held PhD degrees.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the percentage of the faculty members holding PhDs in Malaysian universities was 47 per cent in 2010, and 24 per cent in Thai universities in 2008. Say Sok, “Higher Education Governance Reforms in Thailand and Malaysia and Policy Implications for Cambodian Reform”, 2016, unpublished report. In a personal conversation with then Malaysian Director-General of the Department of Higher Education in 2018, across the research universities the percentage was some 70 per cent and the government aimed to increase this to 100 per cent by 2025.

the course load of academics is very heavy, where they generally relegate research and service to secondary importance, if at all.<sup>12</sup> Against the background, the career management for faculty and staff is rather traditional and rudimentary, and there is little national investment to upgrade degrees, especially for faculty and staff in priority fields and important professional services, particularly in key and bottleneck functions such as strategic university leadership, quality programme management, research management, strategic financial management, strategic human resource management, legal services, and strategic planning for institutional development.

Another major notable development is the rapid increase in academic programmes and HEIs. The total number of programmes available is unknown, but we can surmise from the number of HEIs that it has increased drastically. The number of HEIs increased from 23 in 2000 to 97 in 2010 and 128 in 2021.<sup>13</sup> A few major concerns include much fewer STEM programmes and relatively low-quality programmes,<sup>14</sup> as reflected in few that are accredited internationally; rather poor internal quality assurance system; and graduate employability. The HEIs are predominantly teaching enterprises, and there is little strategic national orientation and investment to promote research and development (R&D) in higher education. A few public HEIs have been struggling to promote research, mainly with external support and more recently development projects credited by multilateral institutions.<sup>15</sup> While more than a dozen HEIs have been accredited by the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, only one private HEI is accredited by the ASEAN University Network. Results from employer surveys and tracer studies indicate concerns over skill gaps and generally low income from the first job.<sup>16</sup>

Against this backdrop of higher education “underdevelopment” — vis-à-vis the required graduates and innovation to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050 — are significant challenges. They include limited state capacity to steer the development of the sector; rather low collective goodwill to achieve a common national agenda;

---

<sup>12</sup> The only exception is the Institute of Technology of Cambodia, which is the most research-intensive university in Cambodia especially in terms of research management, number of research projects, and number of researchers; it also has a pool of full-time faculty paid in monthly allowance who are dedicated to research.

<sup>13</sup> Data from the Department of Higher Education, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, David Ford, “Cambodia: Subprime Degrees?” *International Higher Education* 70, (2013): 15–16.

<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, research consultancy conducted by individual academics privately for their own income generation is numerous.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Michele Bruni, Likanan Luch, Somean Kuoch, and National Employment Agency, “Skills Shortages and Skills Gaps in the Cambodian Labour Market: Evidence from Employer Skills Needs Survey,” *ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series*, 2013; MoEYS. Tracer Study: Follow-up Report (draft unpublished report).

absence of a committed champion of urgency and a pool of transformative leaders;<sup>17</sup> and a lack of frank and sincere dialogue amongst the key leaders at multiple levels, especially between politicians and policymakers, senior technocrats, and university leaders. To assess whether higher education has produced adequate quality graduates and innovation to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050 would warrant a few studies in themselves. Nevertheless, based on our experience and knowledge of the sector and the state of the economy and society, we could say that higher education has not yet fulfilled this duty.

### **3. Potential scenarios of Cambodian (public) higher education in 2040 and need for transformative leadership**

Given the limited quality data availability and lack of a comprehensive database on higher education, it is quite challenging to systematically assess higher education development, let alone to portray the scenarios of its development in the next 20 years. We have attempted to project three broad scenarios based on the data available as well as our experience and knowledge.

A scenario that is very unlikely is where (public) higher education development will be left to its own devices and take a natural course, i.e., evolving slowly and by itself. There will be little strategic steering and little national investment. In this scenario, higher education development, including graduate and programme quality, access, university governance and management, and university missions in the next 20 years

---

<sup>17</sup> Transformative leadership is an emerging concept. Cam Caldwell et al. define their “ideal” transformative leadership model as “an ethically-based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimizing the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honouring the moral duties owed by organizations to their stakeholders” (2012, p. 176). They propose that this leadership model encompasses six characteristics: transformational leadership (focus on synergistic change), charismatic leadership (ability to create a personal relationship), level 5 leadership (humility and resolve), principle-centred leadership (adherence to principles and values), servant leadership (service to stakeholders), and covenantal leadership (contribution to meaning). See Cam Caldwell, Rolf D. Dixon, Larry A. Floyd, Joe Chaudoin, Jonathan Post, and Gaynor Cheokas, “Transformative Leadership: Achieving Unparalleled Excellence,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 109, no. 2 (2012): 175–187. In her research in education leadership, Caroline Shields (2010) adopts a narrower and more emancipatory definition and construction of transformative leadership — that is, transformative leadership has implications for improving not only the institutional management and performance (transformational) but also a broader transformation in and for the larger community and beyond, e.g. liberation, empowerment, and social justice. See Caroline M. Shields, “Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (2010): 558–589. For “transformative leadership” and the roles of higher education for social change, see, for instance, Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, *Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change* (Ann Arbor MI.: W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2000). Despite the differences in understanding of the term, all agree that leadership needs to go well beyond the common notion of leadership as a “position”, or positional leadership as John Maxwell calls it — which is a common misunderstanding of the term amongst “leaders” in many developing countries — to include not only institutional transformation and performance (transformational leadership) but also a broader social transformational goal.

will not be much different from what they are now. There is little hope that higher education will produce adequate qualified talents and innovation to serve and drive economic development and social progress, i.e., to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050. In this scenario, there will be little major orientation and counselling, and students will be left to choose what they can pay for among the programmes on offer. Also, there will be little national investment (e.g., scholarship subsidy) to expand enrolment to produce a large pool of quality graduates, especially in strategic priority fields to serve the economy and society. There will be little proactive national steering and investment to increase and enhance priority academic programmes to make them internationally competitive and relevant to the needs of the economy and society. There will also be little attempt to systematise and strictly implement a progressive career management for faculty and staff. Their career development will be left to take a natural course, and talented academic will increasingly be drawn away to the growing and more promising private sector and the regional economies. Like their contemporary peers, those who stay behind would be absorbed into teaching; they will exhibit little interest in and commitment to research and innovation and services. The government will show little interest in strategic investment to promote R&D in universities too, and public and private HEIs alike will continue to be profit-oriented teaching enterprises, producing graduates mainly to fill up the lower end of the market.

Another scenario, which is the most probable, is that public higher education development will be “partially” steered by the government, within the context of the fragmented higher education system and a “routine” national policy, which is randomly and selectively invested in. This will result in sporadic development or pockets of higher education development as the government and development partners choose to invest in priority areas, programmes, and fields of interest, and on potential HEIs and programmes. In this scenario, the ability of the sector to produce adequate quality graduates and innovation to drive the desired economy and society will be impossible. Here, the extent of achieving Vision 2030 and Vision 2050 will hinge on how large the investment is; the extent of the collective steering from the government; commitment of the key leaders; and the scale of the individual purchasing power.

In this scenario, strategic enrolment orientation to achieve the required number of qualified graduates in targeted priority fields may not be a national priority, and the government may simply continue its routine conduct of major orientation. Strategic, targeted national investment to increase adequate enrolment in priority fields to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050 will be unlikely, although the government and development partners may inject random, partial investment to promote certain fields, e.g., through projects to especially promote enrolment in STEM majors.

Academics will continue to prioritise teaching; support staff will continue to provide basic administrative services; and academic career and university employment will become less attractive to top talents and expatriates. The career path of faculty and staff will probably be left to evolve by itself and slowly. There would be little strategic steering from and collaboration amongst the key government institutions to create a progressive, professional career management system to promote transformative academic leadership with strong integrity, optimal work performance, and collegiality — and to attract talents from outside the academia, the expatriate community, and overseas. These are initiatives that can promote higher education development and to expand higher education missions beyond teaching and routine administrative service. There will be inadequate steering and investment to promote academic programme orientation to enhance the priority programmes that can produce sizeable professionally competent graduates — comparable in competence with their peers in the high middle-income economies in ASEAN — to drive the national development and social progress. Depending on the priority of the time and budget availability, the government may make random investments to promote selective fields of study. Given the aspiration to see selected HEIs as a centre of research and innovation, we may be able to see some national investment in R&D, although the intervention will be ad hoc and can be selective, and it will not be strategically planned and large enough to produce the required innovation to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050. In this scenario, higher education quality will evolve rather naturally, while the aspiration to have a higher education system comparable in quality to peers in high middle-income countries in ASEAN can be far-fetched.

The final scenario is the existence of an advanced public higher education system, one that can produce qualified graduates and innovation to achieve the national aspirations set for 2030 and 2050. If the past 20 years provide accurate inklings for the future, this scenario is unlikely. However, it could happen if there are systematic transformation in many spheres, within and beyond the higher education system, and strategic mobilisation of collective genuine commitment at multiple layers of administration, and firm demonstration of championship and transformative leadership within each higher education establishment, across key government institutions and the higher education system as a whole.

To achieve this optimal scenario, we will need the following prerequisites. At the very basic, it starts with the accurate data on the types, number, and attributes of graduates and types and scale of innovation the nation will need to achieve Vision 2030 and Vision 2050, and the firm commitment to national investment and to implement such a programme with good faith. Higher education development will need to be steered by an overarching national blueprint, which will be translated



into and interlocked with individual HEIs' development strategy to promote teaching, learning and research, especially in priority fields and research clusters. It will need to be adequately and strategically invested, and strictly executed and monitored by a capable state institution firmly handled by a genuinely committed champion of urgency. The execution of the blueprint will need strong support from a swarm of wholehearted, committed transformative technocrats at all levels, politicians and policymakers, and genuine academic leaders who hold academia close to the heart and who are the real transformative leaders in their fields of work.

In view of the progress in the past 20 years, such a scenario is ideal but unlikely, unless higher education development is treated as the utmost important national agenda — one that is core to driving all other national developments. At the pinnacle of the system, there needs to be a national champion — as mentioned earlier — with an urgency in holding this development as the core political portfolio, and one that is empowered to grip the development tightly and close to the heart. To achieve this scenario requires a politically competent, adept political champion who dares to simplify the multi-faceted complex system and mobilise and manage the complex coordination and communication at the national level, and who can hold all key institutions at all levels (micro, meso, and macro) accountable for achieving the national aspiration of an advanced higher education system. Second, as mentioned earlier, to achieve this scenario requires a large pool of wholehearted, genuinely committed politicians, policymakers, senior technocrats, and university leaders to demonstrate genuine, sustained commitment to open and frank dialogue, who are willing to talk to one another openly and amicably, listen to one another attentively, and work collectively and accountably for the common good of higher education development and national development. At the basis of all this, besides professional competence, are skills, attitudes, personal and professional ethics, an open heart, and certainly a start at transformative leadership. In addition, it requires professionally competent, genuinely committed university leaders who can mobilise university resources, especially the following rare and important resource: faculty and staff — to execute the national and institutional policy to achieve the collective dream. While the champion of urgency at the national level will hold the key for the establishment of a favourable ecosystem for higher education development, the presence of the transformative university leaders is the core driving force for individual university development. Currently, such transformative university leaders, who firmly hold university development as the core personal and professional mission and passion, are a rare species.

It is necessary to nurture and expand committed, professionally competent transformative academic leaders, academia, and professionals to establish excellence in teaching, research, and service — across the board and especially in

priority fields of study, research areas, and professional services. Establishing collegiality, strong academic culture, professionalism, committed transformative leadership, and entrepreneurial endeavour will also be very important.

#### **4. Conclusion**

On 31 December 2020, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the arrival of the country's first drop of Apsara oil and expressed his firm commitment to investing the royalty from the first yields on health and education. Together with national investment to higher education from other budget sources, sound management of the returns of this oil into education development, e.g., through the establishment and professional management of an Education Development Fund from the returns, the Apsara oil can be a blessing for Cambodia's higher education development. Academic and development literature indicate that governance, finance, and talents are the trio foundation for higher education excellence. Besides availability of finances and its sound management, therefore, strong political and policy support, transformative university leadership, and excellent workforce are core driving forces for higher education advancement. Given Cambodia's ultra-tragic history which almost depleted the most valuable resource — the "knowledgeable" — and to achieve its national aspiration for 2030 and 2050, the country has no choice but to invest in its most valuable natural resource, i.e., its people — and higher education development holds the key to achieving the aspiration. As historian David Chandler once said, Cambodia usually defies logics. Hence, the direction(s) that Cambodian higher education development is heading towards is to anyone's guess and its development in the next 20 years can go into any direction, depending on how the country charts it. Only time could tell whether Dr Sambo and Dr Sabay would be able to send Samnang to a globally renowned university in Cambodia in the next 20 years.

#### **5. Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to thank Dr Vicheth Sen of the University of British Columbia and Mr Sivhuoch Ou, a PhD candidate of the University of Guelph, for their insightful comments. We are also grateful to Ms Leong Wenshan, copyeditor, for her review and comments on the penultimate draft of the working paper. All errors remain ours. The abridged version of the paper is published in the commemorative 10th issue of The HEAD Foundation's HESB – Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond, and we are thankful to The HEAD Foundation for the invitation to contribute this article.