

International University Partnerships in Cambodian Higher Education

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The privatization policy introduced in the mid-1990s was a landmark change in Cambodian higher education. Public universities were allowed to charge tuition and private universities began to operate. Since then, the system has significantly expanded and greatly diversified to include 39 public and 62 private higher education institutions (HEIs) by 2012 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport [MoEYS] 2013). It enrolled more than 216,053 students in 2011-2012 (MoEYS 2013)—representing a marked increase from 13,464 students in 1996 (World Bank 2010). Student tuition fees have become the main source of income for all HEIs. Before the reforms, however, Cambodian HEIs and the country at large were heavily dependent on foreign technical and financial assistance for their rehabilitation after two decades of civil wars and international isolation. Such dependence allowed foreign donors to directly influence the language of instruction, curriculum, and administrative patterns of Cambodian HEIs throughout the 1990s. Hence, the privatization reforms marked a move away from aid dependence to self-reliance in Cambodian higher education.

Against this backdrop, my study aims to explore the power relationships in international partnership programs between Cambodian universities and universities in economically-advanced countries, almost two decades after the privatization reforms. In particular, it examines how far such partnership programs have manifested mutual benefits and equity. Four case study developed countries include France, the United States, Japan, and South Korea. France—Cambodia's former colonizer—was the only developed country to have offered large-scale assistance to Cambodian HEIs, especially throughout the 1990s. In comparison, US assistance to Cambodian HEIs has been quite limited;

however, the American higher education model has increasingly become popular in Cambodia over the last ten years, as in many other countries.

Japan has been the largest donor for Cambodia, with its assistance amounting to US\$2.1 billion from 1992 to 2011—representing nearly one fifth of the official development assistance (ODA) Cambodia received during the period (Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board [CRDB] 2011). Nevertheless, Japanese assistance to Cambodian higher education, especially at the engineering university, has only increased recently. Unlike the three countries, South Korea—another economically advanced nation—established its official relationships with Cambodia in 1997. Interestingly, it has emerged as one of the new donors for Cambodia, providing the country with up to US\$180 million from 2005 to 2011 (CRDB 2011). Also, Cambodian-Korean university partnerships have increased over time. Hence, this study offers an interesting comparative analysis of international partnership programs between Cambodian universities and universities in four economically-advanced nations: two Western and two Asian.

It is important to note that in the context of this study, international partnerships refer to the formal linkages between Cambodian universities and their overseas counterparts that are established through the signing of memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or other institutional agreements. These linkage arrangements take various forms, including student/faculty exchanges, joint research, curriculum development, professional training, and dual/joint degree programs.

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Methodology

This study has utilized a qualitative research method to uncover the context surrounding international university partnership programs in contemporary Cambodian higher education. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior administrators and faculty at three Cambodian universities from December 2012 to April 2013. These universities, hereafter referred to with the pseudonyms of University A, University B, and University C, represented public specialized HEIs, public comprehensive HEIs, and private HEIs with English as the medium of instruction, respectively. Interviews were also conducted with policy-makers at the MoEYS, the Department of Higher Education, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, and the UNESCO office in Cambodia. In total, the study interviewed 44 persons.

Collected data was analyzed within the theoretical framework of mutuality (Galtung 1975; Held 2003, 2010). Within the context of international academic relations, this concept of mutuality is made up of four aspects, including: (a) equity, meaning the aims and forms of cooperative programs are reached through mutual agreement; (b) autonomy, meaning participants from both sides show respect for and are willing to learn about each other's culture, knowledge, and belief systems; (c) solidarity, meaning collaborative programs encourage strong links and interconnectedness among participants in the developing world; and (d) participation, meaning faculty, researchers, and administrators in the developing world participate fully in all activities and contribute to knowledge production on an equal basis.

Overview of International Partnership Programs

This section presents an overview of the current partnership programs between Cambodian universities and universities in the four economically-advanced nations.

Partnerships with French Universities

The study revealed that since the 1990s, almost all French-Cambodian university partnerships at Universities A and B have been initiated and funded by the French government and its international agencies, including the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). The purpose of supporting such university partnerships, according to many participants, is to help improve France's bilateral relations with Cambodia as well as to promote French culture and language in the country. Thus far, French assistance has been limited to public universities, although several private universities have approached the French government for support and partnerships. It is important to note that many French university partnership activities at the two universities have also occurred at the department and individual faculty levels, without any institutional MOU or partnership agreement.

TABLE 1

THE NUMBER OF MOUS AND PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS BETWEEN EACH CAMBODIAN UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITIES IN FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES, JAPAN, AND SOUTH KOREA IN 2013

Country	University A	University B	University C
France	10 partners	14 partners	–
United States	–	11 partners	17 partners
Japan	7 partners	10 partners	3 partners
South Korea	–	29 partners	8 partners

French assistance to Cambodian higher education has gradually declined since the early 2000s. Cambodia, with its GDP growth hovering between 7-8 percent over the last two decades, is no longer the major priority of French international assistance, which has been primarily directed to the least developed countries in West Africa. The decline of such assistance has greatly affected Cambodian-French university partnership programs. At University A, several partnerships were already gone and the number of scholarships for gradu-

ate studies in France has also dropped. Current partnership activities, although smaller in scope now than in the past, involve technical assistance, joint research, student and faculty exchange programs, and scholarships for graduate studies in France.

At University B, all AUF-supported Francophone activities in such departments as Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, and Biology already disappeared. Currently, few partnership activities with French universities remain in these departments, except for the master's program of Mathematics, which still maintains some activities with and are supported by several French universities. In the French language department, AUF assistance has also significantly declined, and is now limited to exchange programs, scholarships for graduate studies in France, and technical support. Overall, not all the 14 French partnership agreements, as shown in Table 1, were active at the time of this study.

Partnerships with US Universities

According to the study, most Cambodian-American university partnerships have taken place mainly through individual and institutional initiation. Especially, University C has been able to form numerous partnerships with its US counterparts through the personal and professional connections of its faculty and senior administrators, mostly foreign-educated. Such partnerships have involved student exchange programs, short-term training for Cambodian staff, and scholarships for Cambodian students. However, not all 17 partnerships listed in Table 1 were active at the time of this study, with many of them being on and off. This is because University C, like the majority of Cambodian universities, has limited resources to contribute to its international programs. In other words, foreign universities are usually the major providers of financial and technical assistance in their partnerships with Cambodian universities.

The most active US-Cambodian partnership at University B at the time of this study was the newly-established bachelor's program of Social Work. This program was opened in 2008, as a result of the partnership agreement between University B and the Universi-

ty of Washington's School of Social Work. In this partnership, six Cambodians have been offered scholarships to pursue their master's degree at the University of Washington. Five of them already completed their study and returned to work as faculty members in the program. The University of Washington has also offered major technical and financial support to the program. Other US partnerships at the university have taken place on a small scale, with many of them being on and off, because of the university's lack of resources to contribute to its international programs. At both Universities B and C, a number of collaborative activities have also taken place at the individual faculty level, without any formal international agreement.

Partnerships with Japanese Universities

The study showed that Japanese university partnerships at University A are larger in scale than those at the other two universities. This is because those programs have occurred under the ASEAN University Network/Southeast Asia Engineering Education Development Network (AUN/SEED-Net) program, mainly supported and coordinated by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Established in April 2001 with the aim to develop well-qualified human resources in the engineering field in ASEAN, the AUN/SEED-Net Program has built strong networks among leading engineering HEIs in the region and in Japan. It is through these networks that University A—the only Cambodian public engineering university—has been connected to many Japanese and ASEAN universities. Hence, Cambodian-Japanese university linkage programs constitute only a small portion of JICA's huge financial assistance to the university under the umbrella of AUN/SEED-Net. Such JICA's assistance has thus far covered various activities, ranging from joint research, professional training, international conferences, scholarships for graduate studies in other ASEAN countries and in Japan, to the development of research facilities. One of the current JICA's projects at University A is the establishment of a new research laboratory, which is worth up to US\$7 million.

At Universities B and C, Cambodian-Japanese partnerships have mostly taken place through individual and institutional initiation. Those partnership activities have involved faculty and student exchange programs, scholarships for Cambodian students to further their graduate studies in Japan, conferences, and joint research.

Japan's increased academic assistance to Cambodia, especially at University A, has been seen to be partly driven by Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) growth in the country as well as in the ASEAN region. As one participant indicated, "Japan wants to develop skilled labor force to support its firms in Cambodia which have recently increased to more than 100. Another 100 Japanese companies are also coming to the country soon." Hence, improving the quality of HEIs in Cambodia as well as in other ASEAN countries would provide skilled human resources to support Japanese economic expansion in Asia.

Partnerships with Korean Universities

Most Korean-Cambodian partnerships have taken place through individual and institutional initiation, and mainly involved student exchange activities, and scholarships for graduate studies in Korea. Compared to the three countries above, various types of Korean universities have approached their Cambodian counterparts for collaboration, ranging from elite public universities to small private Christian ones. One of the interesting Korean partnerships during this study is the joint master's program of Social Work between University B and Ewha Womans University, which was opened in 2009. In this program, all faculty are Korean professors affiliated with Ewha Womans University, all of whom usually fly to Cambodia for a certain period of time to teach. Hence, in the Social Work program at University B, there are two different models of university partnership: (a) the US-supported bachelor's program, in which all faculty members are Cambodians; and (b) the Korean-supported master's program, in which all faculty are Koreans.

It is interesting that the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has lately increased its support for Cambodian public universities, including Universi-

ties A and B, particularly in the area of information technology. At University A, for instance, KOICA has provided funding to build the multimedia laboratory, which is part of KOICA's larger project of promoting e-learning systems in four ASEAN countries, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Like Japanese academic cooperation, Korea's support for Cambodian higher education, as pointed out by many interviewees, has been partly related to Korean economic interest in Cambodia, as well as in other ASEAN countries.

Mutuality

This section discusses how far Cambodian partnership programs with institutions in the four economically-advanced nations have manifested mutual benefits and equity.

Equity

The study found that for the most part, there was equity in Cambodian partnership programs with universities in the four case study countries. Although the programs were usually initiated and funded by foreign universities and, in many cases, by their governments and/or international aid agencies, Cambodians were allowed to participate in the program planning so that mutually-beneficial partnerships could be established. For instance, in Cambodian-Japanese joint research projects at University A, the Cambodian side usually took the lead in defining development issues related to Cambodia. Likewise, Cambodian participants were also actively involved in the planning and design of the bachelor's program of Social Work at University B. With France, it is interesting that although AUF demands the use of French language in French-Cambodian partnerships, none of the participants in the study pointed out any requirements by their French partner universities. Likewise, no one mentioned any conditions imposed on the Cambodian side by their Korean partners. Hence, it can be concluded that the aims and modalities of all partnership programs were mutually reached.

Autonomy

There was a high level of autonomy in Cambodian partnerships with French, US, and Japanese universities. For instance, most French-Cambodian university relations have existed since the 1990s, with many French scholars having good knowledge of Cambodia and its culture. US and Japanese participants who were involved in the joint projects with Cambodian universities were also reported to respect their Cambodian counterparts and their values. All Cambodian participants who had been to any of the three countries for their graduate studies claimed that inter-cultural learning was highly valued and promoted in these countries.

However, the degree of autonomy in Cambodian-Korean partnership programs was relatively limited, compared to Cambodian university programs with the other three countries. A number of participants who had been to Korea for their graduate studies complained that there was limited room for inter-cultural development in the country, with relatively few Koreans willing to learn about other cultures, especially those of the developing world. It is interesting, however, that Korean staff who were working in Cambodia under KOICA's and other Korean government projects were reported to have good knowledge of Cambodian culture, with some able to speak the Khmer language as well.

Solidarity

In terms of solidarity, most partnerships with the four countries have manifested high levels of support from their institution, the government, and other relevant agencies. In addition, some international programs with Japanese, French, and US universities have led to strong interconnectedness among Cambodian participants as well as between them and institutions in other countries. For instance, AUF-supported partnerships have connected Cambodian universities to those in other French-speaking countries, through scholarship programs, student and staff exchange activities, joint research, and short-term training. The AUN/SEED-Net Program has also built strong connections among ASEAN universities, especially in the field of engineering.

The Korean joint master's program at University B has mainly been managed by the Korean side, and taken place in isolation from the bachelor's program. This greatly affected the degree of solidarity, since two different models were created within one single department at the university. Little was mentioned in this study about the interconnectedness in other Korean-Cambodian partnerships.

Participation

Although the Cambodian side was the main beneficiary of the partnerships, knowledge transfer between Cambodian universities and universities in France, the United States, and Japan has taken place in a mutual manner. Cambodian scholars were respected and allowed to be involved in various activities in their joint projects with universities in these countries. For instance, in the bachelor's program of Social Work at University B, all faculty are Cambodians, who have played an important role in both academic and administrative work. Likewise, all joint research projects funded by JICA at University A have been focused mainly on Cambodian development issues, with all Cambodian participants working collaboratively with Japanese professors throughout the process. Partnerships with French, US, and Japanese universities have also offered Cambodian scholars opportunities to publish their research in international journals as well.

As for the Korean programs, many participants who had been to Korea for their graduate studies pointed out that there were few opportunities for them to participate in the decision-making process. In terms of knowledge transfer, especially in the joint master's program of Social Work at University B, Korean professors flew to Cambodia to manage all academic activities, including teaching, with limited involvement from the Cambodian side. While such assistance has been highly acknowledged, the dominance of the Korean side in the knowledge transfer process has affected the degree to which the program has responded to the needs of Cambodian society.

Conclusion

Overall, this study showed that virtually all international programs between Cambodian universities and their counterparts in France, the United States, Japan, and South Korea have taken the form of foreign assistance. Universities in the four developed countries are the major providers of financial and technical support in their collaboration with Cambodian universities, which have limited resources to contribute to their international activities. It is interesting, however, that in terms of power relationships, most Cambodia's international university programs with French, US, and Japanese universities manifested all aspects of mutuality, which include equity, autonomy, solidarity, and participation. In comparison, the degree of mutuality in partnership programs between Cambodian and Korean universities was quite limited, especially in relation to the issues of inter-cultural development and the decision-making power. Korean universities also paid little attention to promoting interconnectedness among Cambodian participants—another factor affecting the mutuality degree in university partnership programs between the two countries. The comparative findings of this study reflect the lack of international experience of Korean universities, relative to French, US, and Japanese universities, which have long been involved in their international activities, including university partnership programs, thereby able to adopt more strategic and mutual approaches with their foreign partners.

Note

1. This article is a summary of the author's full and more detailed dissertation project, which focuses on the power relationships between Cambodian universities and universities in economically advanced nations.

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