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# **Higher Education in Cambodia and the atypical example of the History Department at RUPP 2**

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## **Abstract**

In the past few years, Cambodia has seen an explosion in the growth of Higher Education that has been, to a large extent, absorbed by the dramatic rise in the number of private Universities. There are now some 106 campuses across the country.

In the academic year, 2007-8, there were 110,090 bachelor degree students enrolled, among which 46,395 were in public Universities and 63,695 in private ones, according to Ministry of Education figures. There were also 15,802 Associate Degree students and 11,209 post –graduate students (over twice the number of the previous year). The vast majority of students - even in state universities - pay fees of about \$400 a year. More than half of the 5,184 postgraduate students in Cambodian Higher Education Institutions 2006-2007 took an MBA or a related financial management course.

Enrolments are now over 12 times the number in 1996. Scholarships do not exist - only a few of the best students are exonerated from paying those fees.

Unlike all other Departments of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), the History Department has not been renovated and is not connected to any other in the region or in the West. Recruitment is low: there are only cohorts of about 30 students for each of the 4 years. The Department is supposed to train upper secondary school teachers for the entire country. It has 11 lecturers, 5 of whom have a Master. None have a PhD. This subject is not very popular in Cambodia among students these days, as teachers are poorly paid.

## **Résumé**

Ces dernières années, le Cambodge a vu une grande explosion dans la croissance de l'éducation supérieure, surtout absorbée par l'essor dramatique des universités privées. Il existe maintenant 106 campus dans le pays. D'après les chiffres du Ministère de l'Éducation, 110.090 bacheliers se sont inscrits dans les universités pendant l'année universitaire 2007/2008, dont 63.695 dans des universités privées et 46.395 dans des universités publiques. Il y avait également 15.802 étudiants inscrits dans des filières universitaires technologiques, ainsi que 11.209 étudiants de troisième cycle. La plupart des étudiants, même dans les universités publiques, payent des droits de scolarité de 400 dollars américains par an. Plus de la moitié des 5.184 étudiants de troisième cycle des institutions universitaires cambodgiennes ont étudié un MBA ou un cours d'administration en 2006/2007. L'inscription est aujourd'hui 12 fois plus élevée en nombre qu'en 1996. Il n'existe pas de bourses – seulement quelques uns des meilleurs étudiants ne payent pas.

Contrairement à tous les autres départements de l'Université Royale de Phnom Penh (RUPP), le département d'histoire n'a pas été rénové et n'est connecté à aucune des régions de l'ouest. Le recrutement est peu important: les cohortes sont seulement de 30 étudiants tous les quatre ans. Le département est censé préparer des professeurs de collèges dans tout le pays mais il n'a que onze chargés de cours, dont cinq ont une maîtrise. Aucun d'entre eux n'a de doctorat. Cette matière n'est plus très populaire de nos jours au Cambodge car les professeurs sont mal payés.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA TODAY**

Cambodia has seen an explosion in the growth of Higher Education in the past few years that has been largely absorbed by the dramatic rise in the number of private Universities. There are now (May 2008) some 68 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the country of which 30 are Government fee-paying institutions and 38 fully private. If you include the branches of private HEIs in provincial centres, the total number of recognized HEI campuses in Cambodia is already just in excess of 100.

Since the days of the Sangkum period in the Sixties, the Cambodians have adopted the French system whereby the final examination of Secondary Education ("Bac double" as it is still called) gives automatic access to Tertiary Education. Nowadays, over 70% of the growing number of grade 12 students successfully pass this Baccalaureate, and therefore can claim to be admitted to Higher Education. 80% of those who pass do pursue their studies in tertiary institutions. In 2006, the rate of success was 77%. In 2007, the pass rate at the Baccalaureate fell to 72%. By contrast, only small numbers were permitted to sit the Bac Double in the sixties, the pass rate for those was generally 50% or less.

In the academic year, 2006-7, there were 92,340 undergraduates enrolled, among which 38,373 were in public Universities and 53,976 in private ones, according to Ministry of Education figures. There were also 15,802 Associate Degree students and 5,184 post graduate students - not including the National Institute of Education that trains all Upper Secondary teachers for the entire territory. More than half of the 5,184 postgraduate students in Cambodian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) take an MBA or related financial management course. In 2006-07, enrolments are 10 times the number in 1996.

In the past decade, international institutions and donors - among which the World Bank - have encouraged the development of private HEIs and the introduction of a large dose (now approximately 75%) of fee-paying students in the State sector as well. This policy has been eagerly embraced by those hoping to reap dividends from an exponential market growth. Equally, the grossly underpaid lecturers have seen in this policy an honest way of earning a decent living. However, the latest developments have seen a fall in fees among the many institutions now competing for students. One may wonder if this is not devaluing the quality of HE in Cambodia, not quite the intention of opening the system up to the market was to address the shortcomings of a system rather starved of Government spending.

When the first private HEIs were opened, the fees they charged brought refreshing new resources into the sub-sector. Fees in those days were of the order of \$380 a semester. However in recent years, with rapid expansion in the number of HEIs available, competition for enrolments has led to a drastic reduction of fees in many institutions. Now fees are typically of the order of \$200 to \$250 per year, and one institution is

reputed to be offering courses for a fee of now \$90 per year. It is clear that competition for students as a result of overexpansion of the system is resulting in the dissipation of many of the benefits initially brought by privatization. (Trends in Higher Education eligibility and enrolment, draft report 13/10/2007 )

It must also be emphasized that the so-called "scholarship" students in public institutions are spared only from paying any fee, but receive no cash whatsoever to cover their subsistence. They also represent a steadily declining proportion of all undergraduate students entering public HE institutions. This academic year 2007-8, they are fewer than a quarter, with the effect that Government HE institutions are largely privatized. This year, the Department of HE has reckoned that overall HE institutional enrolments are 91% fee-paying. Questions remain about the capacity to provide for quality higher education in the context of the rapidly growing number of students spread over one hundred campuses.

If this policy of laissez-faire and untrammelled market solution is allowed to continue with growth largely uncontrolled,, one may wonder how it can be consistent with Government declared policies of equal opportunity and poverty reduction.

Since 2005, Government "scholarships" (or non-fee paying places) have been allocated to the applicants to public HEIs (about 39,000 accepted in 2006) by a computerized methodology. The criteria, after the grades obtained at "Bac double", were students' preferences - they must choose 3 - along with age, gender, poverty and finally remote areas. The operation has been run successfully for 3 straight years. But the efficiency of the system might be strained in the near future, as the number of Grade 12 Exam candidates is expected to double in 2008 as compared to 2007, and quadruple by 2010.

In 2006, 2,432 scholarships were awarded by the Department of HE. However, during the course of the 2006-2007 school year, 503 scholarship recipients were unable to take the offer because they had no scholarship living allowance for Phnom Penh. This left only 1,929 scholarship recipients still in the first year of the public HEI system. In 2007, 2,404 scholarships were awarded by the Department of Higher Education. All those were of course for public Universities. About one quarter of scholarships were allocated to students from Phnom Penh (643) and the rest from the provinces. Ratanakiri had 1, Pailin 3, Oddar Meanchey 4.

At the RUPP, 68 scholarships were allocated in English, 63 in French, 48 in Khmer Literature and Mathematics, 30 in Broadcasting and communication, 27 in Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Philosophy, History, Sociology, Psychology, Geography, 26 in Japanese, 24 in Environmental Science, 22 in Korean, 21 in computer science, 18 in Tourism. As a comparison, scholarships are only 30 in medicine, 24 in management at the National Institute of Management, an immensely popular course, and 33 in Law, a very popular course too.

As a general trend in Cambodia, we can also note that students are automatically passed on to the next level e.g. from Associate Degree to Bachelors Degree and from Bachelors degree to Masters Degree. Government funding had at best been limited to minimal salaries and inadequate maintenance and operational budgets. Fortunately, with the arrival of the Priority Action Program (PAP) funding in recent years, there was a fresh input of Government funding of some public HEIs. For the Royal University of Phnom Penh that amounted, in 2006-07, to \$94 per scholarship student for the year, partly in cash but mostly in kind.

In spite of those efforts, questions remain about the capacity to provide for quality Higher Education in the context of rapidly growing number of institutions. The new 2008 national budget rises by 20%, but the budget of Education is only allotted an 11% rise. Does this mean education is no longer a Government priority?

To end this brief overview on a more positive note, we must point to a most felicitous development in Higher Education in the past few years in Cambodia, one not quantified by the Ministry experts or pundits. It is the highly significant development in the knowledge and use of the English language. This has enabled the best students and academics to have a much easier access to world knowledge and information, together with being in a position to apply for scholarships for Masters' courses abroad. However the vast majority of HEI courses are conducted in Khmer, due to a lack of sufficient fluency in foreign languages by most professors and students.

## **THE ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF PHNOM PENH (RUPP)**

### ***The History Department***

#### **Background**

Since its re-creation in 1980, the History Department has educated 27 successive cohorts of annual student entrants. The History Department students are trained to become history teachers in Upper Secondary schools throughout the country, but some choose to work for NGOs or private institutions, etc... The History department today has 12 lecturers including 10 men and two women. The BA course lasts 4 years and students can graduate in two ways: a final examination, or by writing a memoir or small thesis. During the 4-year course, the students also benefit from study tours to various sites, mostly close to Phnom Penh. Priority Action Plan (PAP) money is the main source to support the field trips, but these field trips are too few for history students, because of the small amount of money from PAP.

Some donors used to help the History Department. UNESCO and the ASEAN Foundation used to provide some books for the Department, but most of the books are not history books. Also, California State University of Long Beach provided many books to the History department. In addition, they used to support internet access for the Department, but they stopped three years ago.

### **Human Resources**

Among the 12 lecturers, five have a Master's Degree and the other seven lecturers have only Bachelor's degrees. They need to pursue their studies to at least a Master's Degree or, if possible, a Doctor's Degree. The quality of some lectures is still low. Some lecturers have insufficient capacity in foreign languages, and lack the self-confidence to develop skills in new subjects and new courses. Therefore, some lecturers are not prepared to offer new subjects required in the curriculum. For example, each lecturer has to teach two to four subjects. Four lectures are beyond the availability of some lecturers who, because of the low salary, have to find extra jobs in order to meet the needs of their families.

Unlike courses such as Computer skills and English, with strong post graduation employment prospects, History has a low market value, so income from student fees is not available to supplement the salaries of the history professors. Thus lecturers do not have time to do research and to improve their knowledge. That is why some lecturers would teach the same lessons or use the same sources for a long time, without updating them. Furthermore, there is no practice of conducting special interest group meetings and of exchanging opinions in the Department. This situation could be improved if the Department had the benefit of international cooperation.

### **Learning Facilities**

With equipment provided by its PAP allocation, the History Department now has the technological capacity to improve the quality of teaching of lecturers. PAP has funded the purchase of 2 laptop computers, one LCD projector, one digital camera, and one video recorder. However, this material support to the Department still needs to be supplemented by technical assistance to improve both the media usage skills and the knowledge of lecturers and students.

Since the California State University of Long Beach stopped their support, especially to internet access, some three years ago, history lecturers and students no longer have access to the internet. In today's era of globalization era, technology is an essential tool of the advancement of knowledge. There are different ways of accessing the knowledge, for example a comprehensive and regularly updated library, if the institution can afford it. Failing that, and the easiest and least expensive access is through the internet. Internet access could open up the world to students, most of them poor students from the countryside.

But internet access is only of benefit to those Khmer students who are fluent in a foreign language, since so little of contemporary knowledge is available in Khmer on the internet. Traditionally this has been through French, more recently English, with training in Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean now becoming available.

In addition to internet access, the Department absolutely needs access to research journals. Nowadays, research journals are the crucial sources of access to new knowledge. However, in order to have access to many journals, including on the internet, funds are needed to pay subscriptions. Finally, the Department needs new history books in order to update the knowledge of both lecturers and students. Unfortunately, the new history books are so expensive that the Department cannot afford them. Again access to new history books remains a critical gap in the resourcing of the History Department.

### **Students**

The numbers of history students have changed over the last several years. From its beginning, students who enrolled, after an entrance exam, each year were on average theoretically 100 in each cohort. However, for example in 1996, there were 40 studying in year 1, 48 in year 2, 41 in year 3, and 95 in year 4. In all, 224 students were trained by the History Department during that year 1996-7. However, the system was changed in 2002 when admissions to the degree of Bachelor of Arts (History) came to be administered by the Department of Higher Education Sector of the Ministry of Education. Students' admission to the Department is now based on their results in the Grade 12 High School Certificate subjects of History and Khmer Literature.

Usually, those who get Grade D or higher are eligible to register to study history. History, as a major subject, is not seen to be of any value in business, which is why, by and large, it is less popular nowadays among Cambodian youths whose main goal is to look for a well-paid job. Competition to get into the more popular business oriented courses is largely resolved by the capacity to pay. Yet, many students are still willing to learn history and, of course, they apply for entry to the History Department. Apart from the few who are able to pay fees, access for the remaining (poor) applicants is governed by the availability of Government scholarships for fee free entry. The number of these scholarships is limited. The University then allocates quotas of scholarships to enable some students to enrol in commercially less popular courses such as Philosophy and History. No matter how numerous the applications they receive, the Admissions office of Department of Higher Education (of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport) awards only the number of scholarships for the study of History in accordance with the quota set by the University for that subject. As an illustration, in 2002, 35 students were granted scholarships while for the two previous years, 45 had been granted scholarships. Overall, in this academic year of 2007-2008, there are 127 students eagerly studying at the History Department. Given the fact that the scholarships provide no living allowance for poor students, mainly from country areas, to live in the high cost Phnom Penh, the number tends to fall between year 1 and year 4, as students drop out.

We hope that the Ministry will see the study of History as an increasingly important subject for building national identity in today's globalized society. It would be much better if the Government were prepared to fund more and better scholarships, including living allowances, to enable the quotas in low enrolment courses to be extended to a larger number.

### **Research Activity**

In today's globalized environment, with national preferences now increasingly subject to external pressures, needs and opportunities are constantly changing. For an academic institution, and in particular the History Department, research into the emerging global context must be one of the first priorities. The leadership of the RUPP has often emphasized that each department has to set up a research project so that new findings can be revised or updated to inform current teaching. Research can help to improve the quality of the knowledge of the students. Without new and constant research activities, they are less able to cope with developments in the global village.

Research activities gained popularity from 1996 to 2006 with encouragement and financial support from the Henrich Boll Foundation. This German organization financed annual conferences in Social Sciences in the lecture halls of RUPP, Campus II, where the History Department is based, in order to let international and especially national researchers share the results of their investigations. In addition to presentations by speakers from the Department, both students and lecturers who did not give any paper made use of the conferences by participating. They listened and took notes carefully. They learned much that was new to add to what they had gained from lessons in class.

In spite of the Henrich Boll Foundation having ceased their aid after one decade of generosity, research activities have not ended with the end of the conferences, the last one being in November 2006. Several active professors have continued their own projects. They are researching Cambodian history, both ancient and modern. One of the leading professors is enthusiastic about Khmer inscriptions at various historical epochs. It is worth noting that these inscriptions require a lot more studies for they are a potential and valuable primary source for Khmer history. So the Department particularly needs a lot more research activities. If possible, all of the staff have to become involved in research, with the assistance of their graduate and even undergraduate students.

### **Translation**

Another way in improving the learning and teaching environment for the Department is through translations. In general, students at university level in Cambodia are limited by the lack of Khmer language materials. Though more and more students are learning foreign languages, such as English, many of them have not yet attained the level of fluency needed to access foreign language books, journals, internet sites etc. Nor do students any longer know



French. To help History students in particular and all Cambodians in general, the Department has now set up a translation program. Fortunately, with financial support of the PAP, more books will be translated.

This program has surveyed what kinds of books are the most urgently needed by the students. Until now, a number of English books have been translated, including *Khmer Stand Up* by Justin Cornfield which described the Khmer Republic. The program, has extended its interest to the world, for instance, *World Civilization* by Burton F. Beers has been translated. However, because of lack of funds, these Khmer-version books have been used within the Department only. None of them have been published yet. It is hoped that international aid can be found to have them published soon and made available to a much wider public.

## CONCLUSION

The History Department is on the right path to the future. It has played important roles in training Cambodian youths, building the educated human resources needed to develop the country. Students of all 27 generations have been educated here and then return to teach History in different provinces of Cambodia. Meanwhile, several things have to be done to make their training more effective. Upgrading the knowledge of the staff and improving the learning environment of the students are all urgent needs. In other words, the teachers themselves need to continue their study for Master and Doctor's Degrees, whereas the students need access to learning tools such as History books, Journals and internet. Last but not least are research activities. Extending its research activities is the best path to the future to be followed by the Department.

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