

CHALLENGES

As mentioned above, China has taken several measures to attract more international students, but is facing a number of challenges, in particular the limited number of international students receiving a scholarship. China's ministry of education has issued a list of universities allowed to provide scholarships to international students, but the list is extremely limited. This weakens China's competitiveness on the international education market.

The Chinese language is hard to learn for international students. In recent years, Chinese universities have set up English courses for international students, but efficiency is low. Most faculty still teach in Chinese. Although Chinese universities offer Chinese language courses for international students, their proficiency remains limited.

Opportunities to immigrate and get a job are also limited. Most international students are eager to immigrate or work in their host country—especially those from developing countries. Although the Chinese government modified the requirements allowing international students to work after graduation, only three cities to date have published the details on how to apply for a work permit. If the government wants to expand interest in studying in China, it must focus on addressing these three issues. ■

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Challenges to Higher Education in Laos and Cambodia

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Trying to summarize the challenges facing higher education in Laos and Cambodia presents several obstacles. One is the risk of addressing the topic superficially. Another is the risk of not acknowledging sufficiently the distinctiveness of each country's culture, history, and political circumstances. These matters aside, this article seeks to identify three broad challenges shared by the two countries with respect to their higher education systems.

THE SETTING

Laos and Cambodia are now experiencing rapid and sustained economic growth, based mainly upon the exploita-

tion of their natural resources, the development of manufacturing industries, and the emergence of new services sectors. Both countries continue, however, to be poor by international standards. Each has high levels of income inequality and poverty is extensive in rural areas. Corruption is ubiquitous in both countries, including within their higher education sectors.

Significant improvements in school retention rates over the past 15 years have contributed to a surge in demand for higher education. In both countries, the public higher education sector has been unable to absorb the surge in demand. Private higher education sectors have therefore been permitted to expand rapidly and without too much control. In Cambodia, where this policy has been more vigorously pursued, the private higher education sector is now larger than the public higher education sector.

In 2015, the most recent year for which reliable data are available, Laos, with a population of over six million, had five public universities, eight public colleges, and 43 private degree-granting colleges. It also had more than 90,000 higher education students, about one-third of whom attended private-sector institutions, though mostly on a part-time basis.

Cambodia, with a population of over 15 million, had 109 universities and institutes, including 66 private-sector universities and colleges. It had about 260,000 higher education students, over one-half of whom attended private-sector institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

The first challenge for higher education in both countries concerns the need for more institutional autonomy. In each setting, public universities have the necessary governance committee structures for the exercise of institutional autonomy, but their governing boards and academic committees have little or no decision-making authority. In Laos, even modest changes to training programs must be approved by the ministry of education and sports; in Cambodia, the situation is similar, except that public universities are line-managed by as many as 15 different ministries, as well as being coordinated by the ministry of education, youth, and sports. Nine public higher education institutions in Cambodia have been granted limited financial autonomy by virtue of being designated "public administration institutions," but no such development has been evident in Laos.

The consequences of a lack of institutional autonomy for public higher education institutions are widely felt in both countries. Academic managers feel weighed down by the burden of state bureaucracy. There is also a culture of risk avoidance in decision-making.

In contrast, private-sector higher education institutions in both countries function more or less independently of state controls. These institutions are mostly profit-driven and owned by wealthy individuals or families. Their governance structures are corporate, but it is their owners who tend to determine their strategic priorities.

RESOURCES

The second challenge for higher education in both countries concerns the need for more resources. Because Laos and Cambodia are low-income countries, budgets for public higher education are inevitably restricted. Budget restrictions are, however, so severe that improvements in the quality of classrooms, libraries, information technology networks, and research laboratories at public higher education institutions occur more by exception than by rule. Both countries are committed to spending more on their education systems, but each of them has heavy existing commitments to the establishment of their early childhood, primary, and secondary education sectors. Increasing the flow of resources to public higher education institutions is considered difficult to achieve.

The third challenge for higher education in both countries concerns the need for better quality.

There is a policy in both countries of keeping a tight cap on tuition fees for attendance at public higher education institutions. This policy is defended on grounds of not wishing to make public higher education unaffordable to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This argument is, however, rarely supported with data about the socioeconomic profile of the students who currently attend public-sector higher education institutions. Many of these students are widely regarded as coming from better-off families with a capacity to pay higher student tuition fees, but this perspective is routinely rejected by both national governments.

The tuition fees charged by private-sector institutions are many times higher than those charged by public-sector institutions. This situation frustrates public-sector academics because they observe that the training programs delivered by the private sector are often the same as those being delivered by the public sector. Furthermore, academics delivering the programs in the private sector are often public-

sector academics who are “moonlighting” for the purpose of increasing their incomes. Public-sector academics also argue that there seems to be no shortage of demand for the more expensive programs offered by the private sector, in which case tuition fee levels for public-sector programs could be increased without causing an adverse social impact, especially if more scholarships were available to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

QUALITY

The third challenge for higher education in both countries concerns the need for better quality. In each case, the qualification levels of academics are poor by international standards. In Laos, for example, fewer than 5 percent of all academic staff members have a doctoral qualification. Teaching skills are also not well developed, and there is little or no professional support available to assist with teaching improvements. In both countries, there is an official expectation that academics at public universities will engage in research. Research productivity at these institutions remains, however, negligible, in large part because academics have neither the skills nor the resources to engage in significant research projects. In addition, many of them prefer to supplement their meagre salaries by accepting additional teaching duties.

System-wide quality assurance policies and procedures have been introduced in both countries, but they are slow to be implemented and there is not much evidence to date regarding their impact. Government ministries do, however, acknowledge openly the existence of quality-related problems. Of increasing concern in both countries is a perceived mismatch between the needs of the labor market and the kinds of training programs being delivered by higher education institutions. Also of concern, though sporadically, are scandals involving private higher education providers who have become excessively greedy.

CONCLUSION

The three major challenges for higher education in Laos and Cambodia reported here are, of course, interrelated, which means that all three most likely need to be addressed simultaneously for the sake of achieving meaningful progress. In both countries, official rhetoric about the need for reform provides the foundation for elaborate plans and guidelines. Curiously, though, there is a lack of reform momentum in the higher education systems in both countries. It is difficult to avoid that there does not yet exist, in either country, the strength of political will that will be required to make the changes necessary for higher education to flourish over coming years.

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