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**Panel Presentation on Cambodia Quality Assurance    Dr. Luise Ahrens**

**Abstract:**

The creation of reasonable and applicable indicators of quality assurance is always difficult. It is more so in an environment where resources are limited and where government plays a role in both private and public university development. This brief paper explores some of the elements that come into play in this situation and suggests some relatively simple and cost-effective means of enhancing quality assurance both in higher education institutions and in the tertiary system. Further discussion will both expand and elaborate the issues involved.

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**Intro:** I worked for ten years in higher education at Universitas Padjarjaran in West Java, Indonesia and have worked almost twenty years in higher education in Cambodia.

The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia was founded in 2002. It is an organ of government within the Council of Ministers and chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister.

QA is an evolutionary process: 1979 when there was nothing to the present.

1979 15% of people with high school education were still alive and present in Cambodia at the end of the Khmer Rouge genocide. In 1980, the then-named University of Phnom Penh started to teach an abbreviated program with 2 teachers and 36 students—all of whom were traumatized from what they had experienced. Thus, those first degrees were not of high quality—and thirty years later, those graduates are leading the education sector and the country.

1995: National Higher Education Action Plan was begun with support from the World Bank. There were the usual areas of concern, but there was an additional one of the absolute loss of human resources during the period of the Khmer Rouge—higher education, because of the time needed for education of professors, was most severely limited.

1997: Unfortunate political difficulties shelved the completed plan.

2001-2002 World Bank began again and the result was the law that established both the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) and the requirement of a foundational year

of study. There were few qualified people to staff the new ACC, none of them with PhDs in any related field of study.

There then arose the question: which institution can make the reforms needed in higher education?

The Ministry of Education: The Department of Higher Education did not have the mandate for quality assurance within the public higher education institutions and the position or office for this task of internal within HEIs is still not funded, although the Ministry has made a directive to establish this office. Thus the process is moving ahead, but slowly and unevenly. There is also no implementation of a credit transfer process—a clear need for the benefit of students. The ministry has not been able to enforce this process.

The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia: Can they lead the change? The Committee is made up of political appointees and the staff members are for the most part very young government-appointed people.

Since 2002, the ACC trained assessors for foundation year and has worked almost exclusively on the recognition process of the various foundation year programs within the HEIs, both public and private. This has brought many changes to the landscape of higher education.

- ✓ In 2005-06, no strategic plans existed in HEIs. In 2008, 50% of HEIs now have strategic plans, at least for foundation year, and some public HEIs have strategic plans for the development of the HEI
- ✓ Libraries: In 2007, the recommendations of the first review of the foundation year all included the need to provide improved library services—at least copies of core textbooks. Now, almost all HEI libraries have some copies of the core textbooks in their possession. There are still very few trained librarians, a different but important issue.

Of course, foundation year is a long way from institutional or even program accreditation. Institutional Accreditation is scheduled to begin with a pilot program in July 2010 with three HEIs—two private and one public. Some of the issues facing the ACC are:

- The issue of rapid, low-quality expansion. Currently Cambodia is at about 2% of enrollment for age cohort, and there is no adult education per se, although graduate schools, the quality of which is a whole other issue, are accepting older students.
- The issue of information to the public about accreditation—what is it? What should we look for? Etc.

- The issue of “who pays” for the accreditation process is not resolved yet.
- The issue of political influence over the results. This is a new idea for Cambodia and many wealthy political figures own and manage universities.
- The biggest issue is the competence of local assessors for institutional or program evaluation. There is almost no one in Cambodia who could accredit a science program—the issue of seeking support from regional HEIs is being discussed now.

It is important to remember that, given the short history of Cambodia, we have come a LONG way, and if the government will give authority to younger, better-education Cambodians to move higher education forward, it can be done. VISION 2020 for higher education is complete—implementation will take both funds and political will—it is not clear if either of these elements is present in the country today.

Abstract

The creation of reasonable and applicable indicators of quality assurance is always difficult. It is more so in an environment where resources are limited and where government plays a role in both private and public university development. This brief paper explores some of the elements that come into play in this situation and suggests some relatively simple and cost-effective means of enhancing quality assurance both in higher education institutions and in the tertiary system. Further discussion will both expand and elaborate the issues involved.

Quality Assurance in a Resource-Poor Environment

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Both the words “quality” and “assurance” are loaded words, ones that carry different meanings for different people. Marjorie Peace Lenn names elements of quality that clarify the concept to some extent: excellence—in labs, libraries, teaching, etc, fitness for purpose as defined by the mission statement of the HEI, efficiency (value for money), and transformation of students into adults with a desire and capacity for autonomous, critical learning. (Lenn, p. 21-22)

But given those elements of a definition, it is still complicated to name true indicators of higher education quality. As Altbach and Reisburg state:

*Quality assurance has become a rapidly growing concern in a context of ongoing change in higher education around the world. At the same time, defining and measuring quality usefully has become more difficult.* (Trends in Global Higher Education, p. 51.)

What are possible indicators that can be used to measure quality in an HEI in any part of the world? passing grades? We know that in these days of inflated grades and even in some cases payment for grades, this does not work. jobs? Perhaps if one limits this to an improved job in the field in which one took the advanced degree, this indicator is possible. demonstration of excellence in future life? Where does that put Bill Gates who dropped out of school? Seeking real indicators in an environment in which resources are severely limited makes the assurance of quality in higher education even more complex.

Today, let us look at two major limitations in the environment of a higher education institution which either clearly limit or enhance quality within the institution—financial and human resources. From the aspect of finance, it is clear that the more-is-better philosophy limits quality. In the beginning, an institution is founded on a firm basis, produces a small number of excellent graduates who get good jobs and the fame of the HEI grows. Then, forces within the HEI sense that there is more money to be had by teaching more students. The enrollment is increased; the faculty members who were doing a good job before, take on more teaching hours or classes are doubled in size. The weakness of this approach is clear—more students in the class equal less teaching/preparing/correcting time. Another way to deal with this issue is to hire more teachers—but experience has shown us that the HEI finds less-qualified teachers to take up some of the burden. Either way quality suffers. This issue is

found across the developing world in greater or lesser degrees (Kim et al, Higher Education in the New Century p.99-100)

A second academic issue affected by finance is that of faculty development. In almost every HEI in Cambodia, there is little or no budget for external conferences, no budget for library development and limited budget for research. There is even no budget or plan for supervision of new lecturers and no resources for helping staff to improve either in methodology or content.

A third serious financial issue is low salaries. Low salaries are the rule across the world for higher education institutions, especially in developing countries. Governments need to discuss this issue and help the HEIs to resolve the societal inequities which arise from salaries in public HEIs which do not even approach the basic cost of living for medium-income families. If government cannot support higher education, and there may be good reasons for this, they need to assist in creating just and equitable financial arrangements within the HEIs. If families/students are to bear the burden of higher education, then there must be public, trustworthy information about the strengths and weaknesses of the various public or private HEIs on offer. Additionally, improved salaries need to be equated with qualifications, performance and teaching/research/supervision.

Along with finance, human resources in higher education are a serious concern across the SEAsian region. In places like Cambodia, where the tragic history is well-known, the process of developing these resources will take time. Educating is step one, but adding “seasoning” by experience and research is also essential. But across the region, more and more young people are getting very good degrees overseas, only to return back to their schools and find their Masters or PhD degree is not rewarded or even in some case appreciated.

Language capacity is another serious issue for the development of human resources. If one is to be able to both read and do research, an international language is not a luxury but a requirement. In Asia, academic meetings and conference are all held in English language—staff members who do not have the language are excluded no matter how high their level of academic knowledge.

In Asia, as is true across the world, lecturers “teach as they have been taught”. The region is breaking away in many cases from the rote learning styles of the previous century, but many of our young lecturers have never seen alternative learning styles. They stand in front of classes and bore the students into somnolence, and call it teaching—sometimes they even prepare to do this, not understanding that more information does not necessarily make a better class!

These are just a few examples of issues that arise in resource-poor environments and of course, there are others which we may find more determinative in our own reality of that ephemeral term “quality”. It is clear that these issues are real; but, even in environments with limited human and financial resources, there are steps that can be taken, and activities that can be encouraged which will begin to address them.

1. Honors assembly: at the end of the academic year, or whenever graduation occurs, outstanding teachers, those who have returned from overseas with high-quality degrees, or those with significant research activity can be either affirmed in the Address of the University President, or listed in the program for the event. This list can form a part of the press release for the event. This enables teachers to feel supported and engaged in the HEI.

2. Seek small grants for faculty research among non-government organizations, multi- and bi-lateral organizations functioning in the country. Where possible, partner with industry or laboratories or factories to provide both research for faculty and internships for students.
3. Link with professional groups in developed countries, such as the American Psychological Association or the Asian Association of Social Work, to find partners for exchange lecturers, external thesis supervision and scholarships.
4. Reward lecturing staff for research hours as well as for teaching hours—this both raises the status of research on the campus and holds on to lecturers whose gift is research and research training.

If these relatively easy steps to quality are applied, then some indicators of quality do become clearer, even in an environment where resources are severely limited. Examples of quality indicators might include:

- financial support to staff who are doing good research and/or teaching with quality (as shown in student evaluations, research contracts, etc);
- Staff satisfaction shown by retention of qualified staff;
- Tracer study evidence re: graduates who get jobs in their field, or for graduate degrees get increased job responsibilities and pay;
- Increased international partnerships for faculty exchange, scholarships and/or research work;
- Articles published by staff or students in credible journals;
- Slow but sure improvement of facilities—libraries, labs, computer access;
- Improvement of student services such as job counseling, housing assistance, health/counseling center, scholarship assistance, etc;
- Government support delivered by means of public block grants to encourage transparent planning; and.
- Clear and accurate information published about schools and programs.

Almost every study of higher education states that the massification and commercialization of higher education area both real and growing. Added to this in developing countries, there is a marked inability or unwillingness to develop and apply standards to the surging numbers in HEIs. Unlimited expansion of higher education systems, without attention to quality issues and national priorities will end in a surge in unemployment of graduates who have neither the skills nor the capacity for work. As Colin Meyn says speaking of Cambodian higher education in the PHNOM PEHN POST:

*..the graduates and employees that are churned out by the education system are not of adequate quality to meet domestic demands. (p.1, 28/10/09)*

This could probably be said of many developing countries around the world. But, attention to what CAN be done rather than what cannot be done in any specific environment is the key to changing quality and opening the door to real change in the higher education system.

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