


# Chapter 14

## Emerging Voices From Cambodia: International Student Journeys and Educational Aspirations in a Globalized Academic Landscape

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter studies Cambodian international students' travel patterns, changes brought about by the students' new culture, and how students helped to shape the globalized knowledge society. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, it draws on in-depth accounts from Cambodian graduates. Findings show that motivations for studying abroad stem from academic quality, career goals, scholarship opportunities, and social influences. Participants recount adapting to substantial academic and cultural changes, acquiring advanced expertise, and cultivating perspectives on global citizenship. Returnees to Cambodia take on professional positions and participate in community-level activities which contribute to development, but they face challenges; unrecognized degrees and limited domestic work capacity. This chapter suggests the need to match global competencies with regional priorities and enhance regional cooperation. It highlights the relevance of Cambodian perspectives regarding the internationalization of higher education and strategizing for evidence-based development frameworks.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, Cambodia's higher education system has undergone a period of profound and sustained transformation, marking one of the most significant institutional overhauls in the country's post-conflict history. This evolution does not only demonstrate the pressing responsibilities of restoring what was lost during the devastation of the 1970s and 1980s but also the international effort to embed the nation within the regional and global knowledge economy. The reform trajectory has been driven by three interrelated processes: rapid institutional expansion, the broadening of academic programs, and the gradual harmonization of governance and quality-assurance mechanisms with international standards.

Historically, higher education in Cambodia was extremely limited in scale and scope in the immediate post-conflict years, with fewer than twenty operational higher education institutions (HEIs) by the late 1990s. As noted by Kimkong (2023) and Heng and Sol (2023), there were no more than 20 colleges and universities in Cambodia in 1997. By 2020, the figure had reached more than 120. They say that this change was not just a reaction to increased local demand; it was the result of a carefully thought-out government policy that was in line with the Royal Government of Cambodia's (RGC) main goal of improving the economy and society.

Consequently, global trends toward decentralization encouraged campus expansion beyond Phnom Penh, including provincial capitals. As Sorn and Suon (2022) point out, this geographic diversification aimed to reduce the long-standing urban-rural disparities in educational access and support balanced regional development. Cambodian colleges and universities also broadened their educational programs. As Huot and Em (2024) and World Bank (2024) note, there has been a paradigm shift from offering only law, economics, and education to incorporating business administration, environmental science, health science, engineering, information and communication technology, and tourism management. The world's employment landscape in any economy that moves towards globalization and an information-oriented society demands a broader set of skills has brought about this change. Changing the curriculum is not just a technical shift; it is also a strategic response to the country's goal of moving from an economy that relies on a lot of low-skilled workers and a lot of work to one that is more diverse and centered on innovation. Within the confines of a strategic plan, Cambodia has focused on improving the competitiveness of its schools and establishing closer international relations. As noted by Sok et al. (2023a), countries such as Cambodia which integrate regional benchmarks into their national documents participate in ASEAN activities at the lower levels of the educational system and engage with the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) at the level of higher education. Such frameworks compel Cambodian universities

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