The Challenges and Strategic Recommendations for Student Services in Higher Education in Cambodia

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Abstract

In alignment with the Royal Government of Cambodia's Vision 2050 and response to Industry 4.0 demands, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports has initiated higher education reforms to build human capital. Despite the rapid increase in higher education institutions, from 1 in 1979 to 189 by 2022–2023, student services remain underdeveloped and inadequately supported. This qualitative study explores key challenges in implementing student services across Cambodian HEIs and examines strategic recommendations to improve support systems. Using purposive sampling, 67 participants from seven stakeholder groups were interviewed through semi-structured, one-on-one, and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis identified challenges such as assessment and attention mechanisms, structured and action plans, human and digital infrastructure, physical infrastructure and facilities, budget constraints, and student perspective. To address these issues, the study proposes a strategic and collaborative approach, involving parent ministries, industry and communities, development partners, religion, parents and guardians, and institutional actors. This study offers practical, stakeholder-informed recommendations to enhance student services, which are vital to improving student success, institutional resilience, and the overall quality of higher education in Cambodia.

Keywords: *Student Service, Challenges, Higher Education, Recommendation, Stakeholder*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions play a vital role in cultivating human capital to meet both economic and social demands. According to Arnold and King (1997), one of the primary objectives of higher education is to foster lifelong learning among students. Clifton (2011) emphasized that higher education institutions are essential pillars for sustaining a strong economy, while Lane (2012) asserted that advancements in higher education significantly drive economic growth. Similarly, the World Bank (2012) highlighted that higher education benefits not only individual students but also serves as a foundation for broader socioeconomic development. Zimpher (2012) further supported this view by arguing that higher education equips individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to secure well-paying jobs and build more prosperous futures.

In the Cambodian context, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS, 2014) affirmed that the higher education sub-sector plays a crucial role in cultivating intellectual capital as a source of national wealth and prosperity, thereby contributing to both present and future socio-economic progress. Since the privatization of higher education in Cambodia, the number of higher education institutions has increased significantly, rising from 8 in 1997 to 189 in the 2022–2023 academic year (MoEYS, 2024a). In response to evolving educational needs, the Royal Government of Cambodia, through MoEYS, has implemented various strategic plans, policies, and legal frameworks aimed at improving educational quality and aligning with the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Despite these developments, Cambodian higher education students continue to face numerous challenges, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including students from low-income families, those with disabilities, and others facing socio-economic constraints. Audin and Davy (2003) observed that such students often struggle with enrollment, study-related difficulties, and limited social and financial support. Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) found that students who lack parental support during their studies tend to perform worse academically than those who have experienced family guidance. Homesickness, as noted by Mackie (1998), is another critical factor contributing to student attrition. McGivney (1996) emphasized that poor study skills, difficulty adapting to the academic environment, and personal and financial challenges are significant barriers to student success. Nevertheless, MoEYS (2024b) reported an increase in the higher education enrollment rate among students aged 18 to 24, rising from 9% in 2013–2014 to 17.9% in 2022–2023.

Given these challenges, there is a growing need to strengthen student services to better support both the general student population and those at higher risk of academic failure. However, Zhai (2004) found that very few students utilize available support services. In contrast, DiRamio and Payne (2007) demonstrated that student access to counseling, career development, and mental health services positively influences academic success. Jaswinder and Associates (2008) argued that structured programs contribute significantly to students' educational experiences and outcomes. UNESCO (2009) echoed this, stating that student services are vital in providing guidance and opportunities that ensure access to high-quality knowledge and skills. Ehrenberg and Webber (2010) reported that such services especially benefit students dealing with academic or financial difficulties. Ciobanu (2013) further noted that institutions prioritizing student services tend to improve staff development, academic achievement, and administrative capacity. Effective student support systems also contribute to greater institutional satisfaction and lower dropout rates (Ciobanu, 2013). Similarly, Siu and Associates (2014) found that supportive environments foster positive psychological outcomes and enhance student competitiveness.

Nonetheless, research suggests that many higher education institutions do not adequately structure or prioritize student services. Mucciante (2009) observed that most institutions lack an understanding of the value of student support systems. Choudaha (2009) added that student associations and volunteer programs often operate without sufficient institutional backing. The absence of clear policies and structures results in fragmented services that fail to address student needs comprehensively. Chickering (1969) argued that one of the key challenges in student affairs is forming partnerships that support learning for a better life, not merely lifelong learning. Welch (2008) warned that increased student numbers without proportional service expansion limit the effectiveness of support programs. Schuh et al. (2017) emphasized that poorly integrated services result in missed opportunities for engagement and academic success. Copeland (1992) also underscored the importance of orientation and employment counseling, which many institutions overlook despite their significance in preparing students for the workforce.

A particularly persistent challenge is political interference. Lim (1999) noted that in developing countries, political factors hinder universities from functioning as professional training institutions. Hengles (2017) reported that in Cambodia, leadership positions in higher education are sometimes filled based on political affiliation rather than qualifications. Similarly, Peterson (2015) criticized the patronage system, where institutional leadership is awarded based on personal connections rather than merit. This politicization impedes reform and undermines institutional capacity, further complicating efforts to improve student services and academic quality. Consequently, there is increasing recognition of the imperative to enhance student services across higher education institutions (HEIs) to effectively motivate and support students in completing their academic programs and successfully meeting labor market demands. This study aims to investigate the challenges associated with the provision of student services in Cambodian higher education and to propose strategic recommendations for improving student learning outcomes. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the primary challenges affecting the delivery of student services in higher education institutions? and (2) What strategic interventions can be implemented to enhance student learning outcomes within these institutions?

Literature Review

Student services, although labeled differently across institutions, are fundamentally designed to support student success beyond the curriculum. These services typically include employment counseling,

health and wellness support, residential life, and extracurricular development. The provision of such services fosters stronger relationships between students and higher education institutions (Ciobanu, 2013). Student services play a crucial role in enhancing academic performance and student retention. Ciobanu (2013) emphasized that the impact of these services is largely mediated by the strength of the institutional-student relationship, and further noted that the composition of the student body, along with the expertise and professionalism of academic and administrative staff, plays a critical role in service delivery.

In Cambodia, the higher education sector experienced significant disruption due to civil conflict, necessitating its re-establishment. The Royal Government of Cambodia has since implemented strategic plans and policy frameworks aimed at improving both the quality and quantity of higher education provision. As part of these efforts, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) introduced the "Vision for Higher Education 2030," which aspires to align educational outputs with labor market demands and national development goals.

Despite these advances, many higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia continue to prioritize teaching over research and student services. Hang Chuon (2016) observed that while some private institutions primarily focus on instruction, they often lack sufficient human and financial resources to support broader educational activities. Conversely, public institutions, with state funding, have begun investing in research and cultivating a research culture. Chanthavong (2015) argued that student services play a crucial role in reducing dropout rates and enhancing retention, particularly among disadvantaged students. Similarly, Bucuy (2023) emphasized that quality student services not only benefit existing students but also enhance institutional attractiveness for prospective students.

However, the provision of student services remains inconsistent across institutions, largely dependent on institutional financial resources, administrative attention, and available human capital. This disparity is particularly pronounced when comparing institutions in developed and developing countries. The World Bank (1994) identified four major challenges facing HEIs in developing nations: limited financial resources, internal inefficiencies, weak external linkages, and issues of social equity. In the same vein, Lim (1999) highlighted problems related to inadequate teacher quality and low compensation, which contribute to the abandonment of the teaching profession. Further, the World Bank (2017) identified additional systemic issues, including access, financial equity, and quality assurance. UNESCO (2000) similarly documented widespread deficiencies in infrastructure, laboratory equipment, instructional materials, and research capacity in developing contexts.

Student services thus represent a key challenge for HEIs that struggle to design and implement programs that meet diverse student needs. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) noted that the diversification of the student body, across socioeconomic and cultural lines, creates heterogeneous service demands that institutions often find difficult to meet. Murray et al. (2015) added that the variation in service delivery models complicates outcome evaluation. Prince (2015) and Khan et al. (2021) similarly pointed to increasing student expectations and tuition costs as challenges, emphasizing that inadequate support services can hinder student success. Bucuy (2022) reiterated that institutions must offer comprehensive services that reflect the value of students' financial investment.

This study identifies six major challenges in the implementation of student services in Cambodian HEIs: (1) assement and attention mechanisms, (2) structure and action plan, (3) Human Resources and Digital Infrastructure, (4) physical infrastructure and facility, (5) budget constraints, and (6) perspectives on students in Higher Educaion. Each of these dimensions is discussed in detail below. Furthermore, the active involvement of diverse stakeholders is crucial to enhancing the quality, relevance, and sustainability of student services in alignment with the evolving needs of higher education institutions.

Challenges
Assessment and Attention Mechanism

A key challenge in implementing effective student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs) lies in the underdeveloped mechanisms for quality assurance and evaluation. Following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the Cambodian higher education system underwent reconstruction. The proliferation of public and private HEIs in the post-conflict era preceded the establishment of a national quality assurance mechanism. It was not until 2003 that the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) was officially created to oversee the quality of higher education (Say Un & Say, 2018). Despite the ACC's establishment, quality assurance remains largely voluntary, which

weakens its influence on institutional behavior. Higher education institutions are not legally bound to adhere to quality standards set by the ACC, resulting in varied levels of compliance and inconsistent attention to educational quality (CEC, 2023). The absence of an enforceable evaluation framework contributes to the marginalization of student services in institutional planning and execution.

In addition, Cambodian HEIs often lack comprehensive mechanisms for monitoring and assessing the quality of student services. Opportunities for students to acquire knowledge outside of formal classroom instruction, such as through workshops, seminars, and extracurricular programs, remain limited (Choudaha, 2009). According to Mucciante (2009), many institutions fail to fully grasp the value of student services, treating them as secondary to academic instruction. Choudaha (2009) further observed that some HEIs undervalue student support programs, and many services are implemented without clear objectives, structures, or alignment with student needs. This lack of systematic evaluation and accountability impairs institutional responsiveness and diminishes the potential impact of student services on student success. Without standardized assessment tools or mandatory reporting systems, student support programs are rarely evaluated for effectiveness, and improvements are implemented inconsistently, if at all.

Structure and Action Plan

The second significant challenge to implementing effective student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs) relates to the absence of a clearly defined organizational structure and strategic action plan. The structural framework within which student services operate plays a crucial role in ensuring quality service delivery that aligns with institutional goals and student needs. Without well-defined responsibilities and coordinated efforts among departments, the efficiency and effectiveness of student support are often compromised. Sandeen and Barr (2006) emphasized the importance of aligning student services directly under the supervision of institutional leadership, suggesting that student affairs units should report to the university president or a senior executive. This structure ensures that student support is integrated into the core mission of the institution and receives appropriate attention and resources. Furthermore, a clearly defined student services structure facilitates coordination among departments, supports policy development, and enhances responsiveness to emerging student needs.

Student service action plans must be based on empirical research and institutional data to ensure that programs are responsive and relevant. Effective planning should prioritize the identification of student needs, resource allocation, and program evaluation mechanisms. As Cashin et al. (1998) argued, action plans informed by data can guide the design and implementation of services that meet both current and evolving student expectations. Moreover, the inclusion of external stakeholders, such as international partners and educational networks, through collaborative programs, exchange initiatives, and research projects, can improve service quality and global relevance. Perkins (1999) further asserted that student services should support the entire academic lifecycle—from enrollment to graduation—ensuring students have the tools, guidance, and support necessary to succeed. In alignment with this perspective, West (2022) advocated for curriculum development and student support structures that reflect the diversity of student experiences and challenges.

However, in many Cambodian HEIs, student services are still treated as peripheral units with unclear mandates and limited influence on institutional planning. The absence of formalized action plans often results in ad hoc program delivery, minimal strategic coordination, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation. Without a clear structural framework, student support remains fragmented and fails to fulfill its potential role in fostering student retention, academic success, and institutional engagement.

Human Resources and Digital Infrastructure

A third critical challenge in the effective implementation of student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs) pertains to the limitations in both human and digital resources. The quality and success of student services largely depend on the competence, training, and professional development of the personnel who deliver them, as well as the technological infrastructure that supports service delivery. Human resource capacity is a fundamental determinant of service effectiveness. As Sandeen (1988) noted, student service providers must possess strong interpersonal and professional skills to respond to diverse student needs. This includes not only academic advising but also personal, emotional, and career guidance. Providers must also be trained to recognize and support students facing social, financial, or psychological challenges (Astin, 1993; McAloon, 1994). According to Simmons, Barrett, and

Simmons (1998), the ability to engage in one-on-one counseling, actively listen, and empathize with students is essential for building trust and promoting student well-being.

However, many HEIs in Cambodia lack sufficient qualified staff to meet these demands. Jaswinder et al. (2008) reported that while institutions may offer a variety of support services, the lack of professionally trained staff often results in service delivery that does not adequately meet student needs. This issue is compounded by low salaries and high staff turnover, which undermine service continuity and institutional memory (Hung, 2008; World Bank, 1994). Lea and Farbus (2000) also highlighted time constraints among academic advisors, which prevent meaningful engagement with students, particularly in large institutions. In addition to human capital challenges, the integration and use of digital technologies in student services remain limited. Technological tools have the potential to enhance service accessibility, responsiveness, and efficiency. As Himelein (1995) and Baghiropova (2008) pointed out, the use of telecommunications and digital platforms in education is essential for modern student support systems. Lundeman (2008) emphasized that as student populations expand, technology becomes a critical enabler for managing student data, delivering support services, and fostering engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of educational technologies in Cambodia, prompting HEIs to transition from traditional classroom-based instruction to online learning platforms (Chet et al., 2020; Phyrom & Sopheak, 2023). Despite this progress, significant barriers remain, particularly in the areas of cost, technological literacy, and access to reliable internet infrastructure. Forrest (1987) observed that in many HEIs, outdated systems continue to hinder the delivery of modern, technology-driven services. Loo and Hang (2007) further identified key challenges in Cambodia, including the high cost of internet access, low English proficiency among students and staff, and a shortage of qualified IT personnel. Rupande (2016) asserted that without adequate investment in digital infrastructure, institutions cannot provide high-quality, efficient services. Crawford et al. (2020) similarly argued that HEIs must not only adopt technological tools but also train staff and students in their effective use. Although recent initiatives show growing interest in digital transformation, the lack of sustained funding and capacity building continues to hamper meaningful progress.

In summary, the dual challenge of insufficient professional staff and underdeveloped digital infrastructure severely limits the ability of Cambodian HEIs to deliver comprehensive and effective student services. Addressing these gaps requires strategic investments in human capital and information technology, along with institutional commitment to continuous capacity development.

Physical Infrastructure and Facilities

Infrastructure is a fundamental component of student services, yet it remains one of the most pressing challenges for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia. Adequate infrastructure—including libraries, laboratories, accommodation, and health facilities—is vital for ensuring students' academic success and overall well-being. However, many Cambodian HEIs face significant limitations in this area, especially those operating within a context of economic constraints and limited institutional investment in student support systems. According to UNESCO (2000), HEIs in developing countries often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, a lack of modern teaching and learning materials, and insufficient laboratory equipment. These deficiencies hinder students' ability to develop practical skills and conduct independent research. In the Cambodian context, this problem is further exacerbated by a lack of modernized facilities that can support experiential learning and accommodate growing student populations. Dy and Ogunniran (2019) highlighted that many HEIs in Cambodia still lack basic science laboratories, thus restricting students' access to quality, hands-on learning experiences.

Library resources are similarly insufficient in many institutions. Dem (2017) found that the shortage of academic literature and self-study spaces continues to limit students' capacity for research and independent learning. Moreover, Heng (2000) argued that Cambodian HEIs lag behind regional and international standards in infrastructure development, a situation that hampers their competitiveness and attractiveness to prospective students. For example, only about 5% of students in some Cambodian universities have access to institutional accommodation, while Stewart (2022) estimated that HEIs in similar contexts globally provide accommodation for no more than 30% of their students. Housing is a key component of student support, particularly for those who must relocate far from home to pursue higher education. Silva (2009) emphasized that insufficient or poor-quality student accommodation exacerbates the financial and emotional stress faced by students, especially those from disadvantaged

backgrounds. Without affordable and secure housing options, many students are at risk of disengaging from their studies due to external pressures unrelated to academic performance.

The lack of proper healthcare facilities is another major concern. Student well-being requires access to basic health services, mental health support, and counseling, yet many HEIs in Cambodia cannot provide such services. This absence can have long-term impacts on student retention and success, particularly for those dealing with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or psychological distress. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), in collaboration with development partners, has acknowledged the importance of upgrading infrastructure to improve educational quality. However, as noted in national strategic documents and reports, the pace of infrastructure improvement remains slow and uneven across institutions. Limited coordination and restricted budgets contribute to this situation, making it difficult for Cambodian HEIs to achieve parity with their regional counterparts or meet international accreditation standards.

In conclusion, inadequate infrastructure—including academic resources, accommodation, and health services—presents a significant barrier to the effective delivery of student services in Cambodian HEIs. This shortfall not only limits students' academic and personal development but also undermines the institutional mission of promoting equitable access to quality education. Addressing these challenges requires sustained investment, strategic planning, and the integration of student well-being into national higher education development policies.

Budget Constraints

One of the most persistent challenges in the implementation of student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs) is the limited availability of financial resources. Budget constraints affect nearly every aspect of student support, from the provision of basic services to the development of long-term strategic programs. The lack of sufficient funding not only limits the quality and quantity of services offered but also places significant pressure on institutions to operate under conditions of financial uncertainty. As Tilak (2003) notes, many ASEAN countries, including Cambodia, face difficulties in enhancing the quality of higher education due to the combination of increasing student populations and inadequate state funding. This observation is supported by UNESCO (2009), which reported that student services in HEIs across developing countries often suffer from limited financial allocation, resulting in gaps between service provision and student needs. In the Cambodian context, this financial shortfall hinders institutions from delivering comprehensive support systems, such as academic advising, career counseling, mental health services, and extracurricular activities.

The implications of budgetary constraints are wide-ranging. Andrews (2008) pointed out that inadequate financial resources severely hamper the organization of student support programs and limit institutional responsiveness to emerging student needs. Welch (2008) similarly observed that funding shortages impact not only the delivery of services but also staff salaries, training, and retention. Hung (2008) emphasized that personnel working in student services often receive lower compensation compared to other university departments, contributing to high turnover rates and diminished continuity in service provision. In Cambodia, Keng et al. (2015) found that many HEIs struggle to fulfill their institutional missions due to financial limitations. This issue was further exacerbated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional revenue streams and forced institutions to divert resources toward online learning platforms. Whitford (2020) observed that pandemic-related financial pressures compelled HEIs to reduce budgets, thereby compromising the quality of student services and institutional operations. These constraints led to the postponement or cancellation of outreach programs, research initiatives, and support services—activities essential to both student success and institutional development.

As Laposhy (2020) explained, the increasing cost of maintaining digital infrastructure and educational technology adds a layer of financial burden, especially as student enrollment continues to rise. Institutions face the dual challenge of meeting growing demands for technology-enabled learning while operating within constrained budgets. Merdi (2022) reported that, to cope with budget limitations, some HEIs have deprioritized spending on research, student engagement, and service improvement—actions that may have long-term negative implications for educational quality and equity. Although there is growing awareness of the importance of student services, the allocation of funds to this area remains insufficient. This issue reflects a broader structural problem within higher education financing, where academic departments and teaching functions often receive priority over student affairs and support

services. The lack of targeted investments undermines the institutional capacity to create inclusive, student-centered learning environments. Furthermore, while many HEIs receive support from international donors, non-governmental organizations, and development agencies, these external funds are often project-based and unsustainable in the long term. Sustainable financing mechanisms are essential to ensure that student services are institutionalized, continuously improved, and aligned with national education goals.

In conclusion, budget constraints represent a critical challenge to the successful implementation of student services in Cambodian HEIs. Financial limitations restrict the development, delivery, and sustainability of programs essential to student success and institutional quality. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach involving increased government investment, enhanced institutional resource mobilization, and the integration of student support into broader higher education policy and planning frameworks.

Perspectives on Students

An essential, yet often overlooked, element in the implementation of student services is how higher education institutions (HEIs) perceive and engage students. Recognizing students not merely as passive recipients of knowledge but as active stakeholders is critical to fostering inclusive and effective educational environments. As stakeholders, students should be integrated into institutional decision-making processes, especially those related to educational services, program development, and policy implementation. Historically, students have not always been granted a voice in shaping higher education systems. Erickson and Strommer (1991) noted that, although efforts have been made to improve the quality of higher education systems globally, students frequently remain marginalized in institutional and policy-level discussions. In contrast, adopting a student-centered perspective allows institutions to respond more effectively to the diverse and evolving needs of their learners.

Perkins (1999) emphasized that students should be viewed as primary clients of the educational system. Their role extends beyond classroom participation to include involvement in extracurricular activities, campus governance, and feedback mechanisms that inform institutional improvement. Higher education institutions that adopt this perspective are better positioned to create responsive, high-quality student services that contribute directly to student retention and success. Student engagement is also fundamental to institutional sustainability and reputation. Zepke (2014) argued that students are not only learners but key clients whose satisfaction and success are essential for institutional growth and competitiveness. Similarly, Bielecki (2017) maintained that universities must recognize students as valued customers; failure to do so can result in student attrition, which subsequently damages institutional reputation and credibility.

Moreover, the extent to which students feel that their voices are heard and valued influences their sense of belonging, motivation, and academic performance. Institutions that actively seek student input and respond to their concerns are more likely to retain students and achieve higher levels of student satisfaction. According to Partners (2006), higher education institutions that prioritize student voice in service design and delivery demonstrate greater success in achieving educational goals and fostering community within campuses. In the Cambodian context, this perspective is particularly relevant given the rapid expansion and diversification of the higher education sector. As HEIs attempt to accommodate students from varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, it becomes increasingly important to tailor services based on actual student experiences and expectations. Engaging students in dialogue and decision-making can help institutions design more inclusive, equitable, and effective support systems.

In conclusion, viewing students as central stakeholders in the higher education ecosystem is critical to improving the quality and effectiveness of student services. Institutions that adopt student-centered approaches, integrate student feedback, and empower students as partners in education are more likely to cultivate supportive learning environments that promote academic success, well-being, and institutional excellence.

Strategic Recommendations

The involvement of multiple stakeholders is essential for improving the quality and relevance of student services, ensuring that these services are sustainable and aligned with the evolving needs of higher education institutions. Etzko (2003) highlighted that the conceptual framework of key institutions in higher education, particularly in fostering a Buddhist society and economy, was developed during the

1990s through the Triple Helix model. This model emphasizes the synergy between three primary actors: higher education institutions, government, and enterprises, aiming to enhance the production, transfer, and utilization of knowledge within society.

Regarding stakeholder engagement with universities, Vuorivo (2014) noted that these partnerships serve varying objectives but are crucial under competitive conditions. Supporting this view, Dictom et al. (2024) argued that active stakeholder involvement significantly increases institutional management efficiency. Conversely, Habtom (2020) found that management limited solely to governmental and higher education bodies often results in suboptimal service delivery due to funding constraints, lack of inter-institutional trust, and weak collaboration with the private sector. Furthermore, Mitchell et al. (2020) emphasized that collaborative relationships between institutions and stakeholders are instrumental in advancing the quality of student services.

Such collaboration facilitates the fulfillment of student needs and promotes academic success. The Council for Education Cooperation (CEC, 2015) asserted that higher education institutions must set clear objectives to address the demands of students locally, nationally, and internationally, while simultaneously preserving national identity and culture. To realize these goals, higher education institutions are required to work collaboratively and responsibly with relevant stakeholders. In the Cambodian context, Sam (2016) identified four pivotal stakeholder groups: state bodies, development partners, enterprises, and higher education institutions. These stakeholders share critical responsibilities to ensure quality education that aligns with both student needs and labor market demands at the regional and international levels.

This section synthesizes findings from previous research on student services involving key external stakeholders related to the higher education sub-sector. These actors include parent ministries, development partners, industry and communities, religion, parents and guardians, and institutional actors.

Parent Ministries

Government bodies play a crucial role in shaping policies, strategies, and implementation frameworks for higher education through legislative and regulatory measures aligned with national development goals. For example, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS) in Cambodia is pivotal in establishing legal frameworks, allocating budgets, and overseeing the quality assurance of higher education institutions (Samles, 2015). MoEYS also facilitates student engagement in social, humanitarian, and technical activities that enrich student services (Wiseman et al., 2016). The Higher Education Accreditation Committee, established in 2003, serves as a regulatory mechanism to evaluate and maintain institutional quality standards (MoEYS, 2015). Additionally, financial administration within public institutions is regulated by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, which issues key legal documents governing budget management and public asset administration (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 1998, 2015, 2018).

Mandatory inspection and evaluation are essential for enhancing the quality of higher education services (Sachs & Howman, 2009). Cambodian student services are governed by multiple legal instruments, including the 1993 Constitution, the Royal Decree on Higher Education Accreditation, and related regulations. Article 66 of the Constitution guarantees access to education and equality, while the Royal Decree affirms students' rights to freedom of expression, quality education, and participation in institutional development (Royal Decree, 1993). The National Standards for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions (2015) include student services as a core accreditation criterion. MoEYS guidelines issued in 2012 and 2022 reinforce stakeholders' rights to raise grievances and participate in quality assurance mechanisms (MoEYS, 2012, 2022).

The one-stop-shop (OSS) mechanism is recognized globally as an effective model to streamline administrative services by consolidating multiple functions under one accessible location (Bishop, 2009; Turner, 2012). Cambodia implemented OSS initiatives starting in 2003, which have since expanded nationwide due to positive stakeholder reception (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2017). This approach improves service delivery efficiency, reduces bureaucracy, and enhances user convenience (Kasmad et al., 2015; Ellucian, 2018).

Industry and Community

Communities and enterprises contribute significantly to the enhancement of higher education quality and student services. Steinberg (1975) identified community support as critical to institutional success, while more recent studies highlight enterprise collaboration in technology transfer, skill development, and employment opportunities (Jordan, 2009; Munoz, 2017; Yaun et al., 2020). Enterprises provide financial sponsorships, scholarships, internships, and infrastructure development, thereby fostering an environment conducive to student success (Samles & Dahles, 2015; Teressa, 2022).

Development Partners

International development partners provide essential technical assistance and financial resources that support higher education development in Cambodia. Since the 1990s, agencies such as AusAID, the World Bank, USAID, the French Development Agency, and UNESCO have actively participated in program development and institutional capacity building (Ahren & Khemmerer, 2002; Dy, 2015; Ford, 2004; Sam & Samles, 2015). The World Bank's investments, including the Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP2), have been instrumental in enhancing infrastructure, staff training, and student services (Oketch, 2016; I2018). Non-governmental organizations also play a crucial role in fostering partnerships that improve academic outcomes (Dickson, 2024).

Religion

Religion serves as a vital influence in the moral and educational development of students. In Cambodia, Buddhism, the state religion, plays a prominent role in shaping societal values and educational practices (Sokvy, 2020; Ministry of Cults and Religions, 2022). Research indicates that religious involvement contributes to students' resilience, stress management, and overall satisfaction with their academic experience (HERI, 2004; Wasserman, 2024; Pollard et al., 2004; Mooney, 2005; Phillips & Henderson, 2006). Participation in religious activities correlates with positive behavioral outcomes and reduced engagement in risky behaviors (Mayrle & Oeur, 2009).

Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians continue to exert a significant influence on students' educational experiences during higher education. While direct oversight diminishes, parental involvement persists through emotional support and guidance, which positively impacts academic performance and social adaptation (Cutrona et al., 1994; Strage & Brandt, 1999; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Research identifies parents as key stakeholders in supporting student success and institutional quality enhancement (Sears & Hall, 2000; Kalsner & Pirtle, 2003; Herndon & Histo, 2004). Parental engagement correlates with improved academic outcomes, well-being, and social integration (Harper, 2012).

Higher Education Institutions Actors

Higher education institutions encompass several critical components that contribute to effective student service delivery, including leadership and action plan, teaching and non-teaching staff, human resources structure, budgeting, research and responsiveness. The following sections elaborate on these elements.

First, effective leadership is essential to the comprehensive delivery of student services. Institutional executives must continuously assess student needs and translate their insights into coherent action plans that support both academic and extracurricular development. As Avci et al. (2015) argue, leaders require a clear vision of higher-education dynamics to drive institutional growth, yet Jaswinder et al. (2008) warn that misaligned or low-quality services will fail to meet those needs. Thus, curriculum and service planning must remain flexible and responsive to evolving student circumstances (West, 2022).

Second, both teaching and support staff critically shape service quality and academic outcomes. Siu et al. (2014) demonstrate that positive psychological support and active engagement bolster student achievement, while the MoEYS (2024d) confirms that qualified instructors foster responsible citizenship through high-quality instruction. Open channels of communication between faculty and students are therefore indispensable for accurately identifying and addressing needs.

Third, an institution's organizational structure underpins operational efficiency and service delivery. Sandeen and Barr (2006) advocate restructuring student-support units to streamline workflows and enhance sustainability. Human resources are the institution's most valuable asset: Brock (2010)

emphasizes that competent staff are indispensable for holistic student guidance, and the Royal Government of Cambodia identifies human-capital development as vital to national resilience.

Fourth, integrating digital technologies significantly improves service efficiency and aligns provision with Generation Z's expectations. Born between 1997 and 2012, today's undergraduates are digital natives who demand instant, user-friendly access (Zeresford Research, 2024). Studies confirm that e-platforms enhance collaboration, eWOM, and institutional reputation (Gupta & Harris, 2010), while punctual, technology-enabled counselling supports well-being (Yost, 2019). Institutional apps and online portals thus serve both student satisfaction and staff performance (Waitwell, 2024).

Fifth, strategic budget allocation is fundamental to responsive, inclusive student services. UNESCO (2009) underscores that dedicated funding ensures equitable support, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Investment in student services not only promotes retention and success but also cultivates skilled graduates who drive national development (Husain et al., 2003; Khan, 2009). Accordingly, ministries and stakeholders must earmark sufficient resources and monitor their impact to optimize service quality.

Sixth, students are both the principal beneficiaries and indispensable partners of higher education. Beyond paying tuition, they advance research, institutional development, and alumni networks that underpin financial stability and knowledge exchange (Feldman, 1969; Kuhate, 2001; Coates, 2005). Active student involvement in planning and feedback cycles enhances service responsiveness and academic performance (Heng, 2013; ACER, 2018). Alumni associations further support institutions through mentorship, fundraising, and infrastructure projects (Waitwell, 2024).

Finally, effective student services depend on evidence-based needs assessments and targeted program design. Institutions must systematically research diverse student cohorts, align offerings with market and well-being priorities, and communicate available supports transparently (Waitwell, 2024; Ouakrime, 2009; Sawal, n.d.). This business-oriented approach ensures resources are allocated efficiently and student expectations are met.

Conceptual Framework

This research on student services is grounded in Vincent Tinto's theory of student retention and departure, first introduced in 1975 and refined in 1993. Tinto emphasizes that student success is largely dependent on two forms of institutional integration: academic and social. Academic integration involves engagement in learning activities and intellectual development, while social integration includes peer relationships and participation in campus life. Deficiencies in either area increase the risk of student attrition. Student services play a key role in fostering both forms of integration. Services such as academic advising, counseling, internships, and life skills programs support student engagement and persistence. Additionally, initiatives that promote mental health, financial support, and career development reduce barriers to academic success, particularly for first-generation students. This study also considers student service models from countries with similar socio-economic and cultural contexts to Cambodia. Drawing from international research, institutional practices, and policy frameworks, a tailored student services framework is developed to reflect the realities of Cambodian higher education institutions. The proposed framework integrates theoretical, regulatory, and empirical insights, as illustrated in the following section.
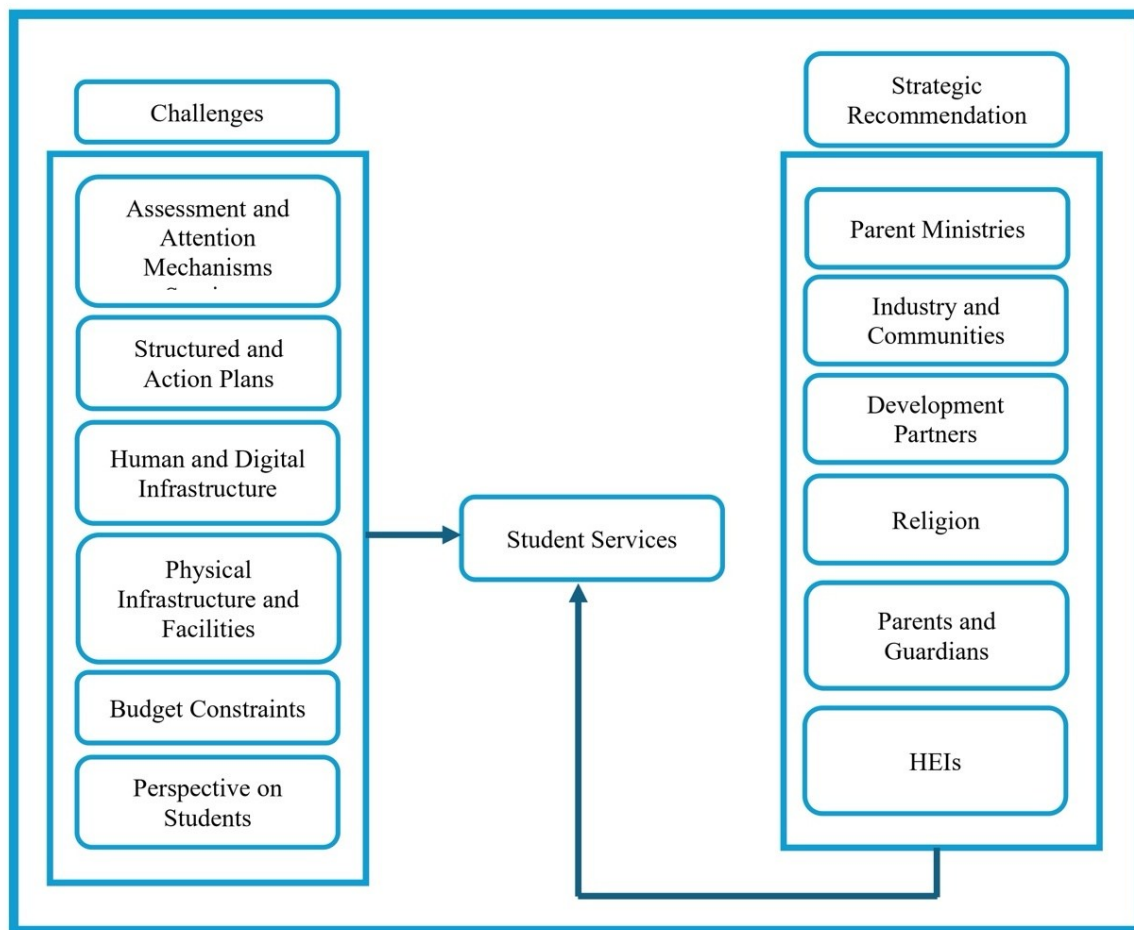
Figure 1: (Sam and Dahles, 2015; UNESCO, 2009)

METHOD
Research design and sample

Based on the objectives and scope of the study, the researchers adopted a qualitative research approach, which emphasizes the collection of objective and detailed data. Patton (2002) argues that positivist research facilitates the systematic acquisition of detailed information, particularly when interviews are used as the primary data collection tool. Over the past decade, qualitative research has gained increasing significance for its ability to generate in-depth, nuanced insights. Creswell (2012) highlights that qualitative methods allow researchers to access participants' lived experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the research context. In this study, semi-structured interviews were selected as the core instrument, enabling researchers to collect practical and realistic data while allowing for follow-up questions to explore emerging themes more thoroughly. Schostak (2006) supports this approach, noting that interviews are particularly effective in obtaining rich and clear information from individuals.

The study involved a total of 67 participants, drawn from six higher education institutions (HEIs). These institutions were selected from among the 90 HEIs under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) and a total of 189 HEIs nationwide (MoEYS, 2024a). The sampling focused on public and private institutions under MoEYS located in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, which hosts the highest number of students and the largest population. According to MoEYS (2024d), Phnom Penh accounted for 147% of the national population in 2019, justifying its strategic importance in the study. The final selection of six institutions was based on their high student enrollment during the 2022–2023 academic year.

Table 1. Participant Geography

Code	Institution	Position	Interview
R1	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
R2	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
R3	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
R4	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
R5	Development Partner	Management Team	One-on-one
R6	Private Sector	Head of HR Depaetment	One-on-one
R7	Researcher	Well-known	One-on-one
R8	Public Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R9	Public Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R10	Public Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R11	Private Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R12	Private Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R13	Private Higher Education	Rector of HEI	One-on-one
R14	Public Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R15	Public Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R16	Public Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R17	Private Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R18	Private Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R19	Private Higher Education	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
R20	Public Higher Education	Students	Focus Group
R21	Public Higher Education	Students	Focus Group
R22	Public Higher Education	Students	Focus Group
R23	Private Higher Education	Students	Focus Group
R24	Private Higher Education	Students	Focus Group
R25	Private Higher Education	Students	Focus Group

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was the semi-structured interview, selected for its effectiveness in eliciting comprehensive and nuanced information from participants. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and emotions while providing the flexibility to adjust or add follow-up questions during the interview process. This adaptability ensures that the interview remains focused on core themes while enabling deeper probing into unexpected but relevant topics.

Cohen et al. (2007) affirm that interviews serve multiple research purposes, such as evaluation, hypothesis development, refinement of research questions, and data validation. In the context of qualitative research, Frakelen et al. (2012) highlight the semi-structured interview as a valuable tool for accessing specific and rich data. This format balances structure and flexibility, enabling researchers to gather detailed insights while remaining responsive to the dynamics of the interview setting.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from seven key participant groups using semi-structured interviews. The researchers organized the collected data thematically in alignment with the research questions. Thematic analysis was employed as the core analytical method, enabling systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across the dataset. According to Sharan (2002), thematic analysis is instrumental in organizing qualitative data into coherent and meaningful categories. Patton (2002) further supports the approach, emphasizing its role in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within complex data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible method for discovering themes, allowing researchers to interpret rich and varied data meaningfully.

The data analysis process involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts to ensure familiarity with the content. Researchers utilized an activity cluster identification system to code and categorize responses. Recurring concepts and patterns were grouped into key thematic categories. Selected responses were presented as direct quotations to highlight participant voices and strengthen the

authenticity of the findings. Creswell (2012) stresses the importance of continuous self-reflection during data analysis, recommending researchers engage in detailed segmentation and categorization of ideas. Following this guidance, the research team collaboratively reviewed the data, applying thematic coding to refine interpretations. The lead author oversaw the analysis process with contributions from expertise in qualitative research, ensuring analytical rigor and credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Challenges
Assessment and Attention Mechanisms

Student services should be established as a mandatory baseline within Cambodia's national higher education quality assurance standards. Although currently included under Standard 5 of the nine-standard framework, their full scope and impact are often underestimated. Comprehensive student support—including mental health counseling, academic advising, and career services—is essential for promoting academic persistence, well-being, and employability. Given the diverse backgrounds of Cambodian undergraduates, many require additional assistance with accommodation, transport, and living expenses. Alongside formal instruction, institutions must also offer co-curricular and community activities that develop soft skills and civic engagement. Systematic delivery of these services not only meets regulatory requirements but also enhances institutional reputation and student outcomes. The findings are as follows:

> *Standard 5 underscores that robust student services are integral to quality assurance, mitigating dropout rates, supporting mental health, and enhancing graduate employability.* R5

In the 7th legislature of the Royal Government, higher education institutions are mandated to actively promote extracurricular activities that support student development beyond the formal curriculum. This approach recognizes that education aims to nurture well-rounded citizens equipped with both strong knowledge and positive attitudes. Achieving this goal requires more than classroom instruction; it necessitates engaging students in community and social activities where behavioral learning occurs organically. Such experiential education cannot be gleaned solely from textbooks but is fostered through active participation in diverse social contexts. Moreover, delivering high-quality student services enhances the institution's appeal to the public and, importantly, to the students themselves, who are the primary beneficiaries of these services. The following statements from the leadership of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports underscore these priorities:

> *Robust student services not only enrich learners' experience but also serve as a key driver for attracting and retaining students within higher-education institutions.* R2

The quality assurance mechanism in Cambodian higher education remains non-mandatory, creating a significant gap in institutional accountability. As a result, improving educational standards and aligning training with evolving regional and global benchmarks remains a persistent challenge. Notably, even well-regarded institutions appear less focused on quality enhancement compared to local counterparts or international standards.

Structured and Action Plans

Some higher education institutions in Cambodia—particularly public ones—often highlight their historical origins dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. However, in reality, all current higher education institutions were re-established after 1979, including the most prominent and widely recognized ones. Implementing student support services effectively and with high quality not only benefits students but also enhances the institutional reputation. While higher education institutions organize their administrative structures based on legal frameworks for public institutions and the governance preferences of private stakeholders, student services remain fragmented across various offices and divisions. This lack of a unified structure hinders the consistent delivery of quality student support services, thereby limiting their effectiveness in fulfilling institutional missions and responding to students' evolving needs . The findings are as outlined below:

At present, there is no clearly defined academic structure in place. The first year primarily focuses on fulfilling basic foundational requirements, while the second through fourth years are oriented toward preparing students for graduate-level study. R1

One of the key obstacles to effective student services in public higher education institutions is the creation of new units or offices primarily to comply with directives from the Ministry of Public Function, rather than to enhance service delivery. Although some private higher education institutions have undertaken structural reforms in student services, challenges persist due to the absence of clearly assigned responsibilities and a lack of well-defined roles within these units. The findings are as outlined below.:

The current organizational arrangement remains fragmented, with faculties or departments primarily supporting their units in isolation. There is still no clearly defined institutional structure, and while some institutions are organized by colleges, they lack coherent principles or strategic plans to guide students toward well-defined academic and professional goals.R9

Higher-education institutions still lack a streamlined structure for student services, resulting in fragmented offices, added complexity, and delays. Consequently, support activities are reactive rather than systematic, compromising both timeliness and service quality.

Human and Digital Infrastructure

Resources play a critical role in enhancing the effectiveness of student services. Human resources, in particular, should not be evaluated solely based on quantity, but also on the level of technical expertise required to deliver specialized services such as mental health counseling, academic advising, and career guidance. These services demand professional expertise and cannot be effectively provided through general knowledge alone. In student affairs, two primary categories of professionals are essential: general service staff and specialized technical experts. General staff typically manage administrative tasks and provide support related to routine student matters, such as applications, payments, and general inquiries. In contrast, technical specialists offer targeted support in areas requiring specific qualifications and skills. Currently, the number of general service providers remains insufficient to meet the growing demands of higher education institutions, and recruiting technically specialized consultants poses an even greater challenge. This issue is further illustrated in the following remarks from the head of the relevant department:

With a staff of only three, including the principal, the institution lacks sufficient personnel to deliver comprehensive student services. Consequently, service quality remains suboptimal, and the limited staff respond reactively rather than proactively. R17

Human resources dedicated to student services in Cambodian higher-education institutions remain largely devoid of formally trained technical specialists. Individuals currently responsible for specialized counseling typically rely on years of practical experience supplemented by brief, ad-hoc training workshops—if any formal training has been received at all. Consequently, the sector lacks personnel with the rigorous professional preparation required to deliver evidence-based, technically proficient student support. The findings are as outlined below.

Student service work is inherently complex and can only be effectively performed by individuals who demonstrate both the willingness and commitment to engage with its multifaceted demands. R7

Human resources in student services remain underutilized, particularly the management of experts and technical specialists, hindering service quality and institutional credibility. Additionally, many higher education institutions, including prestigious ones, have yet to effectively integrate technology, relying on traditional, time-consuming service methods without adequate digital training.

Physical Infrastructure and Facilities

Insufficient attention to student services has resulted in inadequate infrastructure that fails to adequately respond to student needs. Observations and interviews with stakeholders reveal that the

existing student services infrastructure remains underdeveloped and poorly aligned with the core functions of student support. Furthermore, some facilities and equipment available in student service areas are either outdated or merely ornamental, limiting students' ability to access services efficiently and effectively. In certain cases, higher education institutions allocate only small, multi-purpose rooms for delivering diverse counseling services, further constraining service quality and accessibility. The results are as follows:

> *Higher education institutions currently lack dedicated spaces that adequately support the provision of comprehensive student services. In some instances, facilities include computer equipment that remains unused, serving primarily as a visual formality during evaluations rather than as functional resources for students. R20*

Health and mental health consultation services remain inadequate and insufficiently effective, limiting students' confidence in utilizing these support resources. The findings are as outlined below.

> *The university currently lacks a dedicated medical office to offer counseling and support services to students. R23*

The available equipment supporting student service operations is insufficient, requiring service providers to coordinate across multiple offices and departments to complete tasks. Enhancing health care provisions within student services is necessary to improve both efficiency and timeliness for service recipients. The findings are presented as follows:

> *Although computer practice sessions are scheduled, the absence of a dedicated practice room and insufficient computer availability limit practical learning opportunities. Consequently, students receive only theoretical instruction without hands-on experience. R20*

Budget Constraints

The Royal Government of Cambodia has allocated a series of budgets to the education sector aimed at realizing the national visions for 2030 and 2050. Several public higher education institutions have transformed into autonomous public entities to enhance financial independence and administrative efficiency, thereby strengthening leadership, management, and mission fulfillment in alignment with policies and strategies. However, some public institutions remain reliant on directives from the Ministry and have yet to fully mobilize budgets to support student services. Additionally, student services in many institutions have not yet been fully aligned with relevant policies and frameworks. The findings are presented as follows:

> *Financial constraints limit the allocation of resources toward student services, as a significant portion of the budget is dedicated to instructional activities. Given that these services require ongoing investment and involve substantial workload and costs, they often receive insufficient attention and prioritization. R1*

Some institutions have acknowledged that student services require substantial and ongoing financial investment; however, limited budgets—primarily allocated to teaching and other prioritized expenses—constrain their ability to adequately fund these services. The following research excerpts illustrate these findings:

> *Universities often hire staff with insufficient skills and competencies due to budgetary constraints aimed at minimizing expenditures, which subsequently compromises the quality of work outcomes.. R7*

Provision and budgeting for student support within higher education institutions remain insufficiently prioritized, resulting in inadequate allocation of resources. Conversely, institutions tend to allocate a substantial portion of their budgets to other expenditure categories, often at the expense of student service funding.

Perspective on Students

Students play a critical role in maintaining the quality of higher education, warranting focused attention from institutions. Leaders from private higher education establishments, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, researchers, and development partners consistently emphasize that students should be regarded as key stakeholders—often conceptualized as the primary "customers"—whose needs must be carefully addressed and sustained. This perspective aligns with business theories that characterize students as central to institutional success, metaphorically described as "kings" or "gods" within the educational context. The findings are presented as follows:

> *According to Japanese business theory, customers are regarded as "kings," while consumers are revered as "gods," emphasizing the imperative to prioritize and fully satisfy their needs. This principle underscores the necessity of providing comprehensive support and services to students.* R1

When an institution fails to provide students with a sense of confidence, support, and adequate services that meet their needs, student attrition increases as individuals seek alternative higher education providers. Student engagement in institutional decisions and activities is essential to ensuring that these efforts effectively serve their interests. The findings are presented as follows:

> *University leaders prioritize student needs due to their recognition of students as primary stakeholders or customers of the institution.* R11

Students are central stakeholders to whom higher education institutions must devote significant attention and support. Moreover, students function as key customers, contributing substantial financial resources through tuition and fees that sustain institutional operations. However, public higher education institutions have yet to fully acknowledge or operationalize the student-centered customer role in their policies and practices.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION
Parent Ministries

The Royal Government, principally through the Parent Ministries of spearheads the formulation and enforcement of legal frameworks and policy instruments designed to enhance student services within higher education institutions, thereby fostering the development of human capital in alignment with national strategic objectives. A dedicated ministerial cohort is tasked with providing training, counseling, and operational guidance to ensure that these frameworks and policies are implemented effectively and remain responsive to institutional and student needs. Moreover, the Triple Helix model underscores the critical role of public relations in higher education, advocating for sustained collaboration among government, industry, and academia to optimize service delivery and bolster institutional performance.

> *The Royal Government funds higher-education policies—scholarships, capacity-building, quality assurance, and international cooperation—via bilateral MOUs. The Ministry implements IT curricula, training, human-resource development, and budget management to ensure effective execution..* R1

Furthermore, the Ministry of Technical Assistance should establish robust, on-site evaluation mechanisms—rather than relying solely on document review—to ensure institutional compliance and accurately assess service delivery. In formulating higher-education policy, such mechanisms should be designed indigenously rather than imported wholesale from foreign models. Oversight, evaluation, and advisory functions rest with the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia and the General Department of Higher Education. The following research quotations illustrate these points:

> *The Ministry's regulatory framework—including the Higher Education Vision 2030, the ACC Assessment Policy, and the National Qualifications Framework—defines evaluation indicators and documentation requirements; however, it does not mandate corresponding on-site inspections.* R7

Higher education institutions function as public service providers, delivering a spectrum of learning, teaching, research, and community-engagement activities. While many foreign universities have

implemented integrated service models that enhance stakeholder satisfaction, Cambodian institutions remain fragmented, resulting in procedural complexity, prolonged wait times, and diminished user engagement; the adoption of a one-stop-shop mechanism promises to streamline access and improve service delivery.

> *The establishment of a one-stop shop for student services offers a streamlined, time-efficient model that enhances student convenience and reduces procedural redundancy. R9*

The Royal Government, through its Parent Ministries, establishes and enforces legal frameworks and policies to enhance student services and cultivate human capital. A dedicated ministry cadre provides training, counseling, and implementation support. Guided by the Triple Helix model, the focus shifts to public engagement and on-site evaluation over mere document review. The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia and the General Department of Higher Education oversee, assess, and advise on policy execution. To replace Cambodia's fragmented processes with a more integrated approach, a proposed one-stop shop aims to streamline access, accelerate service delivery, and boost student satisfaction.

Industry and Communities

Industry and community partners play a critical role in higher education by offering students opportunities to apply disciplinary knowledge and soft skills in real-world contexts, as well as by contributing technical expertise and financial resources. Conversely, enterprises and communities benefit from the outputs of higher education—both skilled graduates and research innovations—and they, in turn, reinvest in institutional quality and student services to align curricula with evolving market demands. Practical engagement is indispensable for student competency development, as theoretical instruction alone cannot foster the requisite professional skills.

> *Partnerships with industry facilitate student study tours and employment opportunities, which higher education institutions must actively organize and support to enhance students' professional development. R10*

Industry and community organizations constitute significant non-governmental revenue streams for higher education institutions, enabling continuous capacity enhancement and the modernization of services. Conversely, insufficient collaboration with these stakeholders undermines educational quality and diminishes the sector's ability to supply economically and socially relevant skills. As one commentator observes,

> *Non-government funding is a very large source of income. In other countries, income has more channels, bigger...most of the income comes from participating enterprises. R3*

Moreover, industry and communities critically bolster student services by contributing novel knowledge, technologies, work practices, and vital financial resources to support programs and initiatives.

Development Partners

Higher education institutions in Cambodia have received substantial support from development partners to enhance their capacity and align with the Royal Government's policies. These partners provide technical assistance, infrastructure development, staff training, and capacity-building programs. As noted,

> *Development partners contribute significantly to curriculum development, policy formulation, educational materials, and infrastructure funding in accordance with formal agreements. R2*

They also emphasize student services as a critical component of higher education support, fostering improved educational quality and stakeholder engagement.

> *For example, the World Bank encourages institutional ownership and the integration of student services within university plans to meet established standards. Similarly, the ASEAN University Network recognizes student services as a key benchmark, urging universities to implement supportive activities. R5*

Following the recovery of Cambodia's education sector, development partners have played a pivotal role in advancing higher education quality through technical assistance, scholarships, training, and budget support, particularly in developing legal frameworks that address local needs while adhering to regional and international standards.

Religion

Religion has played a significant role in fostering mental calmness and resilience, which is particularly relevant as university life poses challenges not only for students but also for service providers. Religion serves as a crucial framework for understanding natural laws and enhancing psychological education through its teachings. Many higher education institutions, both in Cambodia and internationally, dedicate time to inviting religious practitioners to share methods for cultivating mindfulness, emotional regulation, and life values. This approach helps students grasp the nature of the mind, encouraging determination, hope, and inner peace through wise and ethical effort rather than divine intervention. As highlighted in the following observation:

> *Organizing religious programs, such as Dharma study or scripture sessions, supports students in understanding religious ethics, positively influencing their academic performance and behavior* (R1).

Religious-based psychological education contributes significantly to students' mental health by promoting mindful acceptance of reality. In Cambodia, religion—particularly Buddhism—holds deep cultural significance, with monks playing a vital role in mental and social education. Moreover, students retain the freedom to practice diverse beliefs, enabling them to strengthen mental resilience and pursue authentic life paths.

Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians act as key investors in their children's education, seeking quality higher education and effective student services. They often conduct thorough inquiries through social networks and past experiences before making educational decisions.

> *Strengthening communication between parents, guardians, and higher education institutions facilitates timely feedback on students' academic progress. Research indicates that parental involvement in monitoring and maintaining communication with institutions is essential for student success.* R13

In situations where direct communication with students is limited, institutions rely on parents to relay academic information and address concerns.

> *Parents and guardians can represent students in lodging complaints when students lack the confidence to do so themselves, ensuring their voices are heard regarding institutional services .*R11

Overall, parental engagement significantly enhances student services by providing critical feedback that helps institutions address service gaps and improve educational outcomes.

Higher Education Institution Actors

Higher-education institutions operate as the primary implementing bodies within their respective jurisdictions; existing laws and sectoral policies already empower them to act without awaiting further external directives. Consequently, institutional leaders must demonstrate a firm commitment and clear resolve, recognizing that robust student-service provision is essential both to enhancing educational quality and to fulfilling the university's overarching mission.

> *If institutional leadership fails to prioritize and champion student-service development, the sector cannot advance. Notably, most funding proposals that Cambodian higher-education institutions submit to development partners target instructional resources and general capacity-building, with comparatively little attention devoted to enhancing student-service provision.* R5

Student-service provision is strengthened when academic staff assume advisory functions alongside their instructional duties.

Faculty members who supervise internships, mentor students, and provide classroom guidance thus play a pivotal role in enhancing the overall quality of student services within the institution. R2

Effective student-service provision requires both an adequate number of full-time staff and a workforce whose credentials and practical experience align with students' evolving needs. Personnel with advanced qualifications can deliver more precise counselling, craft context-appropriate solutions, and ultimately enhance service effectiveness and institutional productivity. Two distinct categories of human resources are therefore essential: (a) discipline-specific specialists (e.g., in health, mental-health counselling, information technology, research support, and career development) and (b) staff with broad, generalist expertise. While generalists can address routine enquiries, specialised technical guidance must be delivered by experts possessing the requisite professional training, thereby ensuring that student support is both responsive and of high quality.

Active engagement of subject-matter experts and specialists in designing and delivering targeted programs is essential for effectively supporting students in need. R7

Conversely, routine administrative functions—such as processing certificate requests, distributing informational leaflets, directing students to appropriate offices, and coordinating day-to-day operations— can be performed effectively by general-affairs personnel. A clear organisational structure enhances service efficiency: students understand precisely where to seek assistance, and staff can respond promptly and competently. Nonetheless, even in these roles, effectiveness hinges on personnel who combine relevant technical skills with strong interpersonal commitment, as the work involves frequent communication and, at times, complex student cases that demand patience and empathy.

Staff development should encompass cross-departmental inter-skills training; however, such initiatives must recognise the complementary roles of generalists and specialists. While generalists provide broad, front-line support, they lack the expertise required to address specialised concerns, such as mental-health issues, which should be handled by appropriately trained specialists. R1

Student-service units must evolve in line with contemporary consumer expectations by integrating digital and other modern technologies. Traditional, face-to-face procedures—often hampered by ambiguous communication—can generate frustration for both students and staff and yield limited satisfaction. By contrast, the digitalisation of selected services reduces unnecessary in-person interactions, saves time, and enhances transparency, quality, and processing speed. Moreover, students acquire valuable technological competencies through regular engagement with these platforms, thereby advancing the Royal Government of Cambodia's ambition to cultivate a digitally literate citizenry.

Developing a comprehensive, well-structured database is critical for effective learning-management operations and for enhancing overall educational quality. R5

Higher-education institutions should formulate dedicated budgets and long-term investment plans aimed specifically at strengthening student services. Allocating resources to this area constitutes an investment in educational quality and safeguards the sustainable development of institutional training programmes, as evidenced by the following findings.

Institutions must allocate sufficient budgetary resources to support student service activities, thereby ensuring that these services are of high quality and effectively responsive to the diverse needs of the student population. R1

Recruiting skilled staff, both full-time and part-time, in accordance with the specific requirements of student services necessitates a higher budget allocation by the institution. Although this financial

investment increases operational costs, it is critical to ensuring work efficiency and the effective delivery of services. This is exemplified in the following research findings:

The employment of service staff incurs higher costs primarily due to the necessity of maintaining full-time positions. R7

Students play a crucial role in providing input and feedback that contribute to the continuous improvement of student services. Effective student services are associated with increased enrollment rates, enhanced academic performance, and reduced dropout rates. These outcomes are illustrated in the following excerpts from key stakeholders:

Students contribute to the improvement of student services by providing valuable input and suggestions based on their experiences. Effective student services are linked to higher academic performance and lower dropout rates. In the context of their country, an abandonment rate reaching 7% is considered a critical warning sign, underscoring the importance of robust student services in addressing such challenges. R1

However, the findings also indicate that some students do not utilize available services when facing problems and demonstrate a lack of cooperation with the institution in resolving these issues. In certain cases, students exhibit low self-motivation and limited commitment to their studies. The results are summarized as follows:

Students facing challenges often do not seek available services, and some demonstrate a reluctance to engage in self-help or cooperate with the university. However, when students collaborate with institutional support, it becomes possible to assist a greater number of students effectively. R13

Many higher education institutions have yet to systematically analyze student needs or collect sufficient data to inform effective planning for student support services. It is important to note that academically strong students may not require additional assistance but rather enhanced teaching and counseling support for weaker students. Conducting research is an essential and subsequent step for higher education institutions to develop targeted action plans that address these diverse student needs. The following research findings illustrate these points:

Firstly, educational institutions must research to assess the circumstances of their students and to design services that effectively address their needs. Some institutions organize numerous activities; however, student participation remains low. Additionally, certain programs that do not require fees or offer incentives also experience limited student engagement. R7

Researching and analyzing the needs of students during their higher education journey is a critical foundation for developing dynamic student service plans that effectively respond to those needs. Delivering appropriate services not only minimizes unnecessary activities but also enhances student confidence and engagement.

Discussion and Implications
Challenges
The findings of this study reveal that the mechanism for evaluating the quality of student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs) operates voluntarily, which has contributed to the incomplete and inconsistent implementation of student services. This aligns with the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC, 2023), which affirms that participation in quality assurance mechanisms remains non-compulsory. Consequently, this policy poses significant challenges to enhancing higher education quality, particularly with student services at both national and international levels. Moreover, the study demonstrates a general lack of institutional prioritization and awareness regarding student services in Cambodian HEIs. These findings echo the observations of Choudaha and Mukherjee (2009), who noted that only a limited number of HEIs recognize the importance of student services and often fail to integrate them meaningfully into their operations.

The absence of structured frameworks and action plans also emerged as a pressing concern. Participants indicated that student services are implemented in an ad hoc manner without systematic planning, clear departmental responsibilities, or time allocation. This correlates with the findings of Sandeen and Barr (2006), who identified the lack of proper structure in student affairs as a barrier to comprehensive student support. Cashin et al. (1998) also emphasized the importance of organizational structure in creating opportunities for student engagement in local and international academic and extracurricular activities.

Challenges related to human resources and digital infrastructure were also prevalent. Respondents highlighted the shortage of skilled personnel and inadequate application of technology in service delivery. In many institutions, unqualified staff are assigned to student service roles, often displaying unprofessional behavior and inefficient service provision. These challenges resonate with earlier literature (Lea, 1988; Farbus, 2000; Sandeen, 1991; World Bank, 1994), which found that HEIs in developing countries often lack adequately trained student affairs professionals. Scholars such as Rasciani (2011), Emily (2018), McAloon (1994), and Krise (2009) have similarly emphasized the necessity for service providers to possess both technical and interpersonal competencies. The underutilization of information and communication technologies in Cambodian HEIs mirrors findings by Forest and Loo (1987) and Hang (2007), who identified technological barriers as a critical issue in educational service enhancement. Further, the research revealed serious deficits in physical infrastructure and student welfare facilities. Informants from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS), institutional leaders, and student representatives noted the lack of appropriate infrastructure for student support services, including counseling spaces, first-aid rooms, student accommodation, and adequately equipped offices. These findings align with previous research (Brandmayr, 2009; Silva, 2009; Stewart, 2022; UNESCO, 2000), which emphasized that insufficient infrastructure limits the ability of HEIs to provide quality education and support. Cambodian studies by Chet et al., 2002; Heng et al.,2022) have similarly concluded that inadequate facilities continue to impede progress toward international standards.

Financial limitations were also identified as a key barrier. Interviews with MoEYS officials, development partners, and institutional heads revealed that funding for student services remains insufficient. Many HEIs cannot mobilize resources or secure state investments for improving service quality. These findings align with regional challenges faced by ASEAN member states, where limited government funding has hindered educational reforms (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022). Post-crisis budget cuts have further compromised service quality, as highlighted by the Cambodian Higher Education Association (2023), which reported that budget constraints reduce institutional ability to deliver effective support services. Lastly, the study underscores the importance of recognizing students as central stakeholders and valued customers in the educational process. Leaders from MoEYS, development partners, and institutional representatives stressed the need for institutions to go beyond academic instruction by offering comprehensive student support that fosters confidence and satisfaction. However, this view was not uniformly shared by public HEI administrators. Supporting this perspective, prior scholars (Beile & Zeckhauser, 2017; Kuh & Pike, 2014; Perkins, 1999) emphasized the strategic role of treating students as customers to enhance institutional reputation and student loyalty.

Strategic Recommendation

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of stakeholder engagement in the provision, promotion, and implementation of student services in Cambodian higher education institutions (HEIs). Stakeholder collaboration was identified as a significant factor influencing the success of counseling services and the broader student support system. These findings align with Dickson et al. (2024), who emphasize that active stakeholder participation enhances the effectiveness of institutional management in student service delivery. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2020) highlight the importance of communication in fostering collaborative efforts to improve the quality of student services. Key external stakeholders identified include the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS), development partners, the private sector, community organizations, religious groups, and parents or guardians.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports was noted by multiple respondents—including policymakers, institutional leaders, researchers, and development partners—as a pivotal stakeholder with both technical and financial authority to support student services. The Ministry's responsibilities include developing legal frameworks, policy guidelines, action plans, and mechanisms for quality assurance and service implementation in higher education (Heng et al., 2012; Constitution of the Kingdom of

Cambodia, 1993). This role includes initiatives such as the One Window Service Office (OWSO), which aims to enhance operational efficiency and accountability in service delivery across higher education.

Community and industry were also recognized as significant contributors to the enhancement of student services. Leaders from MoEYS, HEIs, and development partners emphasized that private enterprises and community organizations support student services by offering employment opportunities, sharing technical expertise, and contributing financial and technological resources. These findings are consistent with the works of Hielsuff (2007, 2009) and Sensuff et al. (2015), who reported that partnerships with enterprises provide valuable knowledge, hard and soft skills training, and access to modern technologies. The involvement of international development partners was another key theme identified in the study. These organizations have played an instrumental role in supporting Cambodia's higher education sector through financial investment, capacity-building programs, scholarship opportunities, and infrastructure development. This aligns with prior research (Ahren, 2018; Khemmer & Daher, 2002; Harleroad & Eaton, 1999; Ochesketch, 2015; Dickson et al., 2024), which documents the sustained involvement of development partners in rebuilding Cambodia's post-conflict education system and aligning its standards with regional and global benchmarks.

Religion is also identified as important contributor, particularly in providing psychological and moral support to students. Leaders from MoEYS, institutional heads, and student respondents noted that Buddhist monks and other religious figures regularly engage in student counseling sessions focused on emotional well-being, mindfulness, and ethical living. These findings echo the conclusions of (Constantine et al., 2006; Mayrle, 2006; Oeur & Henderson, 2005; Phillips, 2006; Ross, 1987), who reported that religious engagement can enhance students' mental health, reduce stress, and foster strong moral character. Parents and guardians also emerged as key external stakeholders. Respondents noted that family members provide both emotional and financial support, supply important personal information to facilitate tailored student services, and occasionally act as intermediaries in cases of student complaints or crises. These findings are consistent with research by Herto et al. (2004); Killsand & Wrinkler, 2000; Seatler, 2000), who emphasized the benefits of parental involvement in student motivation, information sharing, and academic performance.

Importantly, the research highlighted the indispensable role of higher education institutions themselves as direct implementers of student services. Institutional leaders, department heads, and student groups emphasized that HEIs are responsible for six core components of student services: leadership and planning, academic and non-academic staffing, organizational structure and human resources, digitalization, budgeting, and research-based service design. The strategic role of institutional leadership and action planning is supported by earlier work from Avcici (2005), Jasderet et al. (2008), and West (2002), who argue that effective internal governance is essential for delivering high-quality student support aligned with institutional goals and student needs.

The active engagement of teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as student service providers, was also noted. Respondents highlighted the importance of role clarity, professional competence, and commitment to service excellence among all personnel involved in delivering student support. These findings corroborate the conclusions of Bliss (2014), who emphasizes that staff professionalism, ethical conduct, and technical proficiency are key determinants of effective student services. Digitalization of student services was another recurring theme. Participants across stakeholder groups noted that digital tools and platforms have helped reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, enhance service transparency, and improve access and responsiveness. The importance of technology in modernizing student services is supported by (Duke et al., 2014; Palumbo et al., 2019), who found that digital systems facilitate faster service delivery and enable institutions to better meet the expectations of tech-savvy student populations. Additionally, technology can reduce the need for face-to-face interaction, which is increasingly important in managing time, resources, and public health concerns.

Finally, the study found that adequate budgeting, student participation, and evidence-based planning are essential for improving student services. MoEYS officials, development partners, and HEI leaders emphasized that sustainable investment, continuous student feedback, and needs assessments are necessary to avoid inefficient use of resources and to ensure that services are aligned with students' evolving needs. These conclusions are consistent with previous studies (Coates, 2005; Feldman, 1969; Heng, 2013; Husain et al., 2003; Khan, 2009; Nota, 2009; Ouakrime, 2009; Sawal, 2009; Waitwell, 2024), which affirm that participatory and data-informed approaches are fundamental to the effective design and delivery of student services.

Implications

This study highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Cambodia to enhance the quality of student services to build stakeholder confidence and support student success. Although limited to a select number of HEIs under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), the findings provide practical implications for key stakeholders:

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS)

- Collaborate with relevant ministries to develop coherent policies and incentive systems that promote effective student services and penalize neglectful practices.
- Establish a one-stop digital service platform to streamline student services and align with successful models used in public administration.
- Allocate dedicated financial support to HEIs to ensure sustainable, efficient, and accessible student service delivery.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

- Prioritize student-centered services to enhance student engagement, institutional reputation, and long-term alumni contribution.
- Invest in recruiting qualified staff with expertise in soft skills, technology, and counseling to improve service quality.
- Strengthen collaboration with external stakeholders, including industry, community, and development partners, to enrich student experience and employability.
- Foster international partnerships and ensure continuous institutional adaptation to remain competitive in a global higher education environment.
- Conduct regular assessments of student needs to inform planning and establish robust monitoring systems for student service delivery.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research:

This qualitative study, focused on large public and private HEIs, used semi-structured interviews. As such, generalizability is constrained. Future studies should: Include HEIs under other ministries, employ mixed-methods approaches for broader insights, use diversified data collection tools, conduct annual research on evolving student needs, explore comparative studies on student services across institutions, and investigate the experiences of international students studying in Cambodia.

CONCLUSIONS

Research reveals that students in Cambodian higher education institutions face significant challenges that hinder their academic progress. This underscores the urgent need for timely intervention and collaboration among stakeholders, particularly higher education institutions, to create supportive and inclusive learning environments. Failure to meet student needs can lead to increased dropout rates, weak career readiness, and diminished institutional credibility. Findings indicate that student services in many institutions lack strategic planning and are undervalued by leadership, despite their critical role in sustaining institutional reputation, income diversification, and educational quality. This neglect disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including students with disabilities, those from low-income backgrounds, and ethnic minorities.

Moreover, the unwillingness of some long-established institutions to modernize student services poses risks to their financial stability and stakeholder trust. As key consumers of education, students are increasingly empowered to choose institutions that meet their needs, making student services a competitive differentiator. The active involvement of both internal and external stakeholders is essential to graduate well-rounded, skilled individuals who contribute meaningfully to national development. Investing in student services not only benefits students but also enhances the institution's standing locally and internationally, while supporting Cambodia's broader socio-economic growth. It is therefore imperative that institutions and ministries adopt robust policies and demonstrate a strong commitment to improving student services across the sector.

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