**Aligning academic career management in the evolving landscape of Cambodian public universities**

**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study examines the management practices and alignment features to develop academic careers, mainly focusing on teaching competencies in the evolving landscape of Cambodian public universities.

**Design/methodology/approach-**A multiple-case research design was adopted to collect data from interviews with 11 academic leaders and focus-group discussions with 13 academic teachers at two public universities in provincial Cambodia. A thematic approach was performed to code and analyze data to address the research questions.

**Findings:** This study found that the management of academic careers in the selected universities was hybrid, deregulating state control to institutional autonomy. However, weak institutional leadership and negligence in formulating comprehensive guidelines have caused misalignments of management practices to develop academic careers in the studied contexts.

**Research limitations/implications:** This case study limits its findings to two universities in provincial Cambodia. This study adds to the scarce literature on the research topic in Cambodian public universities and opens a path for cross-institutional and national comparative studies on similar foci.

**Originality/value:** This is a ground-breaking study set in the evolving space of Cambodian public universities, where attention to the research area remains limited.

**Keywords**: Alignment, management practice, academic staff, public university, Cambodia

**Introduction**

Aligning management practices is paramount to developing academic careers and their competencies in globalized higher education (Whitchurch, 2023). As evident, extensive studies have been conducted in the United States (Teichler, 2017), Australia (Bradley, 2016), Europe (Fumasoli, 2018; Kekäle, 2018), and Asia-Pacific regions (Shin, 2018) to strengthen the system of an academic career system on the verge of changes. Meanwhile, higher education management in Southeast Asia is being transformed from government-funded bodies to corporate organizations. However, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2012) found several underlying issues in university academic career management in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The ADB emphasized that the practices of academic career systems varied from a higher degree of centralization to a certain level of autonomy in the region. In Cambodia, in particular, the management of academic careers, especially civil servants, is controlled by the state (Jarvis and Mok, 2019), while the management of contracted employees has been generally neglected (Mak et al., 2019). Further, academic management systems are fragmented between public and private institutions due to inadequate support from government agencies and development partners (Chhaing, 2022). Consequently, Cambodian academics, both civil servants and service contractors, have unequal opportunities for professional development and involvement in university management (Mak et al., 2019). The lack of all-stakeholder support has affected academic identities and roles in this country (Ros et al., 2020).

The studies discussed above imply that managing Cambodian academic careers remains problematic. Although the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has introduced the *Manual for Human Resources Management* (HRM) (MoEYS, 2021b) and *Human Resources Development* (HRD) Plan to improve efficiency and accountability (MoEYS, 2021c), the lack explicit content guidelines has caused fragmentations within and between Cambodian universities. Thus, Cambodia needs more research to build a comprehensive management system and ensure result-based management that can develop academic careers. Therefore, this study examines the practices of academic career management and its alignment features in two Cambodian public universities to address two research questions:

*RQ1.* How do Cambodian public universities execute the management practices to recruit, develop, evaluate, and compensate academic teachers?

*RQ2.* To what extent can the management practices be aligned to develop teaching competencies in the studied universities?

The study focuses on the four management practices implemented to recruit, develop, evaluate, and compensate Cambodian academic teachers in two public universities. Insights from this study will benefit national and international policymakers, higher education executives and researchers to debate the research foci. This study opens a path for comparative research to discuss the issues of academic career management from cross-institutional and national perspectives.

**Theories of academic careers**

Academic careers have been defined based on theoretical foundations: economics, sociology, psychology, and managerialism (Marini et al., 2019). The economic perspective defines boundaried academic careers under seniority-based structures and salary differentials; the sociological perspective introduces a flexible academic career system under a self-organised community (also see Musselin, 2013). The psychological perspective defines academic careers as active agents through negotiable contracts (Baruch and Hall, 2004). The managerial perspective conceives academic careers as business-like employment structures involved with market competition (Marini et al., 2019). Regardless of the theories, Dobbins et al. (2011) proposed a tripartite governance model to balance university management. For instance, state-centred governance gives authority to state agencies to manage academic staff who are civil servants. This model has been implemented in France, Spain, Russia, and their colonial territories. Academic self-governance provides greater freedom to academic leaders to manage academic staff. This governance is also called collegiality, giving authority to the community of scholars in staff management (Tight, 2014). The final model refers to a market-oriented system involving external stakeholders to recruit, promote, and compensate academic staff. This model is closely associated with academic human resource management in European higher education institutions (Deem et al., 2005; Pausits et al., 2022). Pausits et al. (2022) commented that the European management framework includes four standard dimensions: recruitment, development, evaluations, and compensation, which are crucial to securing academic career development towards achieving teaching and research excellence. However, Pausits and colleagues (2022) argued that the European framework remained in its infancy, lacking alignment practices to develop academic careers. Bearing this in mind, this study aims to examine the alignment features of academic career management in the selected universities in Cambodia.

**Aligning management practices of academic careers**

The term ‘alignment’ is rooted in human resource management practices to denote a degree of ‘congruence’ (Delery and Doty, 1996), ‘fit’ (Wright and Snell, 1998), and ‘mutability’ (Boxall, 2012). Audenaert et al. (2014) defined strategic alignment as the congruence between organisational strategy and the execution of management functions to enhance employee ability, skills, and attitude. Internal alignment was the consistent coordination of management dimensions to select, develop and motivate employee performance. In the education sector, the changing parameters of academic labour have caused several misalignments of academic careers (Whitchurch et al., 2023). Therefore, several studies have been conducted to investigate this phenomenon.

In a Malaysian higher education setting, Nadarajah et al. (2012) researched whether management practices such as recruitment, performance appraisal and payment impacted academics’ job performance and career development. This study found a positive relationship between these management dimensions and job performance in private universities. Another study (Allui and Sahni, 2016) focused on the connection between strategic human resource management and the development of faculty teaching professions. This study found that strategic management practices, including recruitment, professional development, and motivation, encouraged academics to perform excellently in Saudi Arabian higher education. Other studies shared similar findings that a robust academic human resource management system through integrating personnel planning, recruitment, professional development, and payment enhanced university teaching professions in Finland (Kekäle, 2015; 2018) and Croatia (Sušanj., 2020).

In summary, research scholars (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012; Kekäle, 2015) suggested that implementing a comprehensive management system through the execution of recruitment, professional development, evaluation, and compensation could develop academic professions and ensure career progressions. However, attention to this research topic remains scarce in public universities in Cambodia, even though issues are arising.

**Issues of academic career management in Cambodian public universities**

Social and political dynamics have influenced the management systems of Cambodian public universities. After being destructed by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s and tightly controlled by the socialist Soviet Union and communist Vietnam in the 1980s, Cambodian education was reformed towards relative institutional autonomy and accountability in the 1990s and the 2000s (RGC, 1993, see Articles 66 and 67 of the Constitution 1993, p. 8). The endorsement of the Royal Decree on the Legal Statute of Public Administrative Institutions (PAIs) in 1997 (RGC, 1997), updated in 2015 and 2018, was a clear indication of promoting institutional autonomy and accountability in state-funding HEIs. The introduction of the *Education Strategic Plan* (ESP)[[1]](#footnote-1), e.g., *ESP 2009-2013; ESP 2014-2018, and ESP 2019-2023* (MoEYS, 2019c) and other educational policies, e.g., the *Sub-decree on Criteria for the Establishment of Universities [[2]](#footnote-2)* (RGC, 2002); *Royal Decree on Accreditation of Higher Education [[3]](#footnote-3) (RGC, 2003); Education Law 2007 [[4]](#footnote-4)* (RGC, 2007) the *Sub-decree on Organization and Functioning of Ministry of Education[[5]](#footnote-5), Youth and Sport* (RGC, 2009)*, Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030[[6]](#footnote-6) (MoEYS, 2019b)* and the *10-Year Strategy for Higher Education 2021-2030* (MoEYS, 2021a) are meant to improve education quality for economic progression towards an upper-middle income country by 2030 and an advanced society by 2050.

 Presently, 130: 48 public and 82 private higher education institutions (HEIs) are under the management of 16-line ministries in Cambodia. Of 48 public HEIs, 13 are directly supervised by MoEYS. There were 16471 higher academic staff; 67.57% held master’s degrees, 23.59% held bachelor’s degrees, and 8.83% obtained doctoral degrees (MoEYS, 2023, see Cambodia’s Education Congress, pp. 151-152). The management of government educational staff mainly follows state employment laws, e.g., the *Common Statue on Civil Servants* (RGC, 1994), while other initiatives, e.g., the *Royal Decree on Granting the Professorial Ranking* (RGC, 2013), the *Prakas on the Internal Manual of Financial Management for Public HEIs* (MoEYS, 2022a); the *Prakas on the Education Staff Management at Public HEIs* (MoEYS, 2022b).

However, several researchers noted that the management of university personnel remained weak due to the effects of the traditional administrative system (Sen, 2022), rigid payroll (Ros et al., 2019), tacit management guidelines (Sok et al., 2019), and limited leadership capacity to translate the national policy intent into the university guidelines (Sok and Bunry, 2021). The problems of the academic career system in Cambodia also concern the complex roles of line ministries and state agencies (see Cambodia’s Education 2030 Roadmap, MoEYS, 2019a) in staffing procedures (Mak et al., 2019). These complexities have limited staffing autonomy at universities to recruit, develop and promote the capacities of Cambodian academics (Ros et al., 2019).

Based on the abovementioned issues, the management of academic careers remains problematic, contesting between state legitimacy and the institution self-regulated system. To research such a dynamic phenomenon, the study frames its concepts around the academic governance theory (Dobbins et al., 2011), the model of academic human resource management (Kekäle, 2015) and the human resource management theory (Delery and Doty, 1996; Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Using a cross-pollinated framework is expected to get a deeper understanding of academic career management in the evolving context of Cambodia.

**A research conceptual framework**

The framework embraces cross-fertilised concepts comprising three parameters: the management practices, the alignment processes, and the outcomes (Figure 1).

Strategic alignment

* Recruiting teachers with competencies in line with the university needs
* Developing teacher competencies desired by the university and teachers.
* Evaluating teacher performance based on the university regulations and performance agreement.
* Compensating teachers based on merits and the university regulations.

Management practices: recruitment development, evaluation, and compensation

Teaching competencies: subject knowledge, pedagogy, personality, and professionalism

Internal alignment

Figure 1: Research framework developed by the author based on Bowen and Ostroff, (2004); Kekäle (2015), and Pausits et a., (2022).

The management practices include recruitment, professional development, performance evaluation, and compensation dimensions adopted from the literature on academic personnel management (Fumasoli, 2018; Kekäle, 2015, 2018; Musselin, 2013; Pausits et al., 2022). Academic careers refer to sequential positions obtained over academic life, from job entry to retirement (Fumasoli, 2018). Academic career management refers to activities and processes (Musselin, 2013), which generally consist of recruitment, professional development, performance evaluation, and pay and benefits (Pausits et al., 2022).

In this study, recruitment refers to job advertising, screening, interviewing, and contracting employees. In academic employment, recruitment of academics is vital to attracting, selecting, and hiring potential people for teaching and research positions (Kekäle, 2015). Professional development refers to continuous activities to enhance employee abilities and skills for job performance. In academia, professional development refers to supporting and building academic careers (Musselin, 2013). Performance evaluation generally measures employee achievement based on the agreed terms and conditions. In the university setting, performance evaluation refers to evaluative processes to measure effectiveness and to give feedback to foster academic career development. The compensation includes salaries and benefits to motivate academic staff, secure their financial and emotional well-being, and retain them working with the institutions (Pausits et al., 2022).

The alignment processes refer to the consistent execution of management practices to develop employee capacities to perform according to organizational goals. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) (also see Ostroff and Bowen, 2016) noted that alignment can be strategically and internally enhanced to develop employee competencies. Strategic alignment refers to the congruence between the university strategy and the execution of academic staff management, and internal alignment is accrued through daily coordination of the management functions expressed through rigorous recruitment, relevant training, fair payment, and merit-based promotion. The study argues that strategic and internal alignment of management practices can enhance the competencies of academics.

The management outcomes refer to the competencies of academic teachers, including personality, content knowledge, pedagogy, classroom management, lifelong learning (Tigelaar et al., 2004), professionalism, education, scientificity, communication, and digitality (Dervenis et al., 2022). This study, however, includes four common competencies: subject knowledge, pedagogy, personality, and professionalism. They align closely with the competence framework developed for Cambodian higher education (see MoEYS, 2021b).

Overall, the framework provides a critical lens to examine the management practices and alignment processes to enhance academic careers in the dynamic context of Cambodian public universities.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a multiple-case research design to examine a contemporary phenomenon drawing on two public universities. Yin (2018) suggested that the multiple-case design fits the research focusing on evolving issues. This design thus suits the research purpose to investigate the issues of academic career management under reform in Cambodia. The multiple-case design also captures rich data from multilevel participants (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Hence, it is a crucial design to extract data from the university leaders (vice-rectors), the faculty management (vice-deans, department heads), and the faculty members (e.g., teachers) in this study. The design is robust in digging data from the 'how' and the 'why' questions (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, it is used to investigate how the two public universities manage academic staff and why there are misalignments in the practices. Guided by the multiple-case design, the authors proposed the following research procedures.

***Research sites and sample selection***

The two public universities in Cambodia were selected for their potential features. First, they were located in the hubs of businesses and industries. University A was located in the Northwest of Cambodia, bordering Thailand, compacted with industries and tourism activities. University B was in the Eastern part of Cambodia, surrounded by factories and industries bordered by Vietnamese. Second, both universities were considered ‘real world’ cases because they were selected as key implementers of a government project to improve higher education quality and governance sector. Finally, the two universities were considered the bounded cases, as they offered education services in line with Cambodia’s Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030 (MoEYS, 2019b). They formulated the 10-year strategy to support the national goals of producing competent students for the labour market needs and to generate research products to serve Cambodia’s economic and social development. Findings from the two case universities could represent the management system of academic careers in developing Cambodia.

Twenty-four participants were invited to participate in interviews and focus-group discussions. The selection of participants followed rigours for case study research to meet research ethics, reliability, and validity principles (Yin, 2018). In doing so, the first author applied for ethical approval from the research committee before approaching the participants. The research reliability was enhanced by the number of participants, including 11 academic executives (coded P1 to P11) and 13 teachers (coded T1 to T13). The participants’ backgrounds improved the study’s validity regarding positions and responsibilities. Consultative meetings between the first and authors were made to ensure that the composition of participants was reliable and valid for interviews and focus-group discussions.

Data storage in audio recorders and computer drives also maintained data quality and confidentiality by protecting outsider access. Data quality was also enriched using the Khmer mother tongue for interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD) to understand cultural and social meanings. The first author transcribed and translated data from Khmer into English. Co-authors and multilingual colleagues double-checked the data accuracy to enrich trustworthiness.

**Research tools and data collection procedures**

**In-depth interviews for academic executives**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 academic executives in both universities. The interviewees included three vice-rectors, seven vice-deans, and one deputy head of the personnel office. The interview questions were developed based on the research framework adapted from existing literature on university personnel management (Dobbins et al., 2011), human resource management in higher education (Kekäle, 2015) and human resource management in private organisations (Delery and Doty, 1996). The interviews were carried out over a prolonged period, from February to May 2022, to enrich data quality (Cohen et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the Khmer language was used data to understand the data better (see Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interview length was also set at about 40 minutes to ensure adequate time for data mining. With the participants’ consent, interview data were audio-recorded for transcription, and four sets of transcripts were sent to the interviewees to check their trustworthiness.

***Focus-group discussions (FGDs)***

FGDs were conducted with thirteen academic teachers in both universities. Hennink (2014) and Nyumba et al. (2018) suggested that effective FGDs must consider allocating time, place, and participant roles. Following this suggestion, the first researcher set a schedule for each group discussion. The discussion time was limited to 60 minutes to enhance fruitful discussions. Before starting the discussions, the first author liaised with administrators in the two universities to secure a suitable environment. With university administrative assistance, the discussions were arranged in the meeting rooms. At the same time, each group comprised between three and four participants so that they had sufficient time to express their thoughts. Discussions were audio-recorded with participants’ agreement, and transcriptions were carried out immediately to maintain data sensitivity.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis followed a thematic approach (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) using software called NVivo 12 for coding and generating themes (see Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding was performed to identify words and phrases related to the management dimensions. For example, *job announcements, certificates, degrees, experience, competencies, and selection tests* were encoded as academic recruitment. The words: *training objectives, outcomes, and teaching competencies* were labelled as professional development. The words, e.g., *assessment, feedback, teaching quality,* etc., were identified as performance evaluation, and the codes: *salary, incentive, teaching rate, reward, appreciation letter,* etc., were identified as compensation practice. Descriptive coding also identified key statements related to the alignment processes; for example, *The university defined teacher competencies as its strategic priority; the university placed recruitment on its strategic planning; the university’s training developed teaching competencies based on a human development plan; the university evaluated academic performance competencies based on individual outcome; the performance evaluation was transparent etc.*). Pattern coding was finally conducted for a cross-case analysis to compare the similarities and contradictions. For example, suppose a participant said, *“the university used attractive recruitment to select competent candidates”*. In that case, other participants might express similar or contrasting views, e.g., *faculty recruitment is unattractive. Such different views were encoded as contradictions or inconsistencies in teacher management*. After all, the findings were reported in narrative texts and discussed to address the research questions accordingly.

**Findings**

The study reports the findings to demonstrate the management practices and identify the alignment processes to develop academic careers in the studied universities. The findings were presented in a single case and cross cases to compare the commonalities and contradictions in research foci. The discussions and the concluding remarks follow the findings section.

**Management practices and alignment processes in University A**

All academic leaders described a hybrid model of academic career management in the case of a university. They (e.g., P1, P2, P3) explained that state agencies, especially the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), played a central role in managing academic civil servants*.* One senior leader (P1) reiterated that the state agencies tightly control academic recruitment, promotion, and payment. In this case, some mid-level leaders (e.g., P2, P3, P6) complained that some academic staff recruited by state agencies did not meet the university’s needs. One of them emphasised:

In general, MoEYS selects government officials to work as university teachers. The selection is made through examination. [….] which I think [the examination] cannot accurately assess the candidates’ qualifications that fit the university's needs. (P2)

The above narrative shows that state recruitment, which uses exams to assess the qualifications of candidates, tends to be less effective in evaluating candidates’ aptitudes to enter academic careers. In other words, state recruitment is based on the prescribed criteria and procedures in the national employment law, such as the *Common Statute of Civil Servants* (RGC, 1994). This law requires all state agencies to hire civil servants on a pro forma, setting staff quotas for public institutions. In this context, some mid-level leaders (e.g., P2; P6) confirmed that state recruitment generally resulted in a shortage of staff deployment to the university. Therefore, the university has used its self-regulated procedures, albeit less consistently, to hire contracted employees. They explained:

The university uses internal regulations and procedures to recruit contract employees. The university advertises the vacancies, screens the applications, and interviews the candidates. (P3)

The university generally considers educational background, degree (e.g., master’s or PhD) and work experience as the main criteria. (P5)

The faculties recruit contract employees through personal networks. The recruitment was carried out without proper selection guidelines. (P4)

The different recruitment processes shared by the mid-level leaders show the inconsistencies of management practices in the case of the university. This issue happened due to a lack of explicit guidelines for academic career management, as one mid-level leader (e.g., P2) emphasised: there was no specific framework for academic staff management. This situation generally caused tensions and created less favourable working conditions for academic staff. Some academic teachers (e.g., T1, T2, T3) confirmed that inconsistent management practices caused uncertainty in their career prospects and income generations. They perceived that the university did not have a strategic career development plan for them. The acting head of the personnel office verified this issue:

The university does not have a strategic plan or internal fund to develop academic professions. External partners support many capacity-building programs. (P6)

While addressing the issue of professional development, some academic staff [who worked as teachers] reiterated that the university did not provide enough training programs for their needs. They emphasised that previous workshops and seminars [they had attended] focused on administrative tasks more than developed subject knowledge and pedagogy. In this case, the academic teachers recalled:

We need more pedagogical training to improve our teaching capacities. (T1))

The less relevant training programs addressed by the academic teachers indicated an absence of a university-wide system and limited resources for conducting extensive training and development. Mainly, the opportunity for professional development was limited to contract employees, as they echoed in FGD:

The funding to attend professional development is limited to government teachers. We are not given such an opportunity. (T4)

The inadequate resources for professional development in the case of the university reflect a financial deficiency since the university has relied on government funding and financial assistance for training and development. The resource shortage has also affected other management dimensions of academic careers. For example, some mid-level leaders (e.g., P2, P4, P5) believed inadequate funds impacted performance evaluation and compensation practices. Similarly, one academic teacher raised:

Performance evaluation is not yet practical to improve our performance. The university evaluates to fulfil the quality assurance requirements, giving little attention to developing our competencies. (T3)

The reluctant practice of performance evaluation primarily concerns the evaluative procedure and resources. Regarding the procedure, the evaluation aims to measure teaching effectiveness, classroom management, and professional ethics partly to meet programme accreditation. This evaluation process does not embrace formative objectives to develop academic careers. In this context, academic leaders and teachers complained about the absence of constructive feedback and the disconnection between performance evaluation and compensation practices. For example, they said:

Only government teachers receive compensation such as bonuses, medals, and appreciation letters. No financial and non-financial rewards are given based on performance evaluation. (P5)

The university does not provide any incentives, i.e., research incentives, health insurance, and other social welfare based on performance appraisal. We only receive the teaching wages. (T5)

The disconnection between performance evaluation and compensation schemes reflects a lack of alignment processes to support the management of academic careers in the case of university. As a senior leader reaffirmed:

The university does not have a strategic policy for academic career development. The university aligns its management policy and strategy with government policies, e.g., the Policy on Higher Education Vision 2030. (P1)

The limited alignment processes may concern the dominant role and power of state agencies in the academic self-regulated system since the state agencies have given little leeway to universities to negotiate through the recruitment, development, and evaluation of civil servants. The limited internal alignment of the management procedures for contracted employees has been partly due to weak institutional leadership and negligence in building a strong academic career management system.

**Management practices and alignment processes in University B**

All academic leaders in University B also described the hybridization of academic career management, following state-centralised and self-regulated models. All academic leaders (e.g., P7, P8, P9, P10, P11) shared that the state legal framework was mainly used to manage the academic civil servants. For example, two senior leaders elaborated:

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) recruit and deploy government teachers. The university is not involved in the process. (P7)

The employment procedures of government teachers must follow the national policy guidelines directed by MoEYS and other line ministries. (P8)

The above responses implied a strong imposition of government policies and regulations on the management of academic staff in the case of the university. Although some mid-level leaders described institutional procedures in academic career management, the actual practices were perceived as highly inconsistent. Both leaders and teachers shared their experiences:

The university has internal procedures for the management of academic staff. The internal procedures include advertising the vacant positions, screening the qualifications, and interviewing the candidates. (P8)

The university does not have an explicit procedure for contracted staff. The hiring process varies from one faculty to another. (T7)

Regarding the inconsistencies in internal management practices, another mid-level leader mentioned that the university did not have a strategic plan for professional development. He echoed:

The university does not have a master plan for professional development. Currently, the university relies on an external funding source to provide training and development. (P11)

The reliance on external resources for academic career advancement sometimes creates tensions among academic teachers due to a lack of transparency. Despite the senior leader (P7) maintaining that academic staff were equally funded to attend the Master Teacher Programmes and the PhD studies, some academic staff argued that such potential opportunities were unavailable. They shared:

The university primarily provides teacher orientation training but not long-term professional training programmes. (T11)

The less transparency of academic career management in the university implied a lack of an integrative framework connecting performance evaluation and professional development. Some academic teachers confirmed the following:

We need to see a clear goal for performance evaluation. We always need feedback to improve our teaching practices. (T9)

The ambiguous goal of performance evaluation concerns a poor collaboration among the Office of Internal Quality Assurance, the Office of Finance and Administration and the Office of Personnel Management. A senior leader briefly described:

The university evaluates academic staff every semester. The main goal of the evaluation is to measure teaching outcomes and to prepare a self-assessment report for the quality assurance committee. (P8)

This response indicated a distant relationship between career advancement and performance evaluation. In other words, the case university did not develop academic careers based on performance evaluation. Some academic teachers emphasised:

The performance evaluation is ad hoc and does not accurately measure the reality of classroom practice. There is no constructive feedback to improve our competencies. (T8)

The university does not give us any bonus or promotion based on the performance evaluation results. There is no such policy for contract academic employees. (T13)

The above extracts illuminated the misalignment between performance evaluation and compensation practice. Such dissonance has negatively affected the practice of academic career development. A senior leader embarked on this issue:

Academic performance appraisal must be integrated into its strategic priority to develop academics' competencies. However, the university has not done so yet. (P8)

The disconnection between performance evaluation, compensation, and promotion was perceived as a potential constraint to motivating and retaining academic staff, especially contracted employees, since they complained that a lack of motivation and retention policies drove away their interest in pursuing career life with the university. One of them echoed:

I want to leave my job at the university to start (my) own business. (T12)

The findings show that University B has followed the government procedures and used its internal regulations to manage academic staff. However, the management of academic civil servants appears to be centralised through recruitment, payment, and promotion. In addition, the internal management system remains inconsistent due to tacit guidelines and negligence from the university actors. In this context, the management of academic staff in University B embraces limited alignment features to foster academic career development.

**A cross-case analysis of management practices and the alignment processes**

A cross-case analysis shows some contradictions in the management of academic staff in both universities. Generally, academic leaders from both universities agreed that state-centralised and university-self-regulated systems were commonly used to manage academic staff. However, institutional capacities and leadership have contradicted academic career management practices between the two universities. A senior leader from University A described:

It is hard to keep competent teaching staff because the salaries and benefits are not attractive enough. Some have moved to find better-paid jobs in Phnom Penh. (P1)

In contrast, a senior leader in University B argued:

So far, the academic staff are happy to work here. Besides the basic salary, the university gives financial incentives to those who hold administrative positions. (P8)

The different management practices shared by senior leaders from both universities reflect institutional capacities to allocate national and location resources to motivate and retain academic staff. Unlike University A, University B has allocated a top-up fund for staff who hold administrative positions. Also, University B has offered a more extended job contract to service contractors to secure their career and financial status*.* This finding implies better capacities of University B to utilise financial resources for the central academic staff.

The cross-case analysis also shows that both universities have integrated state policies and internal procedures to create a flexible management system under the changing management approach towards autonomy. However, the lack of strong leadership to establish comprehensive management guidelines has caused more inconsistencies than flexibilities, as academic staff shared:

We get the job with the universities because we have a close relationship with the university management. (T4, University A)

In contrast, an academic teacher from University B said:

We get the job through the selection process. We have job interviews and teaching tests. (T11, University B)

The different experiences regarding the practices reveal the different qualities of institutional leadership to establish holistic procedures in academic staff management. In other words, the lack of a holistic framework for academic career management concerns institutional negligence and establishes a robust management system. For that reason, senior leaders(e.g., P1, P7, P8) from both universities expected that the *Higher Education Improvement Project (HEIP)* was their hope to strengthen the internal management system. One of them emphasised:

HEIP is a potential project to enhance the university’s academic quality and financial and personnel management autonomy. It also offers opportunities for teacher professional development. (P1).

While HEIP partly met the expectations of some academic leaders, academic staff, especially service contractors, had dim hope for their career development under this project funding. They contended that the project offered more scholarships to academic civil servants, not the contracted employees (T5, University A; T12, University B). Although this concern may be genuine, in principle, HEIP did not restrict scholarship funding to academic civil servants. The university leaders nominated their academic staff for the scholarship applications. Seeing this unfair process, some academic teachers from both universities felt less motivated to continue their career life with the universities. This problem shows a lack of fair and transparent policy to support academic career development and sustain income generation. One academic teacher lamented:

The university provides no incentives except for our monthly wages from teaching work. The amount is barely enough to support our living expenses. (T4, University A)

In brief, although the management systems of academic careers in both universities are being transformed into hybrid ones, poor institutional capacity and leadership to transparently allocate local resources have caused controversial practices.

**Discussion**

The findings from this case study were discussed around two research questions: How do Cambodian public universities execute the management practices to recruit, develop, evaluate, and compensate academic teachers? To what extent can the management practices be aligned to develop teaching competencies in the studied universities? This study argues that the management of academic careers in both universities is evolving, albeit with centralisation and inconsistency. In this context, management practices are yet to be aligned to foster academic careers.

**RQ1: The management of academic careers in the evolving landscape**

From the European perspective, a comprehensive management framework could develop academic careers and promote their teaching and research capacities for academic excellence (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012; Fumasoli, 2018; Kekäle, 2018; Pausits et al., 2022; Sušanj et al., 2020). Effective management practices could also motivate and retain academic staff, as reported by OECD (2020). However, the management of academic careers in the studied universities is not yet mainstreamed to the European framework nor formulated in the local one. Although the management system is perceived as a hybrid one, it is being influenced by state agencies, on the one hand, and being plagued by poor institutional capacity and leadership, on the other hand. These issues challenge universities to establish local guidelines and allocate resources to develop academic careers. Supporting this finding, Sok et al. (2019) argued that the management of Cambodian academics was influenced by state administrative procedures and entangled with political orbits (Brehm, 2019) and institutional complexities (Ros et al., 2019). These factors have caused inconsistent academic career management practices in the case of universities. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argued that consistency is a crucial management system feature to enhance employee performance competencies. With little consistency, the management practices are not mature enough to develop employee competencies. Therefore, the practices of academic career management are not yet aligned to develop academic careers.

First and foremost, the influence of state legitimacy, such as the national employment laws and procedures, has maligned universities’ staffing processes to identify and elicit qualified people to become academic civil servants. Based on the narratives from mid-level leaders (e.g., P2; P5), state exams were less practical in assessing candidates’ qualifications and attitudes to becoming university academic staff. Chet et al. (2022) noted that some civil servants had unsuitable knowledge and skills for the assigned roles at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. This issue also occurred in other Asian higher education contexts, as Jarvis and Mok (2019) embarked: state legitimacy and power strongly influence staffing processes and limited academic freedom in Asia, especially in less developed countries, including Cambodia.

Second, weak institutional capacity and leadership have caused a disjuncture in the internal management and limited departmental accountability to establish a corporate culture in the academic career system at both universities. As mid-level leaders (e.g., P2, P6, P7) echoed, the universities did not attend to establishing specific procedures or guidelines for recruiting contracted employees. Thus, the management practices varied from one faculty to another. In a comparative study between Malaysian and Cambodian higher education governance, Wan et al. (2018) noted that Cambodia more likely neglected institutional accountability than its counterpart; therefore, the efficiency of higher education management remained a potential issue. Other researchers noted that traditional cultural influences have shaped the management system of Cambodian higher education (Sen, 2022; Sok et al., 2019). Sen (2022) furthered that policy discourses, as stated in the *Royal Decree on Professorial Ranking* (RGC, 2013), clearly indicated a deep-rooted traditional bureaucracy in appointing and promoting academic staff in Cambodia. He contended that the hierarchically bureaucratic procedures have suppressed institutional leeway, thus restricting individual accountability in daily operations.

Third, the lack of state funds for professional development and compensation practice has negatively affected career prospects and motivation in both universities. The senior leaders in both universities (e.g., P1; P7) briefly described that the universities had neither established strategic career planning nor provided sufficient financial incentives based on individual performance outcomes. Academic teachers could earn additional income from teaching activities, while a research fund was not in place to support research activities. This evidence indicates a lack of performance or merit-based pay in both universities. Other researchers (Ros & Oleksiyenko, 2018; Heng et al., 2023) noted that rigid payment restrained career development and drove individual interests away from pursuing teaching and research excellence. Similar to the case study, pay and benefits issues occurred in Chinese universities where salaries and incentives relied on the government fund (Wang and Jones, 2021).

Finally, the disconnection between performance appraisal, payment, and career advancement shows vertical and horizontal misalignments of academic career management in both universities. These issues were highlighted by Whitchurch et al. (2023) in the case of academic labour in the UK context, and there were vertical and horizontal fragmentations of academic staff management about job agreements, career pathways, performance criteria, and workloads. In this case study, academic teachers complained that performance evaluation and payment were not connected. They perceived that the primary goal of performance evaluation was to fulfil the quality assurance requirement, not to promote academic aspiration. They further stated that the evaluation tools and procedures were questionable because they were not focused on result-based management. Practically, the performance evaluation in both universities has followed a national qualification framework, lacking local guidelines to assess individual performance competencies. Such practice has sidetracked from competence-based management, as suggested by Audenaert *et al.* (2014).

In summary, the management of academic careers in the case universities has been centralised and inconsistent, resulting in misalignments.

**RQ 2: The management of academic career with limited alignment features**

From a human resource management perspective, alignment features such as consistency, transparency and consensus can strengthen management systems to promote employee performance competencies (Delery and Doty, 1996; Wright and Snell, 1998; Boxall, 2012). Likewise, the management of academic staff needed vertical and horizontal alignment features to enhance teaching and research competencies (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012; Bradley, 2016; Kekäle, 2018). This study, however, found that the management practices in both universities are not yet aligned to develop academic teachers’ competencies.

The current practices of academic career management have yet to be aligned with the universities’ strategies. According to the university leaders (e.g., P1, P11), the universities did not yet establish strategic recruitment or professional development plans for academic careers. Traditional practices and state administrative procedures remain reinforced in management practices, while academic career development depends mainly on external funding sources. The review of the 10-year strategy (2021-2030) of both universities also indicated a disconnection between the university’s strategy and personnel management practices. For instance, the strategy read that all concerned faculties, departments, and offices had to rigorously select, retain, and manage academic staff; however, there were no explicit procedures for the practices. Consistent with this finding, Ros and Oleksiyenko (2018) found a wide gap between policies and practices in academic professional development in Cambodian universities. A comparative study by Fumasoli (2015) found different alignments between university strategies and academic staff management practices in Norway, Finland, Switzerland, and Austria. Fumasoli (2015) concluded that management practices containing limited alignment features could not attract, motivate, and retain academic staff.

The lack of accountability to align internal practices of academic career management reflects poor university capacity and leadership quality in the studied contexts. As described in the findings section, most academic teachers did not believe they could have equal opportunities for career advancement, and the mid-level leaders could not describe one example of an academic career framework. In contrast, the senior leaders referred to the national competency framework that included professional standards, research capacities, and work ethics as the reference for academic career development. In this regard, there is a lack of consensus among academic leaders and staff regarding the practices of academic career development. Given this concern, the academic leaders (e.g., P1; P8) were reluctant to confirm if their staff had the competencies prescribed in the national competency framework (see MoEYS, 2021a). Similarly, the academic teachers hesitated to elaborate if they had all the above competencies. This situation reflects a lack of an internal competency framework, mainly because of the universities’ negligence to constitutionalise ones suitable for promoting the competencies of academic staff.

**Concluding remarks**

Drawing on the findings, this study concludes that the management of academic careers in both universities is evolving to be hybrid; however, strong state legitimacy and weak institutional capacity and leadership remain crucial problems. Therefore, there are rising tensions and inconsistencies in academic recruitment, performance evaluation, and compensation in the research contexts. Although *HEIP* is seen as an essential initiative to the arising issues in both universities, the implementation of *HEIP* seems to be at a trial-and-error stage, and the commitment of the case universities to achieve its aspiration is questionable. Some interventions should be considered to improve the management of academic careers in the case universities.

It can be noted from this study and other works (e.g., Sen, 2019; Sok et al., 2019) that the governance of Cambodian public universities has arrived at a hybrid model, moving forward institutional autonomy. However, the dominant power and state's role have retarded the reform progress. In Europe, Dobbins et al. (2011) proposed a tripartite model to balance the power and role of different polities such as state, university, and market in academic staff management. In China, Wang and Jones (2021) suggested adopting a multiple-logic management model to negotiate with state power and role interplay in academic personnel management universities. Cambodia needs a counter-balancing approach to juggle power relations between the state, university, and market to ensure efficiency and accountability of academic staff management,

Undeniably, a lack of a comprehensive management framework for academic careers concerns institutional capacity and leadership in contexts. The resolution to this problem can be referred to a management model proposed by Kekäle (2015) for the University of Eastern Finland. The model posited that strong academic personnel management needs strategic and accountable leaders to take all courses of action in daily practices. Otherwise, the management practices do not work to accomplish the university’s goals.

Last but not least, the poor management of academic careers in both universities concerns weak coordination of concerned offices and departments in charge of academic career development. This issue should be improved by establishing a strong corporate culture among faculties and departments inside the universities. It is believed that good corporate management can eliminate overlapping roles and conflicts among line managers (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Otherwise, it causes tensions and ambiguities in the management process. Based on the first researcher’s experiences as a head of the personnel office in one public university, the weak coordination of corporate management has been triggered by the overlapping roles and conflicts among the office of human resources/personnel management, the administrative and finance office, and the quality assurance office, because they have yet to play a concerted role in supporting university corporate management. In the UK, Whitchurch (2023) noted similar fragmentation at the departmental level and suggested establishing mechanisms to support academic managers in promoting academic interests and aspirations. Both universities should have local leaders, especially vice-rectors in corporate management, establish a holistic approach to build corporate culture and promote academic career management.

This exploratory study limits its findings to the case universities in provincial Cambodia under policy reform toward autonomy. The study opens the door for further research using quantitative modelling, mixed-methods research, and longitudinal studies with a more significant number of participants and institutions to enhance a broader understanding of the impact of management practices on academic career development in the evolving context. Comparative studies are worth conducting to investigate the management of academic careers from cross-institutional and national perspectives. Above all, this study opens the debates on academic career management in the reform shifts in Cambodia and other countries in the region.

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1. ESP 2019-2023 outlines national goals of education and strategy for developing autonomous governance and management system in higher education (p.42). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This Sub-degree implicitly states that Cambodian university teachers must be qualified to transfer knowledge and research skills to students by following a modern methodology (p.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This Royal Decree explicitly describes the qualifications and experiences of teachers, developing, giving enumeration and salary scale, contracting, nominating, and promoting them (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The 2007 Education Law defines the term *educational personnel* as those teaching and non-teaching staff, within or outside the civil servant cadre or personnel serving the private education sector (pp. 22-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This Sub-decree provides an overall management structure of MoEYS by highlighting the responsibilities of separate departments, e.g., the Personnel Department in charge of recruitment, nomination, promotion, appointment, retirement, punishment, and elimination of educational staff (p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This policy provides a roadmap for promoting the quality of higher education and strengthening a good government system in order to provide quality of learning, teaching, and research (p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)