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HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENT CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Students are recognized as the fundamental component in developing a country's higher education mission. However, there is less attention in the scholarly literature focused on student life in higher education. The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges of Cambodian higher education students. A qualitative approach was utilized, and purposive sampling was used (n = 97). The data were analysed using thematic coding, derived from a literature review and emergent patterns. The study highlights the five main challenges: (1) Academic performance; (2) Personality adaptation; (3) Career readiness; (4) Socio-cultural background; and (5) Student services platform. The findings of this study provide concrete, actionable recommendations that will directly support the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, HEIs, industry partners, and other relevant stakeholders in closing the skills gap and strengthening graduate employability, enabling them to collaborate closely and effectively to deliver responsive services and meet the needs of the job market. This is particularly important for ensuring the quality, sustainability, and inclusiveness of economic growth, as the government emphasizes.

Keywords: career plan, higher education institution, school transition, student challenges, student retention

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a fundamental role in cultivating high-quality human capital to meet the evolving demands of society and the national economy (Heng et al., 2023; World Bank, 1999). Their core mission extends beyond knowledge transfer to fostering lifelong learning and active citizenship (Arnold & King, 1997; Un & Sok, 2018) and advancing the global knowledge-based economy (Heng, 2023; World Bank, 2007). Scholars highlight that these institutions are foundational pillars of sustainable economic growth and national prosperity (Heng, 2024; World Bank, 2012). Likewise, HEIs function as hubs for business activity, knowledge creation (Hangchoun, 2015), and job generation (MLVT, 2024), supporting the shift towards a knowledge-based and creative society (Heng, 2024).



Since 2009, higher education has transformed to meet global, regional, and national needs by providing practical knowledge applications (OECD, 2005). Additionally, numerous scholarly studies highlight that HE systems also has globally focus on research and development in advanced economies (Altbach, 2005; Flora & Argyroudi, 2026; Jones & de Wit, 2015). Similarly, Breznitz (2014) emphasized that HE is serving as a knowledge hub where researchers contribute to global economic advancements. UNESCO (2022) further emphasizes that higher education quality involves promoting lifelong learning and diverse paths, with student affairs professionals offering services like counselling and career development.

Furthermore, Usher and William (2022) identified five types of higher education: comprehensive university, specialized university, university college, hybrids, and short-cycle higher education. UNESCO (2022) noted that about one-third of global enrolment is in private institutions. Both public and private sectors contribute to global enrollments. UNESCO (2020) showed that women's enrollment increased from 19% to 43% between 2000 and 2020, surpassing men's, but they remain underrepresented in STEM, making up only 30% of global researchers. UNESCO (2022) also reported that Eastern and South-Eastern Asia saw the largest regional increase in gross enrollment rate, up 36 percentage points, from 2000 to 2020. Research indicates that support services significantly impact student retention (Adams, 2011; Bailey & Brown, 2015; Turner, 2011) and support academic pursuits and community engagement (Bailey & Brown, 2015; Tinto, 2025).

Furthermore, since the privatization of higher education in late 1997, Cambodia has witnessed rapid sectoral growth, with institutions increasing from 8 in 1997 to 2000 by early 2026 (MoEYS, 2025, 2026). The government has implemented targeted strategies to align the sector with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focusing on labor market demand, research, and innovation, particularly to achieve the government's goal of development by 2030 and beyond (Cambodia Development Resource Institute [CDRI], 2025; Heng & Sol, 2023). For instance, there are many key initiatives, including the establishment of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) in 2003 and the development of minimum standards for accreditation for higher education in Cambodia (ACC, 2010, 2023). Then, the strategic plans were introduced in 2021, and the Higher Education Reform Program in 2024 aimed to reinforce governance, improve academic programs, promote e-learning, and enhance student enrolment and retention (MoEYS, 2024; Un & Sok, 2018).

In addition, even though there are many research studies in the higher education sector in Cambodia mainly focus on governing and financing (Chet, 2009; Rana et al., 2017; Un & Sok, 2018), building partnerships (Moeurn, 2025), joining dual degree (Hangchoun, 2015), and creating research ecosystem (Heng et al., 2024). However, studies on the challenges faced by students in Cambodian HEIs receive less attention. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges of students in Cambodian HEIs. The significance of the study is not only to provide practical experience to the relevant stakeholders of HEIs, but it also addresses an ongoing gap in the study of students' challenges. Importantly, the findings have significant implications for the global debate on the massification of higher education, especially for developing countries facing

rapidly expanding access to higher education. A main examination question guided the study, including: What are the challenges faced by Cambodian higher education students?

A theoretical background of student transition to university

The closest theory aligned with the student challenges is the Theory of Student Departure. This theory is instrumental in student services and was initially developed by the scholar Vincent Tinto in 1970 (Tinto, 2025). Tinto highlighted the divergent objectives between HEIs and students at this juncture. While HEIs prioritize increasing enrolment and graduation rates, students are primarily focused on completing their degrees. The previous studies suggested that higher education must adopt practical strategies that bolster student retention and integration. This critical method also enhances student motivation (Tinto, 2015), which is essential for cultivating three main competencies: self-efficacy (Chenmers et al., 2001), a sense of belonging (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Strayhorn, 2008), and a good perception of the curriculum (Frick et al., 2009; Tessema et al., 2012).

Moreover, Trilblazer Higher Education has introduced a comprehensive framework for understanding the student life cycle in higher education. This important framework emphasizes the crucial role of creating a supportive environment. Additionally, Burgstahler and Cory (2010) developed a valuable framework for HEIs to support this life cycle, identifying four key areas: instruction, services, information technology, and physical space. In a similar vein, Andrews et al. (2012) found that successful completion of the first year significantly increases student retention and success throughout their academic career.

Literature Review

Academic performance challenges

Numerous studies found that high school graduates encountered significant challenges in adapting to the academic environment. This difficult transition often relies on outdated learning methods and overestimating their prior achievements (Moeurn, 2025a; Yorke & Longden, 2007; UNESCO, 2009). Additionally, this period requires students to shift from passive learning to active engagement (Moore, 2017). Previous results found a disconnect between students' expectations, which negatively affects their integration, personal development, and commitment (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Furthermore, technological play a challenge for students (Alatabi & Alnoori, 2020; Bunthoeurn, 2018). Furthermore, English presents a significant obstacle for students, affecting their understanding of academic texts and success (Moeurn, 2025a; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Kariuki, 2009). Moreover, Cambodian students frequently struggle with English, impacting their academic success (Gochhayat & Das, 2023). Likewise, digital competency is also identified as a main barrier and influences students' navigation of prestigious HEIs (Giotakou, 2024). These multifaceted challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions to support students in overcoming these barriers and successfully transitioning into higher education.

Personality adaptation challenges

The shift to college brings numerous challenges to personality development, which encompasses psychological and physical barriers. Homesickness, identified as an important obstacle to adaptation by Fisher et al. (1985), calls for the development of self-sufficiency and hardiness (Fisher & Thompson, 1989; Moeurn, 2025a; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2015; Rendon, 1992; Thang, 2009). The lack of adequate housing facilities makes adaptation difficult, as Moeurn (2025b) reported problems with new living conditions, communication, and expenses. The absence of proper assistance related to ensuring safe and healthy living conditions adversely affects academic performance (Ciobanu, 2013). The problem of poverty, caused by expenses on materials, medical care, and extracurricular activities, is a key factor in the high dropout rates (Clayton, 1998; Young et al., 2016) and hinders academic involvement and mental state, especially among first-generation and poor students (Harvey et al., 2006; Moeurn et al., 2025). The experience of studying increases the number of psychological problems, such as anxiety and emotional strain associated with adaptation (Nooreen et al., 2009), complicated by academic, parental, and social integration stresses (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Stress management should involve the knowledge and behavior of individuals (Melenie et al., 2022), but not all students are aware of its importance (Doguny & Gulec, 2012; Heng, 2013), and typical issues include lack of meals due to lack of time, cooking possibilities, or money (Moeurn, 2025a; Nooreen et al., 2009).

Career readiness challenges

In the past few years, university students have shown a growing fear regarding how relevant their academic preparation is to meet the needs of the labor market, considering that conventional curricula may not prepare them well enough for the realities of employment (Kantanis, 2000). This fear has drawn attention to the significance of soft skills such as collaboration, communication, flexibility, and problem-solving regarding the employability of university students in today's labor market (ILO, 2021; MLVT, 2024; Rusmin et al., 2024; Tes & Khen, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024). Employers value interpersonal and cognitive skills needed for efficient performance in different working environments, and a lack of these skills often results in underemployment and job dissatisfaction among university students (CDRI, 2015; Moeurn, 2017). Gysbers (2003) defines six key skills for career readiness, which include social competence and entrepreneurship, and Chason et al. (2013) define career readiness as interpretation, problem solving, and decision making. The problems encountered by university students in searching for jobs due to the unclear process are noted by Mahmud et al. (2022), which requires structured assistance through internships and mentorship (CDRI, 2015; Moeurn et al., 2025). It shows a systemic problem of disconnection between academics and the labor market, requiring universities to engage in more practical learning, partnerships with industries, and curriculum changes.

Socio-cultural background challenges

Social networks are crucial for success in new learning environments; however, social integration poses considerable difficulties, especially for those

who belong to underrepresented groups in terms of ethnicity or financial status (Camelia & Nastase, 2018). Social integration is an integral factor that positively influences belonging, persistence, and well-being (Tinto, 1983, 1987, 2017; Yasmin et al., 2024). Moreover, disengagement and dropout occur when a student does not socialize and cannot be involved in various activities (Moeurn, 2025; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Introverts find it hard to establish social relations, which negatively affects their participation (Yasmin et al., 2024; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Inability to assimilate socially results in less engagement in academic and campus life, thus influencing performance and retention rates (Kajoina, 2022; Khoo et al., 2017). To deal with this problem, organizations should implement inclusive strategies, such as peer mentoring (Okypch et al., 2020), orientation activities, culturally sensitive services, and faculty diversity training programs (Heng, 2013; Holly, 2015; Kehm et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2020). In addition, according to Giotakou (2024) and Tinto (1993), Cultural Capital Theory and pre-university experience should be taken into account.

Student services platform challenges

In this regard, the provision of effective student services is very important since it plays an instrumental role in providing necessary support in various spheres, namely academic advising, mental well-being, career counseling, financial aid, as well as participation in extracurricular activities, thus increasing retention rates, enhancing academic achievement and overall student well-being (Abiola & Paul, 2019; ACC, 2019; Ciobanu, 2013; Johnson et al., 2022; Moeurn, 2025a; Tinto, 2017). Nevertheless, students often encounter various barriers and receive inadequate service because of various obstacles, for instance, the lack of time, understaffing, and poor infrastructure that prevent prompt and effective assistance, especially in terms of the rapidly increasing number of students (Brock, 2011; Lea & Farbus, 2000; Moeurn et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2000). One of the main barriers is the lack of awareness concerning the existing services, usually because of ineffective communication (Ciobana, 2013; Dietsche, 2012; Russell et al., 2008; Tinto, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to use some strategies for promoting proactive communication among students through orientation, digital media, as well as peer-led strategies (Ciobana, 2013; Moeurn, 2025a; Phyrom & Sopheak, 2023; Selim & Muhammad, 2014).

Theoretical framework

On the other hand, the theoretical framework used to explain the challenges that students face in Cambodian HE includes an extensive application of theories such as the Student Integration Model by Tinto (1993) in the interpretation, together with the focus on digital competency by Gochhayat and Das (2023) and the focus on cultural capital by Giotakou (2024) regarding social integration. On the other hand, the comprehensive review of the existing literature that will be conducted in the course of this study will reveal five major areas of concern that are faced by the target population of students in Cambodian HE institutions (see Figure 1). In particular, academic performance is the first area where students face challenges in meeting the requirements and expectations of the curriculum. Personality adaptation is the second one, where students face problems related to the change of educational settings and the need to adjust personal and social

behavior accordingly. Career readiness is the third area that students need to address because of the need to prepare for life in the labor market. Socio-cultural background is the fourth area of concern because students coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds will find themselves at various levels of resource support. The fifth area of concern will be the student services platform.

Based on this framework, the study aims to: (1) Identify the main challenges faced by Cambodian higher education students, (2) Explore academic and learning-related challenges, (3) Examine financial and personality challenges, (4) To explore the challenges students face in preparing for the labor market and achieving career readiness, (5) Investigate social, personal, and psychological challenges, and (6) Assess institutional support through student services platforms. Furthermore, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the main challenges Cambodian higher education students face? (2) What are the most significant difficulties that students face in their daily learning? (3) How do tuition fees, living expenses, or family financial expectations impact their ability to focus on their studies? (4) What barriers do students encounter in developing the skills and professional readiness required for the Cambodian labor market? (5) What social and personal challenges do they encounter? (6) How well do Cambodian HEIs support their students?

Method

Research design

This research study employed a qualitative approach to examine the challenges encountered by students in higher education institutions in Cambodia because the qualitative research design is able to capture complex human experiences and provides context-specific information (Patton, 2002). The interview was selected as the main instrument for gathering data since interviews can produce rich information based on real-life experiences (Bruan & Clark, 2006). In the last ten years, the use of the qualitative research design has been gaining popularity due to its ability to produce relevant and useful results. According to Creswell (2012), such a research design enables researchers to interact with research participants, which results in the generation of new ideas and perspectives that cannot be obtained with the use of a quantitative research design.

Research setting and participants

For this study, a purposive sample of 97 respondents from six critical groups within the higher education sector of Cambodia was used in order to gain a thorough understanding of difficulties faced by students in Cambodian HEIs. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is the most suitable way of gaining profound knowledge about the specific phenomenon. In particular, nine HEIs from the list of 189 HEIs under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS, 2024a) that represent public and private universities in Phnom Penh (the city where the highest number of students live and that makes up 14.7% of national population according to MoEYS, 2024d) were chosen based on the following criteria: six universities with the largest number of students enrolled, two HEIs with high tuition fees (\$3,000+ per year) and one university known for its high standards according to the ASEAN University Network (AUN).

Furthermore, key stakeholders from the wider higher education sub-sector were included, such as MoEYS officials, development partners, professional researchers, private sector officials, HE rectors, and students. Such a strategy is quite useful according to Creswell (2012) because it provides a variety of perspectives that are especially useful in qualitative research. Triangulated methodology was applied in this study; thus, a multi-perspective approach along with validated results for each research question (RQ1-RQ6) for all levels of education was provided. In particular, there were 25 respondents who underwent individual interviews, while 72 students took part in nine focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of eight students (C1, C2, C3 for interviews; FGD1, FGD2, FGD3 for FGDs).

Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews have been chosen as the main tool of data collection since they serve as an effective method of studying complicated phenomena such as student experience and institutions in higher education (Cohen et al., 2007). Being qualitative in nature, the semi-structured interviewing technique enables researchers to have an open dialogue, which allows them to examine emerging themes and adapt questions in real time, performing functions such as concept refinement, hypothesis testing, and data gathering (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2012; Schostak, 2006). In this research project, interviews conducted either individually or in groups will be used to obtain information about stakeholders, such as student affairs officers, university officials, and students, with individual interviews providing confidentiality and focus groups enriching the data through interaction among participants (Patton, 2002; Braun, 2006). The interview questions were developed based on academic literature, theoretical knowledge, and the researcher's personal experience, being carefully thought over and modified in collaboration with a specialist researcher whose field is higher education, especially student services in Cambodia (Noble & Smith, 2025). Expert review of the interview protocol was conducted by a committee of three experts, two of whom are specialists in Cambodian higher education and one is a senior researcher of qualitative methodology (Stofer, 2019). In accordance with the feedback received, some modifications have been introduced to the protocol by rephrasing the abstract terminology and rearranging the order of the questions (Bearman, 2019; Stofer, 2019).

Data collection

Thorough research has been done regarding the HEIs in Cambodia to assess the stakeholders, institutional policy, and curriculum alignment to national labor market demand. The process involves sending interview request letters and questionnaires to selected institutions and stakeholders, then conducting one-on-one interviews with the selected individuals using social media or telephone for at least 45 minutes. Confidentiality was ensured, and respondents could freely voice their views or withdraw at any moment. Researchers did an analysis of the agreements before interviews to ensure consistency with participants' goals and obtained consent before making recordings, when there is prior agreement signing. Moreover, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted to obtain the group experience of the students. FGDs take at least 60 minutes,

involving eight purposefully selected students, where two represent each year of study to witness challenges from the time of enrollment until completion of their studies.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis in this study was done in a mixed way, which allowed the emergence of context-specific codes to be matched against Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model. Thematic analysis was used in this study based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) work. Thematic analysis has six steps, which include: Familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme identification, theme review, defining and naming themes, and report writing. According to Sharan (2002) and Patton (2002), thematic analysis is a systematic technique in qualitative research for identifying patterns, concepts, and themes. The researcher combined both pre-existing and emerging themes through examination of the initial codes to develop and re-examine the themes to identify five main themes, namely: academic performance, personality adaptation, career readiness, socio-cultural background, and student services platform. Dependability and confirmability of the study were ensured through the use of peer debriefing, which involved the presentation of codes and themes to senior researchers and higher education experts acting as critical observers. Inter-coder reliability was established using consensus building, where any disagreements, particularly those related to academic and administrative challenges, were sorted out until reaching consensus (Nowell et al., 2017; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Ethical considerations

The interviews were scheduled based on participants' convenience, and coordination of logistics was done via telephone and social media, while the interview was carried out in convenient and comfortable settings with due respect and participant focus. Initially, the researcher introduced the study aims, particularly on student services, and stressed that participation is voluntary, that confidentiality would be maintained, and that the participant could leave the study at any point and answer any question. According to Schostak (2006), ethical considerations should be taken into account to create an open atmosphere where participants can express themselves freely. As stated by Lincoln and Guba (1985), it was important to use various techniques in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study through triangulation of data among different participant categories and member checking to ensure that the results reflect students' experience. Additionally, dependability and confirmability were ensured through the creation of an audit trail and peer debriefing with experts in Cambodian higher education and qualitative research. Finally, the transferability of the study was ensured through the provision of a detailed description of the university context.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Academic performance challenges

The findings showed that academic performance in higher education is the most common and crucial challenge for HEI students in Cambodia. HEIs require students to be independent learners and self-studiers. In addition, students are

required to actively seek knowledge beyond classroom instruction. In secondary education, however, students had a limited role compared to teachers, resulting in minimal attention to class, infrequent reading of books, review of lessons, or completion of exercises. Students have to engage with diverse sources such as online platforms, academic libraries, seminars, workshops, internships, and so forth. Some participants highlighted insufficient skills and knowledge in university learning skills. Furthermore, they have to adapt to various learning methods, including presentations, group assignments, guided research, regular assessment, and experiential activities. The emergence of new key terms, in particular, presented a significant challenge. A quotation from the institution with the third-highest enrollment (FGD) effectively demonstrated this concept.

I had never heard the terms 'quiz,' 'midterm,' or 'final exam' until I entered university. Teamwork is also very difficult because I don't know how to approach classmates I'm unfamiliar with. I've tried asking others to join group work several times, but they often don't show up. So I just do what I can. If you choose the wrong team members, it affects the whole semester. (FGD3)

Another contributing factor included digital and English knowledge, as highlighted by many officials, HE leaders, and students. Students struggle academically with adopting digital tools as a new learning environment. Furthermore, the ability of high school graduates to engage with these tools is quite far from the requirement. Simultaneously, proficiency in English is necessary due to the utilization of technological tools and the study materials being written in English. Thus, digital and English are potentially leading the challenges for HE students in Cambodia. As one HE leader remarked:

Students still face challenges with English usage, especially upon entering university, where many documents are written in English. We encourage them to study harder, but the materials themselves are in English, which adds to the difficulty. (C12)

To sum up, technology is widely used in HEIs to support self-directed learning and collaborative work, enhancing students' skills and general knowledge. Another contributing factor is the English language, which also presents a significant challenge. These issues have demotivated students to concentrate on their studies and acquire global knowledge.

Personality adaptation challenges

The abovementioned issues are clearly essential in students' difficulties; however, adaptation of one's personality is also essential. A large number of students identified the problem regarding their personality background. For example, most students move from the countryside to Phnom Penh to attend university and need life skills. Moreover, such a move implies that they have to deal with new surroundings and no system of support. There are difficulties in finding proper accommodation as a result of a lack of information concerning location, prices, and proximity to institutions. Poor conditions of accommodation, besides, make it difficult for students to adjust to a new environment, which

requires patience and persistence. Moreover, a number of rented apartments lack good ventilation and comfort and are usually located in places with poor access to transport, which causes problems with it. As a result, students have to move to find better accommodation. Such cases may negatively affect student life at university. The HEI leader and the FGD noted:

Students from other regions will need a lot of assistance services, especially in locating accommodation that is both safe and affordable. (C8)

Most of the rooms I occupied were flooded with rainwater up to my knees. It was hard for me to move around or ride on my motorbike due to the wet clothes. (FGD4)

Moreover, financial issues were stated by most respondents as the basic problems, especially those from poor families. These issues tend to make things more difficult because some students have to reside in congested or distant places, making them spend more time commuting and thus affecting their studies and safety. In addition, students need to use more money not only on tuition fees, but also for other needs like books, food, clothes, and other basic needs. The following statement from an important figure from the MoEYS explains this matter.

Studying at university can be expensive, making it challenging for students from financially disadvantaged families. In contrast, scholarships in our country are limited to tuition fees, leaving other expenses entirely self-funded. (C1)

Furthermore, the majority of the participants also highlighted that the above challenges lead to further difficulties, including physical and mental problems. For instance, inadequate nutrition that fails to meet students' physical and mental developmental needs increases their vulnerability to health problems. This issue is particularly severe among students from low-income households and vulnerable families. As one rector from a public HE said:

It is often found that students in our country face many mental health problems, but they cannot find anyone to help, which causes them to give up. (C8)

Students face challenges in adapting to university life, particularly those relocating from rural areas to Phnom Penh. These challenges include finding suitable and affordable housing, dealing with inadequate living conditions, and managing financial constraints. These difficulties can lead to further problems, such as physical and mental health issues, impacting students' academic performance and overall well-being.

Career readiness challenges

In addition to the aforementioned problem, students also faced inadequate career preparation. The officials, development partner, researcher, private sector, and HE leader also mentioned that students face career preparation both while

they are studying and after finishing university. Since the job market is very competitive and selective, students are required to be well prepared for the upcoming job. Supporting services in career development will contribute to securing employment or creating entrepreneurial opportunities during or after graduation, which is a primary goal for many students. However, many students found difficulty in designing their career goals and plans due to the unclear plan and a lack of supporting services in HE. As a result, many participants expressed concerns regarding the lack of career readiness. Particularly, the labor market currently increasingly emphasizes specialized skills and high qualifications, making the recruitment process more rigorous. A development partner echoed this sentiment.

In general, students at higher education institutions often lack access to professional counselling services, which hinders their job preparation. Employment counselling can play a crucial role by organizing support activities, providing guidance, and offering career orientation throughout the four years of study. This comprehensive support helps students graduate successfully and find jobs that align with their skills and aspirations. (C5)

Yet another issue discussed by HEI leaders and the private sector is that students themselves encounter difficulties in the working environment because of insufficient preparation, unfamiliarity with the work environment, and a lack of soft skills. In addition, due to the absence of communication, teamwork, and adaptability skills, job performance is impeded, and as a consequence, productivity and job quality become low. This is why many students tend to switch jobs because of the pressure and difficulties in fulfilling job responsibilities.

Companies recruit students to identify gaps in their training and highlight areas where industry input is needed in the curriculum. Alumni also provide feedback on academic programs. However, some institutions fail to organize this collaboration effectively. (C2)

I have been interviewed seven times without success; they claim I lack the necessary qualifications. Experience, do not yet know computers, and English. (FGD1)

Participants strongly perceived that students lack career readiness because higher education institutions lack adequate career guidance and job preparation programs. This gap hinders their ability to secure employment and advance in their careers.

Socio-cultural background challenges

Another finding also suggests that the socio-cultural background has contributed to the problems experienced by students. The social interactions among the students studying at places where they have not studied before are minimal since most of them feel reluctant to interact with other students because of being uncomfortable, frightened, and having cultural differences. Participants suggested that students who come from different backgrounds find it hard to

create good relationships with other students in a new environment. Therefore, most students concentrate on their studies by attending their lessons and avoid socializing. Also, several participants mentioned many problems, including inadequate communication with new neighbors and friends. A public HE student stated that:

Coming to study in a new environment, I didn't know anyone and found it difficult to communicate with new people because I was afraid to approach them and preferred to observe first. (FGD3)

In other words, students face the problem not only when creating relations with new neighbors in a new environment because of diversity but also with communication and belonging to an institution. Several students isolate themselves from the process of academic life and go back to their rented flats without participating in self-studies and using institutional facilities like the library. Long adaptation periods are needed for those students in order to create social connections with peers, lecturers, and the institution itself. For example, a high official from MoEYS mentioned.

The relationship between students and the institution is distant, resulting in a weak sense of attachment or loyalty to the institution. (C4)

Thus, the creation of relationships with new peers in a new environment causes difficulties for students due to poor communication skills and lack of knowledge about social life in the academic environment. Besides, students' reluctance to communicate with teachers also makes the process complicated.

Student services platform challenges

As a member of staff in student services since 2012, I have noticed that in some cases, higher education institutions do not treat students as customers. The platform is gradually being developed to meet student needs. The other problem that arises from the study concerning the student service platform is that most of the FGDs stated the lack of specific and detailed information about what services HEIs provide and what assistance students get. In addition to studying and paying tuition, there is a lack of awareness about and utilization of additional services. The information given was quite vague and unclear. Moreover, some participants pointed out that dissemination of information is carried out in different ways, which confuses students and brings uncertainty about the reliability of sources. Besides, the use of traditional services, together with the constant use of digital technologies, also complicates the life of students. Numerous FGDs underlined the importance of using digital technologies for improving the accessibility of the service. This leads to a universal lack of comprehensive communication about student services in higher education establishments. The quote of the senior official from the development partner.

The dissemination of information about the student services of the institution is insufficient and lacks comprehensiveness. (C5)

At the same time, the participants have also mentioned the major challenges that student services staff face. As well as students, officials mentioned that staff members providing student services do not show an appropriate attitude and give enough guidance to the students, using inappropriate and discourteous language. These employees lacked good interpersonal communication and soft skills that could improve the level of service delivery. A strong comment from FGD was made.

The words of the service provider were hard to accept; he made us wait until tomorrow and prevented us from asking questions. (FGD4)

The student service platform in higher education institutions has many challenges for the students because of insufficient information and digital tools. Many students do not know how to get services, which makes the problem even harder. Besides, the competencies of the service provider are lacking in some areas such as communication and responsiveness.

Discussion

Academic performance challenges

The specific discovery and the initial significant issue pertain to academic difficulties. The findings are interpreted through Tinto's Theory (Student Integration Model, 1993), validating the importance of academic integration within the Cambodian context. Similarly, the result is consistent with Gochhayat and Das (2023), who found that the rapid shift to online learning globally revealed deep disparities in technological resources. Adapting to HEIs was a well-documented regional and global challenge (Huong, 2022; Moeurn, 2025a; Tao, 2025; UNESCO, 2009). HEIs require independent learning and research, which poses a major challenge for students (Moore, 2017). Specifically, the results align with previous findings such as adapting to higher education learning skills (Hassel & Ridout, 2018), digital and technology knowledge (Alatabi & Alnoori, 2020; Bunthoeurn, 2018; Phyrom & Sopheak, 2023), and the English language (Craystal, 1997; Kariuki, 2009; Moeurn, 2025a; Yorke & Longden, 2007). These challenges have potentially contributed to their underperformance in academics. Furthermore, the study reveals that first-generation students and those lacking information about higher education encounter greater challenges (Bunthoeurn, 2018; Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Moeurn, 2025a), particularly as this study identified that the most significant barrier for students from low-income households and students with disabilities received less attention from relevant stakeholders. These major challenges indicate a failure in integrating students since Cambodia transitioned from a rote-learning secondary system to an autonomous HEI environment.

Personality adaptation challenges

Furthermore, the study also found that HE students encountered personality adaptation difficulties. These challenges included geographical displacement, living alone, experiencing housing inadequacy, financial constraints, and nutrition and malnutrition, which represent what Tinto (1993) defines as external commitment, which pressures compete with students' ability to integrate into the

university. While these have been widely discussed in the literature such as relocation and homesickness (Fisher et al., 1985; Moeurn, 2025a), autonomy and resilience (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2015; Rendon, 1992; Thang, 2009), financial hardship (Clayton, 1998; Young et al., 2016), mental health (Daniel & MacNeela, 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2013; Harvey et al., 2006; Moeurn et al., 2025), stress management (Doguny & Gulec, 2012; Heng, 2013; Melenie et al., 2022), and nutrition (Moeurn, 2025a; Nooreen et al., 2009). This is identified as a major challenge for students from economically disadvantaged households and first-generation students (Harvey et al., 2006; Moeurn et al., 2025). In Cambodia, a developing country, most students at HEIs are from rural areas, facing greater difficulties.

Career readiness challenges

Moreover, the findings of this study highlighted that students encountered a gap between their academic knowledge and the demands of the labor market, resulting in unemployment, a lack of soft skills, and insufficient career readiness. According to Tinto's model, a student's Goal Commitment and persistence are heavily influenced by the perceived reward or degree. These results align with the policy paper, regional report, and research findings from various sources (ILO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2024), local policy assessment (CDRI, 2025; MLVT, 2024; NCYD & UNFPA, 2020; Moeurn, 2026; NEA, 2000; Tes & Khen, 2025), who found that the students, both while studying and after graduation, have not yet been well prepared for the job requirements or persistent skills mismatch. The challenges included: mismatch (CDRI, 2015; Kantanis, 2000), soft skills (ILO, 2021; MLVT, 2024; NEA, 2000; Rusmin et al., 2024; Tes & Khen, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024), career readiness (Chason et al., 2013; Gysbers, 2003; Moeurn, 2025a), and job search process (CDRI, 2015; Mahmud et al., 2022; Moeurn et al., 2025). The governmental authority, MLVT, revealed that students lack soft skills and career readiness, necessitating HEIs' commitment to provide more extracurricular activities and design programs responsive to market demands. This study also found that students moved jobs due to a lack of career advice and consultation from HEIs and no personal career goals.

Socio-cultural background challenges

In addition to the above challenges, the study also underscores the challenges in building social connections, cultural differences, and communication matters. This study underscores a significant issue concerning socialization skills in unfamiliar environments and new learning settings, which may contribute to student challenges. This extends Tinto's (1983) concept of Social Integration, leading students to fail to build social connections or appreciate cultural differences between their homes and universities. This result also aligns with Giotakou's (2024) Cultural Capital Theory, which found that first-generation rural students lack inferred academic challenges at university. It corroborates earlier findings across various contexts (Moeurn, 2025a; UNESCO, 2009; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Zepke & Leach, 2010). The challenges are social integration (Liu, 2023; Norzaini, 2003; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Yasmin et al., 2024; Zepke & Leach, 2010), underrepresented students (Camelia & Nastase, 2018; Rendon, 1992; Tinto, 1983; Yasmin et al., 2024), and poor student

assimilation (Chet al., 2022; Kajoina, 2022; Kariuki, 2009; Khoo et al., 2017; Tinto, 2017). In unfamiliar environments, students face communication challenges that hinder their ability to connect with peers and navigate complex academic landscapes.

Student services platform challenges

Finally, the study also revealed that students face challenges in accessing student services at higher education institutions (HEIs), which indicates a failure of institutional support for student integration. This finding aligns with Tinto's theory that institutions must meet student needs, but many renowned HEIs prioritize prestige over providing adequate student support services. These challenges include four main challenges: accessing student services, systemic challenges, time constraints, and insufficient infrastructure (Brock, 2011; Lea & Farbus, 2000; Moeurn et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2000), which are exacerbated by rapidly growing student populations, reducing the capacity for timely assistance. The next challenges are due to awareness and staff qualifications and skills (Ciobana, 2013; Dietsche, 2012; Russell et al., 2008), highlighting a broader issue of service visibility and accessibility (Tinto, 2017). The study found insufficient funds for HEIs in Cambodia to run their students' support systems, with some HEIs neglecting student activities.

In conclusion, this research has significant contributions to the existing theories and literature on the challenges of students in Cambodian higher education, identifying five prominent domains. This research study also builds upon Tinto's model by demonstrating that in a developing nation such as Cambodia, external socio-economic pressures and the pursuit of institutional prestige frequently supersede student support. Specifically, the findings demonstrated an enhanced conceptual understanding of these challenges within Cambodian HEIs. In addition, this research validated and enriched the global academic discourse by positing that Western-centric frameworks, illustrated by Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model, require modification to incorporate the "structural survival" and "market utility" imperatives characteristic of developing nations. Through other engaging works, both Giotakou's (2024) notion of Cultural Capital and Gochhayat and Das's (2023) research on Digital Inequalities, this study confirmed that student retention is primarily influenced by institutional and structural factors rather than individual psychological resilience. Consequently, the findings underscore a shift in Cambodian higher education from a "prestige-seeking" model to a "support-centric" approach. This shift actively addresses the capital disparities that currently hinder the success of the country's most disadvantaged student groups.

Conclusion

This research is aimed at examining the difficulties that students face at HEIs and, in particular, students of Cambodia. It is found that students face numerous challenges, including academic, personality, career, socio-cultural, and student services challenges. Moreover, it is noted that only a small number of HEIs give importance to creating a supportive environment, especially public institutions. The results show that although the leaders of HEIs know and

understand the importance and the crucial role of support services, there is a lack of funds and staff in the sphere of student services.

At the same time, this research gives recommendations for policymakers and other interested parties, especially for HEIs. Therefore, the provision of appropriate support and assistance will provide a favourable learning environment for students. Lack of assistance will result in higher rates of dropouts and poor career planning among graduates and thus will prevent graduates from being well-prepared for entering the labour market. Poor development of student services increases these problems greatly and affects those students who belong to vulnerable groups, namely students with disabilities, low-income families, ethnic minority groups, and students without academic and career goals.

Policy and institutional recommendation

The study also found several recommendations put forward to help students in HE succeed in their academic journey. These recommendations included: 1. The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS): As the primary regulatory body, MoEYS has to play a key role in reinforcing and monitoring the student services within HEIs under its supervision. Student services are a critical point to help significantly contribute to human capital as planned by the Royal Government of Cambodia. Importantly, it also supports the transition of the country from a lower-middle to an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and 2050. Consequently, the researcher would like to provide the following recommendations. MoEYS should develop student-centered policies and incentive mechanisms for effective student services. A one-stop service model integrated with digital technology should be adopted, and HEIs should be funded for efficient and sustainable student services. 2. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): As practitioners, they should prioritize high-quality student services to build trust and engagement, recruit staff with strong skills, and collaborate with stakeholders for internships, study visits, and career development. Additionally, HEIs should provide career guidance, counselling, and skill development to prepare students for employment. 3. Student involvement: Students should actively engage with service providers, raise concerns, and participate in clubs and activities to improve student services.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

There are several limitations of the study. First, in regard to the scope of the methodology used, the research is based on a qualitative design and concentrates on selected key informants and certain students. Second, in relation to geographic scope, HEIs and the research site are located in Phnom Penh, which may not necessarily reflect the experience of students in other parts of Cambodia. Third, in regard to stakeholder perspective, there are only selected students taking part in the research, which limits its generalizability. Fourth, there are no lecturers from HEIs included in the sample. In addition, taking into account the above-mentioned limitations, future research in this area is recommended to use quantitative or mixed-method research designs with a larger sample size. Results of the current study can be useful as the base for the development of the survey instrument to identify the factors influencing student success in Cambodian HEIs. This type of research is crucial because its results can be used to implement appropriate

policies and interventions to help Cambodian students fulfill academic and employment requirements.

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