The Challenges of The First-Year Student in Higher Education Institutions in Cambodia

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Abstract:

In the 1990s, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) initiated privatizing higher education institutions (HEIs). This policy shift led to a dramatic increase in the number of HEIs, expanding from only 8 in the late 1990s to 189 in the academic year 2022–2023. Alongside this growth, students' enrollment numbers surged from 175,962 in the academic year 2021–2022 to 237,243 in 2022–2023. The transition from secondary to higher education represents a significant change for students. Currently, there are not many research studies that allocate considerate focus on the first–year student challenges in higher education in Cambodia. This qualitative research aims to explore the challenges faced by first-year students in Cambodia's HEIs. A semi-structured interview was deployed with the participants purposively selected from six public and private HEIs. In sum, this study engages fifty-seven participants in total from the six HEIs and other relevant institutions. The findings indicate that first-year students encounter several challenges, ranging from academic, personal, social integration, transition to career-oriented learning, to adaptation to available student services challenges. The results underscore the need for HEIs to prioritize creating a supportive environment that fosters a smooth transition, encouraging student retention and continuity into subsequent years.

Keywords: first-year student, challenges, higher education institution, student services, career plan.

## Evolution of Cambodian HEIs:

Higher education in Cambodia traces its roots to the late French colonial period. The first institution, the National Institute of Juridical, Political, and Economic Sciences, was established in 1949 (Tan, 1974; MoEYS, 2024d). In 1957, it was renamed the Faculty of Law, and by 1960, it became the Faculty of Law and Economic Science within the Royal Khmer University (Royal Degree, 1960). During this period, upper-secondary educators grew significantly, from just 8 in 1953 to approximately 200 by 1967 (Ben 1996). Driven by a growing demand for human resources to support economic and societal development, higher education institutions (HEIs) expanded to 29 in the 1960s (Hang, 2016). The mid-1960s saw the formation of several national universities, consolidating various faculties and institutions. Before the Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) period, Cambodia's HEIs included notable institutions such as the Royal Khmer University, Royal University of

Technical, Royal University of Fine Arts, and several others across such main provinces as Battambang and Kampong Cham (Tan, 1974). Right after the Khmer Rouge regime vanished, the higher education system was reestablished in 1979, starting with the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry (Ben, 1996; Hang, 2015). With the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc support, Cambodian students were given opportunities to study abroad, particularly in Eastern Europe, enhancing the technical and professional capacities that were lost during the conflict (Hang, 2015). Vietnamese trainers also played a significant role, assisting in the training of Cambodian medical students who had survived the regime (Sam et al., 2012).

In response to the labor-market needs and the growing number of secondary school graduates, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) implemented, in the mid-1990s, a policy privatizing the higher education sector (Un & Sok, 2018). This policy has led to a significant increase in the number of HEIs, allowing public institutions to offer private classes and permitting private HEIs to recruit students (Sam et al., 2012). Presently, Cambodian HEIs operate under various names, including universities, technical institutes, multi-technical institutes, and royal academies (MoEYS, 2019).

Figure 1: Statistic of Higher Education in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2019; MoEYS, 2024a)
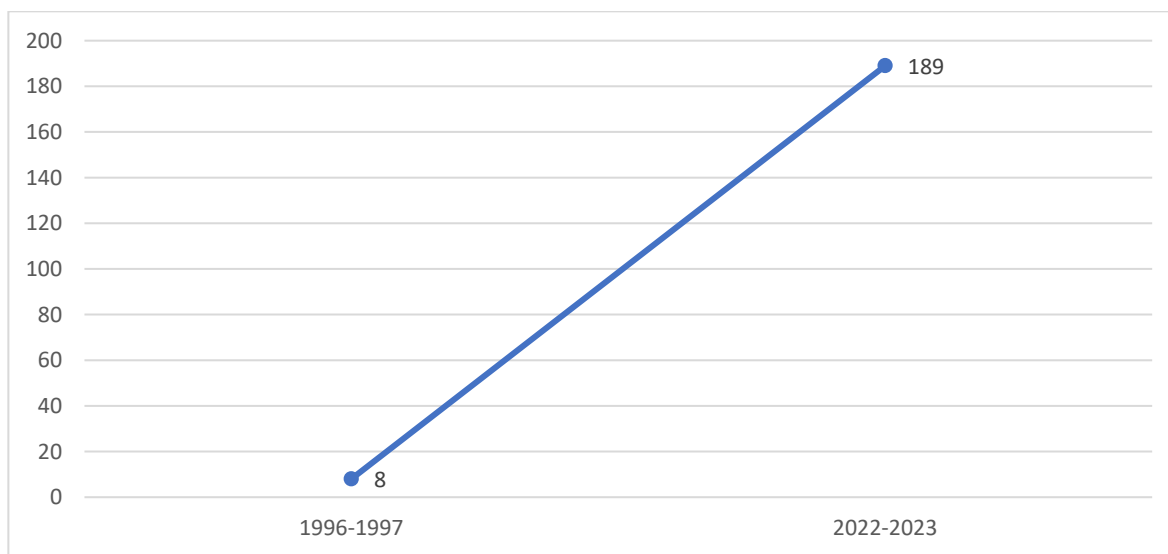
Admission to Cambodian HEIs is based primarily on passing the national Grade 12 examination or holding an associate degree. In some cases, additional official documentation issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) allows students to begin their foundation year in higher education (Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, 2004). Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, MoEYS decided an automatic pass for all Grade 12 exam candidates to support continuity in education (MoEYS, 2020).

In recent years, the role of HEIs has evolved from the conservative dissemination of knowledge to the creation and application of knowledge, therefore fostering innovation (Etzkowitz et al., 2007). Human resource development has become a

cornerstone of Cambodia's social and economic progress, with the HEI sector contributing significantly to the RGC's Rectangular Strategy and its vision for national development (MoEYS, 2024c).

With the rapid expansion of HEIs in Cambodia, the RGC established the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) in 2003 to monitor and evaluate the quality of education within HEIs (Un & Sok, 2018). Initially operated under the Office of the Council of Ministers, the ACC was transferred to the MoEYS in 2013, solidifying its role as the primary mechanism for quality assurance in higher education (ACC, 2023). Despite the implementation of quality evaluation mechanisms, challenges persist regarding the effectiveness and

quality of teaching and learning within Cambodian HEIs. Many institutions emphasize teaching over research activities, limiting their contributions to knowledge creation and innovation (Ford, 2006; Hang, 2015). This focus on instruction rather than research restricts the development of a robust research culture that could enhance educational outcomes and national development. Cambodia's economic growth has been steady, maintaining a rate of 7% in 2014, which enabled the country to transition from a low-income to a lower-middle-income status (Hang, 2015). This economic progress has contributed to a rise in higher education enrollment, with student numbers increasing by 10% from 257,470 in the 2012–2013 academic year to 284,599 in 2022–2023 (MoEYS, 2024b).

The value of higher education is widely recognized by various stakeholders. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), both students and families view higher education as a pathway to well-paid jobs, while employers prioritize graduates with the expertise required for effective service delivery. This study also showed that policymakers anticipate that HEIs will produce skilled human resources to fuel economic growth, whereas universities aspire to instill a culture of lifelong learning among students (AACU, 2002).

Figure 2: Statistic of Bachelor's Degree Students (MoEYS, 2024a)
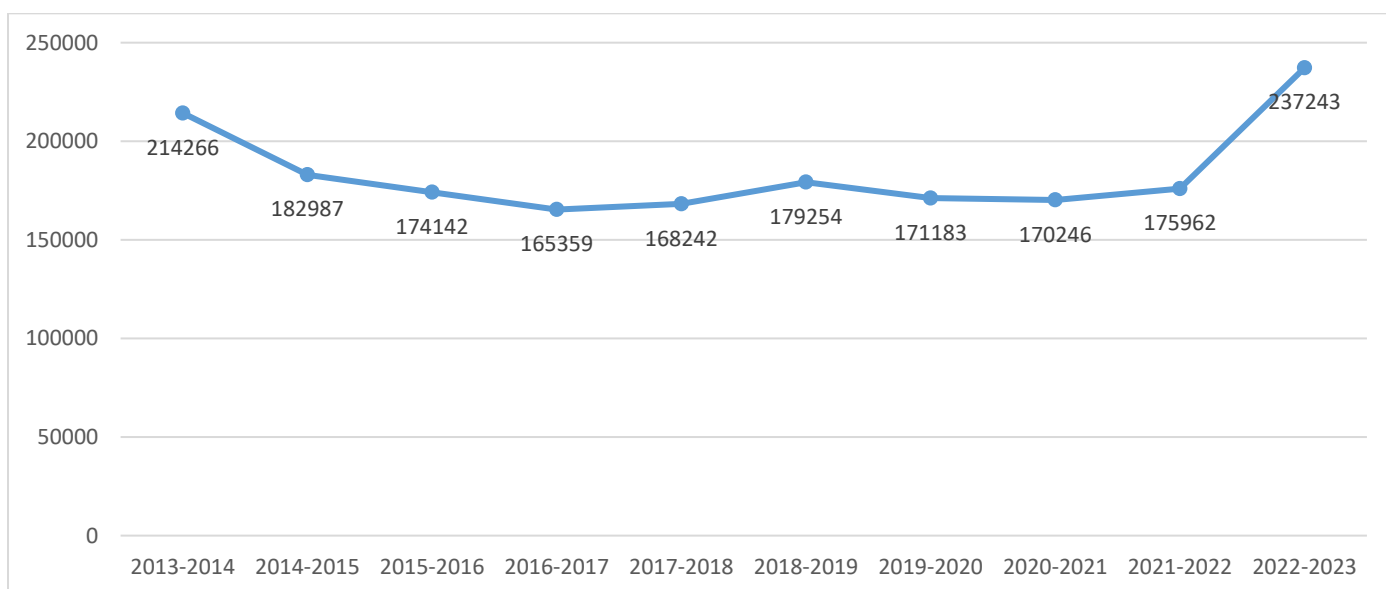
Numerous research studies have been conducted on various aspects of Cambodia's higher education sector, focusing on areas such as finance, governance, recognition, teaching and learning, research activities, human resources, history and development, technology, and infrastructure. For instance, these include, among others, CDRI, 2015; Chet, 2006; Chet, 2009; Chet & Un, 2019; Chet et al., 2022; Clayton & Ngoy, 1997; Doeur, 2022; Dy, 2015; Ford, 2006; Heng, 2013; Heng, 2013; Heng, 2020; Heng, 2023; Heng & Heng, 2023; Heng & Sol, 2023; Heng, 2024. However, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific challenges faced by first-year students in Cambodia. Although student services are considered a critical factor for quality assurance in Cambodian HEIs, they are often overshadowed by other components, especially regarding support for students transitioning from high school to college.

Against this backdrop, international research highlights the unique challenges encountered by first-year university students during their transition period. For instance, Els et al. (2018) reported that the highest dropout rate in HEIs typically occurs during the first year. Likewise, Shabana and Naeem (2024) indicated that freshly graduated high-school students face various issues, including adapting to new educational environments, interacting with peers from different age and social groups, understanding new learning systems, and

adjusting to new evaluation methods. In addition, Tao et al. (2000) revealed that students often experience mental health challenges related to social and personal adjustments.

Furthermore, the transition to university life requires first-year students to develop self-discipline, gain new knowledge, and adapt to living away from their families (Holly, 2015). Mudhovozi (2012) observed that this period of independence and new experiences can heighten students' concerns and needs. Likewise, students entering university come from diverse backgrounds, with variations in culture, identity, and academic preparedness (Rothaman et al., 2011). This diversity can complicate their adjustment to university life, making the transition even more challenging (Simpson & Frost, 1993). According to Earness and Dwyer (2010), some students may struggle with their self-perceptions and easily experience stress.

Research further identified various challenges faced by first-year students, including homesickness, loneliness, low academic performance, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Buote et al., 2007). Likewise, Oluwatimilehin (2024) noted that these challenges are often linked to social, economic, academic, and cultural factors, underscoring the importance of adequately preparing high-school students for university life. Proper preparation helps students manage these issues effectively, resulting in better outcomes. Similarly, Tinto (1993) pointed out that first-year students are at a higher risk of dropping out compared to those at other levels, indicating that 20% to 25% of students decide not to continue to the second year (Hamilton, 2006). Koch and Gardner (2017) also highlighted students who fail or drop out in their first year rarely return to complete their studies. Comparably, Yorke and Longden (2004) have found that struggles during this transition period often led to demotivation, poor academic performance, and, ultimately in a worse scenario, dropout.

As a reflection on several studies above, it is very valid to conclude that research studies on the challenges faced by first-year college students are

still beyond tracing. This is particularly relevant given that many first-year students in Cambodia relocate from distant provinces, often with little support from the family network. This study aims to explore the challenges experienced by first-year students in HEIs in Cambodia. It therefore seeks to address the following question: *What are the challenges students encountered during their first year at Cambodian HEIs?*

Literature Review:

A transition to university presents various challenges for students in their first academic year at higher education institutions (HEIs). This phase is not only about pursuing a higher degree but also about fostering personal development, independence, and lifelong learning (Elwick & Cannizzaro, 2017). According to Giddan (1988), the first year of university represents one of the most challenging transitions, often marked by significant mental stress. After completing high school, many graduates are prepared to begin university, while some are looking for jobs or other opportunities based on personal interests. Those who enter university without adequate preparation face additional difficulties (Moeurn, 2017). Parker et al. (2003) found that uncertainty around educational paths, career prospects, and adaptation to university life often leads to significant challenges. Moreover, Nault (2008) showed that students frequently choose majors or skills that do not align with labor market demands, exacerbated by a lack of information on suitable major selection, orientation, and related areas.

In addition, first-year students typically encounter five primary challenges: mental health issues, academic difficulties, cultural and social adaptation, living conditions, and career development (Shaun & Stephen, 2009). These challenges require dedicated support services to ensure an efficient transition. Students from rural backgrounds, in particular, face added adaptation concerns when adjusting to university life. Similarly, Davies and Elias (2003) identified various factors contributing to student dropout, including academic challenges, financial constraints, unsuitable major choices,

disappointment with university life, lack of confidence, health issues, disabilities, and other personal factors.

Mainly, Moeurn (2017) highlighted that the three main challenges that frequently lead students to reconsider their academic paths include selecting an unsuitable major, financial pressures, and skill development needs. Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) highlighted that the first year is the most difficult period at university due to the need to adapt and explore a new learning environment that differs significantly from secondary education. There are two primary areas of adaptation: curriculum and academic, with the latter being particularly pressing for students.

Furthermore, Tinto (1993) found that students who drop out of university often follow a sequence of stages leading to this decision. These stages include initial pre-university preparation, setting personal goals and commitment to study, experiencing university life, attempting to adapt, and ultimately choosing to leave the institution. Tinto emphasized that the university experience and the process of adaptation are crucial factors that need guidance and support from the university itself. This implies that institutions play a significant role in either facilitating student retention or inadvertently contributing to dropout. Previous research supports Tinto's findings, highlighting two primary factors that influence whether a student decides to continue or drop out: the selection of a suitable major and the availability of student support services within the university (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). The choice of a major is critical, as students who select fields that align with their interests and career aspirations are more likely to remain engaged and motivated. Conversely, students who feel disconnected from their chosen major or find that it does not align with their skills or aspirations are at greater risk of leaving (Moeurn, 2017).

University support services are equally essential, as they provide students with the resources and assistance necessary to adapt to the academic, social, and personal challenges of university life. These services include academic advising, counseling, mentorship programs, and career services, all of which help students navigate the complex transition to university and foster a sense of belonging and resilience (UNESCO, 2009). Institutions that prioritize robust support systems for first-year students can significantly reduce dropout rates by addressing the challenges that students face during this critical period. In summary, the decision to drop out or persist in university is influenced by a combination of personal factors, such as goal-setting and major selection, as well as the quality of institutional support. Universities that actively engage students through comprehensive support programs and foster a welcoming academic environment can help students overcome adaptation challenges, enhancing their overall university experience and likelihood of completion.

Academic Challenges:
Adaptation to University System

The transition from high school to university education involves a fundamental shift in teaching methods, expectations, and responsibilities. Unlike high school, where instruction is often structured and closely guided, university education employs diverse teaching formats, such as seminars, forums, and instructional sessions that require active student participation (Ploner, 2018). First-year students often enter university expecting detailed guidance from faculty, while professors expect students to engage actively and develop independent study habits (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). This misalignment in expectations can lead to challenges, particularly for students accustomed to high levels of teacher support (Moeurn, 2017). Overconfidence in high school performance can further hinder a successful transition to university. He added that students who take excessive pride in their high school achievements may approach university with a complacent attitude, underestimating the need for adaptation to the more demanding environment. Such students are at a higher risk of facing academic difficulties, as university education requires more advanced study skills and greater self-discipline (Tinto, 1995). Many researchers highlight the consequences of

inadequate preparation for university study. Hughes and Wyld (1992) found that students with low study skills are more likely to experience difficulties adapting to university systems and are at an increased risk of dropping out. Even well-prepared students who possess strong study skills may encounter academic challenges due to factors inherent to the university environment. Pantages and Creedon (1978) noted that approximately 40% of first-year students face significant academic challenges, with some failing to meet academic requirements. Living away from home to pursue a university degree presents a unique set of positive and negative challenges. On one hand, students gain independence and self-reliance; on the other hand, they may experience homesickness, isolation, or difficulties in adjusting to their new environment (Paul & Brier, 2001). For some students, these challenges become overwhelming, leading them to consider leaving university before the end of their first semester (Pratt & Alisat, 2000). Kantanis (2000) emphasized that the first semester is a critical period for first-year students, as the academic and social experiences during this time significantly impact their decision to persist or quit university.

The academic challenges associated with this transition often contribute to elevated stress levels. Yang and Chen (2016) found that students' inability to cope with the new learning environment leads to heightened stress, which can affect academic performance. First-year students are expected to manage heavier workloads, adapt to new learning groups, and adjust to unfamiliar academic conditions (Shabana & Naeem, 2024). Hubbard (1994) highlighted that recent high school graduates typically lack experience in the self-directed learning required at university. In contrast to high school teachers, university faculty members play a more limited role, focusing primarily on instruction and orientation, with students assuming greater responsibility for their learning (Murtagh, 2010). Moreover, Lowe and Cook (2003) found that nearly one-third of first-year students expect university teaching methods to mirror those of high school. This expectation often leads to disappointment and difficult adaptation, as

university teaching typically places greater focus on critical thinking and self-intensive study.

Down (2005) demonstrated that first-year students frequently exhibit limited study skills, including inadequate memorization techniques, difficulty in identifying main ideas, and underdeveloped group work and writing abilities. These students often struggle to distinguish between factual information and examples, which necessitates clear explanations accompanied by relevant and detailed documentation (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Additionally, first-year students are often unfamiliar with technical terminology commonly used at the university level, particularly specialized vocabulary within their chosen fields of study (Ploner, 2018). Stylianou et al. (2011) identified terminology, symbols, and signs in scientific subjects—especially in mathematics—as particularly challenging due to their unique language.

The assessment methods employed by higher education institutions also present significant obstacles. A report by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) revealed that 81% of respondents encountered difficulties with academic writing, while 88% struggled to submit assignments. Students often find it challenging to understand grading criteria and the evaluation methods used in higher education settings (Cowley & Hyams, 2018). Furthermore, many students face time constraints, as they must work after class, making it difficult to allocate adequate time for studying and completing assignments on time (Larcombe et al., 2015). First-year students often lack effective time management skills, which hampers their ability to balance self-study with extracurricular activities (King et al., 2021). Financial constraints further compound these issues, as some students seek part-time employment to support their academic journey (Newfield, 2018).

Teacher Behaviors

Rogers (2006) noted that some instructors teaching first-year students exhibit a lack of positive attitudes and insufficient dedication to their

professional responsibilities. This has led to concerns among students that the quality of teaching does not meet their expectations (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The relationship between teachers and students plays a significant role in influencing students' learning outcomes (Carini et al., 2006). In Cambodia, educators are required to adhere to the legal framework and educational policies, particularly respecting the ethics and standards of the teaching profession (RGC, 2008). Teachers must demonstrate attentiveness in their instructional roles and foster an inclusive, non-discriminatory environment for students of diverse backgrounds. Positive teacher-student relationships encourage students to engage actively in class activities (Astin, 1999), and such interactions help students feel a stronger connection to the university environment (Tinto, 2015).

Facilities and Experimental Tool:

HEIs serve as primary centers for developing skilled individuals to meet labor market and societal demands. To fulfill their mission and vision effectively, HEIs require adequate resources, including qualified personnel and high-quality infrastructure. These essential resources are fundamental to ensuring effective and responsive teaching and learning (ACC, 2023). However, insufficient resources hinder the ability of HEIs to achieve their objectives and meet students' expectations, particularly in low-income and developing countries. The Task Force (2000) highlighted that HEIs in developing nations often lack infrastructure, laboratory facilities, and necessary support materials. In the modern era, access to practical and technological tools is crucial to enhancing hands-on learning and facilitating experimentation. Richards and Renandya (2002) further observed that some HEIs lack sufficient study materials, buildings, laboratories, and spaces for community activities. Additionally, these institutions frequently face overcrowded classrooms, which can diminish the quality of education. Student housing, especially for those from rural areas, also presents a significant challenge. Dormitory availability remains a persistent issue for many HEIs, limiting their capacity to address students' accommodation needs effectively (Silva, 2009).

Digital and English

The Internet has become an invaluable tool for gathering information and is increasingly utilized by students (US News, 2021). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional teaching and learning methods transitioned rapidly to online platforms, overcoming regional and national barriers (MoEYS, 2024). This shift highlighted the critical role of technology in addressing educational challenges and improving the quality of instruction, rendering traditional approaches less appealing (Yost, 2019). UNESCO has recommended that educational institutions integrate technology into their training programs, including online learning, to enhance accessibility and efficiency (Crawford et al., 2020). The primary goal of digital tools in education is to facilitate collaboration and communication more effectively.

In response to COVID-19, higher education institutions in Cambodia have accelerated the adoption of technology (Phyrom & Sopheak, 2023). These institutions are gradually transitioning from traditional teaching methods to online learning, supported by technological advancements in instructional formats and support services. However, challenges persist. Limited language proficiency, high costs of technological devices, and a lack of experience with software have created barriers to effective technology use (Bunthoeurn, 2018). Loo and Hang (2007) identified several challenges to technology adoption in Cambodia, including the high cost of internet connections, inadequate English proficiency, difficulties in typing Khmer, a shortage of technical experts, and insufficient funding to promote technological advancements. They also noted that internet usage in Cambodia began in 1994 among journalists and was not fully established until 1997, facilitated by technical assistance from Canada and a connection via Singapore.

English, the global lingua franca, is used officially in more than 50 countries and serves as the primary medium of communication in many others (Huong, 2022). Crystal (1997) argues that English provides access to opportunities in higher education, employment, travel, and improved living standards. However, English language proficiency remains a significant challenge for many university students in Cambodia. Moeurn (2017) found that students often struggle with English during their studies, particularly when engaging with academic materials. Kariuki (2006) similarly observed that first-year students face difficulties with textbooks written in English. For non-native English speakers, understanding lessons and content in English-speaking courses is initially challenging, especially in specialized subjects like mathematics (The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000). The linguistic demands of academic English further complicate learning for students with limited proficiency, making the transition to higher education more difficult.

Personality Challenges:

Personality changes occur when students are away from their families alone, enter new communities, meet new people, and deal with problems on their own. During this transition, students face several challenges, such as homesickness, accommodation, finances, mental health, and wellness.

Homesickness and Accommodation

Geographical transitions are often linked to both mental and physical dissatisfaction, contributing to feelings of homesickness (Fisher et al., 1985). Homesickness, in particular, poses a significant challenge, as it hinders students' ability to fully adapt to a new environment (Fisher, 1989). Thompson et al. (2021) examined students' experiences during their transition to university and observed that many students struggle to adjust, frequently experiencing feelings of shock and loneliness. As students gradually develop the ability to adapt, take ownership of their independence, and become more responsible while living away from home, they often continue to grapple with homesickness, loneliness, and depression (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015).

Accommodation challenges compound these difficulties, as the increasing number of students pursuing higher education often exceeds the availability of suitable housing. The transition from living in one's family home to residing in rented rooms, with relatives, or with friends can be particularly stressful, especially during the initial adjustment period (Yuping, 2005). The strain of adapting to both old and new living habits exacerbates this stress (Moeurn, 2017). Furthermore, insufficient financial resources can prevent students from securing safe housing and accessing adequate nutrition, further undermining their well-being and academic performance (Ramrathan, 2013).

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach to support students' mental health, ensure adequate housing options, and mitigate the financial pressures associated with geographical and lifestyle changes during the transition to university life.

Finance

Daniel and MacNeela (2021) emphasize that financial resources significantly influence student learning outcomes. Higher education students often fulfill dual roles as both learners and practitioners, requiring considerable time and resources to meet the demands of this academic level (Stallman, 2010). Beyond tuition fees, students must also cover living expenses, study materials, practical learning activities, participation in training programs, and healthcare. These financial demands are crucial for creating an environment conducive to academic success in higher education.

However, financial constraints can impede students' ability to focus on their studies and fully engage with academic and extracurricular activities. These challenges are particularly pronounced for students facing significant financial difficulties as they struggle to balance

their educational commitments with the need to manage limited resources. Financial strain is one of the leading factors influencing students' decisions to leave higher education prematurely. Tinto (1998) identifies financial problems as a critical determinant of student dropout rates. Furthermore, poor financial management and budgeting skills exacerbate the challenges faced by first-year students (Thompson et al., 2021).

The financial burden of rising tuition fees, textbooks, accommodation costs, and other living expenses intensifies the pressure on students, making it difficult for them to sustain their academic endeavors (Newfield, 2018). Without adequate financial support and effective resource management, students are likely to face heightened stress, which can adversely affect their academic performance and overall well-being. These findings underscore the importance of addressing financial barriers to support students' success in higher education.

Mental Health and Health

The transition to university life is influenced not only by the educational level but also by factors such as accommodation and social integration. Emotional distress stemming from familial separation, academic pressure, and work responsibilities significantly impacts cognitive functions, including memory, focus, and decision-making (Marin et al., 2011). Students often struggle with discomfort in adapting to a new learning environment and forming new social connections (Gibney et al., 2011). Even after completing their studies, many students report experiencing considerable emotional stress (Zitzow, 1984).

Challenges during this transitional phase can lead to depression and a lack of motivation (Daniels & MacNeels, 2021). According to Stone and Archer (1990), the 1990s saw a noticeable increase in the number of higher education students seeking counseling for mental health issues. Similarly, Eisenberg et al. (2007) noted that multiple challenges during this period contributed to the deterioration of students' mental health. Mental

illness is frequently cited as one of the primary reasons students drop out of university (Baik et al., 2015). External factors, including family dynamics, friendships, and workplace pressures, significantly influence students' mental health during their studies (Lerner et al., 2005). Effective psychological intervention requires both knowledge and behavioral management strategies to reduce internal and external stressors (Melanie et al., 2022). Lecompte et al. (1983) further observed that students with high levels of anxiety at the beginning of the academic year tended to achieve lower grades by the end of the year compared to their less anxious peers.

Nutritional challenges exacerbate these stressors. A 2007 study of 170 students at Balikesir University Bandirma Health Vocational School Nursing and Bandirma Vocational School identified common reasons for skipping breakfast, including insufficient time, inability to wake up on time, lack of access to food preparation, hunger-related issues, and financial constraints (Doygun & Gulec, 2012). Proper nutrition plays a vital role during adolescence and early adulthood, critical phases of growth and development. Adequate food intake and sufficient vitamins are essential to meet physiological demands (Poertner, 2009). Malnutrition and poor physical development are pressing concerns for students and their families, as these issues directly affect both mental and physical health. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring students' overall well-being and academic success.

Social Challenges:

During this transition, students will live in a new place where living, culture, communication, and transportation are not completely the same as in their hometown. In this situation, students face socio-cultural problems and friendships and relationships.

Socio-cultural

Continuing education students hail from diverse backgrounds, particularly those belonging to specific ethnic groups who confront cultural challenges (Parker et al., 2017). Ethnic minority

students face heightened difficulties compared to the general student population (Ploner et al., 2018). Additionally, students with varying income sources, family backgrounds, and social origins contribute to the social challenges encountered during the transition period (Camelia & Nastase, 2018). A student may experience loneliness when they are yet to establish effective relationships with the people around them (Tinto, 1983). Low family income and high dropout rates are correlated (Ramrathan, 2013). Research indicates that students drop out of school due to three main factors: academic problems, failure to integrate into the social and university environment, and a lack of commitment from higher education institutions to provide student services (Tinto, 1987). Introverted students often struggle to build relationships with friends and find it challenging to participate in group work and group projects assigned by teachers (Shabana & Naeem, 2024).

Network and Relationship

First-year university students encounter numerous stressors, including the establishment of new relationships, adaptation of existing relationships with parents and family members, and development of study habits suitable for a novel learning environment (Parker et al., 2003). Students who experience communication difficulties with their university are at an increased risk of dropping out due to the institution's extensive size, intricate administrative structure, and diverse student population (Tinto, 1983). Dropout rates may be attributed to a lack of connection between students and the institution, as well as unmet expectations (Tett et al., 2017).

Friendship

When meeting new students, students do not dare to increase friendships immediately. Students find it difficult to make friends at university (Yasmin et al., 2024). The inability to make friends quickly with new people is even more difficult for students who are not very good at communication. Contrary to high school friendships that have been known for many years. Making friends in a new environment with diverse students is not easy (Nunn, 2021). Building friendships requires commitment and time to build trust. Diversity and unfamiliarity

hinder the formation of friendships promptly as needed.

Employment Challenges:

Career development planning is an important part that students need to be adequately prepared and responsive to economic and social needs. Instead, students will have problems setting goals and developing their professional abilities because they do not know exactly how to organize and what basic ideas to think about. During this transition, students face problems such as career plans, soft skills, and readiness to enter the job market.

Career Plan

Ministry of Labour Vocational and Training (2024) emphasizes the significance of goal setting and career planning, particularly for young individuals to adapt to the rapid global development and the policies of the Royal Government. Tinto (1987) asserts that students with a well-defined career plan exhibit better adaptability and academic performance compared to those without a career plan. This issue is compounded when students observe the previous generation of students struggling to secure decent employment or facing unemployment. Despite graduating from higher education, many students still lack essential skills, while high-achieving students fail to meet the demands of the job market (CDRI, 2015). Ozlem and Selma (2012) demonstrate that during the transition period, graduating students commence their job search to obtain a budget without a proper work plan, leaving them uncertain, hopeless, unstable, and anxious about their employment prospects. Unemployment not only poses a common problem but also stems from inadequate work planning, which affects individuals' emotions. Prolonged unemployment can lead to mental health issues.

Soft-Skills

Lack of confidence in building skills and specialties at this time makes students lack strong confidence and the right efforts to continue the process of building skills, and these factors lead to lower academic results. They will think that the current study does not meet the needs of future

jobs). The National Council for Youth Development of Cambodia and UNFPA released a joint analysis of the situation of Cambodian youth in late 2020, stating that the results of this research show that the quality of education is One problem is that graduates are not fully capable of meeting the needs of the global corporation because of their skills gap (NCYDC & UNFPA, 2020). MLVT (2024) shows that seven soft skills are in high demand in the Cambodian market, including customer coordination skills, teamwork skills, new and fast learning skills, problem-solving skills, communication skills, planning skills, and foreign language skills. The National Employment Agency (2000) found that Cambodian employers were in dire need of soft skills for their employees.

Prepare for the Job Market

The changes in the job market require job seekers and those who are working to continue to learn some new and necessary skills to meet the needs of the job market. In the first year, some students look for work to reduce their family budget (Stallman, 2010). But the work that students are not ready for not only have difficulties in the work, but students also have problems with studying. Moeurn (2017) Lack of readiness to enter the job market and make job performance negatively impact student learning. The World Economic Forum (2023) indicates that 44% of core skills are expected to change and require new skills to be learned over the next five years (quoted from MLVT, 2024, page 12). Getting a job goes through many different stages by the conditions and requirements of the recruiting institution. Failure to properly prepare and meet all the requirements Job seekers will find it difficult to get a job interview and a job offer.

Student Services Challenges:

Higher education institutions provide several support services to assist students while studying at the university. In Cambodia, the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia has developed a standard for evaluating the quality of higher education, which is in the fifth standard on student services (ACC, 2018). This standard clearly states the functions and duties of higher education

institutions in supporting and supporting students to achieve university life.

Service Provider and Information

Providers play a vital role in providing professional, quality, and timely services to help guide and guide students. Brock (2010) argues that good student services need human resources to provide adequate services to orient and provide solutions to students. However, if the provision of student services is not correct, it may put the recipient at a disadvantage. Inability to provide student services through the provision of inadequate services to students, such as health and mental health cases. Lea and Farbus (2000) found that neither the provider nor the student had enough time to help with the task. Employees must continue to develop their ability to work more efficiently and respond to customer needs. In this case, as the World Economic Forum suggests, those who are doing some work need to continue to learn their skills in line with the changing market. (MLVT, 2024) Providers need to be regularly trained in both technical and soft skills to get the job done faster, better, and more responsively. Regular additional skills training will enable him to be better able to provide student support services and also accelerate the responsiveness of higher education missions (Sandeen, 1988). In addition, Sandeen (1988) argues that another challenge is the lack of professional and vocational training for staff in this field. Employees who receive additional skills training regularly will enable them to be better able to provide services to assist students with disabilities in student services through the provision of inadequate services for students, such as health and mental health cases (Notta, 2009). Student providers need to understand the status and needs of clients (McAloon, 1994). Advanced interpersonal skills are the most important requirement for student service providers, in some cases facilitating one-on-one face-to-face coordination as well as listening skills (Barrett & Simmons, 1998).

Service Information

Ensuring the provision of information regarding student services is crucial for each higher education

institution to inform the students, who are the recipients of the service, to better comprehend and utilize the available services. Some students remain unaware of the existence of student support services provided by universities (Mulaudzi, 2023). In situations where support services are not sufficiently publicized or notified, clients are left in the dark about where to access services and how to proceed. Consequently, anxiety and stress arise, exacerbating the challenges faced by first-year students as they navigate their new university life. The World Bank (1994) highlights that higher education institutions in developing countries confront a shortage of human resources and efficiency.

Service Infrastructure

Student service infrastructure in higher education institutions continues to be a problem for institutions. Especially in countries with weak economies and higher education institutions that do not pay attention to student services (Keng et al., 2015). The Task Force (2000) states that higher education institutions in developing countries lack the infrastructure, experimental materials, and materials to support student learning. In fact, in line with the changes and evolution of technology, some study materials and tools are needed to increase the practical capacity of students. Dy and Ogunniran (2019) found that many Cambodian higher education institutions do not yet have modern laboratories. The research also adds that these shortcomings do not help students to apply the theories learned in the classroom. In addition, some Cambodian higher education institutions do not yet have sufficient research resources (Heng et al., 2022). More research has found that

infrastructure in Cambodian higher education institutions continues to be a challenge. Higher education institutions in Cambodia do not have sufficient library resources, making it difficult for students to research and self-study outside of the classroom (Dem, 2017). Accommodation for participating students is very important in reducing the difficulties of the student while he is away from home. However, the provision of accommodation for students is not yet sufficient to meet the needs of students for higher education (Silva, 2009). Higher education institutions in Italy provide accommodation for only 5% of students (Brandmayr, 2009). In New Zealand, higher education institutions provide no more than 30% of the accommodation that the institution needs to be modernized (Stewart, 2022). Chet et al. (2022) stated that the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, with relevant partners, find it difficult to ensure the quality and ability of students to be recognized by the World Higher Education Institutions. Therefore, higher education institutions in Cambodia are still ranked low compared to higher education institutions both regionally and globally (Heng, 2020).

Theoretical Framework:

Research from both developed and developing countries has consistently shown that first-year university students face a multitude of challenges during their transition to higher education. Recognizing these issues as universal, this study adapts an established framework by Yasmin et al. (2024) and contextualizes it to higher education in Cambodia environment to better understand the specific experiences of first-year students in Cambodia.

Figure 3: First-year student challenges in HE in Cambodia
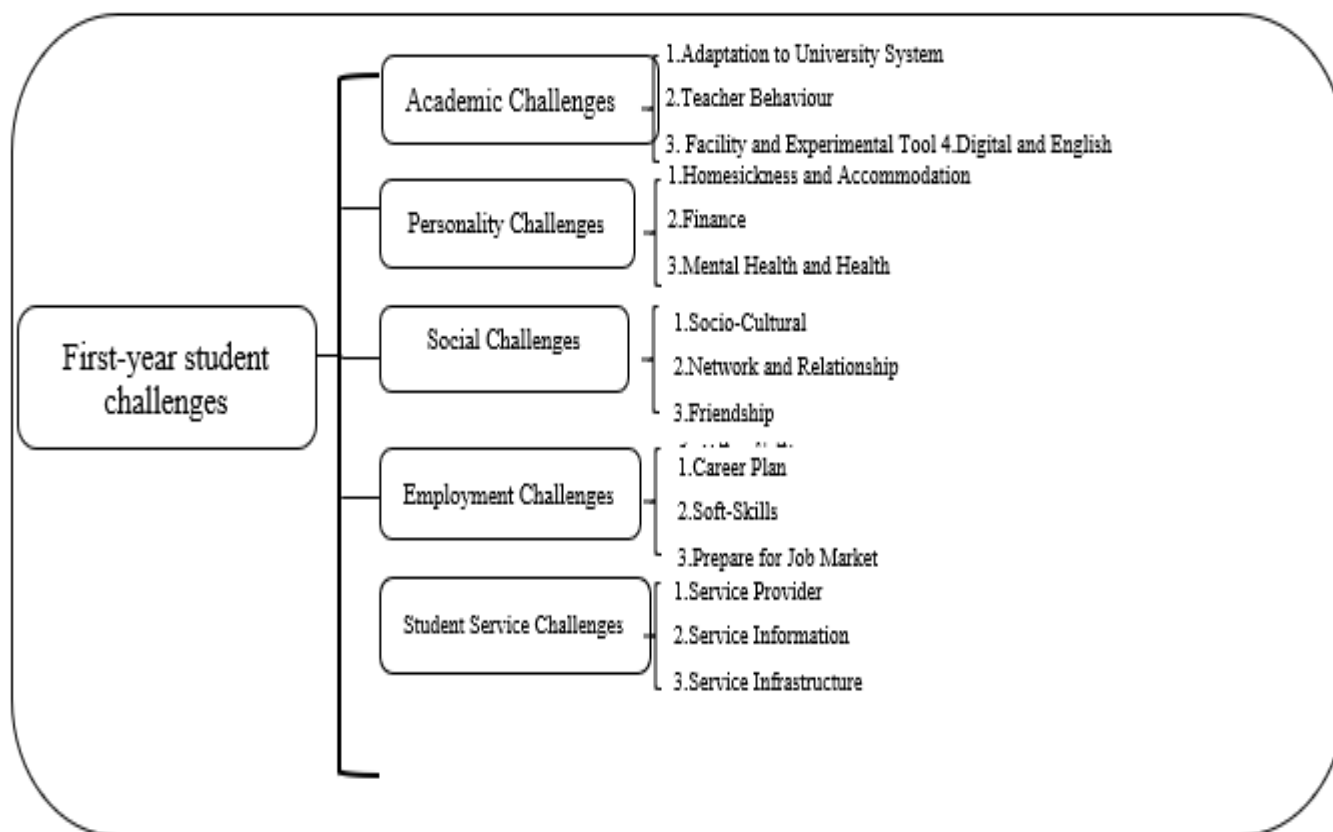
Adopted from Yasmin et al. (2024)

Methodology:

Research Design

Qualitative research is the best method for this study. According to Patton (2002) found that qualitatively makes it easier for researchers to classify details. Based on the merits, the interview was selected as a tool to collect data on this topic. Most importantly, Creswell (2012) showed that qualitative research enables researchers to explore in-depth details and easily obtain ideas from research participants. Interviews are an effective tool to obtain more accurate data from individuals (Schostak, 2006). Interviews help researchers with several tasks, such as sampling questions, evaluating, developing hypotheses, and collecting data (Cohen et al., 2007). One-on-one interviews for Higher Education Student Affairs Office leaders, while group interviews were conducted with students. One-on-one interviews resulted in researchers gaining more in-depth data and hands-on experience for those with experience in this field Patton (2002). In addition, this interview helped research participants to present data in greater depth and confidence. As for group interviews, students were able to share their experiences of interconnected cells. In particular, this interview encourages students who are not very talented to have the courage to participate in answering Schostak (2006). The researchers cited quotes to make the research results more specific (Patton, 2002). Group interviews helped research participants to provide more information and complement each other (Cohen et al., 2007).

Research setting and participants

This research selects public and private higher education institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. A total of 6 out of 90 higher education institutions were selected. The reasons for choosing the above six institutions are the institutions with the largest number of students in the academic year 2022-2023. Student recruitment uses a sample selection method with purposive sampling. Patton (2002) argues that the use of purposive sampling methods is the best tool for qualitative research to gather in-depth data on a particular issue. In addition, the research participants were from three groups: the

National level, the researcher, and target higher education institutions. Wicks et al.(1994) stated that relevant stakeholders played an important role in enhancing the quality of education. Importantly, Cullen et al.(2003) found that putting the relevant stakeholder in a research study helps provide essential and detailed results. In addition, the researchers interviewed two national leaders in the higher education sub-sector. A total of 57 research participants were interviewed in 6 groups (48) and 9 in one-on-one interviews.

Table 1: Participant Geography

Code	Institution	Position	Interview
P1	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
P2	MoEYS	Management Team	One-on-one
P3	Researcher	Well-known in HE	One-on-one
P4	Public HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P5	Public HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P6	Public HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P7	Private HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P8	Private HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P9	Private HEI	Head of Student Affair	One-on-one
P10	Public HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group
P11	Public HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group
P12	Public HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group
P13	Private HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group
P14	Private HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group
P14	Private HEI	Students (8 people)	Focus Group

Research Tool:

The methodology employed in this research utilized a semi-structured interview format for data collection. As stated by Fraenkel et al. (2012), semi-structured interviews are recognized as an effective tool for qualitative research because they allow researchers to gather detailed and specific information directly from participants. For the focus group interviews, the questions were designed to explore five key themes: academic challenges, personality challenges, social challenges, employment challenges, and access to university student services challenges. The interview questions for both groups were adapted from the framework developed by Johnson et al. (2022) and Mulaudzi (2023). In parallel, one-on-one interviews with Student Services Officers focused on topics such as first-year student preparation, personality traits, social communication, job search and employment issues, and the provision of university services.

Data Collection:

In adherence to ethical standards and institutional protocols, the researcher submitted a formal request letter, accompanied by the research questionnaire, to six higher education institutions and relevant stakeholders to seek approval for conducting interviews. Upon receiving permission, the researcher scheduled interviews at times convenient for the participants. Appointments were arranged through social media platforms or by

phone, depending on the preferences of the participants. The interviews were conducted in various locations, chosen based on the participants' convenience. Before commencing each interview, the researcher clearly outlined the study's objectives and emphasized the confidentiality of the information provided by the participants Schostak (2006). Participants were informed of their rights to express their views freely and to withdraw from the interview or refrain from answering specific questions at any point without any repercussions. Face-to-face interviews were designed to last a minimum of 45 minutes, while group interviews (8 students) with students were structured to take at least 60 minutes. These durations ensured adequate time to explore the topics in depth and gather comprehensive insights from the participants.

Data Analysis:

The process of data collection and analysis involved a thematic analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability. Sharan (2002) stated that thematic analysis helps provide detailed and organized data. The researchers carefully read each participant's responses multiple times, noting key ideas and categorizing them using an activity cluster ID system. Once similar data points were identified, they were grouped based on shared themes or content. To emphasize critical insights, selected responses were highlighted as direct quotes from the participants. The data were analyzed in alignment with the activity cluster framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This thematic approach enabled the researchers to identify patterns and organize the findings systematically. Creswell (2012) emphasized the importance of self-analysis, noting that researchers must carefully read and segment participants' ideas, marking key concepts and organizing them into distinct sections. Historically, this process has involved the use of color coding to analyze and organize large datasets into coherent sections. After completing the initial analysis, the researchers refined the data into well-structured research findings. This process included consultations with co-authors who possess extensive experience in qualitative data collection and verification. The first author led the data analysis under the guidance and collaborative input of these experienced co-authors, ensuring the rigor and credibility of the research outcomes.

Research Findings:

Academic Challenges:

The transition from high school to university represents more than a mere academic level upgrade; it entails significant changes that often pose challenges for first-year students. One key shift involves learning styles. In high school, students predominantly rely on teacher-led instruction, whereas in university, they are expected to adopt self-directed learning approaches, including independent study and conducting research outside the classroom. Students who fail to adapt and continue to depend on passive learning methods, such as attending lectures without taking notes or summarizing content, risk earning lower grades or even failing their courses. At the university level, academic performance is assessed through a Grade Point Average (GPA), which is calculated based on the grades earned across all subjects within a semester or academic year. This stands in stark contrast to high school, where students only need to achieve an overall average score of 50% or higher to progress to the next grade, even if they fail individual subjects. The stricter grading and credit systems at universities, requiring at least 120 credits for a bachelor's degree, often pose difficulties for students unprepared for these heightened expectations. Freshmen who fail to meet the academic requirements may have to retake supplementary exams or repeat the academic year, delaying their progress. The quotes from two focus group interviews are below:

In my first class, I assumed it would be like high school and remained passive, simply listening without taking notes or engaging. Over time, I realized I had gained little, and as final exams approached, I became anxious, unsure of what to review. Checking my empty notebook, I felt unprepared but chose to let it go.

(A focus group interview with students: P13)

HEIs in Cambodia lack support for students with disabilities, with classes often held upstairs, making access difficult. These challenges are largely understood only by the affected students.

(A focus group interview with students: P11)

Assessment tools and criteria in universities are also markedly different from those in high schools. For instance, in Cambodian higher education institutions, classroom assessments contribute 40% of the total grade, while final exams account for the remaining 60%. Classroom assessments encompass attendance, group assignments, quizzes, class participation, and other activities. Many first-year students struggle to meet these requirements due to their unfamiliarity with the new academic environment. Group assignments, in particular, are a source of concern for freshmen. These tasks require students to collaborate effectively, share responsibilities, and contribute equitably to produce high-quality outcomes, including presentations and written reports. However, students often face challenges such as poor teamwork skills, difficulty communicating with new peers, and an inability to distribute tasks efficiently. These issues are exacerbated when some group members fail to participate or contribute adequately. Furthermore, technological advancements in teaching, such as the use of LCD projectors, present additional hurdles. Many freshmen possess limited computer skills, which hampers their ability to prepare presentations or type documents correctly. Moreover, the discrepancy in academic calendars between public and private institutions, with public institutions often having longer vacations, results in extended timeframes for degree completion. A quote from an interviewee is below:

Before university, I was unfamiliar with terms like "quiz," "midterm," and "final exam." Group assignments were particularly challenging due to a lack of experience in teamwork and communication with unfamiliar peers. Despite efforts to involve inactive members, I often had to complete tasks alone. I recommend addressing inactive group members early, as their lack of participation can impact the entire semester.

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P9)

The introduction of new subjects in the foundation year presents significant challenges for many freshmen, as they often encounter topics and concepts they have never studied before. This unfamiliarity can make it difficult for first-year students to grasp key ideas and concepts, leading to increased stress and anxiety. A particular challenge lies in understanding the technical terminology associated with these subjects, which many students find daunting. A common issue among freshmen is their reliance on passive learning strategies, such as depending solely on lecturer instructions and core textbooks rather than engaging in self-directed study. Many students continue to use rote memorization techniques carried over from high school, under the belief that memorization alone is sufficient to pass exams. This approach, while potentially effective in a high school setting, is inadequate for the deeper critical thinking and understanding required in HE. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

Some subjects are completely new for us. We sometimes get stressed about the concept. Though not to studying in social science subject due to my weakness at high school. As a result, schools still offer these subjects for us.

(A focus group interview with students: P13)

Achieving high scores is often seen as the primary goal for freshmen, overshadowing the importance of mastering the subject matter. Despite significant effort, some students find specific subjects particularly difficult to comprehend, even after considerable struggle. These challenges highlight the need for additional academic support, such as tutoring, workshops, and guidance on effective study strategies, to help students adapt to the demands of higher education. The quote from an interviewee is below:

Some freshmen choose majors based on parental guidance rather than their interests or abilities, often leading to poor performance and failure in some subjects. This contributes to the high dropout rate among first-year students.

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P8)

Lecturers play a pivotal role in facilitating the transition for first-year university students, as their teaching methods significantly influence students' commitment and academic performance. However, when lecturers fail to fulfill their core responsibilities, students may struggle to meet academic expectations. Discussions among students have highlighted concerns regarding some lecturers' lack of approachability and engagement. Instead of fostering a supportive learning environment, some lecturers tend to focus on sharing their family life experiences during class time rather than concentrating on delivering clear and effective lessons. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

Some teachers did not pay much attention to teaching rather than talking about their family's story during class. Their slide presentation is somehow very complicated and hard to understand.

(A focus group interview with students: P14)

This lack of attention to lesson explanation, coupled with a perceived lack of dedication to their teaching careers, often results in a gap between students and lecturers. Such a disconnect discourages students from asking questions or seeking additional clarification on complex topics. Consequently, this strained relationship can lead to heightened frustration among students and negatively impact their ability to succeed academically. Moreover, many first-year courses are heavily theory-based, with limited opportunities for practical application. Students in technical majors, in particular, have expressed concerns over the lack of access to laboratory facilities and experimental tools necessary for hands-on learning. Without sufficient resources, students are unable to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. In some cases, university programs are designed in such a way that students are required to complete laboratory work only after completing theoretical courses, further delaying their ability to apply what

they have learned. The quotes from the two interviews are below:

Some instructors fail to adequately prepare for their teaching responsibilities, resulting in student misunderstandings. I consistently advise against applying strategies or successes from one subject universally across all subjects, as each requires a tailored approach.

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P9)

In computer-related courses, students are limited to theoretical learning without access to laboratory facilities for practical application. Instructors have explained that the university lacks adequate laboratory resources. However, solely relying on theory hinders long-term retention, particularly for students in technical fields where hands-on experience is essential. On occasion, students are compelled to pool their funds to purchase necessary tools, resulting in increased personal expenses.

(A focus group interview with students: P14)

Using digital skills remains a concern for first-year students due to their lack of knowledge from high school. Most freshmen revealed that they spent most of their time on certain subjects for the national examination while the remaining subjects were neglected. However, higher education institutions in Cambodia have started to incorporate digital technology into their services and teaching systems, leading to increased difficulty for students. Some assignments require students to prepare slide presentations and submit them via email, which becomes problematic due to their lack of knowledge in using these tools. Some students expressed concern about accessing the internet. Only a small number of freshmen created their personal Gmail accounts during their first year at university. The quote from an interviewee is below:

We did not know how to send the assignment and group work on time. University lecturers want us to submit via email. Particularly, I do not know how to create a slide presentation.

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P4)

Furthermore, English serves as a significant barrier to their studies. Some lecturers use both English and Khmer in their teaching, but most relevant and supportive documents are written in English, especially when accessing websites or online resources. This language barrier makes it difficult for students to catch up with the meaning of the lesson, leading to poor understanding and a low level of comprehension. To address this issue, students spend considerable time translating English into Khmer to gain a better understanding. In certain subjects where lecturers use English exclusively, students become demotivated, misunderstand the lessons, and feel frustrated when asking for clarification on uncertain points or lessons. In English-instructed classes, students fear asking questions and are unsure of how to raise them in English. In forums, seminars, training sessions, and workshops, English is used for communication and instruction, which can be challenging for students with limited English proficiency. Exchange programs outside Cambodia often require a high level of English, which can limit their opportunities. At the high school level, students primarily focus on the subjects required for exams and neglect English. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

My lack of English proficiency, stemming from insufficient attention and time dedicated to learning it earlier, has become a major challenge in my university studies. With most assignments and resources in English, I struggle to find relevant documents and understand lectures, hindering my academic performance and collaboration with peers.

(A focus group interview with students: P12)

Freshmen who fail to meet academic requirements may have to retake exams or repeat the academic year, delaying their progress. The difference in assessment methods between high school and university adds to the challenge, along with the introduction of new subjects in the foundation year. Some students struggle with specific subjects despite their efforts, and a lack of lecturer engagement worsens the situation. Additionally, limited digital skills and challenges with English further hinder their learning and adaptation to university life. These issues often create a gap between students and lecturers.

Personality Challenges

The majority of university students in Cambodia hail from various provinces, and moving to Phnom Penh, the capital city, presents a new and unfamiliar environment that is far from the warmth of their families. This transition period gives rise to numerous concerns, particularly for female students, as they navigate living alone or with friends in unfamiliar places. The uncertainty surrounding their living situation, including the nature of their relationships with roommates, poses significant challenges in terms of safety and security. First-year students often find themselves ill-prepared to manage the practical aspects of independent living, such as securing accommodation, arranging food, and managing expenses. Approximately 50% of respondents reported experiencing homesickness, which is exacerbated by adverse weather conditions, leading them to cry and wish to return to their hometowns. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

As a female, I was disappointed due to feeling lonely and miserable. I have not lived alone. The rental room did not comfort us as our hometown. Specifically, I fear communicating with other people around me.

(A focus group interview with students: P11)

Finding suitable accommodation near the university is a daunting task, as rental rooms near the campus have higher prices and limited availability. Students often spend at least a week searching for a suitable rental room, and the facilities vary greatly depending on the price. Many students express that while their own homes might not be spacious, they are more comfortable and welcoming than shared rental rooms. The diverse backgrounds and educational levels of fellow residents in rental rooms create further concerns, particularly regarding establishing positive

relationships with new neighbors. Additionally, students living in areas far from the university face additional challenges, such as spending more time commuting and juggling household chores with their relatives before being able to focus on their studies. Some students lack transportation and are forced to walk to school, adding to their difficulties. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

Transitioning to university life, I faced homesickness, loneliness, and uncertainty about my future. Living with relatives added to the challenge, as I had to help with household chores and childcare. Despite feeling miserable and wanting to drop out, I remained committed to my studies, often reviewing lessons late at night after completing household duties.

(A focus group interview with students: P15)

The high cost of living and studying at universities in Cambodia presents significant challenges for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Expenses such as room rent, food, and study materials are difficult to manage, leading to inadequate living conditions and negatively impacting academic performance. Insufficient funding for study materials hinders academic achievement, while the cost of food affects daily nutrition, potentially damaging students' health. Consequently, some students consider dropping out to return home due to the family's inability to support them financially. Mental health issues are another significant concern for first-year students. The transition to university life, coupled with academic pressures, financial difficulties, and adapting to new living arrangements, can lead to emotional stress, loneliness, and anxiety. Students often lack access to appropriate counseling services, further exacerbating their mental health struggles. To cope with financial constraints, many students take on part-time or full-time jobs, which can interfere with their studies and lead to health problems due to insufficient rest. The lack of health services at universities compounds these issues, as students do not have access to proper medical care and facilities. The quote from two interviewees

included a management team in MoEYs and two focus groups are below:

About 80 to 90% of students suffer from mental crises, yet institutions lack adequate counseling services. Students report unaddressed issues, and some schools do not provide mental health or health counseling services at all.

(A one-on-one interview with the management team in MoEYS: P2)

No hard work, no money for study. Some work is done all night, so there is time to rest during the day. Sometimes, I must sleep in class, and I can't catch up on lessons. The teamwork that the teacher assigns I have not done much because there is no time to help. If we do not try to help ourselves, no one will help us.

(A focus group interview with students: P10)

The university shall have a room to provide health services to students. Some students who are not feeling well can come and receive services. Especially female students, when they come to receive health services, they need a closed room and experts.

(A focus group interview with students: P11)

Students in Cambodia face significant challenges with their living situation, including uncertainty about roommate relationships and safety. Finding a suitable rental room often takes a week, with facilities varying widely depending on price. The high cost of living and studying further exacerbates these challenges, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Social Challenges:

Communication among classmates and neighbors is often limited during the initial stages of university life, which can hinder the establishment of relationships. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon. Firstly, individuals may not have prior knowledge of each other, including their backgrounds, gender, or physical appearance. Students from different provinces may also face linguistic barriers, as regional dialects can vary significantly, sometimes leading to misunderstandings. Over time, however, such

barriers may diminish as students communicate more frequently, allowing them to better understand each other's language and expressions. This transitional period often requires additional time for students to observe one another, engage in teamwork, and participate in social activities. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

The first time at university, we got confused about using language and culture. In a class, students are from different areas across Cambodia. They are quite different in communication. We need more time to adapt and create good friendships.

(A focus group interview with students: P12)

For introverted students, initiating communication poses an even greater challenge, as they may lack the confidence or skills to engage effectively with others. Building meaningful relationships demands mutual understanding and openness, yet many first-year students report feelings of loneliness and frustration during their early months at university. They may limit interactions to mandatory activities, such as answering attendance calls, and avoid voluntary participation in conversations. This lack of communication often extends to academic contexts, where students may hesitate to ask questions of their instructors or peers. Consequently, their learning and ability to collaborate in group work are negatively impacted. The transition to university life may fall short of students' expectations based on their high school experiences. Many struggle to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the university environment. Students with disabilities, in particular, face heightened difficulties in forming friendships and developing social connections, leading to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of the university's physical environment, including its location, buildings, and classrooms, can add to the challenges faced by first-year students as they navigate and adapt to their new surroundings. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

During my first time at university, I did not know where to go and how to get the correct class and building. I wanted to communicate with my classmates, yet I did not know how to start a conversation because I had never known them before.

(A focus group interview with students: P13)

In conclusion, limited communication among classmates and neighbors during the early stages of university life can hinder the formation of relationships. For introverted students, the challenge is even more pronounced, as they may struggle with confidence or communication skills, making it harder for them to engage with others and build connections.

Employment Challenges:

The majority of students in this study reported that their primary motivation for pursuing a university education was to secure employment and achieve a satisfactory salary. Adopting an organized and goal-oriented approach is essential for effectively planning and preparing for a career while at university, ensuring readiness for the labor market. However, over half of the students expressed uncertainty regarding their studies due to several factors, including a lack of clarity about their personal goals, insufficient understanding of the skills they are acquiring, uncertainty about the purpose and applicability of those skills, low resilience, concerns about their selected field of study, and anxiety about future employment prospects. This uncertainty often results in incomplete and unstructured learning, as students engage with their studies only in response to immediate circumstances rather than through a deliberate, strategic approach. The quote from an interviewee with a researcher in the HE sector is below:

The relationship between HEIs and the private sector was work, not week. They have not yet been talking and discussing how to create a responsive curriculum.

(A one-on-one interview with a researcher: P3)

Many students also take up part-time employment during their university years, often in roles that align with employer demands rather than their chosen field of study. This mismatch frequently

leads to challenges, as students may struggle to adapt to unfamiliar work environments, unclear job expectations, suboptimal working conditions, or interpersonal dynamics in the workplace. These difficulties can result in poor performance, limited creativity, and an inability to build strong professional relationships. Furthermore, students who find that their jobs fail to meet their expectations—whether due to dissatisfaction with the nature of the work or inadequate compensation—often change jobs frequently, disrupting their career progression. The quote from a focus group interview is below:

I decided to apply for a job part-time to generate more income to support my studies. The first time at work is not easy because I need to do many tasks assigned.

(A focus group interview with students: P10)

Students seeking job opportunities often rely on self-initiated efforts, such as networking and participation in extracurricular activities, to access information and identify potential roles. This underscores the importance of targeted career support and guidance to help students align their academic pursuits with their professional aspirations and navigate the transition from university to the workforce more effectively. The quote of an interviewee from the head of student affairs is below:

Ordinary students work in the service sector to earn money, but students with disabilities cannot go to work. Therefore, the school should provide any opportunities or job information that students with disabilities can do to support their studies. Students with disability do not need a sponsor; they just want a job to be able to make money on their own. The student's statement is disabled.

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P8)

The majority of students in this study are motivated by the desire to secure employment and earn a satisfactory salary. Many also engage in part-time jobs, typically in roles aligned with employer demands rather than their field of study. To find job opportunities, students often rely on self-initiated

efforts, including networking and participating in extracurricular activities.

Student Services Challenges:

Providing comprehensive student support services is a critical aspect of fostering a positive university experience, particularly for first-year students who have chosen a university as their preferred vocational training institution among numerous alternatives. These services should create a welcoming and supportive environment, instilling confidence in students by offering guidance on academic matters, personal development, mental health, occupational well-being, social engagement, and other extracurricular activities. However, first-year students in this study highlighted several challenges related to university support services. Common issues included inappropriate communication styles, delays in service delivery, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and insufficient notifications regarding available services. Some students reported feelings of anxiety when accessing these services due to the use of dismissive or abusive language and the dissemination of inaccurate information. The quote from an interviewee with a researcher in the HE sector is below:

The student services providers at higher education did not select the appropriate time for students. Particularly, they have poor interpersonal skills. He mainly pointed out that the student's services did not work in higher education.

(A one-on-one interview with a researcher: P3)

Moreover, awareness of the range of student support services provided by the university appeared to be limited. While most participants were familiar with core services such as teaching and learning support, the enrollment process, and library access, their understanding of additional services was vague or uncertain. This lack of clarity underscores the need for improved communication and outreach strategies to ensure that students are fully informed about the breadth of support available to them. The quotes of two interviewees of a head of student affairs and a management team in MoEYS are below:

First-year students need a lot of services because they are new students; they need to ask about textbooks, classrooms, teachers, and study schedules. First-year students also have problems with English, and some subjects do not catch up. They should use the method of learning or counseling from the university. P6

(A one-on-one interview with a head of student affairs: P6)

Some universities attract a large number of first-year students, but there is no way to maintain students to study for long. Exchange students disappear.

(A one-on-one interview with the management team in MoEYS: P1)

The dissemination of information regarding university student services remains inadequate. Although the university actively utilizes social media platforms, the focus is predominantly on showcasing major institutional activities such as meetings, memorandums of understanding with partner organizations, and workshops. As a result, the specific services available to students are rarely promoted, leaving many students unaware of the types of support they can access or how to find assistance when needed. This lack of visibility hinders students' ability to seek timely consultation and support. To address this issue, the university should implement a comprehensive strategy for promoting student services across all available channels, ensuring that information is accurate, accessible, and widely disseminated. This would help students gain a clearer understanding of the range of services offered and how to access them effectively. The quote from an interviewee with a researcher in the HE sector is below:

The school needs to research the needs of students when they attend university. The result will be the essential input to create a responsive master plan.

(A one-on-one interview with a researcher in the HE sector: P3)

In addition to communication challenges, the organization of infrastructure and personnel responsible for student services requires significant improvement. Many university staff participating in this study acknowledged a shortage of dedicated student service officers to facilitate learning and address student needs effectively. Furthermore, the timing of service provision is often misaligned with students' availability. Adherence to fixed administrative working hours creates a mismatch, as students may only be free to access services outside these hours. Consequently, the limited flexibility in service provision undermines the university's ability to accommodate students' schedules, further diminishing the effectiveness of support services. The quotes from two interviewees, the management team in MoEYS, and a group of students are below:

Some universities name student service, but there are no staff members. Institutions with regular staff do not have a proper schedule, do not have experts, and are not sustainable only when they are inspected and evaluated. The organization of the university is pictorial.

(A one-on-one interview with the management team in MoEYS: P2)

Ignorant subjects and skills can do some work; they do not know where to go for advice, how much to pay, or what to do. It looks like the university does not care about students.

(A focus group interview with students: P10)

The findings of this research reveal that first-year university students in Cambodia encounter significant challenges in their academic and personal lives. These challenges encompass various transitional dimensions, including academic transition, personality adjustment, social integration, employment adaptation, and the transition to utilizing university-provided student services. Students often need to fundamentally adjust their previous practices in areas such as studying, living arrangements, work responsibilities, and interpersonal communication. This period of transition can be particularly demanding, requiring substantial resilience and adaptability. At this critical juncture, students are at an increased risk of experiencing heightened stress levels, which can lead to depression and, in

severe cases, withdrawal from their academic programs.

Discussion:

The research identified the transition challenges that first-year students at universities in Cambodia encounter. During this transition, first-year students face difficulties in adapting to the HE system, literacy, study, and assessment of teacher attitudes, materials, and digital and English language. For instance, a focus group interview (P14) stated that students are unfamiliar with terms like quiz, midterm, and final exam. They added that group assignments were particularly challenging due to a lack of experience in teamwork and communication with unfamiliar peers. The results of this study are similar to those of Ploner (2018), who found that university study consisted of teaching, seminar, forum, and presentation routines. The results of Hassel and Ridout (2018) also show that university students have to study on their own without having to wait for the teacher to show them everything. This is in line with research by Murtagh (2010), who found that students are responsible for themselves, while teachers are simply instructing and providing orientation. Likewise, Lowe and Cook (2003) stated that nearly a third of first-year students expect teachers to use the same teaching methods as high school.

Students have not yet adapted and have not yet mastered basic skills in the new context, similar to the Downs (2005) study, which found that first-year students still had some low skills, such as briefing, discussing, and writing ability. Using technical terms and using English is difficult for first-year students, as the group discussion (P12) raised that they lack English proficiency. Thus, they struggle to find relevant documents and understand the lessons. The results of this research are similar to those of Ploner (2018), who found that first-year students did not yet understand the technical terms used at the university, which made it difficult for them to understand the subject. Research by Moeurn (2017) also found that some students experience English problems while studying at university. A further similar statement by Kariuki (2006) found that the use of English in

the textbook is also a challenge for first-year students. The research adds that students have difficulty using English to understand lessons and the content of words in English-speaking subjects.

Furthermore, the presentation of The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000) is consistent with the findings, which also found that the use of English in specialized subjects such as mathematics is difficult for students. Lack of materials and equipment, experiments, and digital knowledge have become challenges for first-year students. The results of this study are similar to those of Richards & Renandya (2002), who found that higher education institutions lacked school facilities, specialized classrooms, and a lack of social work knowledge activities in the classroom. Too many students make it difficult to teach. Other research has also found that the results of a Bunthoeurn (2018) study show that the use of technology has become a problem due to limited language skills. A similar study by Loo and Hang (2007) found that the challenges of using technology in Cambodia were due to the high cost of internet connection, lack of knowledge of English, difficulty in typing in Khmer, lack of technical human resources, and lack of funding to promote the use of technology.

The study found that the next challenge was the personality transition of first-year students, who had to move away from family, budget, mood swings, homesickness, and other health problems. For instance, a management team in MoEYS (P2) highlighted that about 80 to 90% of students suffer from mental crises, yet institutions lack adequate counseling services. Students report unaddressed issues, and some schools do not provide mental health or health counseling services at all. The results of this study are similar to those of some researchers, such as Fisher et al. (1985), who found that geographical change is associated with both mental and physical dissatisfaction, leading to homesickness. Research by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015) also found that students begin to develop the ability to adapt, own, be away from home, and be more responsible and homesick,

which then leads to depression. Research by Ramrathan (2013) also found that with adequate funding, students could not find safe accommodation and adequate nutrition.

In addition, a focus group (P10) showed that they had no money to study due to some expense. Similar results were found by Tinto (1998), who suggested that financial problems were a major factor in students' decision to drop out. Thompson et al. (2021) also found that mismanagement and misuse of funds create problems for students. Moreover, Newfield (2018) found that various sources of student expenses include rising tuition fees, textbooks, accommodation policies, and other living expenses. Mental health-related outcomes, such as the findings of Daniels and MacNeels (2021), found that many difficult situations at this time would cause students to become depressed and lack motivation. A similar study by Stone and Archer (1990) found that in the 1990s, student counselors in higher education reported a significant increase in the number of students with mental health problems. Health problems are similar to some studies. A study by the University Bandirma Health Vocational School Nursing and Bandirma Vocation of Doygun and Gulec (2012) found the same reason why students do not eat breakfast: they cannot wake up early, have little time, and are absent. Cook, starve, starve, and not have enough money.

The study also found that first-year students face challenges related to the social transition, with students having difficulty communicating with new people who have never known differences in communication and living habits and that students need a lot of time to adapt to the new environment. As found from group discussion (P12), students got confused about using language and culture. In a class, students are from different areas across Cambodia. They are quite different in communication. This result is similar to previous research by Parker et al. (2017), which found that continuing education students come from different backgrounds, especially students from one ethnic group who face challenges in cultural affairs. Tinto's (1983) research also found that a student

who feels lonely is when he is not yet able to form effective relationships with the people around him. The same results were found by Camelia and Nastase (2018), who showed that students with different sources of income, families, and backgrounds were also at risk of social problems during the transition period. Research by Shabana and Naeem (2024) found similarly that shy students often find it difficult to improve relationships with friends and find it difficult to work in groups and projects.

Transition-related employment challenges are the result of research on first-year students. They choose careers that are not in line with their interests and abilities, study without goals, and work without access to accurate and clear information, which becomes a challenge in studying at the university. Students from the provinces or students with low living standards must seek income to support their studies. At this point, students must not yet understand the job market and meet all working conditions. For instance, a group discussion interview (P10) reported that.

They decided to apply for a job part-time to generate more income to support my studies. The first time at work is not easy because they need to do many tasks assigned, and they do not know how to do that work. The results are similar to those of Tinto (1987), which found that students with a clear career plan were more adaptable and outperformed than students without a career plan. The study adds that the problem is exacerbated when students look at the previous generation of undocumented or unemployed students. Similar results were found by CDRI (2015), which found that students with poor skills, despite graduating from higher education, while high-achieving students did not respond. And the needs of the labor market yet. Research by Ozlem and Selma (2012) also found that students do not have the right work plan, making them work in vain, hopeless, unstable, and anxious about the job.

The final result of the next challenge is student service interventions. When faced with a problem, students need a professional, problem-solving

counselor and mentor. However, the provision of services for students is not enough and responds to the situation of Cambodian students, while students have not yet received accurate and complete information on university student services. A result from the researcher in the HE sector illustrated that the student services providers at higher education did not select the appropriate time for students. Particularly, they have poor interpersonal skills. He mainly pointed out that the student's services did not work in higher education. This result is similar to the results of Brock (2010), who found that good student services needed human resources to provide adequate services to orient and provide solutions to students. Further similar results from Lea and Farbus (2000) found that neither the provider nor the student had enough time to help with the task. An Israeli study (2023) also found that some students were unaware of the presence of student support services provided by universities. A similar statement by the World Bank (1997) found that higher education institutions in developing countries face budget challenges in building quality and improving student services. Research by The Task Force (2000) also shows that higher education institutions in developing countries lack infrastructure, laboratory equipment, and student learning aids.

Overall, the results of the research show that first-year students studying at universities in Cambodia face several challenges and that student support systems and services are still limited. This result requires the participation and efforts of all stakeholders with the highest responsibility to ensure a better student learning environment at the university, which will help motivate students to achieve the expected results. Of their higher education institutions and respond to the economic and social needs of Cambodia. The results also show that higher education institutions must fulfill their functions and duties by the legal documents on the provision of student services in higher education institutions to improve the quality of higher education in the country.

Conclusion:

This research highlights the challenges of first-year students at HEIs in Cambodia, especially in academic, personality, social transitions, employment transitions, and student service transitions. Transitional issues include adaptation to the higher education system, literacy, study and assessment of teacher attitudes, materials and equipment, and digital and English language. This problem makes students not ready and properly able to implement the new education system as required at the tertiary level. Personality transition issues include homesickness, accommodation, finances, mental health, and wellness. During this transition, students face both physical and psychological difficulties, which hurt their university life. In addition, social transition issues include socio-cultural, networking, and friendship. First-year students do not yet have the ability and ability to quickly develop relationships in line with their actual needs.

In particular, the challenges that first-year students face are job transitions, such as career plans, soft skills, and job market readiness. During this transition, students are increasingly under pressure from both future and academic plans. Finally, this research also shows the challenges related to student services, with the results showing that higher education institutions do not pay much attention to providing support to students through service providers, information services, and service infrastructure. Overall, the results show that first-year students are left behind and do not receive full services, just as first-year students have everything.

Recommendation:

This is a small study focusing on the largest number of public and private higher education institutions. This data and this research are due to interviews with leaders, officials, and target students. Therefore, the results of this research do not have the power to evaluate all higher education institutions in Cambodia. To study the challenges of first-year students in higher education in more comprehensive and in-depth, the following recommendations should be considered:

Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport

The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport should prepare a standard letter for the provision of student services, which is the obligation of HEIs.

Secondly, it shall develop incentives for HEIs to better implement first-year student support services. Finally, it should discuss and bring student issues to the table for review, and decision-making is necessary for the promotion of this service to be sustainable and accurate.

HEIs

Higher education institutions should research the needs of first-year students to design student services that respond to the situation. Second, they should improve student infrastructure. Third, they should recruit first-year student teachers who are talented in both technical and motivational skills. Finally, teachers should be encouraged to have good relations with students in a fair, non-discriminatory manner and by legal documents.

Students

Students should gain an in-depth understanding of the curriculum and how to study at the university and strengthen their capacity, knowledge, skills, soft skills, and technology. Secondly, students should use the counseling services of higher education institutions as much as possible. Finally, students should have the courage to address their needs and seek help.

Researchers

Future research should address the challenges of implementing student services in higher education of various ministries. Secondly, there is a need for using qualitative and quantitative methods to get detailed data. Finally, the next study should focus on the impact of student services on student learning.

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