

Factors Influencing Cambodia's Master's Degree Students to Choose between Thesis and Coursework Program

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Abstract

The educational sector in Cambodia has experienced significant growth over the years, featuring increased number of higher institutions as well as greater turn out of graduates from educational institutions of learning in the country. However, what remains an ongoing concern is the inability of students to enroll for courses which are highly demanded in the market. The absence of a requisite agency to conduct effective restructuring and enforcement of higher education policies, among other factors has significantly contributed to the restriction of Master's degree students in choosing between research-based and coursework programs. Previous studies used theoretical frameworks such as social change as a unifying model for explaining the choice for more engaging and rigorous programs like research courses as opposed to coursework-based programs. Therefore, this study aims at obtaining the motivations or de-motivation amongst master's degree students for either choosing research or coursework-based approach to their program. Using a quantitative study design featuring the use of a structured questionnaire, 187 students were enrolled for this study and data collected was subjected to statistical analysis. 58% of participants are enrolled in coursework-based type of masters while 42% are enrolled in thesis-based masters' degrees, and 59.5% of respondents answered that their reason for choosing coursework over thesis was to balance between family and education constraints. Results from this study show that lack of research skills, time constraints, family factors, quality of education offered by institutions, and lack of knowledgeable advisors leads to the choice of coursework over thesis amongst the students.

Keywords

Factors, Masters' Degree, Thesis Program, Coursework Program, High Education

1. Introduction

1.1. Graduate Education System

The higher education in Cambodia has experienced significant growth over the last ten years, especially in relation to the private sector (2017). In 1996, the very first university, Norton University, was started to affect the policy of the government regarding public/private partnership. From then on, there has been a rapid growth in the number of higher education institutions. As of 2002, the country was home to 22 public Universities, and the private institutions reached 40 in total. The population of students in the higher education institutions has increased from 10,000 to 20,062 from 1997 to 2002.

The Royal Academy of Cambodia, which was initially started for research purposes, is the sole academy in the country. It mainly offers masters and doctoral degree programs. The university has, at least, four faculties which provide courses leading to bachelor's degrees and above.

1.2. Higher Education and Its Quality

A regulatory authority that gives the direction of governance on issues concerning higher education is very essential in unifying, guiding and harmonizing collaborative efforts in the human capital to develop and supply the demands of the labor market, and not only to sustain but also to accelerate the economic growth of the country. When such a body does not exist or is less active, there is a predilection on the part of the institutions of higher educational establishments to offer courses which are highly demanded by the students who have the money to pay for such courses but who are not well-informed of the needs of the market. This is the situation in Cambodia's higher education sector. It is even more apparent in the current situation where the government offers insufficient funding to the state universities and none whatsoever to private universities. This has reduced the influence of the government over the courses which the schools offer. However, the imbalance between the skills of the graduates and the market demands in particular fields cannot be fixed by focusing on imparting knowledge relevant to specific skill-sets and fields while ignoring the other disciplines. Especially when the disciplines being disregarded are key to the development of the nation.

Due to the problem of shortage of skilled labor in such areas as are critical to National development, the country will, as expected, slump down in economic growth and become less competitive in the long run. Another concern linked to the above is the quality of education that students obtain. Because there is no specific body/organization with the power to restructure and enforce the higher education policies effectively, institutions and their respective personnel in power are more likely to develop behavioral patterns allowing them to compromise on the quality of education being offered. Hence, the said personnel might be tempted to adopt short-cuts to ensure higher revenues, delay or avoid bank-

ruptcy, or remain in business for years to come.

This situation is even more perilous in Cambodia where the accreditation committee of Cambodia continues to offer foundation year accreditation even though it has been operational for more than a decade. It has experienced unwanted and unnecessary delay in its pursuit of institutional accreditation. This calls into question the quality of university graduates being produced. The students are barely equipped with the right skills to be employable.

2. Theoretical Framework

There is a general dearth of research on the area of masters' students' choice of coursework programs over thesis. Most of the literature and models that have been developed are largely based on predictors of success in graduate school, predictors of drop-out among various racial and socio-economic groups, and predictors of choice for particular programs. While this is the case, there exist some general literature and non-specific models which are useful for explaining the selection of non-thesis programs over research-based programs. This literature review will focus on the discussion of the theory of social capital as a unifying model for explaining not only the success in graduate school but also a choice for more engaging and rigorous programs like research courses as opposed to coursework-based programs.

Social Capital

This theoretical framework offers insight into the contribution of relationships and networks to influence and foster academic choice in school. While this model may be appropriate for certain racial groups, such as African Americans and Latinos, it is also useful for explaining other behaviors related to academic performance. First proposed by Coleman (1988), this theory suggests that social capital is imperative in educational settings. Although students have many sources of capital at their disposal, i.e., financial, human, and social; he mentioned that social capital is core to networks, academic achievement, and norms. Social capital refers to the value of the social networks at the disposal of an individual. Social networks have two core parts, i.e., social connections and relationships and the resources availed by such connections. Different scholars have focused on the various aspects of social capital. For example, some researchers have concentrated on the connections among the institutional agents and the components which organize those relationships to units (Stanton-Salaazar, 1997). Other researchers have focused on the norms and values of reciprocity and trustworthiness that occur from the relationships so as to access resources (Fukuyama, 1999). It looked like an investment which yields expected returns; social capital can be deemed as an investment in social relations which yields given returns.

According to Burt (1997), social capital refers to the opportunity and not the capability to be able to have access to many types of resources through the con-

nections that one has created. It may also be defined as the existence of various informal values which are shared within a particular group, and which allow cooperation and socialization among them. Moreover, as such, the amount of social capital that a person can contend with will predict the level of the network that they will be able to mobilize as well as the degree of resources that the people in the system possess. Other individuals have identified other types of social capital. For example, Putnam mentioned bonding and bridging as the types of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding allows the existence of close ties between the members of a group in which support is available to the members of the group from within. Bridging social capital refers to the connections that are established between groups which are heterogeneous. While the latter type does not provide very adhesive and strong ties, it is nevertheless imperative for the movement of resources from one group to another. For the movement of community resources, bridging social capital is the most important. For this research, these two types of social capital will be considered, e.g. bonding and bridging. Bridging will refer to the relationship of the students with the teachers, while bonding will refer to the relationship of students among themselves, i.e., peer to peer.

A significant amount of research continues to mount on the evidence that students who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds view educational tasks differently (Weis, 1990). Students who are concerned with more conventional methods of hard work on general tasks to have access to academic credentials are more likely to engage in academic work more than those who do not have much hope in the education system as the leeway to future rewards. For example, if a student wants to enter a specific trade, he will, for instance, choose the pathway, of say, research and thesis writing, as opposed to the alternative path of coursework which may not give real promise of entry into that job.

It is true that the family holds sway over the nature of dispositions that an individual has. However, educational systems can either enhance or redirect those dispositions. The influence of educational institutions can be explained by the Bourdieu's model of habitus, which, he explains as a system of enduring dispositions which bring past experiences into a complex mix of perceptions, actions, and appreciation. Through this model, it is possible to have insight into how students make sense of the world in which they live and how they perceive the opportunities that they are exposed to (Richardson, 1986).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Sample Population

The sample population for this research was master's degree students in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The research was carried out within Cambodian Higher Education Institutions because it is meant to find out the motivation or demotivation for either choosing research or coursework-based approach to a master's program.

3.2. Research Design

This article used quantitative study design. The study was to find out the predictors of master's students following the coursework-based path as opposed to thesis-based track in their postgraduate studies.

3.3. Sample Size

The sample size was 200 students while the required sample size was 185 students. This included all students who were willing to participate in the study. An online method was used for sampling as it was easier to find master's students in the college through their online social network than to look for them in their respective classes at the college.

3.4. Data Collection Technique

A structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was shared with the students as an online survey to be carried through a Google Drive document, and some will be posted to the student as Skype for further interview.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data coming immediately from the collection was organized, and all relevant information was provided. Data cleaning was done and the cleaned data was presented using text, tables, bar graphs, pie charts, and line graphs, etc. All these varieties of modes were used to improve the visual appeal of and the ease of reading the study results. The data was then analyzed using available Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 28.0.

3.6. Research Criteria

The inclusion criteria consisted of all the students who were taking master's courses and were willing to participate in the study. Students were not required to show their identity card for the reason of protecting their privacy, but the researcher and his team had an obligation to prove the respondents were currently studying their master's degree. Students must also have chosen either a research-based or a coursework-based path in their master's program.

The exclusion criteria involved all non-university students or college staff who had not registered themselves for any postgraduate course. Undergraduate students were also not to be considered eligible for the study. Neither were those who had just joined the program and had not completed one year or chosen the path for their master's studies.

4. Presentation of Results

Type of masters

Figure 1 shows the ratio of coursework-based approach to thesis-based approach opted for by the students enrolled in the master's program. More than

half of the students were taking coursework-based route for their master's studies (58%) whereas the rest of them were opting for a thesis-based approach to their master's degrees.

Types of Programs

Most common master's programs taken by the respondents were MBA (44%), followed by others (22%), M Ed. (18%), MA (7%), M Bus (5%) and MSc (4%) (Figure 2).

4.1. Socio-Demographics Variables of Students (Table 1)

The age of respondents ranged between 24 to 40 years with the age group from 24 to 29 years (65.9%) being the highest age group of the students, followed by 36 to 40 years (21.7%). Most of the respondents were males with almost 70 percent (69.2%) and rest were females (30.8%). Moving to marital status most of them were single 110 (59.5%). In addition, many of the students were in their second year (40%), followed by third year students (36.8%), and more than 60% (122) of them funded themselves.

Individual factors for choosing coursework

Lack of research skills was the most common individual reason for choosing coursework of thesis 34 (18.4%), followed by lack of research skill plus time constraint 25 (13.5%) and time constraint alone as reason 10.8 (20%) (Figure 3).

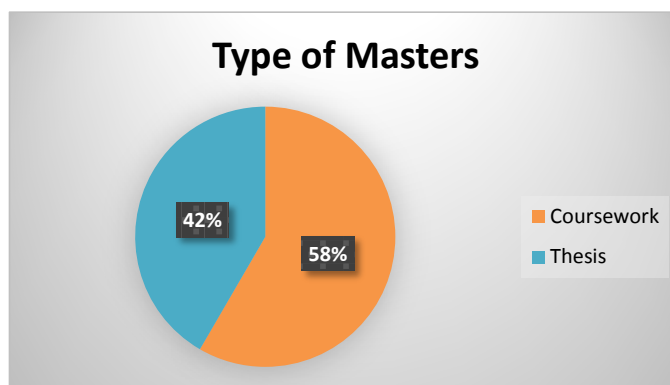


Figure 1. Type of masters of the Cambodian masters' students.

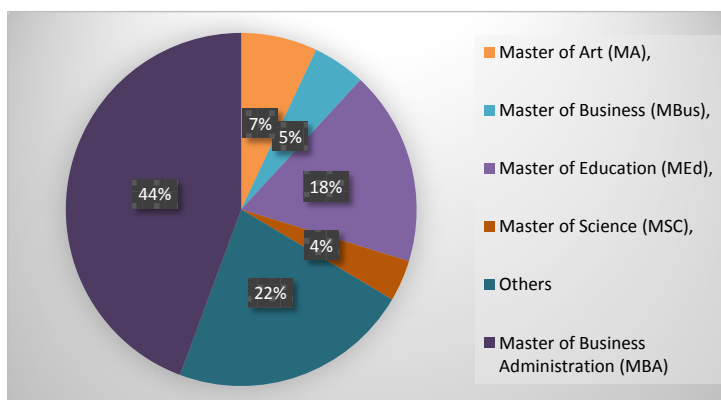


Figure 2. Types of master's degree programs.

Table 1. Socio-demographics of the respondents.

Characteristics	Total (185)	Percentage (100%)
Age (years)		
24 - 29	122	65.9
30 - 35	22	11.9
36 - 40	40	21.7
40 - 45	1	0.5
Gender		
Female	57	30.8
Male	128	69.2
Marital status		
Single	110	59.5
Married	73	39.5
Divorced	2	1.1
Year of education		
First year	43	23.2
Second year	74	40.0
Third year	68	36.8
Type of funding		
Sponsor	24	13.0
Employer	14	7.6
Parents	11	5.9
Self-funding	125	67.6
Scholarship	8	4.3
Partial scholarship	2	1.1
Monk	1	0.5

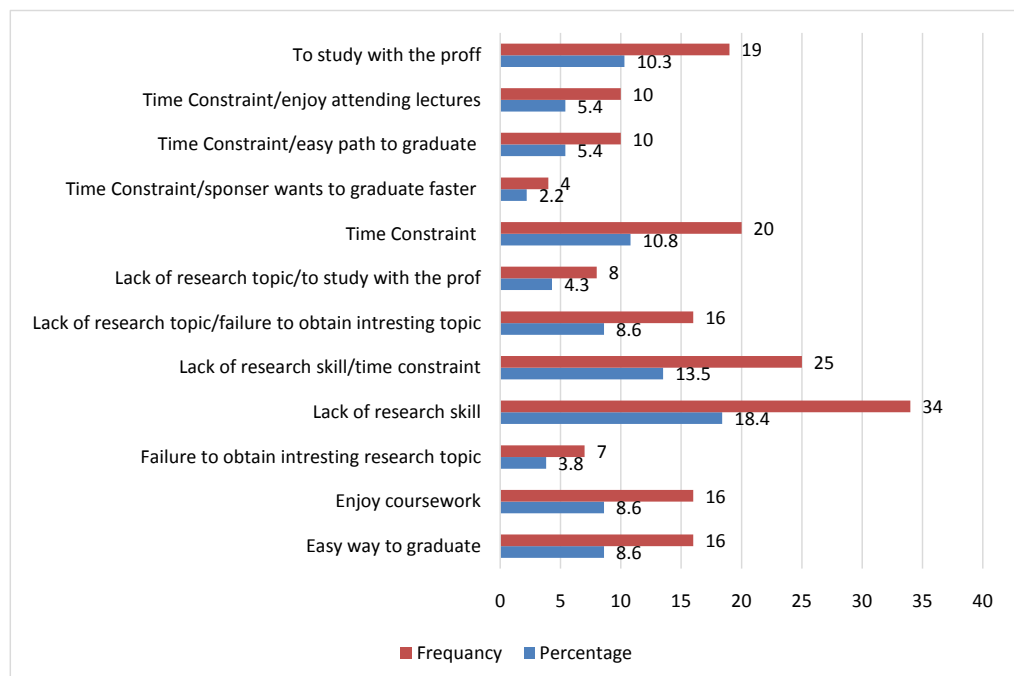


Figure 3. Individual factors affecting students' choice of master's type.

Family factors for choosing coursework

Family factors also play a key role in the choice of a student’s path in their academic career. Elements, such as financial constraints, family pressure and preferences, the stress of maintaining a balance between financial stability and pursuing quality education as well as health concerns of family members could drive a student to prefer one academic path over the other.

Keeping this in mind, **Figure 4** shows the responses of students regarding the different family factors that played a role in helping them choose between a thesis-based academic path or a coursework-based one in their master’s program. Speaking of which, most the respondents answered that their reason for choosing coursework over thesis was the need to balance between family and education constraints 110 (59.5%).

School factors for choosing course work

Figure 5 demonstrates the influence of school/university factors on students’ coursework or thesis-based approach to study. University factors affecting the choice of the students were almost similar with much difference and Students’ responses ranked quality of education at 17.3% with a response frequency of 32, followed closely by lack of knowledgeable advisor plus lack of research-oriented options standing at 15.7% with a frequency of 29 and lack of knowledgeable advisors alone at 15.2% with a frequency of 28.

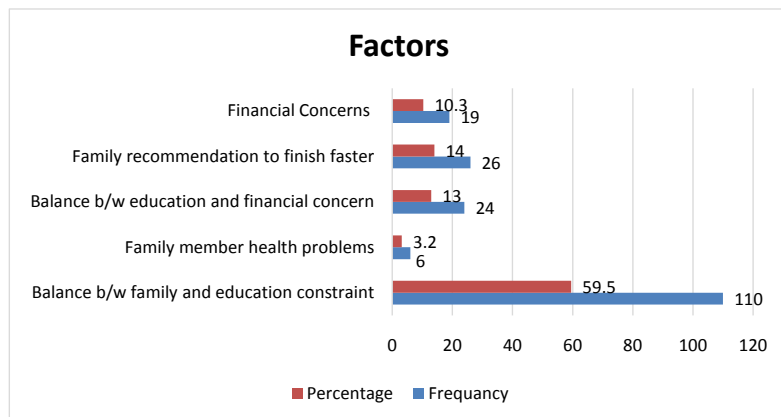


Figure 4. Family factors affecting student’s choice of type of masters.

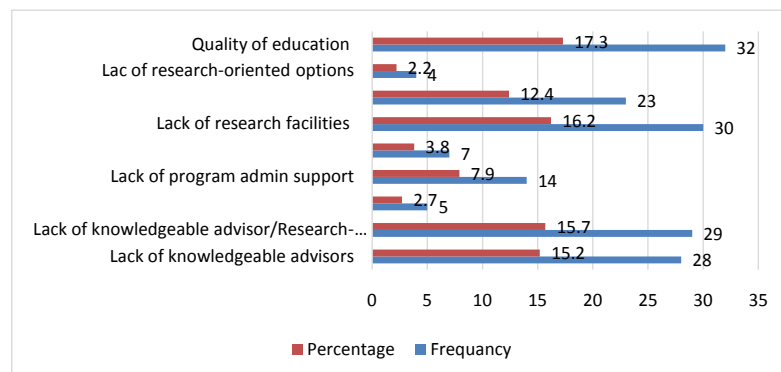


Figure 5. School/university factors affecting students’ choice of type of masters.

4.2. Discussion

As mentioned in the results, majority of the respondents have chosen coursework over thesis for their masters, and reasons for choosing the coursework included individual factors, like lack of research skills as well as time constraints. In addition, family factors, such as the desire to balance between family and education accounted for most of the students' reasoning for choosing coursework over thesis while university related factors, such as quality of the education and lack of knowledgeable advisors, ranked last in the list of reasons for students to choose coursework over. Most of the students funded themselves for their master's program and this is mainly because most of these students were attending private schools. Hence the key factors that influence the students' choice are quality of education, balance between family and education, and lack of research skills.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, respondents favored coursework over thesis, reasoning lack of time, research skills, financial strains, and quality of education being better in coursework than thesis. Students should be able to choose any specialty that will increase their chances of improving and growing both academically and career wise university should be able to provide students with expert teachers and high-quality education as development of countries depends on their human capital. Thus, investing in people's education should be any country's priority. This study was strictly quantitative, further studies on relationship between type of funding and other demographics and the choice of type of studies is recommended to better understand different aspects influencing the students' choices.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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