

U.S. TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA: SOFT POWER AND
ORIENTALISM IN CONTEXT

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	10
ABSTRACT.....	11
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	13
Transnational Higher Education.....	14
An Increase in Transnational Education and Geopolitical Tensions.....	18
Statement of the Problem.....	20
Purpose of the Study.....	22
Methodology.....	23
Preview of Dissertation.....	25
Significance of the Study.....	26
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	27
The Political Context.....	27
The ASEAN Region and Cambodia.....	27
U.S./Cambodian Relations.....	30
Historical Relations.....	31
Post-Khmer Rouge Period.....	31
Relations during the Trump Administration.....	33
Transnational Higher Education as a Phenomenon.....	35
Early Beginnings of Transnational Higher Education.....	36

Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Transnational Higher Education.....	38
Importing Country Motivations.....	41
Transnational Higher Education in Cambodia and Southeast Asia.....	42
Transnational Higher Education in Southeast Asia.....	42
Cambodia, Higher Education, and Transnational Higher Education.....	44
Related Research.....	46
Higher Education and Soft Power.....	46
Higher Education and Orientalism.....	51
Transnational Higher Education Students.....	54
Conceptual Frameworks.....	59
Soft Power.....	60
Orientalism.....	61
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	64
Research Questions.....	64
Research Approach.....	66
Research Sample.....	67
Data Collection.....	68
Site and Data Access.....	69
Data Analysis.....	72
Validity and Reliability.....	73

Positionality.....	74
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	76
Overview of Findings.....	76
Perceptions about the United States: A Complex Context.....	77
U.S. Sanctions and Visa Restrictions Against Cambodia.....	78
Antagonization from the U.S. Embassy.....	80
U.S. Domestic Chaos and Racism/Xenophobia.....	81
The United States on a Pedestal: Soft Power Resources.....	82
U.S. Culture, Diversity, and Values.....	83
U.S. Higher Education Reputation and Rankings.....	85
Recognition of U.S. Credentials.....	87
U.S. University Curriculum and Student Life.....	89
Development of Culturally “Western” Skills.....	92
Competitiveness in the Job Market.....	96
Preference for U.S. Higher Education over Other Countries.....	98
Perceptions about Cambodia: A Growing Inferiority Complex?.....	101
Perceptions about Politics and Culture in Cambodia.....	102
The Case of Zaman University.....	106
Perceptions about Cambodian Workplace Culture.....	108
Perceptions about Cambodian Education.....	109

Narrow Curriculum and Lack of Extracurriculars.....	110
Lack of Freedom of Expression.....	115
Low Quality Instructors.....	117
Khmer Language and Culture.....	119
Sources and Exacerbation of Perceptions and Attitudes.....	121
Marketing Materials.....	121
Staff and Faculty.....	123
Role of Parents.....	128
Cultural and Institutional Outsiders.....	131
Synthesized Perceptions and the Resilience of U.S. Soft Power.....	132
‘Improving’ Cambodia.....	133
Desire for Development and Increased Ties with the United States.....	135
Summary.....	141
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	142
Overview of the Study.....	142
Summary of the Findings and Implications.....	143
Soft Power in Context.....	143
Orientalism in Context.....	145
Contributions to Existing Literature.....	146
Soft Power and International Higher Education.....	147

The Rise of China?.....	150
Orientalism and Student Perceptions.....	151
Implications for Future Practice.....	151
Soft Power and the Viability of Transnational Higher Education Programs.....	152
Orientalism: Changing the Narrative.....	156
Implications for Future Research.....	158
Transnational Higher Education.....	159
International and Transnational Higher Education Students.....	161
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DUAL DEGREE STUDENTS.....	164
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SINGLE DEGREE STUDENTS.....	166
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR WESTERN UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STAFF.....	168
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMBODIA FACULTY AND STAFF.....	170
APPENDIX E: TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS.....	172
APPENDIX F: LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	178
REFERENCES.....	180

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1: Soft power spectrum (Nye, 2004)</i>	60
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ABSTRACT

In the expanding landscape of transnational higher education (TNHE), cases have begun to emerge that serve as possible bellwethers for future challenges. These challenges include geopolitical conflicts and concerns over foreign influence that threaten the viability of continued TNHE delivery. To explore this issue in depth, this study focused on a particular case, that of a U.S. TNHE program in Cambodia, at a time of increased tensions between home and host country.

This study explored the perceptions, values, and attitudes of local students enrolled in a U.S. TNHE program in Cambodia and how their experiences and perceptions connected with the complex political relationship between the United States and Cambodia. 32 students, 4 staff members, and 5 faculty members involved in the program were interviewed to learn about their perceptions of the program and what values and attitudes they held related to both the program, its context, and their participation in it.

Findings indicate that the soft power of the United States, in particular that of its higher education system, remains strong in spite of negative perceptions of U.S. politics and foreign policy, and despite the contentious nature of U.S./Cambodian relations. Additionally, the study found the presence of Orientalist tropes that were internalized by students when expressing their preference for U.S. higher education over Cambodian higher education, which have been reinforced by marketing and media, as well as by the opinions of family, friends, faculty, staff members, and acquaintances. By integrating these findings, this study illuminates how the soft power attraction of the United States helps TNHE programs exhibit resilience even in times of political crisis between sending and receiving countries. However, the long-term viability of such programs, and their reliance on U.S. soft power attraction, is questionable and subject to the

changing nature of the political context. Additionally, with the increase in the number of TNHE providers and programs, practitioners should be cognizant of the messaging used to promote programs to students and their families. In this way, they can avoid reinforcement of negative perceptions of the host country to ensure that long term involvement in the local higher education landscape is rooted in respectful partnership and not by banking on the enduring attraction of U.S. soft power.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs), which have played a key role for centuries connecting people across borders through international exchanges, research, and partnerships, are far from immune to international politics. When political issues emerge in host countries, foreign higher education institutions operating TNHE ventures sometimes find themselves in a Catch-22, trapped between operating “neutrally” and taking a possibly political stance (Fischer, 2021a, 2021b; Havergal, 2016; Krieger, 2013; Polakiewicz, 2019). One path might anger the host nation, while the other may anger their home campus stakeholders. While critics have derided U.S. universities that operate in “unfriendly” countries, or in places with questionable histories of human rights (Fischer, 2021b; Havergal, 2016), what can we learn from the students’ perspectives? What impact do universities have in locations where the political relationships between host and home countries are complicated? What do the students in these locations think about the politics of transnational higher education (TNHE)?

Current events make evident that we are living in an era of not only rapid globalization, but also increased nationalism and xenophobia¹. Organizations such as HEIs that operate across international borders must contend with the new realities of a multipolar world (Fischer, 2021b; Marginson, 2021). The international landscape in which universities operate is ever changing and increasingly competitive, with shifting political and economic relationships affecting university operations alongside the opening of new markets and opportunities (Chou, Kamola, & Pietsch, 2016). This was the reality for institutions engaging internationally even prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has further complicated internationalization efforts by universities.

¹ Examples include the United States with the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump on an anti-globalist platform (Ashraf, 2017), ethnic cleansing which incorporates anti-UN and pro-Burmese rhetoric in Myanmar (Holmes, 2017), the rise of right wing nationalist parties in Europe (Shuster, 2016), and the exit of the UK from the European Union (Erlanger, 2016).

Transnational Higher Education

A TNHE program is inherently a contested political space in which larger international politics are interpreted and experienced by stakeholders, who must navigate these conflicting ideas and tensions alongside their own personal motivations and ambitions. It could be that the people to people diplomacy that occurs between students, faculty, and staff operating in transnational higher education can weather the storms and complexities of international politics. It could also be true that international politics do not play a large role in TNHE participants' perceptions and experiences, and that concerns over political tensions affecting TNHE operations are unfounded. Outside parties, especially at the home campus who may only be acquainted with the macro level politics of governments, may be unable to conceptualize how TNHE programs are perceived and experienced by the actual students. It could also be the case that administrators operating these programs are ignoring the less quantifiable impacts of these programs in favor of general proclamations about the programs' inherent and assumed goodness. In any case, new research into these emerging issues can give us a more nuanced understanding of the reality on the ground.

Global North² originating TNHE, that is, educational programs (curriculum, degrees, etc. delivered across borders from the Global North) to the Global South are at times disparaged as being neocolonial and opportunistic in nature (Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020a). It is inarguable that the Global North, being made up of former colonizing or dominating countries, retains structural advantages over former colonized and/or marginalized countries in the Global South (Kiely, 2016). Critics characterize Global North to Global South programs as promoting

² “The terms North and South or global North and global South refer to the distinction between those nations that are most wealthy and powerful and those that are poorer and less powerful in the global political economy” (Aulette, 2012).

“Western” ideas and education as superior with little regard to the context in which they operate, and sometimes as solely revenue-generating ventures for the home campuses (Bothwell, 2015; Edelstein & Douglass, 2012; Kamenetz, 2013; Wilkins, 2017). The criticism is levied at the home university administrators and faculty behind such models, and it is rare that host country students’ interpretations are studied (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012, 2013). When they have been, it has usually been in regard to measuring students’ motivations for pursuing TNHE and their future plans post-graduation, often with economic and employment foci (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2015; Dowling-Hetherington, 2020; Levatino, 2017; Li, 2020). Other TNHE research, when conducted at the institutional level, has focused on graduate employment outcomes, student perceptions of academic quality, or the motivations of students, faculty, or administrators to be involved in such programs (Cai & Hall, 2016; Fang & Wang, 2014; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012a, 2012b).

The attention to the geopolitical aspects of TNHE has been increasing significantly in recent years, especially as U.S.-China policy begins to affect educational relationships between institutions in those two countries. New research has addressed the international relations issues that have brought transnational education initiatives, such as Confucius Institutes and U.S.-China research partnerships, under increased scrutiny (Lee & Haupt, 2020; Nunley, 2021). Macro level politics are often addressed in industry publication stories about branch campuses such as in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, or *University World News* (Ahmari, 2011; Brooks, 2011; Clifford & Kinser, 2016; Fischer, 2021b; Kiley, 2013; Krieger, 2013; Redden, 2013, 2017b, 2017c; Stearns, 2011). What is needed from current research is an examination of how these macro level international politics may affect student perceptions at the micro level of an actual TNHE program. As Kosmutzky and Putty (2016) noted, much of the existing research

is based on highly localized case studies, and what is needed is an “integrated perspective on the interplay between local (and regional), national (and supranational, such as within Europe or the Asia-Pacific area), and global developments” in TNHE (p. 16). While the case used in this study could be seen as highly localized, it involves players from the Global North and the Global South in a country increasingly caught within the larger political game of U.S.-China relations.

Additionally, while Cambodian-U.S. relations may seem like a niche issue, there are contextual similarities to a number of other existing and emerging cases of transnational education around the world where international politics threatens TNHE ventures, such as Russia (Fischer, 2021a), Hong Kong (Qin & May, 2020), Singapore (Kurohi, 2019; Polakiewicz, 2019), China (Green-Riley, 2020; Lee & Haupt, 2020), Qatar (Redden, 2017b), the United Arab Emirates (Swan, 2020), and Hungary (Murphy, 2021).

At the time of this study, the political relationship between Cambodia and the United States had been strained to such a point that Cambodia had strikingly accused the United States of attempting to foment a coup or color revolution in the country (Dara & Baliga, 2017b). In September 2017, visas for some Cambodian officials to the United States were suspended, and the Cambodian Prime Minister even suggested that the United States should withdraw its Peace Corps volunteers (Dara & Baliga, 2017a). In June 2018, the United States imposed sanctions and froze assets of a high ranking Cambodian official accused of human rights abuses tied to the political crackdown ahead of July 2018 elections, and the official targeted responded with threats to U.S. citizens that attempt to ‘interfere’ in Cambodian domestic politics (Dara, 2018a). It is against this backdrop that the newly formed partnership was launched in 2017 between “Western University (WU), a U.S. public HEI, and the American College Cambodia (ACC), a young private Cambodian university, offering U.S. accredited dual degrees to local students in country.

As the founder of the university is a member of the ruling political party in Cambodia, and a significant number of students are related to ruling party members, this particular case is a prime lens through which to view the perceptions of U.S./Cambodian, and more broadly, Global North/Global South higher education partnerships operating within tense political climates. There are bound to be many future cases of TNHE programs in tense contexts given the increasing number of such international partnerships across the globe. Since the beginning of this study, WU has opened additional TNHE locations in India, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mauritius, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Peru, and Mexico, with plans for additional locations in the future.

This study is concerned with understanding the phenomenological experiences of dual degree students involved in a TNHE program in a country with an antagonistic relationship with the program's home country. Critics of TNHE argue that these Global North originating programs are neocolonial in nature, almost by default (Ahmari, 2011; Lee, 2021; Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020a). At the same time, researchers and practitioners have also cited the perceived and reported benefits of TNHE programs and degrees for students abroad (Brodhead, 2011; Knight & McNamara, 2015; Mitchell, 2020; Stearns, 2011; White & Lee, 2020). What we do not have is a clear picture of how the students themselves perceive these programs, not just through the lens of their own personal ambitions but through the lens of being students in a Global South country with a complicated historical and present relationship with the Global North country that is conferring their degrees. While stakeholders in the United States may look with concern upon the political context in which the TNHE program under study operates, the reality is that the developments and events that make up that context may be interpreted quite differently by students in the host country.

An Increase in Transnational Education and Geopolitical Tensions

The internationalization of higher education has not always been central to university operations, though higher education has often served cross-border purposes. “During the 1990s the global dimension moved from the periphery of strategic vision in higher education, a main item only in research and knowledge, to become an external factor that required a central strategic response” (Marginson, 2011). As part of the increase in intentional internationalization efforts by universities, a new mode of global engagement – TNHE - has been facilitated by the expansion of online provision and internet access globally. “HEIs from across the globe are constantly under pressure to have internationalized curriculum, activities, and campuses” (Mwangi, et al., 2021, p. 114). Additionally, globalization and the increased flow of international trade have aided the import and export of higher education as a product and service (Ross, 2008).

TNHE is inarguably on the rise, especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. When it comes to recording this phenomenon, much of the information available focuses on one of the more widely recognized iterations of TNHE, the international branch campus (IBC). According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT), there are 306 IBCs in operation as of June 2021. In 2009, there were 160, meaning there has been an increase of roughly 90% in the past decade. Many IBCs are located in the Middle East and Asia, in cultural and political contexts quite different in most cases from those of the majority of host institutions, which are often located in places such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe, and Australia. And this data only takes into account full-fledged campuses of foreign institutions. It does not include the less visible, and less well studied side of TNHE: foreign accredited programs delivered on the campuses of partner institutions, such as the one in this study. In the United States, home of Western University (WU), the political climate at the time

of this study was one of increasing nationalism and anti-globalist rhetoric (Borger, 2019; Hennigan, 2018; Reuters, 2019). This corresponded with a rise in TNHE providers and programs, cases such as the one in this study. Cases of geopolitical tensions affecting transnational education will likely become more frequent, as seen in 2017 with the diplomatic crisis in Qatar³ (Redden, 2017b), and the ongoing targeting by the U.S. government of Chinese funded Confucius Institutes at U.S. HEIs (Green-Riley, 2020).

Despite perceived cultural, political, and other differences between home and host countries, the soft power attraction of Global North, and in this case U.S., higher education has meant that importing countries remain open to U.S. TNHE providers, and U.S. TNHE providers are still keen to engage in possibly risky (financial and reputational) ventures. The ability to address the decision to launch and operate a TNHE program in a politically sensitive or volatile context may require evidence of positive, or at the very least, non-hostile perceptions towards the TNHE provider and its home country. And as these programs become more prevalent, questions will rise on not just graduate employability, but on the ability of the providers to address the very real impacts of their programs on students and their communities (Pilsbury, Vance, Trifiro, & Lee, 2020; Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020b). We have seen U.S. academics' criticisms, often addressing the neocolonial implications, of branch campuses in Qatar, China, and Singapore covered in higher education news, and the resulting attempts to justify continued operations with limited effectiveness (Brooks, 2011; Kiley, 2013; Krieger, 2013; Redden, 2013). Rather than addressing legitimate questions over TNHE operations in difficult contexts with grand overtures

³ A diplomatic rift in early summer 2017 culminated in five Arab countries cutting diplomatic ties with Qatar, essentially isolating the peninsular country in a region already known for political instability. Qatar, perceived to be one of the more stable countries in the Arab gulf, is host to many foreign higher education institutions, including six U.S. branch campuses. As of this writing, most foreign university branch campuses in Qatar indicated that they were operating as usual while continuing to monitor for any security risks to faculty, staff, or students.

about the value of internationalization in higher education (Ross, 2011), TNHE practitioners can do so more effectively by seeking to understand the perceptions and the experiences of those students who are truly at the core of such ventures. The perspectives of students, the most critical TNHE stakeholders, about their experiences studying in these programs and about the motivations of the exporting Global North HEIs have been acknowledged in the past as lacking in the literature (Caruana & Montgomery, 2015; Roy, 2011). At the same time, the geopolitical context in which TNHE programs are being launched is becoming increasingly complex. “As the international political situation worsens, TNHE operators face a complicated landscape that may limit the offering of academic programmes and oblige them to carefully balance different national interests with global scientific and educational exchange” (Sutrisno, 2020). Therefore, this study will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of TNHE programs, both as academic ventures and potential forces of orientalism, neocolonialism, as well as cultural and political diplomacy.

Statement of the Problem

As TNHE grows in popularity, spurred along by ever increasing globalization, there is a need to develop a deeper understanding of how it is experienced by, and affects, the students it aims to serve. This is not only for purposes of quality assurance, but to address assumptions about the benefits of importing and exporting Global North programs (Pilsbury, Vance, Trifiro, & Lee, 2020). Global North universities publicly declare that their motivations for delivering TNHE to the Global South stem from their desire for academic collaborations. More often than not, these collaborations are also for financial reasons, as universities seek new revenue streams through international student enrollments (Brooks, 2011; Douglass, Edelstein, & Hoareau, 2011; Krieger, 2013; Lane, et al., 2021; Naidoo, 2010; Yao, 2021). However, we do not know as much

about how such TNHE ventures, and their countries of origin, are perceived and interpreted by their students, especially in politically sensitive contexts. Administrators and faculty may describe their intentions as building bridges among cultures, promoting access to education, and teaching skills such as ‘critical thinking’, but how students perceive the intentions of the home university, the TNHE home country, and the programs’ influence and effects on their lives and communities are not widely studied. And in a context where the host country government is increasingly hostile towards the TNHE provider’s home country, which had been exhibiting increasingly xenophobic politics during the time of this study, it is unclear if the political rhetoric factors into stakeholder students’ perceptions.

Judging by past outcries over operating in countries with unfamiliar or disparate political contexts (i.e. Singapore, China, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates), it would serve HEIs well to know if the negative perceptions reported in the news media are limited to the host country government and U.S. critics of the program. It is possible that these perceptions color student experiences and attitudes as well. More broadly, it is important to understand how student experiences and perceptions in TNHE programs provide alternative perspectives on host and home country politics and operations. These perceptions could point to not only the ability to operate in a particular country long term, but to the ability to expand the academic partnership into other areas that require a trustful partnership. Deeper partnerships that go beyond degree provision could include new and innovative educational opportunities for students, co-authored faculty research, and joint grant proposals. Such ventures require a high degree of trust and mutual goal setting not just between faculty and staff at the partner institutions, but between the institutions and their prospective students. As this study will show, word of mouth and secondhand experiences are very salient in shaping the perceptions of TNHE students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing literature by uncovering the perceptions and beliefs of students about the political context in which TNHE programs operate, as well as their perceptions of the programs' place and impacts on the political and educational context. The study does so by examining the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of actual student stakeholders at the micro level of a U.S. TNHE program in the context of macro level politics and international relations in an unstable political environment. To do this, I employed Joseph Nye, Jr.'s concept of "Soft Power" (2004) as well as Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978, 1993). U.S. higher education acts as a strong soft power resource of the United States, that is, it holds a significant strength in that students admire and aspire to be a part of the U.S. higher education system, regardless of their overall feelings about U.S. culture and politics. At the same time, Orientalist ideas about the superiority of the United States over Global South countries need to be factored into these positive perceptions of U.S. higher education. The political context of U.S./Cambodian tensions, itself imbued with Orientalist and neocolonial issues, may influence how U.S. TNHE is perceived by participating students, and consequently may alter their perceptions of their own country and its systems. So far, critics and proponents of U.S. TNHE have often failed to synthesize competing interpretations of the impact of TNHE and to understand the complexities which the students themselves are able to grasp.

When supposedly otherwise neutral departments of culture like literature and critical theory converge upon the weaker or subordinate culture and interpret it with ideas of unchanging non-European and European essences, narratives about geographical possession, and images of legitimacy and redemption, the striking consequence has been

to disguise the power situation and to conceal how much the experience of the stronger party overlaps with and, strangely, depends on the weaker. (Said, 1993, pp. 191-192)

Current pro- and anti-TNHE arguments may not tell the full story of how students in a U.S. TNHE program interpret and perceive the program in which they participate as well as the value they place on their U.S. higher education degree, itself a soft power resource of the United States. Not enough research has been done to understand how TNHE programs are perceived by stakeholders, especially students, in a shifting or hostile political context involving the sending and receiving countries. While higher education is a valuable source of U.S. soft power, there is a need to know how the program is perceived by students given the increasing likelihood that the program will be called into question due to the hostile political environment. These perceptions and beliefs about the value of a TNHE program provides valuable information for evaluating the long-term potential of operations in such a context. At the very least, these perceptions can help us to understand how U.S. higher education, as a vessel of U.S. soft power subject to changing political conditions, is perceived and interpreted by students; if it is resilient or fragile within a volatile political environment.

Methodology

The site for this case study is an example of purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). The site is unique, in that there are not many U.S. HEIs operating in Cambodia, and the climate in Cambodia at the time of the study was politically charged. The case study is highly relevant given the changing relationship between the United States and Southeast Asia at the present moment. Cambodia and the United States have a long and difficult history, and the fallout of both the Cambodian and U.S. elections, as well as U.S. Embassy statements on human rights and politics in Cambodia had been widely reported in the news and publicly criticized by the

Cambodian ruling party (Al Jazeera, 2017; Dara, 2018a; Dara, 2018b; Dara & Baliga, 2017a; Dara & Baliga, 2017b; Sokhean & Meyn, 2017; Ven, 2017b). U.S. distance learning models and dual degree partnership programs are increasing in number in Southeast Asia, and WU has since launched new TNHE programs with partners in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines, with plans for even more TNHE locations in the next several years.

The program at ACC was the first U.S. dual degree delivered entirely in Cambodia and is co-taught by faculty at the host institution. These faculty are nearly all Global North degree holders, and many are from or educated in the United States. Some have taught at other foreign educational institutions and are part of a growing number of mobile faculty who have chosen to pursue their careers abroad. Given the volatile context in which this program operates, as well as the fact that WU's partner in Cambodia is an "American style" university, this case serves as a bellwether for U.S. TNHE partnerships in tense political contexts. The student participants were highly aware of U.S. interactions with Cambodia given the prominent nature of their countries' relationship in the news during data collection, and therefore it was likely not as difficult to draw out their perceptions of the political context as opposed to conducting a study in a more stable context where such political developments and events are not widely publicized. By using semi-structured interviews, I was able to systematize the research questions while allowing for participants to elaborate on their individual values, attitudes, and beliefs towards the U.S. TNHE program as well as their perceptions of the political context. The benefit of conducting this case study at a location where I had deep familiarity with the subjects was that it allowed me to probe responses based on a deep knowledge of the program and the political context, and to allow participants to consider the program within that context. This approach allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which a TNHE program acts as a resource of U.S. soft

power, and at times an Orientalizing force, one that is subject to the political context's effects on its operational conditions, even as participants believed that education is something separate and apart from politics. Forty-one stakeholders, including thirty-two students, were interviewed to construct an understanding of this context at this particular time and in this particular space. But the results may shed light on the operation and impact of such TNHE programs beyond this case and context.

Preview of Dissertation

This study is divided into 5 chapters. In the first chapter, I will present an introduction to the study as well as the statement of the problem. The second chapter consists of a review of the political context in Cambodia as well as current literature on TNHE in the historical landscape of changing geopolitics. In this chapter I also explain the selection of the study's soft power and Orientalism frameworks. In the third chapter I explain the methodology of this qualitative study based on interviews, including the rationale for this method, an explanation of the data collection, and an exploration of the validity and reliability of the study. In chapter four, I analyze the research findings through the lenses of Nye's soft power and Said's Orientalism. Soft power allows me to demonstrate how the attraction towards the United States and its HEIs affects students' perceptions of the TNHE program. The Orientalism theory provided a tool to illustrate how the positive perceptions of the program and the United States has impacted the students' perceptions of their home country and its education system. The TNHE program ultimately has, although unintended, serious implications for how students perceive their own country and culture. But the findings indicate that students are more sophisticated in their own synthesis of these competing ideas about TNHE programs. By integrating both these frameworks, a more vivid picture emerged of how the political context and students' internal

values, attitudes, and perceptions of and about politics and education influences the soft power value of transnational higher education in a challenging context. Chapter five details the conclusions and implications for this research on TNHE programs and further research beyond Cambodia.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because U.S. higher education is increasingly viewed as a lucrative export, one that will continue to expand into new countries and contexts. This is particularly relevant given the explosion of interest in TNHE provision due to the COVID-19 pandemic and fluctuations in international students' physical mobility to Western countries in recent years. It appears that the rapid growth of TNHE options for students will remain post-COVID-19, not only as a backstop for future shocks to the international student recruitment industry but as a real evolution in higher education options for students (Bartlett, 2021; Sutrisno, 2020). This expansion does not happen in a contextual vacuum. U.S. historical interventions, both through hard and soft power, affect students' perceptions, especially in politically sensitive contexts. The ability of TNHE ventures to operate in sensitive contexts, especially long term, will depend on how they are perceived by students, who go on to become policy makers and influencers in their societies. This study aims to give researchers and administrators of TNHE programs a better understanding of student perceptions, and whether U.S. higher education is seen as just another neocolonial and orientalist export, a resilient and welcome form of soft power, or something more complex.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study will incorporate existing research on TNHE, on American universities operating abroad, and on Orientalism and soft power in international higher education. The program in this study is a type of TNHE program that incorporates a physical presence on the campus of a partner institution abroad to allow for the delivery of dual degrees. While the particular TNHE program in this study, the WU program at ACC, is not an IBC as it is traditionally defined, an IBC as a type of TNHE is closest in nature to the program in question and is the one of the closest reference points for this study in regards to existing research and literature. Before diving into current research on TNHE participants, I will first revisit the political context and U.S./Cambodian relations, literature on the rise of TNHE, TNHE in contemporary contexts, TNHE in Southeast Asia and Cambodia, and research on higher education, soft power, and Orientalism.

The Political Context

The ASEAN Region and Cambodia

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 by five Southeast Asian states in an effort to promote regional peace, stability, and cooperation (ASEAN, n.d.). As its membership grew to ten, the block continued its mission of developing and asserting a collective voice on the global stage, and to protect its membership from the unwelcome overreach of external powers. Currently ASEAN encompasses over 625 million people, has agreements spanning all forms of governance, and is about to celebrate its 50th anniversary (ASEAN, n.d.). “A Deloitte study recently projected that five of the top 15 manufacturing locations in the world will be in ASEAN by 2018, and, by 2050, ASEAN is also projected to be the fourth-largest economy in the world (after the EU, US and China)” (Swire,

2014). Yet ASEAN has faced increasing difficulties, including a growing number of authoritarian governments among its members, as well as the organization's and its members' relations with China. Between an increased military presence in the South China Sea, environmentally questionable developments on the Mekong River, and development projects that, while welcomed by cash strapped Southeast Asian governments, are protested by local populations, China's role in ASEAN affairs cannot be overstated. While the United States has had diplomatic relations with ASEAN for thirty years, its recent abandonment of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) stands in stark contrast to China's relations with ASEAN, where it has been included in the "ASEAN plus 3" group meant to increase cooperation between ASEAN and East Asia (ASEAN, 2017).

Cambodia's entry into ASEAN was delayed at first due to its governance by the Khmer Rouge regime and its subsequent political instability. It was not until 1999 that the country finally was admitted to ASEAN, and in recent years its vetoes of ASEAN policy statements have prevented the organization from presenting a united front. Cambodia's increasingly friendly relationship with China and antagonistic relationship with the international community, chiefly the United States, has concerned its ASEAN neighbors. Chiefly concerned is Vietnam, which is engaged in a tense indirect conflict with China over the South China Sea and values U.S. protection. In terms of Human Development Rankings of the ASEAN states, Cambodia is second to last, followed only by Myanmar (United Nations Development Programme, 2019), and this was before the Myanmar military coup of 2021. Add to this Cambodia's cultural and economic disputes with Thailand (Ngoun, 2012), border disputes with Vietnam (Radio Free Asia, 2020), and border disputes with Laos (Kang, 2018), and Cambodia has not enjoyed model relationships within ASEAN nor seemingly bought into ASEAN's philosophy of "quiet diplomacy"

(Katsumata, 2003, p. 106). However, as we can see in the case of Vietnam and its tumultuous history with the United States, current relations do not always indicate future ones.

Cambodia's issues with its neighbors are only exacerbated by its increasing reliance on China for foreign direct investment. As international aid organizations headquartered in the Global North turn their attention to more poverty-stricken states, China has stepped in to fill the gap in Cambodia and the region. In fact, it has become "the largest source of economic assistance to Southeast Asian countries" since the 1990s (Stetar, et al., 2010, p. 195-196). This aid has flowed towards large scale infrastructure projects, such as dams and transportation, as well as education and cultural projects. While the United States has a legacy of hard power intervention in Southeast Asia, China is increasingly using no-strings-attached development assistance to project its soft power (Deth et al., 2016). "Indeed, soft power initiatives have earned China greater respect in the region, as governments feel less threatened in their relations with the country, thus allowing China to play a more active role in regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations" (Stetar et al., 2010, p. 196). This government approval, however, does not always translate to popular support, something echoed frequently by Cambodians in conversations.

In the end, Cambodia's difficulties with ASEAN may affect its regional integration in terms of providing more access to higher education and employment opportunities to its young people, forcing it to further rely on foreign aid and private training and educational operators. Cambodia is not seen as a higher education destination within ASEAN, with its mobile students often seeking opportunities abroad in Thailand, Singapore, and Japan. Additionally, its position as a sort of bellwether for foreign spheres of influence in the regional economic and political power struggle between the United States and China means that it is a vital place in which to

study the effects of TNHE. U.S. TNHE providers have largely overlooked mainland Southeast Asia, preferring to focus on higher income countries such as Singapore. As those countries become saturated, more operators may begin to look towards middle- and lower-income countries with high demand and low access to education as potential new markets for TNHE.

U.S./Cambodian Relations

During the course of this study, the United States and Cambodia were at a serious low point in their diplomatic relationship post-Khmer Rouge. Decades of Western aid projects, many of which have been criticized as politically motivated, contextually inappropriate, or as contributing to dependency and the stagnated growth of Cambodian civil society, have contributed to Cambodians' perceptions of the United States and other Western powers (Strangio, 2014). While the Obama administration (2009-2017) had a higher degree of engagement with Southeast Asia than many of his predecessors post-Vietnam War, the Trump administration was perceived to be generally uninterested in the region politically (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), his forays into East Asian geopolitics and his high approval ratings in Vietnam and Philippines notwithstanding. This was particularly demonstrated by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the TPP program, which was popular among ASEAN countries, and his failure to attend ASEAN summits in the region to meet with his contemporaries (Dinh & Ng, 2020). Additionally, the fears of the CPP, Cambodia's ruling party, over losing ground in local and national elections across Cambodia in 2017 and 2018 resulted in the increased suppression of the main opposition political party, the CNRP, and free speech and expression by voters (Beech, 2018; Boland, 2017; Kijewski, 2018; Macan-Markar, 2018; Phorn, 2018). Subsequent criticism from human rights groups, the European Union, the United States, and others were criticized by the Cambodian ruling party as evidence of further Western

interference in Cambodian affairs (Dara, 2018a; Nachemson, 2017; Palatino, 2016; Strangio, 2014).

Historical Relations

The relationship between the United States and Cambodia experienced dramatic shifts that coincided with, or were the result of, changes in Cambodian domestic politics. Some of these changes were directly influenced by the United States.

During the Vietnam War, the United States backed a right-wing military coup led by General Lon Nol, seen as the anti-communist solution to the Cambodian King Sihanouk, who was viewed as too soft on rising communist movements (Becker, 1998). Lon Nol's repressive regime, corrupted by vast quantities of United States funding packaged as aid assistance, was overthrown by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. The involvement of the United States with Lon Nol's regime was denied by the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia as recently as 2019, much to the disbelief of most Cambodians (Dara, 2019). The Khmer Rouge regime executed anyone who was thought to have conspired with the United States, alongside up to 3 million other Cambodians (Becker, 1998). Ironically, it was the communist Vietnamese who in the end liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge (Becker, 1998). The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) party that was installed after the fall of the Khmer Rouge was also communist and incorporated among its ranks former Khmer Rouge soldiers (including the current Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen). The PRK was backed by the Soviet Union, and to counter Soviet influence in the region, the United States ended up giving backdoor support to the Khmer Rouge (Becker, 1998; Osborne, 2008).

Post-Khmer Rouge Period

The civil war in Cambodia only officially came to an end in 1991, with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority

Government (UNTAC) (Osborne, 2008). It was after this period that Cambodia's relations with the non-communist world were slowly reestablished in earnest. During the UNTAC period, the country transitioned towards plural democracy (at least outwardly) and a market economy (Strangio, 2014). The ruling PRK became the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which remains in power to this day. The reopening of Cambodia to the West also brought with it a major influx of Western aid money, resulting in massive amounts of graft, political protests, and resulting violence (Osborne, 2008; Strangio, 2014). Experts from aid organizations and the UN flooded Phnom Penh, and brought with them enormous salaries and per diems, their ubiquitous white Land Rovers, and in many cases, sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV (Osborne, 2008; Strangio, 2014). It was at this time that the U.S. dollar became the de facto currency in the country (the U.S. dollar coexists still alongside the Cambodian riel as daily currencies, though there have been attempts to change this recently) (Strangio, 2014). While many of UNTAC's objectives were seen as having failed, they did manage to oversee an initially successful and peaceful election in 1993 that saw the election of a pro-Royalist party (Osborne, 2008). The CPP, however, stinging from this loss, accused the UN of interfering in the election (a narrative they would use again in 2017 and 2018 against the United States and other Western powers). A staged secession and reconciliation allowed Hun Sen's CPP to engineer a power sharing agreement with the pro-Royalists (Becker, 1998). In 1993, Hun Sen visited New York, and officially reestablished a diplomatic relationship that had ended with the U.S. evacuation from Cambodia in 1975 (Strangio, 2014). However, the post 1993 years were volatile and violent, which ironically resulted in hundreds of millions more USD in foreign aid (Strangio, 2014). A grenade attack on an opposition party rally in 1997 that injured an American citizen resulted in an FBI investigation in Cambodia (Barber & Chaumeau, 1997; Mean Sangha & Meas, 2017). Later,

despite the release of declassified files that point to clear cut evidence of CPP involvement, the report was quietly buried in an attempt to maintain delicate U.S. ties with the CPP (Strangio, 2014). This event would, in 2018, be used by the United States to justify sanctions against the chief of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit in reaction to the political crackdown of that year (Dara, 2018a).

From 1998 to 2012, elections were relatively stable in Cambodia, despite frequent foreign investigations into government graft and, occasionally, political violence (Osborne, 2008). A visit from then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Cambodia in 2010, U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama in 2015, as well as official visits to the United States by Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2012 and 2016 demonstrated seemingly increased goodwill between the United States and Cambodia (Kuch & Zsombor, 2012; Vannarin, 2016). Relations never fully thawed, however, as Hun Sen found cause to continue to needle the United States over what he saw as two-faced relations, critiquing U.S. first lady Michelle Obama's education efforts when she visited. "It will become a political matter in the long term. The children will say in the future that the U.S. assisted them in completing university, while Hun Sen will be known as a man who doesn't work" he stated (Oudum & Sokheng, 2015).

Relations during the Trump Administration

More recently, a number of critical setbacks have occurred, culminating in a diplomatic rift between the United States and Cambodia that was increasingly hostile and unpredictable during the Trump administration and the time of this study. Despite having dropped 2.75 million tons of ordinance on Cambodia during the Vietnam War (Ponniah, 2014), the United States both reduced aid to assist with decontaminating the landscape of unexploded ordnance (UXO), (Chheng & de Bourmont, 2017) and continued to demand the repayment of war debt from the

Lon Nol era (Wallace, 2017). During this time, Hun Sen increasingly relied on Chinese development aid and investment while accusing the United States of using his country as a proxy battleground with China for influence in the Asia Pacific (Nachemson & Sokhean, 2017). In November 2016, the Cambodian government temporarily suspended its intake of Cambodian national deportees from the United States, citing human rights concerns. This led the United States to suspend business and tourist visas for senior Foreign Affairs Ministry officials and their families in September 2017 (Thul, 2017c). Also, in September 2017, the ruling party arrested the opposition leader, Kem Sokha, on charges of conspiring to overthrow the government. The evidence against him was an edited video from 2013 where he expressed gratitude for a U.S. based organization's training in democratic processes (Paddock & Wallace, 2017). Criticism over this charge from the United States and its allies led to Hun Sen accusing the United States of attempting to foment a color revolution and calling for an investigation of U.S. "spies" (Baliga & Chheng, 2017; Dara & Baliga, 2017b). Following these incidents, the Cambodian government forced the shuttering of the Cambodia Daily newspaper, closed 30+ radio stations that had been broadcasting Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and Voice of Democracy, and expelled the U.S. funded National Democratic Institute and all its foreign staff from the country (Al Jazeera, 2017). The last English language independently run newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, was sold to a Malaysian public relations firm in 2018 in what was widely condemned outside the country as the final nail in the coffin of Cambodia's free press (Ellis-Petersen, 2018).

In response to these actions and Hun Sen's increasingly hostile rhetoric, the U.S. government issued a statement decrying the Cambodian government's accusations as red herrings (Ven, 2017b) and issued a security statement to citizens in the country alerting them to increased anti-American rhetoric from government officials (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, 2017).

Hun Sen then suggested that if Cambodia was so dangerous, that the United States should remove its Peace Corps volunteers (Dara & Baliga, 2017a). At the same time, he cancelled long running joint U.S./Cambodian military exercises (Sokhean & Meyn, 2017), suspended cooperation in finding the remains of U.S. soldiers from the Vietnam War (Thul, 2017b), ended U.S. Navy funded aid projects in the country (Thul, 2017a), and said he wanted to cancel the dual U.S. citizenship of one of his grandchildren (Ven, 2017a) despite the fact that one of his sons, the presumed future head of the CPP, graduated from the West Point military academy in the United States. In July 2017, right in the middle of the escalation of tensions, the WU program admitted its first students to the TNHE program at ACC. Elections were set to take place on July 29, 2018, a few weeks before the first students were set to graduate from the program. Those elections would be held after the banning of the main opposition party, and Kem Sokha remains under house arrest.

The events of the past forty to fifty years have all contributed to the tumultuous relationship between the United States and Cambodia. However, the acceleration of the political crackdown during the last several years, and especially in 2017 and 2018, form the backdrop for the educational partnership formed between ACC and its U.S. partner, WU. It would be naïve to think that the relationship between the United States and Cambodia, and its deterioration, did not factor into the experiences of Cambodian TNHE students.

Transnational Higher Education as a Phenomenon

TNHE has become another term in international higher education research that is often discussed but ill-defined. It has been employed sometimes interchangeably with the terms cross border education, borderless education, international education, global education, etc. (Knight, 2004, 2016). These terms usually refer to international mobility of students (often study abroad

or exchange). However, TNHE more accurately refers to the delivery of educational programs (or curriculum and degrees), across borders (Knight, 2016). Some of these programs are delivered in person by faculty from (or employed by) the home institution, such as at an IBC, while others are franchised, articulated, or perhaps delivered online (Altbach & Knight, 2011). For the purposes of this study, I used Wilkins' (2016) definition, that TNHE "refers to study programs where learners are located in a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based" (p. 3), since the WU TNHE program at ACC is comprised of WU degrees delivered in person, on site, at the partner institution.

At the beginning of this study, research on TNHE was somewhat limited, constituting more of a niche area of international higher education research, and mostly comprised of studies on student motivations and satisfaction, but the global COVID-19 pandemic has led to an explosion in both the proliferation of TNHE programs and providers as well as new research on these programs (Pilsbury, Lee, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020; Sutrisno, 2020). Before examining the landscape in which this contemporary TNHE program exists, it is important to understand the beginnings of this phenomenon.

Early Beginnings of Transnational Higher Education

TNHE is not an entirely new phenomenon, though attention on it has increased significantly in recent years as the number of both IBCs and other forms of cross border provision in international higher education have grown along with the further globalization of higher education generally. The first recorded IBC was opened in the 1920s in Paris, France, and there have been 'American style' universities abroad since the 19th century (Lane & Kinser, 2015; Long, 2020; McGreevy, 2012). Unlike IBCs, 'American style' institutions are locally owned and operated, although they are often accredited by U.S. accrediting bodies. The

American University of Beirut (AUB), in Lebanon, is one of the most widely recognized such institutions. AUB is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, headquartered in Pennsylvania (American University of Beirut, n.d.). After World War II, as more and more countries in the developing world began to throw off the yoke of colonialism, the rival United States and the Soviet Union used international education programs, such as scholarships, as tools of soft power to expand or attempt to maintain their spheres of influence (Nye, 2004b).

After the Second World War, as the United States became a superpower, American foreign policy complicated the Near East colleges' identification with the United States. Meanwhile, the addition of American liberal arts colleges in Europe created opportunities for American faculty and students to continue their work and study outside the United States. Preoccupation with U.S. regional accreditation - which requires institutions to adopt patently American structures and practices - in the 1970s and then again in the 2000s, reinforced the links between the field abroad and American higher education stateside. (Long, 2020, p. 186)

Beyond the proliferation of American style universities, local universities in the Global South also attempted to 'catch up' with development in the Global North through curriculum and policy borrowing with the education systems and economies of more industrialized nations, imported Western education models and curriculum (De Wit, 2002, p. 12). While some of this was done willingly, some of it was also at the 'recommendation' (or loan-based requirements) of international development organizations and institutions such as the World Bank (Easterly, 2007; Grendzier, 1998). The tide shifted further in favor of TNHE programs with the rise of neoliberal policies and free trade, away from foreign policy-tinged development efforts by countries, and

towards commercialized profit seeking by individual providers (Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020a). What would follow is the ever-increasing rate of growth in both participating institutions and countries in the exporting and importing of educational programs as products in the free trade market (Altbach & Knight, 2011; Naidoo, 2010). Confusion among stakeholders over exactly for what purposes an institution or a country would engage in TNHE is not, therefore, unexpected.

Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Transnational Higher Education

The era of neoliberal globalization, marked by the reduction of global trade barriers and increased privatization of industry, and propelled by the technological revolution, has resulted in providers unabashedly repackaging TNHE from international collaborative projects into economic products to be traded and exported (Wilkins, 2016). Higher education globally is constantly and rapidly changing due to “the development of advanced communication and technological services, increased international labour mobility, more emphasis on the market economy and trade liberalization, focus on the knowledge society, increased level of private investment and decreased public support for education” (Knight, 2004, p. 7). The reduction in government subsidies for public higher education, the incorporation of ‘international engagement’ into university rankings, and increased competition for students have served as push factors, while incentives for foreign providers of TNHE from countries wishing to serve as educational hubs have provided the pull factors for the growth of US TNHE programs. IBCs, as one form of TNHE, have exploded in popularity, at first from the Anglophone world but now from countries such as Malaysia, China, and India. The Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) at SUNY-Albany currently lists 306 IBCs in operation, including 59 U.S. HEIs running a total of 86 branch campuses (2021). C-BERT identifies 37 exporting countries and 83

importing countries (2021). This list does not include TNHE programs such as the WU programs, due to the definition of IBCs used by C-BERT. Whether as a result or cause of increased competition in TNHE, the current field of TNHE provision is a complicated web of university outposts, some developed by institutions themselves and some spurred on by official government policy shifts. How closely these institutions identify with their home university campus, or home country, is increasingly debated. “Have higher education institutions become tools of public diplomacy? Or, are such institutions evolving into multiple national corporations with limited affinity with their home nation?” (Lane and Kinser, 2015).

During the time of this study, international higher education programs, like higher education more broadly, saw reduced federal funding as part of official U.S. foreign diplomatic strategy. Under the Trump administration, the country’s increasingly nationalist outlook had an impact not only on HEIs’ international student recruitment, but on funding opportunities (Trilokekar, 2021, p. 33). U.S. State Department sponsored people-to-people diplomacy programs, such as the Fulbright scholarship which funds both in and outbound students and is a critical soft power program, faced drastically reduced budgets. In addition to U.S. Embassies abroad, U.S. economic interest groups and agencies such as the Commerce Department and Commercial Service aid U.S. universities in identifying partners or favorable locations in foreign countries. “The activities of the Commerce Department are fully aligned with the trade liberalization agenda of the WTO [World Trade Organization], where higher education falls under the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS)” (Ross, 2008, p. 36). Several academic associations have expressed concern over the inclusion of education in GATS, as education is increasingly treated as a private, tradable product instead of a public good (Lane, Brown II, & Pearcey, 2004). Accrediting bodies for U.S. HEI academic programs such as the

Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) are increasingly taking their services abroad, but national level regulation in the United States is not keeping up with the pace of change in TNHE (Altbach & Knight, 2011). “International education as a policy arena thus falls through the cracks of federal, state, and institutional responsibilities” (Trilokekar, 2021, p. 24). Institutional successes and failures are, in the end, the responsibility of individual U.S. institutions, and beyond seeking recognition from United States based accrediting bodies (which themselves have varying standards), there is little accountability for any foreign diplomacy fallouts should these endeavors fail or run afoul of public opinion locally.

Previous studies have noted how the United States and its individual states usually play very little formal role in ensuring U.S. TNHE or IBC success in foreign countries, indeed showing very little attention to such operations as long as funding for such ventures was not sourced from taxpayer dollars (Owens & Lane, 2014, p. 77). It was unprecedented when the U.S. states of Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York became involved in negotiations with Hungary to allow the continued operations there of university branch campuses from their respective states (Redden, 2017c; Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020b). Such a development may point to an increasing awareness of the continued, and growing, political and economic implications of TNHE. “With changing governments and associated shifts in U.S. foreign policy, there have been ebbs and flows of investments in international education, with perceptions of international education as a soft power tool shifting dramatically over different time periods” (Trilokekar, 20201, p. 25). While U.S. federal funding for certain diplomatic educational programs is at best uncertain and at worst under threat, U.S. Embassies abroad continue to act as promoters of U.S. higher education, highlighting scholarships for foreign students to study in the United States and hosting information sessions on applying to U.S. universities. The U.S.

Embassy in Cambodia even hires local students to keep a pulse on youth culture in Cambodia, and hosts Facebook live chats to talk about educational and cultural exchanges with the U.S. (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, n.d.; U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, 2018).

Importing Country Motivations

In addition to the changing motivations of TNHE exporting countries, another shift is the increased efforts from many importing countries to attract brand name universities to assist in their move from service to knowledge based economies (Altbach & Knight, 2011; Knight, 2004; Owens & Lane, 2014). Oftentimes this is conducted at the national level, with countries offering tax incentives and startup capital to fund IBCs and TNHE programs from overseas universities (Ross, 2008; Wilkins, 2016).

While laudable in inspiration, the content that is being imported has a clear cultural standpoint. Unless it is absorbed alongside teachings from a local standpoint, it remains to be seen how this export model will differ, in the long run, from the tradition of colonial educations. All over the developing world, governments desperate to attract foreign investment, global firms, and now global universities are channeling scarce public educational resources into programs tailored to the skill sets of a “knowledge society” at the expense of all other definitions of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge traditions. (Ross, 2008, p. 37)

When Global North institutions are specifically invited or encouraged by Global South governments to set up TNHE operations, the public justification from the exporting side can then be couched as a means to expand education access to underserved populations, develop local capacity, and enhance international collaborations. When presented alone, these justifications

can downplay the obvious financial reasons for treating higher education degree programs as exports.

Transnational Higher Education in Cambodia and Southeast Asia

While Southeast Asian countries are often treated as a monolith, with some exceptions for Singapore, the countries within the region are varied and distinct, with unique cultures, languages, experiences with colonialism (or not, in the case of Thailand), and have varying levels of development. Research and operations of TNHE in the region, as a whole, is often dominated by the Singaporean and Malaysian markets, and so it is necessary to approach the region and Cambodia separately to appreciate the differences.

Transnational Higher Education in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia, as a region, “is something of a laboratory in the development and regulation of transnational education” (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001). With a large and young population, as well as few accredited or ranked higher education providers, Southeast Asia is seen by some as the next frontier for international higher education (Lau, 2021). Judging by the success of some providers in Vietnam, such as the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), this view is not without evidence. Yet despite the increased demand, low incomes still mean that traveling abroad for an education is available only to the very wealthy in these countries. Many of the states that make up ASEAN have service sector economies, or rely on agricultural, manufacturing, and garment exports. The drive to develop knowledge-based economies has worked well in Singapore, Malaysia, and on varying scales in a select few other ASEAN states, while some, such as Cambodia, lag. “Given the intensification of global competition for high-skill jobs, educational services are increasingly the number one commodity in fast-developing countries” (Ross, 2008, p. 36).

While the various countries that comprise ASEAN all share the development goal of increased access to higher education, the ability of member states to provide that access varies widely across the region (Welch, 2011, p. 1). It is in this context that international higher education, and TNHE, operates within ASEAN. While several ASEAN states have become important markets for international student recruitment, there are still large populations in ASEAN that cannot afford to travel abroad for tertiary education. “Foreign universities have demonstrated interest in locating branches near rapidly expanding academic markets and being part of the emergence of Asia as a power player in the higher education landscape. It is no accident that most of the IBCs built in the past decade are located around the Indian Ocean and Pacific Rim” (Lane & Kinser, 2015). Malaysia and Singapore, in particular, have become hubs for high quality TNHE and top destinations for international students from the region and beyond.

TNHE is also taking shape elsewhere in ASEAN. As incomes rise across the region, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand have become attractive new destinations for exporting countries (Altbach & Knight, 2011, p. 116-117). In the region as a whole, the increase in TNHE has proved a challenge for national agencies tasked with quality oversight. “While many transnational institutions and programmes act ethically and are of high quality, there are numerous regional examples of bogus ‘cyber universities’ and virtual diploma mills” (Welch, 2011, p. 15). To increase regional quality assurance, promote integration, and increase regional capacity for cooperation, the ASEAN bloc instituted a process of tertiary level cooperation modeled after the Bologna process in the EU. The ASEAN higher education sector will eventually encompass over 6,500 institutions and roughly 12 million students (Sirat et al., 2014). “The latest OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] annual report

suggested regional mobility is of growing importance over global mobility, raising questions about the extent to which students will be looking to travel across the globe for international study in the future” (Lee, 2014).

The ASEAN region is ripe for TNHE to continue to expand, with increasing demand for access to quality higher education options and rising income levels. ASEAN efforts to develop quality domestic and regional university capacity will be challenged by students’ demand for international credentials as well as the need for capacity building at home (Chao, 2018). Quality assurance will also be a challenge, both for public and private institutions. Whether TNHE will be ultimately beneficial or detrimental to ASEAN’s higher education goals remains to be seen, and research on TNHE will be critical to understanding local impact.

In the context of stagnant or declining enrollments and the decrease in federal and state funding of public institutions, U.S. universities are seeking increased international enrollments from students that must pay full price for attendance (Whitford, 2021). Some institutions have taken to expanding their efforts to pursue revenue generation through new TNHE ventures, exporting the U.S. model of higher education to countries where demand is great but international mobility potential is low. At the time of this study, and arguably still, the United States had been losing political influence in Southeast Asia due to the increasing influence of China as well as the change in the U.S. administration and its priorities (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017). Despite the challenges, U.S. institutions are still seeking a foothold in Southeast Asia.

Cambodia, Higher Education, and Transnational Higher Education

Cambodia’s higher education system suffered major losses during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979). After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, the Soviet Union stepped in to

provide tertiary education for many Cambodian citizens (Masis, 2010). Many Cambodian senior academics that remain in Cambodia were educated in the former Soviet states, while those with U.S. degrees, often refugees, are usually found working abroad (Ros, et al., 2020). Even now, in the period of relative stability in the first two decades of the 21st century, very few Cambodian university lecturers hold PhDs, have much academic training, or conduct research (Ros, et al., 2020; Williams, et al., 2016). The higher education sector faces huge challenges, including high demand, low regulatory oversight, and little transparency (Ford, 2006; Williams, et al., 2016). The Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association has spoken out about perceived corruption and apathy within the system, including by teachers themselves. They additionally criticize what they see as ever-changing goals for the education sector, driven by donors' shifting missions rather than the vision of local educators (Amarthalingam, 2020). The Ministry of Education has also moved slowly with plans to accredit universities in the country (Williams, et al., 2016), sometimes leaving graduating students unable to access graduate programs or jobs outside the country due to the lack of internationally recognized credentials. While an Accreditation Committee of Cambodia was created in 2003, it had not, at the time of this study, accredited any Cambodian HEIs. This was mostly seen as a result of corruption and entrenched politics in the sector (Ford, 2013). The lack of accreditation in Cambodia continues to present a challenge to integration with the rest of ASEAN as well as any viable recognition by other foreign countries. The growth in private universities, a response to the unmet demand and desire for recognized credentials, is perhaps not surprising, yet remarkable given the first one only opened its doors in 1997 (Chealy, 2009, p. 156).

The challenges of meeting the demand for internationally recognized, high quality education at a reasonable cost has therefore opened the possibility that Cambodia could be a new

‘market’ for TNHE providers. Despite Cambodia’s low Human Development Index rating, it has seen incredible economic growth during the last two decades and its projected economic growth in 2017, when the WU program was launched, was 7.1%, the second highest in all of ASEAN (Asian Development Bank, 2017). The growing middle class and increased business opportunities have been generating high demand for education that can meet the needs of the new economy, while low relative income levels compared to exporting nations means it is not yet seen as a popular target for international student recruitment. The EducationUSA recruitment tour of Southeast Asia only began including Cambodia on the tour in the last few years. Given the low recruitment yield for student mobility, TNHE therefore represents a more viable opportunity to engage with students in Cambodia. TNHE “attracts students who cannot otherwise obtain access at home and thus seek almost any means to study as well as high-quality programs carefully targeted at a small and able elite group” (Altbach & Knight, 2011, p. 114).

Related Research

Higher Education and Soft Power

While, formally, international educational collaboration has been lauded as a way to increase access to higher education globally and foster international collaborations, along with decreased federal subsidies and the push/pull of globalization, the perception exists that operating TNHE programs abroad may be, at its core, about seeking additional sources of revenue for home campuses (Edelstein & Douglass, 2012; Kamenetz, 2013; Krieger, 2013; Redden, 2016). Even so, higher education has often been, and remains, a major part of soft power politics. The United States enrolls huge numbers of international students in its universities, and those who either return to their countries of origin or were educated by U.S. universities at home “provide professional and political networks in building positive goodwill

and diplomacy” (Lee, 2014). These benefits are not just limited to U.S. goodwill abroad.

“Through individuals who return to their campuses and even those who remain but participate in institutional partnerships or accreditation site visits, American universities abroad have served as critical resources for internationalizing U.S. campuses” (Long, 2020, p. 186). Given these factors, the higher education system of the United States is a critical source of U.S. soft power abroad.

The soft power of higher education has been a subject of research for decades, although there has been increasing attention to the idea recently as the United States perceives other countries (mostly China) as wielding influence in its own institutions. However, as Altbach (2019) noted, there have been similar ‘scares’ in the past, such as when the Center for Public Integrity, a U.S. independent watchdog group, reported on the supposed threat posed by Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of China, the retreat of the United States as a geopolitical leader under the Trump administration, and the fear of Chinese soft power overtaking U.S. soft power globally, coincides with the ascendance of Chinese higher education in global rankings and its success in attracting increasing numbers of international students (Kulkarni, 2020; Lee, 2014; Morrison, 2020; Trilokekar, 2021, p. 37).

Other scholars have examined the use of TNHE as a state sanctioned form of neo-imperialism to grow or maintain influence globally. Chankseliani’s (2020) study explored Russian IBCs in the former Soviet bloc and contends that the exporting of Russian higher education has been an “attempt to retain and strengthen political power and influence” (p. 27). Chankseliani also asserts that TNHE programs originating in the Global North, such as the United States, France, United Kingdom, and Australia are primarily motivated by revenue generation for the home campus, Russia’s intent is to strengthen its political influence. Yao

(2021) contends that student mobility, rather than a more neutral exchange of knowledge and people, is rather part of U.S. academic imperialism across the globe. Yao wrote that academic imperialism is the “privileging and dominance of knowledge” within higher education (p. 155). When it comes to TNHE, where programs are marketed for their supposed superior quality to local degrees, it is clear how the critique can be applied. Additionally, Yao explored how the power imbalance between sending and receiving countries in the Global South and Global North for both people and programs is a form of academic dependency (p. 159). Yao’s (2014) research on Chinese international students in the United States points to rhetoric about the United States education system being “the best in the world,” highlighting academic dependency on the Global North even from China, a much more powerful country than Cambodia (as cited in Yao, 2021, p. 159).

While studies exist on the benefits for countries that import foreign higher education (Vincent-Lancrin, 2007), there is little to be found in terms of how students view the impact of TNHE on their home country higher education systems. Ding (2019) found, however, that TNHE in China exists “at the edge of the local higher education system and exerts a marginal impact on host countries’ capacity building” (p. 419). In this sense, there may be limited soft power impact long term if countries, including their students and educators, are seeing failed knowledge transfer and capacity development in their own systems after the importation of TNHE.

Researchers have also examined whether scholarship programs have been successful as an attempt to exert soft power amongst student recipients. Dong & Chapman (2010) looked specifically into whether positive perceptions of China resulted from the Chinese Government Scholarship Program. The rationales for this program, including training future foreign leaders, are nearly identical to those of the U.S. Fulbright program and other U.S. government funded

educational exchange programs. Dong & Chapman asked, as one of their research questions, “what are the scholarship recipients’ perceptions of the scholarship program’s contributions to building goodwill toward the Chinese government and promoting friendships with scholarship recipients’ home countries?” (p. 152). They employed a survey and interviews of scholarship recipients, and found that nearly all participants felt that their study in China was positive towards building relations between China and their home countries (p. 161), though the strength of their feelings on this depended on their own efforts in engaging with Chinese culture as well as their interactions with Chinese faculty.

Trilokekar (2021) explored how governments have used international higher education programs “as a soft power foreign policy tool” (p. 37), and that the soft power of a country takes generations to develop. This may explain why China’s soft power has been predicted to eventually surpass that of the United States, but so far has not done so as its use of higher education as a soft power tool is more recent than the United States. However, Trilokekar also explains that this shift may still be coming, in particular when U.S. policies towards international students run counter to its expressed soft power goals of promoting international exchange through its educational programs. This was particularly salient during the Trump administration, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and at a time when HEIs were scrambling to deliver their programs to students abroad who were not physically mobile due to the pandemic and its knock on effect of restricted visas.

In reviewing the history of soft power and higher education, Wojciuk (2018) contends that soft power is very much dependent on context.

Soft power manifests itself when the models of institutional and cultural organization generate recognition, admiration, and - possibly but not necessarily - a desire to imitate

them or become part of a given system. The sources of soft power do not exist independently from social reality. (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 347)

This idea resonates with the current study, and with Nye's assertion that context is key to understanding soft power, because while this is a case study and not immediately generalizable to all instances of TNHE, it is critical to examine the context to understand the perceptions of students. Wojciuk's study also examines in part the experience of students participating in programs at IBCs. Their experiences ranged from "smooth acculturation of the Western academic system, through identity concerns, to the cultural shock and rejection of the foreign model" (p. 349). As the WU TNHE program in Cambodia is one of very few foreign programs in the country, and the only U.S. accredited degree granting program, it was not known at the outset of the partnership how students would take to the program and what their feelings on participation would be, necessarily. Aside from the existence of some students who had attended American style secondary institutions, many others had little to no exposure to U.S. education and little exposure to U.S. culture aside from secondhand experiences and the media.

"Proponents argue that branch campuses provide needed educational capacity in underserved areas, while allowing the home institution to diversify its revenue and enhance its reputation. Critics claim that operating under authoritarian governments hampers the academic freedom of faculty and students" (Lane & Kinser, 2015). Given the reputation of Cambodia as corrupt (Transparency International, 2016), and its higher education sector as generally low quality (Ford, 2013), it remains to be seen whether this partnership will prove a quality option for Cambodian students, or will be perceived by participants as just another opportunistic venture by a U.S. based organization, thus providing insight into the soft power of such a venture in this context.

Higher Education and Orientalism

Orientalist attitudes about Asian students in Global North education have been documented through the interrogation of stereotypes. Moosavi (2020, wrote about the stereotype of East Asian students lacking critical thinking skills as an Orientalist attitude in Western (Global North) academia. Moosavi found that this attitude was also pervasive among the students themselves, not just from their Global North lecturers. “The persistence of Orientalist views about East Asian students is so widespread that I also suggest that Orientalism may be found amongst East Asian academics and students, who may suffer from an “internalised Orientalism” (p. 2). It would be incorrect to assume that studies on East Asian students are automatically applicable to Cambodians, or any Southeast Asians, as treating all of Asia as a monolith is in itself an Orientalist attitude (Said, 1978). In the same vein, it is likely that Cambodian students would be subject to similar Orientalist stereotypes about their competencies versus Western (or Global North) students, because of Orientalist attitudes. A critical finding in Moosavi’s research, that East Asian students have internalized Orientalist attitudes, is concerning given the ways that TNHE is often marketed as a superior educational experience to local options in developing countries.

The Orientalist dichotomy of East versus West, besides perpetuating stereotypes about students, also limits the imagination of researchers who aim to study seemingly disparate educational systems. Takayama (2008) argues that by continuing to view Japanese and U.S. higher education systems as binary, comparative education researchers are unable to see the “common global structures” present in both systems (p. 19). “When a western education system and a non-western education system surface in such a side-by-side comparison, it is likely that the study draws on - and feeds into - the legacy of western Orientalist discourse” (p. 21). I would

argue that this same idea can be applied when a TNHE program markets itself to local students: that it inherently creates a binary comparison between two ‘products,’ one of which must be marketed as superior in order to be desirable to students. This idea of superior versus inferior quality can fuel Orientalist attitudes about the local context.

Phan (2018) also found this same dichotomy to be ever present in Global North TNHE in Asia, through engaging with TNHE marketing, employees, and educational fairs. East versus West comparisons were “employed by everyone involved in this space, including policymakers, universities, staff, students, parents, education recruiters and brokers/agents, government officials, and media commentators” (p. 56). Phan contends that the East/West dichotomy, an Orientalist idea, was used to justify TNHE (both programs and participation in them) in Asia. The intentional set up of East and West as opposites results in the conclusion that “one is what the other is not” (p. 57). Phan also discussed the case of the Yale-NUS (National University of Singapore) joint college. She found that, despite the very big negative reaction to the project at the home campus and very positive reaction among those responsible for its formation in Singapore, it made little difference to the general population in Singapore and even among some students. The attitude among international students that she encountered was that it did not matter to them which institution they attended, because “everything in Singapore is international in one or another way” (p. 217). This points to the failure of the East/West dichotomy in capturing the current reality of truly globalized contexts, such as Singapore. Singaporean students studying in other countries were similarly underwhelmed. “They did not disagree or feel excited about the project. Nor did they feel proud of Singapore’s accomplishment in securing an official and significant affiliation with Yale, which is something that few countries could achieve” (p. 217). However, the experience of students in major higher education hubs, such as

Singapore and the UAE, is likely to be quite different from those in countries with a TNHE sector in its infancy, such as Cambodia.

Leng (2015), challenged previous comparative education studies of Cambodian higher education partnerships. Noting that past critical studies had focused on power dynamics and inequality among Global North-Cambodian university partnerships, Leng contended that research on Cambodian higher education was not grounded in the cultural context of the country. Having grown up in Cambodia, Leng argued that the hierarchical nature of Cambodian social life lent itself to mutuality in university partnerships, in that Cambodian universities participate in a patron-client style relationship built on respect and harmony. Leng's findings indicated a high degree of autonomy for Cambodian universities in their international partnerships, including with U.S. based institutions, although most of the partnerships in the study were begun from mutual connections and between academics with research interests in Cambodia, rather than institutional driven partnerships. When asking participants if the need for continued international assistance to the higher education sector in Cambodia would persist, respondents insisted that abandoning partnerships with foreign countries such as France would be "not morally right" due to their gratitude for past support (p. 273). Ultimately, Leng concludes that the study "clearly showcases the vital role of human relationships in international programs" (p. 270).

Dobinson (2020) employed Orientalism, among other frameworks, to research how Asian postgraduate students at an Australian university, as well as an Australian TNHE program in Vietnam, perceived themselves and how they felt they were perceived by others. Students reported that they felt portrayed in 'the West' as "hardworking, persevering, eager to learn" among other positives, however they felt that they were also viewed at times as "passive" and "uncritical," (p. 69) as well as "cognitively inferior and slow witted" (p. 70). The effect of these

stereotypes that the students felt were held by their lecturers was that they felt “inferior, incompetent and backward” (p. 71). One student described the feeling as fatigue from having to “‘bounce back between two rivers’ or occupying two worlds...as well as the need to operate in two languages” (p. 71). Rather than being empowered with the ability to operate in both “Eastern” and “Western” contexts, as has been marketed to them, it is possible that TNHE students feel similarly exhausted from the constant cultural shifting and navigating that they must endure to succeed both in their home context and their foreign educational context.

Transnational Higher Education Students

Despite the well documented benefits of global engagement for higher education and the U.S. economy (NAFSA, 2020), when formulating and marketing internationalization plans U.S. universities have had to address criticism about mission drift as well as negative public perceptions of globalization. This has resulted in an overemphasis on how these programs can benefit the home campus and the downplaying of benefits to foreign partners. When examining internationalization strategies of U.S. HEIs, Mwangi et al. (2021) found that “the impact [of the strategies] on specific countries or HEIs abroad was treated as an afterthought or not discussed at all” (p. 125). These kinds of attitudes may not be lost on foreign students, who pay attention to U.S. politics and how they are treated (Baer, 2017). Additionally, “a foreign learning environment bringing different rules, practices, and values can disorient the international student or IBC student embedded in their own culture” (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 352).

In terms of studies on TNHE student perceptions, scholars have argued previously that not enough has been done on TNHE students’ attitudes, beliefs, and decision making (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2015; Wilkins, 2020; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012). Among the existing research on TNHE students, studies have focused on students’ evaluations of quality, service, and

motivations for choosing a TNHE program over local options or traveling abroad. Additionally, much of the research has been conducted in countries considered hubs for TNHE activities, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar on the Arabian Peninsula, and Singapore and Malaysia in Southeast Asia.

Researchers have found conflicting evidence of students' perceptions of TNHE quality. According to Wilkins, et al. (2012b), students in the UAE were satisfied with basically all elements of their IBC experience, including program and lecturer quality, student learning, resources, facilities and social life, and assessment. However, a later study by Bhuian (2016) reported that students studying at IBCs in Qatar were overall dissatisfied with TNHE programs' academic and administrative services, as well as the facilities and resources, at their institutions. Moving to Southeast Asia, Ahmad (2015) reported in a mixed method study that IBC students in Malaysia were highly satisfied with their experiences, both academic and non-academic. Respondents were from Australian, British, and Indian IBCs in Malaysia, pointing to overall satisfaction with TNHE experiences regardless of the TNHE programs' country of origin.

Previous research on students' evaluation of university image attractiveness has found that "opinions gained through personal relationships and the media" had a large impact on students' perceptions of IBCs (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013, p. 616). This indicates that TNHE students' perceptions about U.S. TNHE programs and providers may be heavily influenced by both media images of the United States and the views of their friends and family. Ahmad's (2015) study on student satisfaction at IBCs in Malaysia also assessed students' motivations for choosing TNHE programs. Ahmad found that their main motivations included studying at an "internationally known" institution, that their degree would be "valued by the home country" and would be "internationally recognized", and that they had better prospects for future employment

and job opportunities (p. 496). Logically, in order for a university and degree to be internationally recognized and valued by employers, this indicates that these institutions originate from a higher education system and home country that wield at least some modicum of soft power. Another study by Ahmad & Buchanan (2015) on TNHE students in Malaysia found that other motivation factors besides institutional reputation and employment prospects included cost of living, lower tuition fees than at the home campus, “similar degree programme offered as in Western country,” “foreign universities have best reputation in my country”, and “the degrees from international university are more prestigious” (p. 9). These student perceptions indicate a strong faith in the quality of foreign programs and conversely, a lack of faith in local institutions. It should be noted that unlike Cambodia, Malaysia is a higher education hub in Southeast Asia, and therefore attracts students both regionally and globally for its higher education offerings, including IBCs (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2015).

Significantly, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and around the launch of the WU program in Cambodia, U.S. HEIs had reported a drop in international enrollments. International students “feeling unwelcome,” and the “U.S. social and political environment” were cited as some of the reasons for this decline (Baer, 2017). Trilokekar (2021) writes that in such a climate, “international education cannot serve as a soft power tool” (p. 35).

Students in a context that challenges their cultural beliefs, attitudes, and understandings of their own country and the country whose culture they encounter may struggle with such emotions...In such cases, rather than the power of attraction of a foreign culture, students can struggle with the negative, disabling effects of culture shock or even experience a normative threat. Anxiety and stress may therefore have an adverse impact on the perception of that country. (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 353)

Pyvis and Chapman (2005) studied whether culture shock could affect students studying in a TNHE program, given that most culture shock studies had been conducted on academically mobile students. Culture shock can affect student welfare and the perceived quality of the program. Pyvis and Chapman found that, unlike studies on international students who were academically mobile, TNHE master's students in their study based in Singapore did not feel that their perspectives were not valued in the classroom or by lecturers (p. 33). However, respondents in the study did report a strong sense of fear of exclusion or marginalization. While the authors were not intending to uncover the reasons for this fear, they infer that it could be a result of culture shock and learning in an unfamiliar environment (p. 34). Feelings of culture shock, as Wojciuk (2018) noted, can have detrimental effects on the soft power of a country's higher education system among international students, such as in Yonezawa's (2008) study of foreign students at Japanese institutions. Yonezawa also found that the imperial history of Japan "still functions as an especially negative factor" among international students' views (p. 65). Given the United States' history in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, this could also be a negative factor in students' views of the program in this study. If U.S. institutions are to continue to promote and export their educational resources and rely on U.S. higher education's soft power to do so, they will need to pay more attention to how their programs are subject to geopolitics, and how those contextual factors influence student perceptions.

Phan (2018) wrote extensively about TNHE in Vietnam (2018). The perception of the general public and academia about TNHE programs in Vietnam is that they are generally low to mediocre quality and sought after by wealthy students looking for an easy degree program, though this was not a view always shared by the students (p. 145-147). Drawing from qualitative interviews Phan found that among those students and parents who sought after Australian TNHE

programs were attitudes about Australian education being “much better” than Vietnamese education (p. 146), that students could get “better jobs with high salaries” by attending a TNHE program (p. 147), and that attending such a program would make them “different from other students going to local universities” (p. 148). However, Phan also found that social class was a prominent and understudied area of TNHE student identity, that could not always be explained by Asia versus ‘the West’ (p. 150). As the Vietnamese higher education sector is more developed and includes more, and longer established, TNHE options, it would be unwise to assume that the perception of TNHE in Cambodia would mirror that of Vietnam.

Regarding WU TNHE research, scholars have examined the student mobility choices and compounding factors affecting the choices of Chinese TNHE students (Li, et al., 2021) as well as the motivations for Jordanian, Indonesian, Cambodian, and Chinese students to select WU TNHE programs (Ghosh, et al., in press). Li, et al., found that for the Chinese students in the study, a primary motivating factor for choosing the TNHE program was the lowered score required to obtain admission to a prestigious university. They were not as motivated by the draw towards a high-quality international education (pp. 8-9). In the Chinese context, with a large population and highly competitive local universities, this finding can be expected to be different to Cambodia given the differences in the higher education sectors in both countries. Li, et al, did find that students were motivated to stay at home after graduation, or to return home to China after some time abroad (pp. 11-12). Ghosh, et al. (in press) studied four of the existing WU programs, including the Cambodian location. Their mixed methods research sought to uncover what factors motivated international students across four countries to select a TNHE program from a U.S. university, and whether the soft power of the United States and its higher education sector was a factor. The findings indicate that U.S. soft power indeed was a major factor in

students enrolling in WU TNHE programs, though the Cambodian students were the most motivated among the students by cost. Like in Li, et al.'s study, Chinese students were found to be overall less motivated by the idea of enrolling in a specifically American program, especially in comparison with students from the other locations for whom the U.S. faculty and experience was particularly motivating.

Conceptual Frameworks

This study will contribute to the existing literature by uncovering the perceptions of student stakeholders at the micro level in the context of macro level politics and international relations in an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. Assuming that students are blindly attracted to U.S. soft power, or on the other hand, assuming that they share the same hostilities towards the United States as the Cambodian government, are both flawed assumptions lacking in historical and contemporary context. The assumptions ignore the real story of how Cambodians, in this case, students in a TNHE program, interpret and perceive both the program and the U.S./Cambodian political context in which it operates. While there has been research on how TNHE programs are perceived by stakeholders, especially students, there is not much research on how TNHE programs are perceived in a shifting or hostile political environment towards a home campus' country. The need exists to understand how TNHE programs are perceived by stakeholders given the increasing likelihood that such programs are increasingly threatened by the rise in geopolitical tensions across the globe (Associated Press, 2021). The perceptions uncovered in this study could provide contextual understanding for researchers and practitioners about how geopolitics may or may not affect TNHE operations, and at the very least help both groups to understand how TNHE actions are perceived and interpreted by students enrolled in a U.S. TNHE program.

Soft Power

To add theoretical depth to this study, I drew on Nye's theory of soft power (2004b) as it relates to the current political context. To do so, it is also necessary to consider the impact of neocolonialism, the idea of extracting resources from developing countries for the benefit of developed countries through market demands rather than force, is an oft cited critique of Western intervention (even aid programs), even if the term itself is not always explicitly used (Easterly, 2007). Soft power, as opposed to military force, can be seen as aiding neocolonialism as it is through soft power interactions that new partnerships (such as educational partnerships) are established, and through which resources (such as student tuition and brain power) are extracted. Soft power is coercion through attraction, and the WU program uses the attraction of prestigious U.S. higher education to recruit students to the program.

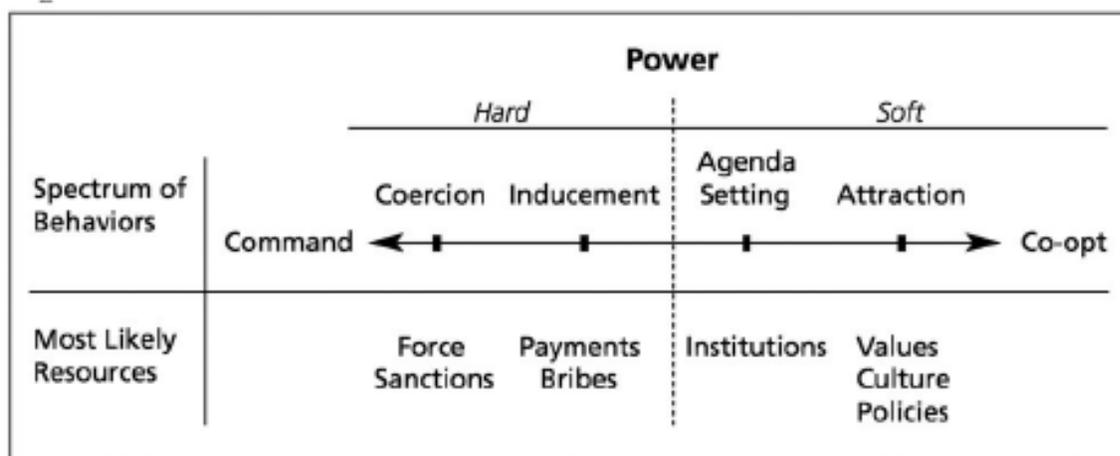


Figure 1: Soft power spectrum (Nye, 2004)

Dependency theorists might argue that such programs prevent countries from developing on their own, and some critics would argue about the need for such societies to pursue modernization at all (Easterly, 2007).

Soft power, when it comes to political values, is only effective when a country lives up to those values both domestically and abroad (Nye, 2004b, p. 11). Perception is an important aspect

in the capacity of soft power. If opinions about a country deteriorate, this can greatly impact that country's ability to successfully project its soft power through any means. The reputation of a country, both domestically and internationally, is crucial, and part of this perception includes, but is not limited to, the desire of others to pursue a degree in a nation's system of higher education. A decline in a nation's soft power can also impact the status of its education system and ultimately make a nation less competitive in the global economic market and economy. Domestic or foreign policies that appear to be insincere, contradictory, or self-serving lessen a nation's soft power, and therefore, that nation's overall global influence (Stetar et al., 2010, p. 194). In the current U.S. and Cambodian political contexts, very immediate changes in perception of hypocrisy or legitimacy could affect how institutional motivations are received, and how U.S. institutions operate abroad can have an impact on the United States' larger political and diplomatic goals.

Orientalism

Said's (1978) seminal work, *Orientalism*, is employed for this study due to the fact that this is a Global North originating program set up in the Global South. The program is marketed as "American standard" and "U.S. accredited," meaning, those who conceived of this program associate those terms with quality versus what is available locally in Cambodia. This is noted not as a criticism but as an observation. "By casting U.S. accreditation as the world's "gold standard" of quality assurance in higher education, the American higher education system simultaneously participates in a system of global competition for legitimacy and recognition, and influences the norms of such competition" (Blanco, 2021, pp. 60-61). The idea that the American is associated with high quality, inversely makes the statement, in this context, that Cambodian is low quality. These ideas cannot be separated from Orientalist attitudes about East versus West.

“Neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other” (Said, 1978, p. xvii). In this sense, Orientalism is a natural contextual framework for trying to understand how students from the “East” (or Global South) conceptualize their place within a “Western” (or Global North) program, given increasing tensions between “East” and “West” (Cambodia and the United States). Measuring students’ motivations to pursue TNHE programs does not give the whole picture. On the one hand, these students are Cambodian, but on the other, they are students of U.S. higher education and will be U.S. degree holders. “Internationalization strategies have been used historically to socialize students and scholars from abroad into Western thought and promote allyship with the United States” (de Wit, 1999, as cited in Mwangi, et al., 2021, p. 126). How students navigate their identities and perceive of the program and its impacts is important to understanding their self-determined identities and interpretations of U.S. soft power in Cambodia.

This study contributes to the existing research on Global North/Global South TNHE academic partnerships in politically sensitive contexts, through listening to the students themselves, and then examining how students interpret and navigate the complex climate in which they study. In much the way the American University of Beirut, an independently operated private university in Lebanon, has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time through the actions and motivations of administrators, faculty, and students (Anderson, 2011), so does the WU program at ACC constitute a multilayered, inherently political space whose purpose and experience is interpreted and reinterpreted through stakeholders’, especially students’, multiple lenses of personal ambitions, international politics, and the context of Global North to South TNHE. Orientalism, as a way of understanding how “West” views “East,” allows us to

interrogate not only how the host university views the Cambodian context but how Cambodian students view themselves in that context. Given the context of hostile U.S./Cambodian relations at the time this study takes place, this study offers a window into how U.S. TNHE is perceived by students in light of the volatile political context.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology employed for this study. I will present the research questions that were developed in connection with the context and literature review, alongside the methodological techniques employed during the study. I will also discuss the selection of the research sample and the reasoning behind the choice of population and context, to be followed by a discussion on validity and reliability of the data, limitations, and the significance of the study. The chapter concludes with an exploration of my positionality as a researcher.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to contribute to research on TNHE, in particular on student participants' perspectives on TNHE programs and on the geopolitical context and tensions in which programs operate. This study also employs the concepts of soft power (Nye, 2004b) and Orientalism (Said, 1978), to contribute to understanding how students' perceptions may be affected by these dynamics. Research exists on how geopolitical tensions affect higher education research collaborations (Kokabisaghi, et al., 2019; Lee & Haupt, 2020), and on the soft power of U.S. higher education (Lo, 2011; Nye, n.d.; Trilokekar, 2009, 2021). We can read about the perspectives of researchers and practitioners on how geopolitical tensions, and soft power, affect international higher education (Brodhead, 2011; Clifford & Kinser, 2016; Edelstein & Douglass, 2012; Lee, 2014; Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020b). But not as much research has been done on, or attention given to, the perspectives and perceptions of TNHE students on their programs, on their program's soft power, and on their program's geopolitical context. The primary research questions for this study were:

1. What are Cambodian TNHE students' perceptions about the United States and about Cambodia?

- a. What are their perceptions about U.S. higher education and Cambodian higher education?
2. What are the sources and influences of students' perceptions about the United States, U.S. higher education, Cambodia, and Cambodian higher education?
 - a. How might their perceptions influence their attraction to U.S. programs over Cambodian programs?
3. How do the students perceive the impact of geopolitical tensions between the United States and Cambodia on their TNHE experiences and future plans?

To analyze these questions, the conceptual frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2004b) and Orientalism (Said, 1978) were employed for each research question to understand how U.S. higher education, as a soft power resource, influences student perceptions of the United States originating TNHE program, the perceptions of students' on U.S. values and policies in regards to their attraction to U.S. higher education, and their perceptions of the programs' impact on their plans and U.S./Cambodian relations. In Nye's (2004b) soft power framework, institutions of a country act as a soft power resource when they serve as attracting forces. U.S. higher education institutions' reputation and rankings, as well as beliefs about its superiority, are the reasons that these institutions act as soft power resources. Nye also posited that a country's soft power is drawn from culture, political values, and foreign policies, but dependent on others' perceiving those values and policies as legitimate and moral (2004b, p. 11). Given the changing political values in the United States as well as unfavorable foreign policy towards Cambodia during the time of this study, one could expect a corresponding decline in U.S. soft power amongst students in Cambodia. To expand on Nye's soft power, I also employed Said's (1978) Orientalism theory, in order to understand students' beliefs about the value and assumed superiority of a U.S. higher

education, originating in the Global North, to the Cambodian education system. Their attraction to U.S. higher education, and beliefs about its value and impact on themselves and on their future plans, in turn impacts the students' perceptions of their own country and its politics. This theory helps explain why students perceive the presence of the U.S. TNHE program as a positive for Cambodia, despite existing tensions, and more strikingly, because of those same tensions.

Research Approach

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Cambodian dual degree student participants in a U.S. TNHE program in Cambodia. Additionally, in order to develop a better understanding of the context, additional interviews were conducted with a number of staff and faculty from both the home and host institutions, as well as some single degree students at the host institution. This method of data collection was used because interviewing, as a research method, allows for the uncovering of perceptions (Seidman, 2013), and can allow participants to explain in depth their beliefs and attitudes about the context, about the United States and U.S. higher education, as well as about Cambodia and Cambodian higher education. Interviewing also allows the researcher to follow up on new points brought up by participants, which is harder to do in a survey. Given the varied background of participants, this allowed for an exploration of how their perceptions were formed with their prior exposure, or lack of exposure to, foreign education systems (Seidman, 2013). One weakness of this approach is that participants' needed to be willing to share information about their perceptions with a cultural outsider, and for the very reason that this context was chosen (the geopolitical tensions and politics of Cambodia), some participants' may not have been willing to be totally candid about their views and beliefs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Additional contextual data was

gathered from marketing materials, such as websites and social media connected to the TNHE program, to give additional context to the interviews.

Research Sample

Twenty-nine TNHE (dual degree) students and 3 non-TNHE (single degree) students at the host institution (ACC), 3 home institution (WU) staff members, 1 host institution (ACC) staff member, and 5 host institution (ACC) faculty members were interviewed, for a total of 41 interviews. The primary focus, informed by the research questions, was on the students involved in the TNHE program, but interviews with single degree students helped to uncover if similar perceptions were present generally since the host institution of the TNHE program (ACC) is itself an American style HEI. Because the study also dissected how perceptions of students about the United States, U.S. higher education, Cambodia, and Cambodian higher education were formed or influenced by soft power and Orientalism, staff and faculty involved in the program were also interviewed. Given the small number of on-site staff and faculty, there are only a few non-student interviews. These were done with staff and faculty who had the most involvement with the dual degree programs, or who had been at the institution the longest and were most familiar. This was inherently a small number given the high rate of turnover that is present at ACC, which is not unusual for institutions that hire expatriate staff and faculty.

Given the hesitance of some Cambodians to openly discuss political opinions in front of others due to a history of crackdowns on expressions of dissent by the Cambodian government (Al Jazeera; 2017; Boland, 2017; Kijewski, 2018; Mean Sanga & Meas, 2017; Seiff, 2016; Thul & Tostevin, 2017), it was useful to conduct one on one interviews so that participants had a chance, if they were willing, to speak freely and without concern that their comments might be

recorded by others. In the same vein, to avoid assigning culturally inappropriate pseudonyms, interviewees are quoted using participant codes.

This is a phenomenological study, and given that there were, at the time of the study, no other comparable TNHE programs in the country, and few in the region, with which to make comparisons, the loose structure allowed for continued data gathering for greater contextual understanding. I believe this is reasonable since I was based on the campus of ACC from June 2017 to March 2020, which constituted the period of the study. Therefore, I was able to devote a significant amount of time to this understudied and “exotic” case (Maxwell, 2013, p. 89). This study also considered current events, domestic and international politics in Cambodia and the United States, as well as historical events in Cambodian/U.S. relations, using news articles, policy documents, political speeches, and historical writings. The study incorporates larger narratives that can be detected in the phenomenological experiences of students in the program, which allows the implications of the research to be applied to other TNHE programs and partnerships around the world.

Data Collection

As Maxwell (2013) wrote, “the data in a qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you...” (p. 87). As I was, during the period of the study, a full-time employee of the TNHE program in Cambodia, there were ample opportunities for me to collect data in all forms, including writing memos regarding the broader changing context of the U.S./Cambodian political relationship to inform about the context in which the dual degree programs were being delivered (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 269). I also attended guest lectures from the U.S. Ambassador and at the U.S. Embassy, participated in

higher education fairs, and spoke with secondary school teachers, students, and their families on many occasions.

While the study refrains from citing any data that would be ethically problematic, (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97), including any data that would violate confidentiality, I do feel that my presence on the campus was aided in making this a more comprehensive study. Being present on campus allowed me to observe interactions between students, between students and faculty, and between students and administrators. I was also able to observe and participate in information sessions about the host institution (WU) and TNHE program for potential and current students. Due to this, I was able to see how the home and host institutions were marketed to students, which I believe had an impact on students' perceptions of the TNHE program. I believe it was especially enlightening to listen to the key words and phrases that were used by existing students, faculty, and administrators at ACC as I found those reappearing in the interviews with the student participants when describing the program. Early interviews allowed for the modification of certain interview questions to explore new ideas about how U.S. soft power and Orientalism affected perceptions of Cambodia and Cambodian higher education, as discussed in Creswell (2014, p. 195).

Site and Data Access

The site chosen for this study was ACC, an 'American style' private higher education institution in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. ACC was established in 2013, and in 2016 signed an MOU with WU to offer three undergraduate dual degree TNHE programs in Law, Business Administration, and Civil Engineering on site through a hybrid teaching scheme at a much lower cost than at WU's home campus in the United States. Despite these cost saving measures, the degrees offered by WU at ACC are still the most expensive options in Cambodia

and required faculty at the home campus to take a leap of faith on the revenue potential of operating in such a country. The ability of the program to attract students who can afford the fees, and therefore WU's commitment to providing increased access in a country suffering from a high degree of inequality, are some of the challenges this program faced, not to mention the upheavals in the political relationship between the United States and Cambodia at the time of this study.

The TNHE program's enrollment at the time of this study grew from 61 at the end of 2018 to 141 at the end of 2019. ACC enrolls fewer than 400 students. It is still, at the time of this writing, the only tertiary institution in Cambodia offering U.S. accredited dual degree programs on site, with U.S. programs from WU and Fort Hays State University. There are other institutions with foreign degree programs, however, such as Limkokwing University, which is a Malaysian branch campus. ACC offers four-year bachelor programs and all students participate in their general education requirements. All courses are conducted in English.

The WU program at ACC is not considered an IBC as it is not independently operated by the home institution. This strategy avoids in part the extensive administrative, legal, and financial hurdles that setting up and operating a branch campus abroad usually entails (Krieger, 2013), and has the added benefit of a local partner, their student body, and their expertise in the local market. The WU TNHE model operates on the campuses of partner universities abroad, and delivers degree content collaboratively with partner institution faculty, with limited home institution staff on site.

Most students at ACC are ethnic Khmer Cambodians, and some are Chinese-Khmer, though they occasionally enroll foreign students living in Cambodia from countries such as France, Vietnam, Mauritius, and South Korea. WU is a public research university located in the

United States. WU runs TNHE programs at partner universities in over a dozen countries around the world. At the time of this study, the ACC location was the second launched TNHE location, with the first one having launched in China in 2015. Given my employment at WU as the onsite director of the WU location in Cambodia at the time of this study, my relationship with the gatekeepers (administration and faculty at both institutions) had already been established by the time I began my data collection.

Probably the area that was most consequential to my results was my relationship with the participants. Given my role as the director of the WU TNHE program at ACC during the period of the study, there was a risk that participants may have been hesitant to share opinions with me about the program that were not altogether positive. However, this is where I believe my rapport with the participants was beneficial as opposed to problematic. My experience in the country and my continued presence on site, I believe, allowed me to establish trust with the students (Creswell, 2014, p. 93). Cambodia has a long history of well-intentioned project leaders from the Global North arriving in country, at times with little preparation, promising huge changes, and often departing after a short period with little to no progress made, and sometimes harm done (Domashneva, 2013; Guiney, 2016; O'Regan, 2015; Rosenberg, 2018). My sensitivity to this particular issue, as a former NGO worker in Cambodia, is what informed my approach to the study, and the selection of my worksite as the site of the study. I hoped that my history in the country, my relocation to Phnom Penh, and constant presence would be reassuring to participants that I was not there only to collect data and leave, with no consideration of my impact on the location or participants. Importantly, I emphasized to the students during the interview process that the data collection for the study, and their participation, had no bearing on their academic progress.

Data Analysis

Regarding data analysis, given the sheer amount of data that I was privy to, I employed constant analysis throughout the collection process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 7-8). This also allowed me to reevaluate my data collection methods to be sure I was following unanticipated leads and avenues, and to begin to develop an understanding of how Orientalism and soft power not only impacted students' perceptions of the United States and the program, but of Cambodia as well.

Using Saldaña's data coding guide (2016), the transcribed interview data was coded using both structural coding and values coding simultaneously. I coded the interviews according to themes that emerged throughout the interviews, and that corresponded with ideas from the conceptual frameworks of Nye's soft power (2004b) and Said's Orientalism (1978). Structural codes included perceptions about the program, the United States and U.S. higher education, Cambodia and Cambodian higher education, WU, ACC, politics (both domestic and international), and soft power. Values codes included foreign education, family/friends/community, practicalities such as saving time and money by choosing the TNHE program, career and ambition, attitudes towards Cambodian versus U.S. education, attitudes towards political issues, attitudes towards U.S./Cambodian relations, and beliefs about U.S. TNHE in Cambodia as well as beliefs about whether or not politics affects education. There was some natural overlap between some of the values codes and structural codes, which lent itself to the simultaneous coding. These codes presented several themes, which were grouped according to their relevance to the research questions. Nye's soft power framework allowed me to deduce, through themes about reputation and benefits, how soft power was expressed by students' perceptions of the United States and Cambodia and their corresponding higher education

systems. His ideas about political values and foreign policies also aided in the explanation of how Cambodian students' perceptions of U.S. values and policies either lessened or increased U.S. soft power influence through U.S. TNHE. The codes also presented themes about negative perceptions of Cambodia and Cambodian higher education that were influenced not only by 1st, 2nd, and sometimes 3rd hand experiences, media, and politics, but by perceptions of foreign higher education, in particular U.S. higher education, as being of superior quality, such as explored in Said's Orientalism. Lastly, themes emerged about the resilience of U.S. higher education's soft power despite negative perceptions of U.S. policy towards Cambodia and its shifting political values.

Validity and Reliability

My efforts at testing validity go to several of Maxwell's points (2013, p. 126-129). Validity threats include, as previously mentioned, my status as administrative director of the TNHE program in the study. I cannot guarantee, despite all efforts, that all participants felt they could openly and honestly communicate with me their opinions about the program, about the United States, and about Cambodia. This is what Maxwell terms "reactivity" (p. 125). It became clear during the study that some students were more comfortable than others discussing their political opinions. This is not entirely surprising, given the contextual realities, and may serve as further proof about students' perceptions on their rights to freedom of expression as well as cultural and societal norms in Cambodia. One way I addressed validity was to include non-dual degree participants in the study. As I am not the administrator for the other academic programs at the host institution, interview data from participants in those programs provided a valuable comparison validity test for the responses regarding the TNHE program (p. 129).

My observations and data collection was facilitated by my “intensive, long term involvement” in the site and program under study, which allowed me to collect “rich data,” that is, data that is complex and varied (p. 126). It is important to acknowledge the language and cultural differences between myself and the participants. The student participants all had, at a minimum, college level English ability (and sometimes near or total fluency in English), which allowed me to communicate with them on a level that would be much more difficult had I attempted to conduct a study on a Khmer language program or conducted the interviews in Khmer. From my experience conducting research in Cambodia, using a translator can also lead to issues of interpreting and deriving meaning from participant responses, so I felt it best to conduct the interviews myself in English. Finally, it emerged through early observation and interactions at the study site that many students were more comfortable expressing complex concepts in English than in Khmer due to the fact that their later years of formal education (and sometimes prior to university) were in English. This is corroborated by other sources on English language in Cambodia as well (An & Mom, 2020; Roughneen, 2019).

Positionality

As both a researcher on TNHE programs and international higher education and an administrator of such programs, including the program in Cambodia, I am both hopeful for the positive experiences and educational exchanges that occur in these programs and skeptical of the grand promises made by many TNHE practitioners and exporting universities. This is because, as is noted in the literature, many of them are perceived to be contextually insensitive (simply transferring U.S. programs to the host context without regard to local needs) and too focused on revenue generation for the home university, amounting to what has been described as essentially neocolonialism through TNHE (Ahmari, 2011; Brooks, 2011; Kiley, 2013; Krieger, 2013;

Pilsbury, Vance, & Trifiro, 2020a; Ross, 2011). I also struggle with my own feelings about U.S. foreign policy towards Cambodia, Cambodia's domestic politics, U.S./Cambodian relations, and who I represent as both a researcher on, and an administrator of, TNHE. These feelings have emerged as a result of my time living and working in Cambodia, both during and prior to this study, and my own persistent interest in U.S. foreign policy. As a U.S. citizen, as a representative of WU, and as an international education practitioner, I am keenly aware of my unavoidable role in perpetuating certain beliefs about the United States and about U.S. higher education versus local higher education in the countries where I work. "For the first time Westerners have been required to confront themselves not simply as the Raj but as representatives of a culture and even of races accused of crimes - crimes of violence, crimes of suppression, crimes of conscience" (Said, 1993, p. 195).

Despite the justifications for this case study, it is still a single site case study, and given the particularities of the U.S./Cambodian relationship, it was not always clear at the outset how generalizable this study could be to the larger field of TNHE. I had to consider within this study my ability to receive honest answers from participants given my professional role in both the development and delivery of the program under study. Additionally, I am a White, native English-speaking American, who was conducting my interviews in English with the participants. I am clearly a cultural outsider, and therefore it is possible that a Khmer researcher would have received different responses or made different interpretations about the data. However, I still hope that through this research I can contribute intellectually to our understanding of TNHE programs, their impacts, and how they are perceived by students, as well as threats to transnational partnerships, as the growth of these partnerships shows no signs of slowing down amidst a climate of growing geopolitical tensions.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview of Findings

Participants in the TNHE program expressed a strong attraction to the United States, its culture, and institutions, as resources of U.S. soft power explained by Nye (2004b). However, the long-term strength of U.S. soft power resources as a source of attraction and motivation for TNHE students in Cambodia is questionable, at least partly because of students' perceptions of the United States' political actions and foreign policies towards Cambodia. The increased political tension between the United States and Cambodia did not have a large direct impact on students' perceptions of the TNHE program but did impact their feelings about the United States overall. Students' perceptions of the United States and U.S. higher education could be compounding perceptions of Cambodia and Cambodian higher education, in what can be described as a feedback loop that explains their motivations to participate in U.S. higher education and their expectations of the program's benefits.

Said's Orientalism (1978) helps explain both students' feelings towards their home country's culture and institutions and why those feelings are formed in contrast to their perceptions of the United States, its culture, and institutions. If we replace references to Arab or Islamic scholars with Khmer scholars, we can see how Said explains this here:

No Arab or Islamic scholar can afford to ignore what goes on in...universities in the United States and Europe; the converse is not true...The predictable result of all this is that Oriental students...still want to come and sit at the feet of American Orientalists, and later to repeat to their local audiences the cliches I have been characterizing as Orientalist dogmas. Such a system of reproduction makes it inevitable that the Oriental scholar will

use his American training to feel superior to his own people because he is able to “manage” the Orientalist system. (p. 324)

However, despite students’ criticisms of their own country, most were not keen to abandon Cambodia post-graduation. Many hoped to use what they learned from the programs, and what they admired about the United States, to make improvements in their own communities, thus demonstrating the outsize effect of U.S. soft power but also the synthesis of often opposing ideas about the United States and Cambodia.

In the sections that follow, I detail the process by which students’ perceptions of the U.S. TNHE program, and of the United States generally, are influenced by representations such as media, rankings, and marketing, by foreign and domestic politics, and by firsthand and secondhand experiences. These inputs form their perceptions, which cycle back to influencing their perceptions of their home country, in a feedback loop. The soft power of the United States is generally a positive force for students’ perceptions of the United States and the program, but this in turn feeds Orientalist narratives about Cambodia as undeveloped and backwards. These narratives are apparent in how the students describe Cambodia and Cambodian higher education and are echoed in how the program is marketed to them. The findings will explain in detail how various inputs have shaped students’ perspectives, and how those perspectives about the United States and Cambodia influence each other.

Perceptions about the United States: A Complex Context

The macro level environment in which the U.S. TNHE program operated at the time of the study is key to understanding the complexity of perceptions about the United States. The United States’ continues its dominance in the minds of most students as a premier source of quality higher education and as a country with an aspirational level of development. The growing

chasm between the governments of the United States and Cambodia at the time of the study as well as the insidiousness of xenophobic attitudes in the United States affected students' perceptions but did not diminish their admiration for U.S. higher education.

Many students, especially at the beginning of their interviews, denied that politics had much of anything to do with their education. They expressed that politics generally had little to do with their daily lives, particularly those political developments between the Cambodian and U.S. governments. However, over the course of the interviews, those that expressed that they were politically aware did admit that politics has had, or has the potential to have, some effect on their education. Regardless, most felt strongly that politics should not impact education, and that tensions between governments should not hinder educational exchanges such as TNHE programs. The question of students' perceptions of politics is important to the study because political tensions, and government policy, can undercut U.S. higher education's soft power. The reality of the U.S./Cambodian relationship, and of U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration, was that politics did seep into the educational experience, not only causing anxiety about their futures, but influencing some to reconsider their perceptions of the United States.

U.S. Sanctions and Visa Restrictions Against Cambodia

Cambodian students expressed frustration about U.S. sanctions on Cambodia and the effects those sanctions had on the economy. "The U.S. and other Western countries have been **putting Cambodia in a difficult situation** putting economic sanctions on them, making it very difficult to trade and to do other activities" (Participant B52). In addition, the Trump administration's rhetoric and actions, and its China policies, were seen as having a negative effect on Cambodia, too.

It's changed a bit because like since now, Trump is the president. So, there he is trying to reject China goods that are imported, and **Cambodia are facing towards China for aid instead**. So, I feel like if he could **make a better foreign policy** and do not like have direct policies that affect other countries it would be better for Cambodia because Cambodia would like both countries to maintain our economy. And I think it will be better soon because the election, there will be a new election soon. And he will not be the president. **I hope there is a better president** that will actually **think about the wellbeing of other countries**, not just the States. (Participant B41)

Students' perceptions about difficulties getting to the United States were frequently based on the experience of friends and family who attempted to go to the United States to study or visit. Such practical concerns were commonly cited by students when asked about their feelings towards the United States.

I, well currently, maybe [the relationship] it's good because like back then [the United States] they fund and [provide] things for organizations or situations here. But after the elections and other political things going on, I think there have been some conflicts like maybe minor or major depending on the circumstances. And I think the way I see it **maybe it's partially because of China**, too. So **maybe the relationship between Cambodia and America is not as good as usual**. And especially now that it's really **hard to get a visa there**...like it's always been hard, but **I feel like they've made stricter rules on it**. (Participant L8)

Some students felt that if visas continued to be difficult to obtain for Cambodians, even anecdotally, it would encourage students to seek other educational opportunities. "For some other people it can actually affect them because if the U.S. government is putting a **tighter**

regulation on getting a visa people will look to Australia or UK and stuff” (Participant B1).
 “Because I heard the seniors, the second cohort of [WU], some of the students **couldn’t get a visa** to graduate there, which is **concerning**, well, it will affect me, too” (Participant B41).

If we were to discuss about applying to the U.S. and stuff, people are, **the opinion is quite negative** because like recently there has been **increasing number of people who didn’t manage to get the visa** to study there. So, they’re thinking that the **regulation is getting stricter** and they’re having concerns relating to that. (Participant B1)

Antagonization from the U.S. Embassy

While the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia tried to distinguish its criticisms of the Cambodian government as separate from its attitude towards the Cambodian people, its stances were often interpreted as both paternalistic and infantilizing towards Cambodians (Ven, 2017b). The U.S. Embassy’s Facebook posts were often reported in local media.

Yeah...**I thought it strange** because in the Phnom Penh Post, the guy in charge he **denies that the U.S. is responsible in the overthrowing of King Sihanouk**. But I have taken the stand into like to not look at one side of the story, but look at the whole picture, when he said that it raised a question **because historically the U.S. is, is responsible for the overthrowing of many governments all over all over the world, not just not just here in Cambodia**, and every time they do that, that country does not prosper into a wide range of democracy like they wanted. (Participant B52)

Students felt that the U.S. Embassy’s attempts to educate Cambodians about issues with Cambodian government was patronizing, as they did not need a foreign actor to explain domestic politics to them.

Where should I start? Well it's just saying that Cambodia politics, you know. The reason we all know what it is you know **we all know what he's [Cambodian Prime Minister] done. We don't need people to tell us what it is because we already know it.** It's just that we don't act toward it, because I think that people, we, I believe that we are privileged, I believe because we can pay a lot of money to send to school to get a second degree or maybe the JD or master's or something. So for people like me or mostly people in this area we don't really concern about politics because I don't know, in the bad way we say we gain [through the] politics so that I think that most people like the poor they should be concerned. But the problem [for] the poor is not because they didn't want to [get involved, it's] because they didn't know what to [be] concerned with. They didn't have a knowledge of how the leaders do what they want. **People who know about it,** are the advocated one, and the advocated one want profit or **get benefit from this type of stuff.** (Participant L11)

U.S. Embassy statements also fell flat among students who paid attention, because their supposed support of the Cambodian people was not reflected in official U.S. foreign policy towards Cambodia.

U.S. Domestic Chaos and Racism/Xenophobia

As previously discussed, institutions' soft power can be diminished by a country's actions (Nye, 2004b, p. 17). The Trump administration's policies in the United States were perceived by student participants as xenophobic and possibly detrimental to their opportunities for visas or work in the United States. "Oh, it's like now, we're **not in a really good relationship.** And as Trump has been the president of America, maybe he more open [to] giving the opportunity to the American citizen more than the immigrants" (Participant B44).

In some cases, students' perceptions of the United States were shaped by media reports of gun violence. "But then a lot of parents they've heard the **news a lot about gun control and gun crime** and so most parents would just either send them to Australia" (Participant B27). Domestic politics in the United States also affected student perceptions of racism in the United States and of what their experience there could be like.

Well more importantly, it's not really negative, **we talk about Donald Trump**, political issue, you know **talking about taking immigrants**, we talk about the latest new trends, about how people should be treated like I think that **there's an issue whether the racism and the black community**, yeah we do talk about it and we raised topics and debates.

(Participant L11)

Some even admitted that their plans had changed in response to U.S. politics.

I just thought **I don't want to go [to the U.S.] anymore**. I would want to go to Australia.

OK there are many factors. But I think I don't have any family over there. I think

discrimination is part of it. And the **chaos right now in America**. (Participant L23)

It is important to note that foreign politics interfering with education in Cambodia is not unprecedented and has a very glaring contemporary example that looms large for many students.

The United States on a Pedestal: Soft Power Resources

Despite the very critical perceptions that students held of U.S. politics and xenophobia, their feelings about certain U.S. soft power resources, such as the higher education system, remained strongly positive. The resilience of U.S. higher education as a resource of soft power, despite other negative perceptions, is a significant reality. The admiration for certain systems such as U.S. higher education, or at least the "acknowledgment" of its supposed superiority, points to the ongoing Western hegemony in determining the legitimacy of educational training

and credentials in contemporary times. The results of this study indicate that the Cambodian students enrolled in the TNHE program have been influenced strongly by U.S. soft power resources, which include U.S. culture and U.S. higher education. These resources act as pull factors and have a large impact on their choice to apply. Nye (2004b) explains that “soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” (p. 5). Students’ perceptions about the United States, often formed in contrast to their experiences in Cambodia, show both the soft power of the United States (strongly propelled by the attraction to U.S. higher education programs) and the continued tensions of how “East” and “West” are perceived in contrast to one another, as articulated by Edward Said (1978). The students believe they will gain benefits from participation in the TNHE program due to their, and in some cases their families’, attraction to the United States and its institutions, and their perceptions about U.S. values and culture. In some cases, students’ perceptions of the program melded with their perceptions of the U.S. style higher education institution, ACC, that houses the TNHE program.

U.S. Culture, Diversity, and Values

Although students were highly critical of certain aspects of U.S. politics, such as xenophobia, they were also attracted to what they believed were specifically American values, such as “freedom”, and the cultural diversity of the United States. “Because [the United States] is the **land of freedom**, there’s so many **diversity**, the **melting pot**” (Participant B34). It is worth noting that Cambodia’s population is over 97% Khmer ethnicity (Central Intelligence Agency, 2021), and students’ perceptions of what diversity means ranged from cultural pluralism to a range of ideologies. Students explained that they were exposed to American and global diversity by participating in the TNHE program. This attraction to diversity and the ability to express different points of view is particularly noteworthy as this program began operating during the

time that the ruling political party in Cambodia had the main opposition party banned, after the opposition had made big gains in local elections the year prior. This stifling of political dissent, and subsequent crackdowns on expressions of dissent against the ruling party on social media, may explain why students admired this aspect of American life. Similar democratic backsliding has also been occurring across ASEAN in Thailand and the Philippines, and most notably with the 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

[Participating in the dual degree program], what it means is that it helps me to **understand the world around me**, to dissect and to **experience other cultures**, **experience multiculturalism**. And to understand more than one side of the story is about understanding the whole picture, two sided, before and not, **being open minded** and to always keep on learning in continuous learning and be open minded. It is because it **opens to new possibilities**. It **opens doors** to creative jobs [and] created like, **understanding of different cultures** and it opens pathways and it **broadens my horizons into understanding**. (Participant B52)

One dual degree participant completed the degree program's required internship at the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, which compounded their experience with diversity in the TNHE program.

[Participating in the dual degree and the internship] makes me more interested [in going to the United States]. I tend to learn more about like U.S. culture and like U.S. experience...at [the embassy] like I work with officer like they all foreigner and most of them **even though they have U.S. citizenship they come from different like the origin nationality**. Yes, so it **quite diverse** and yeah, we learn a lot from them. (Participant B31)

These beliefs clearly indicated that the attraction for these students went beyond obtaining a U.S. accredited degree. Students wanted to experience a broader curriculum that exposed them to foreign points of view and learn from professors who came from and studied in various countries.

So, first of all I thought that I wanted to study business but which business school should I attend to. And then I heard rumors about [ACC], how good their reputation is in Phnom Penh compared to other business schools. So, then I decided to take a look at the school and then **I heard that all the professor they have PhD and are from foreign country.**

And then I discuss it with my parents and we decided to study here. (Participant B27)

This is also another expression of how students in the program specifically valued foreign education. They wanted to learn from non-Cambodians because they felt that foreign degrees were more valuable. This gives some additional depth to this belief, however, because students begin to explain that the reasons why they value foreign education are partly based on being able to experience a variety of points of view.

U.S. Higher Education Reputation and Rankings

Students participating in the TNHE program routinely reported that they applied to ACC specifically because they, or their parents, felt that they would benefit from participating in a U.S. dual degree. “The reason why is because [ACC] is one of the only institutions I think if not the only institution that provides **American style education**. So that is the reason why I decided to choose this school” (Participant B1).

Yes, [the dual degree] that was **exactly the reason I came here**. To be honest, when I came here, my initial major, I was interested in global affairs but sadly that did not have a dual degree. A lot of the students actually came here aiming for global affairs but when

they found out that there wasn't a dual degree they opted for the second best option which was business because mostly the backgrounds of most of our families are either working in the government or in business. (Participant B53)

These preferences were shaped by assumptions about Western higher education being superior, and by rankings of U.S. higher education globally. “[A] U.S. dual degree, it’s **more prestigious**” (Participant B17). Cambodia, being a small country that is also less developed, means that its influence around the world is extremely limited compared to the United States. Students therefore assumed that the influence of the United States globally would also affect their educational experience, because they would become, in some ways, adjacent to the United States and tap into the exposure and reach of the United States, setting them apart from others.

“Because the way I see it I feel like **America is really well known around the world**, so if I know what kind of education they provide it **maybe I get a better view about everything that goes on around the world**, like especially in law and all political things or economic things” (Participant L8). Many students were influenced by family or friends who studied in the United States or abroad, who espoused the benefits of an American education when they came home.

I believe America is **the number one country**...so I am going to be educated people.

Most of my mother’s friends they sent their children to the U.S. to get a degree so most people in Cambodia they like to **get a foreign degree and U.S. is number one**.

(Participant B13)

Frequently students would express their belief that U.S. degrees were simply better than local degrees, and in some cases, better than any other alternatives to be found either in Cambodia or by going abroad to another country. “U.S. education is, I would say, **better than other country**” (Participant B24). “Yes, I think [participating in the dual degree] matters because for some

reason Cambodian people always think the **U.S. degree is the top, it's number one**" (Participant L19). Some felt that U.S. degrees were just inherently superior to other degrees, but especially to Cambodian degrees. "Yes, I want a better education because the perception in Cambodia that's like...a degree from abroad is **more valued especially from the United States**. It's also **intrinsically better**" (Participant B33). Students also expressed the idea that a U.S. degree program would not only be better, but also allow them to expand their education beyond Cambodia and Cambodian issues, which they found to be limiting.

For me, first I want to explore the other international [educational] system besides Cambodia because as you know like everyone, almost everyone acknowledges that **American system is like one of the best education systems**, so as one of the students I would like to know more about how it works and I would like to experience it myself.

(Participant L21)

These frequently encountered assertions that U.S. higher education was number one were expressed without further explanation. Students did not specifically mention what rankings they knew about, nor did they speak about rankings of individual universities or degree programs aside from occasional references to the WU's business college being highly reputable which they likely picked up from the programs' marketing. Rather they repeated what seemed to be accepted as common knowledge in Cambodia, that local higher education was generally underdeveloped, and that everyone agrees that the United States is number one.

Recognition of U.S. Credentials.

Related to their desire to pursue challenges, many students expressed an interest in attending graduate school to study for advanced degrees. For these students, the transferability and recognition of their U.S. credentials would make this possible, as U.S. degrees are more

widely recognized abroad than Cambodian degrees for a variety of reasons including not only local accreditation but an overall lack of familiarity with the Cambodian higher education sector among Western universities and administrators. The evaluation of locally acquired credits from Cambodia, even from institutions from more well-known countries such as Malaysia, often requires constant back and forth with the transfer office at WU, despite the fact that the partnership with ACC is now nearly 5 years old.

The most important reason that I chose to study here because of the dual degree programs, it provides two degrees and one of the degrees is from [Western University], which is **worldwide recognized** and I think it's very **beneficial for my future career**.

(Participant E2)

The transferability of their U.S. credits to other programs and countries also meant they would not have to repeat courses and spend more money and time to show they were qualified for graduate programs.

Well it's opened a lot of doors. And also, I plan on **pursuing the JD**, too. So it's much better to use a program like if I studied at another university they would really, you know their recommendation would, I don't know, maybe I have to study two or more years before I pursue it [the JD]. So yeah. So, this is sort of like an **easy step** going forward.

(Participant L11)

Even for those unsure if they would go to the United States, they felt participating in a U.S. undergraduate program would prepare them better for graduate study regardless of which country they applied to post graduation. "I think like I mentioned earlier because I planned to **pursue my JD degree or LLM degree** outside Cambodia. So, I think that would benefit me a lot if I started to get myself familiar with the American system" (Participant L20). The lack of

recognition of Cambodian university credits contributes to the idea that local degrees are inferior to foreign degrees since they are not deemed equivalent or of quality. Much like employers would make assumptions that these students would make better employees, foreign institutions, by denying transferability of Cambodian credits, reinforce the idea that Cambodian graduates lack the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in a Western context.

U.S. University Curriculum and Student Life.

While many participants' assumptions about and descriptions of U.S. higher education were somewhat vague or general, others expressed more specific reasons for thinking that the U.S. system of education would benefit them personally. For some students, they believed that the dual degree programs gave them the added perspective of learning about two different systems: local and international; Cambodian and American. For them, this meant they could confidently navigate different contexts and cultural practices at work or graduate school in the future. “[ACC] has an American standard for studying and also for the dual degree program so that I can have a **perspective of how business practice work in Cambodia and as well as in the United States**” (Participant B44). For both business and law students, this was particularly attractive for those that wanted to work for multinational corporations in Cambodia or with Western clients.

Yeah, I think it definitely teaches me about how the American legal system works because it's **quite different from here**. Because here we have civil law, that's common law so you know it's **great to understand about how America does things**. But overall, you know, it's also **refreshing to have someone from America** explain what's different in America and **give us some insight and a point of view** from what it's like to be an American lawyer compared to here. (Participant L22)

This is a unique feature of the TNHE program because the courses are all taught by two professors: one located in the United States and the other at the Cambodian institution, allowing for dual perspectives to be shared with students and for additional contextualization of course materials.

Having an American curriculum actually help us a lot. Although yeah, we will work in Cambodia, but we will learn beyond what happens in Cambodia because yeah in our assignments and stuff we have things to **analyze and see from a global perspective**. So yeah it helps on the educational and probably **professional side** as well. (Participant B34)

One student was explicit that they wanted to use their knowledge of American and global business practices to be able to focus on United States and Western businesses operating in Cambodia after graduation. The student also expressed their specific preference to not work with Chinese businesspeople in Cambodia, despite the rapid expansion of that business sector in the country in recent years. “In here if I get the degree from [WU], I can just go to apply for the **work that involve with Americans and the businessmen that come from Europe**. I want to work with them rather than Chinese” (Participant B51). This anti-Chinese sentiment came up with several students and reflects a growing divide in Cambodia between those welcoming the influx of Chinese businesses and those who are wary of China’s rapidly growing influence on Cambodia in politics and development and among wealthy elites. There are currently some Chinese language high schools in the country, but not Chinese universities where a comparison of attitudes could be made. However, as will be discussed in this chapter, students reported that friends that attended university in China did not recommend the experience.

General education and extensive student services, distinct features of U.S. higher education that are usually absent from Cambodian universities, are other aspects that students

cited as positives of participating in the programs at ACC. “[When it comes to] **general education**, [ACC] is definitely lean toward [offering that]...here in the general education class, we learn about geography or exploring the universe which is **totally different from other universities**” (Participant B24). This reflects the perspective that the TNHE program and ACC would give them a broader base of knowledge than a local program.

The study environment as I mentioned earlier it's not just [study] and go home. It's like there are **clubs and activities, the library, learning center**, and so on, all the service being provided to you to make sure that you are at home. **You feel at home** although you are not at your original home. (Participant B34)

This sense of wanting to feel at home, and as part of a community, was repeated by various students. They would explain this in contrast to Cambodian university culture, which generally places less of an emphasis on extracurricular activities and student life outside of the classroom. Students would explain that at Cambodian universities, you only go to campus for class, and then you leave. There are not a lot of opportunities to socialize and participate in activities. At ACC, and in the dual degree programs, there are many opportunities for students to connect, and this strong network continues after graduation. Alumni gatherings and traveling together to the WU main campus for graduation are aspects of the experience that students frequently ask about. Students feel a connection both to each other from the shared experience, and to WU as their American alma mater. Despite the distance between their campus and the WU main campus, students did report that they felt like true WU students. “Yes, because we use D2L, we use [WU] email, and they send stuff to us like, **we are students there**” (Participant B24). The interview findings reflected observations from spending time on the ACC campus. The connection they felt with the WU campus was something they wanted to project to others, and students proudly wore

WU clothing and displayed WU stickers on their laptops, setting them apart from non-TNHE participants on the ACC campus and from other university students where those kinds of material items are less common. In speaking to students about these types of items, they pointedly preferred items that were WU only, rejecting those that featured Khmer language or indicated the campus was located in Cambodia. Students' pride in their university and degree programs contributed to a sense that they were in some ways superior to their local university counterparts, something mirrored in how Said describes Arab scholars who returned home after studying in the "West" (p. 324).

Development of Culturally "Western" Skills.

One of the more common features of U.S. higher education cited in marketing and by U.S. development organizations is the focus on developing critical thinking skills. U.S. businesspeople and teachers in Cambodia frequently describe Cambodians as lacking "critical thinking skills" that they see as necessary to Cambodia becoming a more developed society (She Can, 2021; Hong, 2020; GoCorps, 2020). U.S. diplomats cite critical thinking as an important feature of democratic societies (Newbill, 2018), something that Cambodia no longer is, especially post 2018 with the outlawing of the opposition party, the strengthening of *lèse-majesté* laws, and growing crackdowns on dissent. The assumption is that because critical thinking is not an explicit part of Cambodian curriculum, it is not present in Cambodian society. This belief also contributes to a lack of acknowledgement among foreigners about the effects of colonization and foreign domination in Cambodia and puts the blame for Cambodia's current state of development on Cambodians themselves. This prevails despite existing research on the ways Cambodian students are often stereotyped as "passive" because of the different ways they might engage with critical thinking in the classroom if done so in a culturally contextualized way

(Bevan, 2017). Even local publications will point out this apparent missing feature of Cambodian education (Khmer Times, 2014; Va, 2016). “Critical thinking starts with a curious mind and the freedom to ask questions. In Cambodia—partly for cultural reasons—questions are too often not welcome. Hence, most students, especially in the provinces, grow up accepting what they are told and taught” (Va, 2016). One Cambodian graduate of a UK university criticized local graduates thusly: “students become more independent after learning to think critically. [Cambodian students] only do things based on the guidance they receive” (Va, 2016).

The development of critical thinking skills was commonly cited as a benefit of participation in the TNHE program under study. When asking faculty at ACC about how critical thinking is taught in a politically sensitive context, some felt that it was fine to use Cambodian examples in the classroom, while others reported they only used foreign examples and let students bring up Cambodian examples if they chose to do so. Regardless of how it was presented and taught, students were very enthusiastic in their belief that these programs improved their critical thinking skills, and that their ability to think critically was a key benefit of the programs. This foreign idea that Cambodians cannot think critically and that local schools do not teach it has demonstrably filtered down to these students, and again contributes to a sense of superiority over others in Cambodia. For some Cambodian foreign degree holders, this has also led to an ironic inability to critically assess historical reasons for why Cambodian development and politics are in their current state. The Cambodian government has developed, like many authoritarian governments globally in recent years, an obsession with what it calls “fake news,” frequently weaponizing it against expressions of dissent (Hul, 2017; Thul & Tostevin, 2017), while the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia uses the same charge against what it labels as government

propaganda (Newbill, 2018). And so, there is no consensus on Western ideas of critical thinking and its deployment in the Cambodian context.

When asked how they would benefit from participation in the programs, students frequently reported “critical thinking” as a skill they anticipated developing. “Because like my major is law, and in law, it does require **critical thinking** and you need to interpret the law. So, I think I need critical thinking.” (Participant L12). “So, when I come to university and get into this school, [ACC], I think, I think **I learn a lot**. It help **improve my critical thinking skills**, and I learn a lot more than back in high school” (Participant S3). Other related aspects students cited included an increased sense of independence and the ability to seek out information from sources beyond the classroom and the instructor. “Here we’re more expected to be **independent and self-reliant** to interpret the information and the lessons ourselves by learning from **not just within the curriculum however outside as well and applying it**” (Participant B33). Research skills are embedded in the curriculum, and the access that participants have to the WU libraries and databases is a distinct feature of the programs frequently used in marketing and recruitment. As Bevan (2017) notes, well stocked libraries and access to research databases are absent from many Cambodian schools and universities. Again, the Khmer Rouge decimation of academia and the need to rebuild Cambodian academic life, along with the continued need for development funds for tertiary institutions, are reasons why these resources are absent in local institutions which are necessary for developing critical thinking skills. This is in addition to the extreme disparities regarding online journal access between Cambodian and U.S. university students and institutions. It is worth noting that the disparities played out among instructors, too, with WU co-professors at ACC enjoying access to WU online resources which other instructors in single degree programs did not have, even if students in their ACC classes did, leading to frequent

requests for a reconsideration of this arrangement so they could evaluate sources being used by students for non-dual degree program classes.

Students also spoke highly of other personal and professional skills they were developing from participating in the programs, which they felt would eventually set them apart from graduates of local institutions. “Because since [ACC] **train us to have skills and problem solving**, actually help me to **perform better at the workplace** with all the sub skills applied from what I study, not just from [ACC] but also from [WU]” (Participant B34).

So, I’m studying with [WU] for the past one year I have **learned a lot** it’s not just anything like a course that you can just [read] something in the textbook like you **go beyond to real life experience** as well for example you get to **analyze real time financial analyses** and so on. So, I would say it’s **very beneficial** for me to **prepare for the real-life workplace** when I graduate. (Participant B34)

Beyond the academic benefits of earning a more widely recognized degree and the educational benefits of a broader curriculum, students believed that they experienced personal growth from participating in the TNHE program, and they widely reported a desire to challenge themselves as a reason for pursuing the WU degree. This coincided with their beliefs that Cambodian education consists of regurgitating facts rather than employing critical thinking.

[Participating in the dual degree program] it’s changed me a lot. Changed me to be **more responsible in time management** and to relying more on **teamwork** instead of doing it by yourself and to **ask for help** instead of accepting that you don’t understand.

(Participant B27)

[I chose the dual degree program] because I wanted to **test myself**. I wasn’t sure if I could like, if I could handle myself, if I could like **take on the challenges of college style**

education. I was still nervous on how do I keep my grades or how do I like, raise my GPA? How do I like continue to be outgoing with my professor and this is why I come here and like to see if I can do it or not and so far? Amazing. (Participant B52)

Personal development and skills development for the students also included more confidence operating in a bilingual environment, something many of them anticipated doing in the future. “I think the impact should be the language because when I was interning last summer, I got work in a law firm. Most of the language they use is English. So, I think the study here have **improved my language**” (Participant L12). English language skills, enhanced critical thinking and research skills, and seeking out and feeling confident with unfamiliar challenges were all aspects that students felt set them above and apart from local peers.

Competitiveness in the Job Market.

Unsurprisingly, one of the aspects that came up frequently was the ability to earn a higher salary, and get better jobs, compared to graduates from Cambodian universities. This was something students were frequently told by faculty and staff promoting the dual degrees. There was an inherent belief that a foreign, especially a Western, degree is proof of competency in the workplace, much more so than a local degree. “I believe this degree will help me land in a **high salary job**, not just high salary but also like **positive working environment** as well (Participant B34). In some cases, they expected the pay to be twice what they would earn with only a Cambodian degree.

I’m not sure, I think it be, you know, if I get a U.S. degree and I have, it’s kind of hard to explain. If I’m working at this place, at one place, the same job some type of stuff, like if I have a Cambodian degree, I may only get a thousand dollars a month. But if I have U.S. degree...and I work in Cambodia I think the **salary will be doubled.** (Participant L19)

Students believed that employers would specifically value their U.S. credential as proof of their readiness to work and their ability to hit the ground running without the need for extensive on the job training. ACC requires internships as part of its graduation requirements, and this adds to the belief that these graduates are better prepared than others.

[I picked this program] because of job opportunities in the future. They are looking for both **high qualification** students with the qualified **ability to work**. So, in order to prove to them that I'm qualified for the good job I need to have the kind of American certificate to prove to them. (Participant L21)

Furthermore, the WU's business dual degree program at ACC is run by one of the top ranked public university business schools in the United States and as noted previously, students were very focused on rankings.

Yeah, the dual degree part it's **really good to have a degree that comes from two universities while you only go to one**. When you graduate and then you go to apply for jobs and then they think like 'oh, this person who spent only four years and with **degrees from one of the top universities**.' Yeah. It gives you **more credibility**. (Participant B20)

The belief that the TNHE program was a way to improve human resources in Cambodia was common, reflecting neoliberal rhetoric used by Western development organizations and foreign training programs from more developed countries like Japan (UNESCO, 2021; Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2021; Rana et al., 2016). Students expressed that they would be more valued by employers than Cambodian university graduates.

And it's like, **reputation** kind of thing. And in addition, it will offer me like more opportunities when I have like American degree since like **companies here will value**

more as well, you will **stand out among all the Cambodians** that do not have a dual degree from like the States. (Participant B41)

Students expressed confidence that their U.S. degree would allow them to compete not only with other Cambodian graduates, but with job seekers across the region and globally. This was particularly important to them given that many of these students planned to seek work with businesses or organizations that had Western clients or that operated internationally. “That means that if I pursue an American education it will mean that I will be **up to par** to not just people in Cambodia but also like people around the world as well” (Participant B34). Multiple students reported feeling that their education would make them better qualified, and more advanced, than other Cambodian and Southeast Asian graduates for competitive jobs.

I feel that **we are like more advanced than other students** from other universities. And we have, like when I apply for internships or like job, I tend to feel that **I’m more qualified** than, it doesn’t mean like I underestimate them, but I’m just like what I feel because like we have more like more higher system, education system, or something like that. That’s why I feel prepared. Yes, **more prepared, and more confident**. Yeah, it’s totally good because it gives students opportunities to explore U.S. higher education and to like to study local, but we can like **compete with, like globally and specifically like Southeast Asian universities**. (Participant B31)

Preference for U.S. Higher Education over Other Countries.

While the TNHE students often cited very practical benefits to studying in the TNHE program, especially regarding saving time and money, they had not been persuaded to pursue study in other countries despite the chance to do so on scholarship. Cambodia’s Gross Domestic Product per capita is about 2.5% that of the United States (World Bank, 2019), and while some

students at ACC certainly come from wealthy families, there are also many who are only able to attend because of loans and scholarships provided by the school or outside foundations and non-governmental organizations. While overall U.S. scholarship opportunities for foreign students dwindled during the period of this study, other countries, most notably in this case China, were providing ample scholarships to Cambodian students, in a similar soft power push to the Soviet higher education scholarship programs during the Cold War. Soft power comes in many forms, and despite the fact that tuition scholarships could in some cases be interpreted as a sort of ‘payment’ or bribe’, Nye specifically classifies scholarships and government sponsored educational exchanges as a form of soft power (2004b, p. 45-46). Chinese scholarship opportunities do draw some Cambodian students who need the funding, but Chinese universities were still not a top choice for these students. Furthermore, they also reported feedback from friends indicating that this preference held even for Cambodian students outside ACC.

To a certain extent, because like for an example is like university in America is more **world recognized** than Chinese universities and sometimes the reason they prefer to go to China **I think most of my friends that go to Chinese universities is because they got scholarships from the government. And it’s a lot cheaper in China than in the States.** But I believe, I think so, they might be interested in going to China instead, because I heard that if you know how to speak Chinese in Cambodia, you will get paid more. For example, there’s this translator he earns, like, translate from Khmer to English, earns only like \$500. But if you translate from Khmer to Chinese, you earn like \$800. So, it’s a better value for you. **But for those, like students from a better well-off family that can afford like American education, they would prefer to go to America.**

(Participant B41)

I think there are some students who are already going to China versus the fact that how livable a place is say like, I have some friends who went to China and came back and said that they can't live there because it's the **living situation isn't what they expected. It wasn't that good.** So, they came back, and they went to another place. And then the **U.S. I think it's kind of a really livable place.** And the people are very nice when you meet the right people. (Participant E6)

When asked if students would at some point start preferring Chinese higher education opportunities because of the increasing business and political ties between Cambodia and China, students were adamant that they would not. "For China, as many of my friends have gone there is because of the scholarship but if they have in mind of **choosing China as the first choice, I don't think so**" (Participant B44). Some students reported that the closeness of the Cambodian and Chinese governments was the only reason their friends went to study in China in the first place, indicating that if that governmental relationship were to turn south, so would Cambodian enrollments in Chinese universities.

They [students] wouldn't go to China because they wouldn't go there. They wouldn't go there because now that the [Cambodian] government and the country is having a more intimate relationship with China and students are receiving scholarship and they are **going to China solely as a result of the partnership.** (Participant B52)

As mentioned previously, Cambodian students' familiarity with English was a draw for U.S. programs, while the difficulty of learning Chinese remained a barrier to study in that country for students without previous Chinese language skills. This preference for U.S. programs over Chinese programs is not only an indicator of the soft power of U.S. higher education, but also an expected outcome of the continued global dominance of the English language, from which the

U.S. programs benefit. Students said that their friends were unable to pursue particular majors because of the difficulty of doing so in a Chinese language, while they would have more flexibility in U.S. programs to select a preferred major due to their familiarity with English.

I think some of my friends also currently in China for their bachelor degree, I think most of **Cambodian students study in China because of the government scholarships** there, but **I don't really prefer China because I don't really like there**. They [my friends] haven't talked about their school, but they said it's good. Yeah, they said there's good education. But they said the problem is the language because Chinese is hard to learn. So, they switch their major back and forth because of the language. (Participant L12)

The perceptions of Chinese higher education, like perceptions of Cambodian higher education, are part of the representations that students absorb leading to beliefs in the superiority of U.S. higher education. These perceptions are exacerbated by United States versus China narratives, especially when it comes to those countries' correspondingly waning and waxing influence on the Cambodian government and business environment. The idea of 'Western' education versus what is broadly painted as 'Eastern', 'traditional', or 'Asian', is likely influencing students' perceptions of higher education in China in addition to their perceptions of higher education in Cambodia.

Perceptions about Cambodia: A Growing Inferiority Complex?

For some students, their positive perceptions and beliefs about U.S. culture, values, and standards were formed in opposition to the negative perceptions they held or had developed about certain aspects of their home country. Some of this was because they perceived Cambodia as less developed than the United States, or because they believed Khmer culture overall had a

stifling effect on their ambitions and freedoms compared to what they believed about U.S. culture. This dichotomy of what is ‘good quality’ versus what is ‘poor quality’ mirrors the attitudes and beliefs about Western versus Eastern cultures that are part of Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism (1978). “The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (p. 1-2). This is not to say that Cambodians have all simply absorbed Orientalist attitudes about themselves and the West and do not recognize the long-term impacts of Western colonialism and interventionism on their country and its trajectory. Indeed, at an academic conference in Siem Reap in 2011, Cambodians were quite eager to challenge Western presenters who expressed generalizations about Cambodian minds and attitudes. Rather, it is possible that Orientalist attitudes have played a part in how these students initially conceptualize their own motivations for pursuing this particular program, why they see it as superior to what is available locally, and what benefits they seek from participating. As will be discussed, these ideas mirror messages from friends and family as well as program marketing materials in a similarly black and white manner. However, as students think forward to what they plan to do with their acquired education and skills post-graduation, we can see they have already started moving beyond East versus West dichotomies, towards a synthesis of aspirations and understandings.

Perceptions about Politics and Culture in Cambodia

The East versus West Orientalist dichotomy and comparisons that students expressed about the United States and Cambodia went beyond educational systems. Some of the students indicated that their experience in the U.S. TNHE program and knowledge of U.S. politics changed how they felt about Cambodia in turn. These feelings ranged from ideas that Cambodia was much more corrupt than the United States, that the Cambodian government did not respect

human rights, to simple declarations that Cambodia was just “not good” in comparison. Due to their negative feelings about certain aspects of Cambodia and Cambodian culture, they subsequently felt pride at having earned a U.S. degree which they felt was higher quality and not tainted by corruption.

“Like the first thing that comes to mind [about Cambodia] is like, it’s not that good in terms of politics or like the U.S. want us to be more democratic. **So, I feel like we’re not that good**” (Participant B24).

I think [our view of the United States] it’s mostly positive because in America one thing that Cambodians would acknowledge about America is that **America is a less corrupted country**. So, with less corruption they feel like if they go to study and work in America their **work has merit**. And so, it gives them a **sense of accomplishment and pride** and they have much **more fairer** chance of obtaining something they want unlike in Cambodia. (Participant L22)

Corruption was a recurring theme for this law student, who hoped to take the lessons learned about the U.S. system in the dual degree program to improve what they viewed as deficiencies in the Cambodian justice system.

Yes, I think the **U.S. actually has a better legal system than ours**. In any legal system, you know money and corruption is always going to be a bit, sort of like, tied. I mean someone who has more money and connection always has an overwhelming advantage. But I feel like the **American legal system is more fair** in terms that the government, the royal government, the legislative...**they can’t really interfere with the court’s decision**. The court has sort of like their own rights, like their own branch of power. So even though you know I heard some people from America, Americans say that in any country

even in America if you have money and you go and bribe the judges and you know you hire good lawyers you're still going to have a good chance of winning in the end. But it's a little, that's **actually much more fair than in Cambodia where you know corruption is a very huge problem** and someone with money is always guaranteed, 99 percent of the time guaranteed to get away with it. (Participant L22)

There were several instances where students expressed their admiration for the United States due to it being in their view much more developed and diverse than Cambodia. These perceptions were sometimes firsthand, as some students had spent time traveling or studying in the United States. For others, their ideas were formed from exposure to images of the United States through Hollywood and social media.

First of all in the U.S. people are always speak English and they have a lot of **people from all over the world and they share different culture** and they of course they have the **education there that is much better than in Cambodia** because are **already developed**. (Participant B51)

[There is] probably a big difference [between the countries], because the U.S., as you know, is a country [has] so big building, cultures, rich[er] people than Cambodia, **everyone get a good education. Better than Cambodia as you know**. (Participant L3)

Said wrote about this phenomenon in the Arab world in the 1970s:

There is a vast standardization of taste in the region, symbolized not only by transistors, blue jeans, and Coca-Cola but also by cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media and consumed unthinkingly by the mass television audience. The paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an "Arab" of the sort put out by Hollywood is but the simplest result of what I am referring to. (1978, p. 324-325)

Students' views of themselves as Khmers has been shaped not just by their experience in Cambodia but in how their country is seen and described by outsiders. However, it is critical not to minimize the very real lived experiences that inform students' opinions of their own country. Student's views on Cambodia could range from it being rather homogenous to downright dangerous.

Politics is something that we are **not allowed to talk [about]** and it's never really the subject [of conversation] because...like how could you know about something if that thing it will never be introduced at all. You know like if you know about politics but **if you talk about politics you get killed or be imprisoned.** (Participant L11)

Another student also described the dangers of the current climate in Cambodia.

I think it's probably more the lifestyle than the experience because here we live much differently than in America where you know, you know America, they say it's kind of like the **land of the free** where you have **more freedom** to go around and do what you want. But in **Cambodia it's rather restricted or even dangerous** because you know there is a lot of crime and also people are usually very fearful here. They don't really want to explore much. And in America I feel like I have a better chance of getting to **explore the land** and the city because it's some **really beautiful sights** I've seen in America. So, **we don't really have that here.** I'd go experience that. (Participant L22)

It was surprising, as a foreigner, to hear the final part of this student's perspective, given the enormous draw that cultural heritage and religious sites in Cambodia such as Angkor Wat have for outsiders.

One student explained that they felt Cambodia tried to make good impressions on foreign visitors, but that they were disappointed in 'Cambodian behavior' and the inability to maintain

improvements in society. They felt that many ‘improvements’ in the country were done just for show, and not for the benefit of Cambodian people.

I don’t really know much [about politics] but the only thing I know is in Cambodia we have a **tendency to sort of just make ourselves look good for a certain period**. If like, let’s say back **when Obama visited the streets were cleaner, there was a lot more order** but then **after he left everything was just back to normal**. In a way, **the U.S. helped us out a lot, whether it’s education or infrastructure** but the thing is, it’s sort of a like a very bad Cambodian trait where countries help us but **we don’t maintain what they help us with**. An example would be the bridges, the schools that they built, it’s not well maintained, and that’s something that I obviously don’t like about the **typical Cambodian behavior**...Based on what I’ve seen I think they [the United States] followed up on most of their projects. It’s just that after they’re done and the result is there, and we Cambodians, **we don’t maintain that finished product** and the finished product deteriorates faster than it should. (Participant B53)

The Case of Zaman University

The reality of political interference in Cambodian higher education emerged in a huge way roughly a year and half after the launch of the U.S. TNHE program at ACC. In 2018, the higher education sector in Cambodia was rocked when the Turkish government demanded the closure of Zaman International Schools, all the while dangling the possibility of a huge bilateral trade increase between Turkey and Cambodia. Unlike scholarships, bribes and threats are forms of hard power (Nye, 2004b, p. 8). Zaman University, a well-respected private higher education institution in Phnom Penh, became a high-profile casualty of the Turkish government’s vendetta against the Fethullah Gülen movement, to which Zaman schools had alleged ties (Nachemson &

Dara, 2016). Some students went so far as to believe that the allegations of ties to terrorism meant that Zaman had ties to the Islamic State (ISIS). Eventually, as a sort of resolution, the university was sold to a Cambodian citizen and had its name changed to Paragon, but the threat of a foreign university's closure because of politics and the effect that could have on students' academic careers was not lost on ACC students and their parents. Even students who had intended to apply to Zaman before the closure had done so hoping that an international credential from that institution would get them closer to the United States.

Well, at that time...there was this terrorism news about, **I nearly applied to Zaman**, but there was this news that Zaman is related to the Turkish Embassy which, they are related to the terrorism as well so like the **link to the U.S. will be weakened based on that**. So [ACC] is new and also, I think at that time when I came to ask for their permission, I met one of the staff. He said, oh there are a lot of Cambodians in the States...and we have a lot of connections there so it's better that you come here and if you want to go abroad afterwards it's easier because there's an established link. So, in a sense yes, **it affected my choice of university**. (Participant B33)

Students admitted that the politics that caused the chaos with Zaman could have a similar effect on enrollments at ACC if U.S./Cambodian relations continued on a negative trajectory.

I think for now, [American and Cambodian relations] might matter. It might matter to some people because maybe if, like, say **in the worst-case scenario something bad happened and American companies they will close in Cambodia it might affect the decisions to choose [an]other university**. Although I'm not saying that will happen but just imagine the worst-case scenario. So, if that actually is there, I actually think that they would put that into consideration. I think it would strongly affect their position, to choose

the university. Oh yeah, like, that is **another reason why I don't go to Zaman.**

(Participant B34)

Another student felt that families' fears also had a big influence on what happened with Zaman University.

I think [if political tension was very high] it would [affect our choice of schools] because in our culture our parents, most of them they tend to be very protective and controlling which also stems from that overprotectiveness and if they see something that might sort of be unfavorable towards their child then chances are they wouldn't send them off to the U.S. or have them be involved in the American system. That said though, a similar situation would be back a few years ago, back at Zaman with the whole ISIS crisis, **my brother was going to Zaman**, now they changed their name Paragon, back then when the Turkish ambassador suspected that the institution being a part of ISIS and that just **caused sort of a big panic among the parents. Quite a few of them actually took their children out of school and sent them to other high schools.** (Participant B53)

Despite students' insistence that politics should stay out of education and that was the best way to avoid trouble, a view likely inherited from their parents' Khmer Rouge traumas, those who avoid politics are not always unaffected by them. The closure of Zaman University was a clear case of geopolitics having micro level effects on university students in Cambodia.

Perceptions About Cambodian Workplace Culture

While many in the United States might find comparisons of American work/life balance and workers' rights with other countries to be disappointing, to these Cambodian students the U.S. system was better than what they saw at home. Their ideas about American workplace culture valuing creativity and flexibility mirrors their attitudes about the American education

system versus the Cambodian system, and again were expressed in very black and white, developed versus undeveloped, and good versus poor statements, rather than on some kind of spectrum.

Because of the people in the States they have a **better business practice** and they much more advanced...what I'm much interested about is the **work life balance** and the **flexibility**, and also the **welfare of the employee** and stuff like that. So, **in Cambodia where [people] still stick to the traditional ways** of working eight hours per day. And **there's no flexibility** that, **people are just not open up to new ideas** and also that people not really open up to what other's [are] thinking and they always looking for the command from the upper level and do the work. And yeah...the United States is **more creative** from that way. (Participant B44)

For these students, particularly the business students who were seen by ACC faculty as especially ambitious and entrepreneurial, creativity and flexibility were recurring themes in their admiration of U.S. practices. And these attributes were always in opposition to what they saw as lacking in the Cambodian workplace.

Perceptions about Cambodian Education

As previously discussed, students believed that U.S. higher education was of a higher quality overall and specifically of a higher quality than they would get at a Cambodian university, and therefore they felt they would have better educational experiences and outcomes by participating in the U.S. TNHE program at ACC. Some of their beliefs about the low quality of Cambodian schooling came from firsthand experience. “[Studying at ACC] it's a privilege. I can say that because comparing to education in Cambodia and other school that...I went to the public high school and I know **the quality of education there is not that good**” (Participant

S3). One student, in an effort to explain the difference between U.S. and Cambodian degrees, used a simple metaphor of the two vehicles that are most ubiquitous in contemporary Phnom Penh: the first car people are able to afford, a Camry, versus what the upper class drive, a Rolls-Royce.

It's hard to say but **it is like I'm driving a Camry and driving a Rolls-Royce** like this.

It's different. It's like incomparable [sic] because **when people hear that you get a degree from the U.S., they would think that you are so smart** and they would they would think that **you're the first choice** if they were to pick. But then **if you have Cambodian certification** and you would think that **anyone can get that degree and they don't value [you] that much.** (Participant B27)

One student tellingly believed I, a foreigner, would of course agree that American education was naturally better than Cambodian education. "Because **as you know Cambodia does not have a good education [system]**, so for now [ACC] has the connection with [WU] so they can **provide good, American standard to Cambodian people**" (Participant L3). Again, students are expressing the idea that the "American" standard is universally recognized as "good."

Narrow Curriculum and Lack of Extracurriculars

When asked to explain more specifically the differences between Cambodian and U.S. style education, students expressed negative opinions about the scope of the curriculum taught in local schools and universities. Some students cited a more fixed and traditional educational curriculum in Cambodian schools and universities versus what was offered at ACC and in the U.S. TNHE program. They felt that foreign curriculum being introduced to Cambodia was positive for the country, and that they hoped more foreign countries would introduce similar programs.

I would say, yeah, I just hope that the U.S., not just the U.S., but also other nations will **continue to invest like the dual degree program or just like the curriculum to Cambodia. Our curriculum is still kind of lacking.** Although I will say put more emphasis on high school because university, I think, is going well so far especially in private university, but high school is still lacking even the private high school. Some of them are **not really up to par** compared to other countries. (Participant B34)

Students expressed feelings that the traditional Cambodian curriculum, which includes the study of Buddhism and Khmer culture, was too limiting for them.

[Participating in the dual degree] it's probably because I want to break free from the sort of **fixed education system** that was taught here. And also because America is one of the **more developed** countries and I thought that **they're developed and the education system has to be good, too**, so **if I go there then I should be able to be competent** when I leave. (Participant B53)

“There's also religion like at other [Cambodian] university I see them learning about **religion** and also like **manners**, or stuff” (Participant B24). Students also complained that unlike at ACC, there were few, if any, extracurriculars in Cambodian public schools. “They don't give us...like activities in school clubs, soccer clubs so I can experience, because I used to study at a public school not private schools so, in **Cambodia public schools do not provide us with good activities**” (Participant L3). The broader curriculum of ACC and the TNHE program, in contrast, allowed students a chance to learn about the world outside Cambodia, and as previously discussed, students valued diversity and foreign points of view. “[The education I get at ACC] it's just not only a national level, but it become international level so I can learn more about the

globe, the world, not just about my country. **[Cambodian education] seems so narrow scope**” (Participant S5).

Another common belief was that the teaching of critical thinking was lacking in Cambodian education. Said (1978) specifically wrote of the efforts of authoritarian governments (emergent in the aftermath of colonialism) in the Near East that replaced critical thinking and strong intellectual traditions with rote learning and orthodoxy (p. xxviii). As the Khmer Rouge specifically targeted academics and teachers, the Cambodian education system is still recovering in terms of teacher training and qualifications.

So, getting American education is different from Khmer education because the way you think the way you do the assignment do the homework and do a lot of teamwork. It’s different from Khmer education. **Khmer education, we only focus teacher and student but not student to student.** There’s not a lot of teamwork involved. And we **are not independent** the way teachers set up it’s so strict that...like if they put two plus two is four, **they don’t want us to put one plus three is four. We have to be two plus two is four.** So, it’s tricky. But then we have U.S. education with which we can be more broadly than Khmer education. (Participant B27)

Students specifically criticized Cambodian education and teachers for using rote learning techniques, but also not being willing or able to answer students’ questions.

Well [participating in the program] means that I can sort of broaden my horizons in a way because the **education system here in Cambodia it’s very, let’s say, fixed and based on memory.** While in the U.S. it’s more creativity and critical thinking and problem solving. After coming here, I realized that because in my first year and also I’m almost

finishing my second year now but I'm **still sort of struggling with the whole critical thinking part because it's still something I'm not used to yet.** (Participant B53)

This contrasts with how the ACC students described their professors specifically as 'approachable.'

I would say in general I would say in Cambodia education is more like **rote learning**. Like when you actually just write down what your high school teacher wrote down and then **just memorize** the whole thing. But when I study high school in American curriculum it's more like you actually have to **think by yourself**. Like more like **independent studying** and with also the teacher assisting as well but you get to **think on your own more rather than like your teacher telling you everything**. And I would say regarding university from other local universities some is quite great but there's **still some rote learning** and the professor that's not really like put much emphasis on you like because there's a lot of students and mostly at some point **you just get lost and you cannot really ask your professor.** (Participant B34)

Students who had attended private, international style high schools, often reported wanting to continue in the American system because they had felt their high school education was higher quality than they would receive at local public schools. One student specifically tied the critical thinking aspect of U.S. higher education to U.S. democratic values and style of government.

I came from a school called CIA [First] Cambodian International School. The school they have is trying to **emulate American or U.S. style education** by offering advanced placement courses, college level courses. So, I am already aware of how U.S. style education would be before I came here. So, it's not really surprising. So, what the, to just

answer the question it is about like **learning something new questioning everything around us** and trying to understand what is happening around the world and experiencing different cultures. Yeah **more of U.S. culture or education** and like their **stand for what they believe in, in their democracy, I guess.** (Participant B52)

Yet there were many participants who had also attended Cambodian public high schools, and even some who had transferred to ACC after some time spent studying at Cambodian public universities and so were able to give firsthand perspectives.

I would say the **independence [is one difference between Cambodian and U.S. education]** because from my experience at high school it's usually the teacher that's crunching all the information and kind of spoon feed it to us...So, [in the dual degree program at [ACC] it is more of a **journey by ourselves** rather than with the professors which is quite good, **contrasting from the Cambodian education that I'm used to.** (Participant B33)

One student explained that local universities in Cambodia simply did not have the resources that foreign universities could provide to students, which is an example of how the disparities in university resources between the Global North and Global South play into student perceptions of quality. Students enrolled in the TNHE programs at ACC have even greater access to resources, as their enrollment at WU allows them access to the entirety of the university's online databases for scholarly journals and texts.

I just want to get proper education. Like...in Cambodia, most of the schools, like their education is **not very qualified.** Yeah. And they have **not enough material for study** or something. So, study in American university can provide us like enough materials and like similar to another country in Europe or developed countries. (Participant B51)

As Said wrote of the effects of colonialism and the authoritarian governments that emerged post-colonization in the Near East in *Orientalism*, they “do nothing to open up societies where secular ideas about human history and development have been overtaken...by an Islamism built out of rote learning...and an inability to analyze and exchange ideas within the generally discordant world of modern discourse...with the result that critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world have simply dropped out of sight. Orthodoxy and dogma rule instead” (p. xxvii). Students were able to articulate what they saw as the differences between Cambodian and American education systems currently, but they were not seemingly, at least when responding to this study, making connections about the capacity of Cambodian education historically, and few made reference to the decimation of Cambodian academics and universities under the Khmer Rouge. As discussed in Chapter 2, the UNTAC period of the 1990s saw a huge influx of development organizations and other Western bodies into Cambodia in an attempt to ‘rebuild’ Cambodia post-genocide and civil war, mostly by recommending the importation of Western models and systems. The oldest of the students interviewed in this study would have been born in 1997, and their parents would all have been directly impacted by the Khmer Rouge. Some of their parents sought education abroad in this period, as the Cambodian education system had suffered such devastation. And the limits on academic freedom under the current regime in Cambodia means that the country’s universities and schooling systems are still hindered in their ability to deliver what students see as a high-quality education.

Lack of Freedom of Expression

Some students went further in their criticisms of the Cambodian education system, describing a lack of ability to express their ideas. This is corroborated by faculty at ACC who

claim to have direct knowledge of these limitations at local Cambodian universities. Students felt that participating in the dual degree allowed them a much higher degree of freedom of expression in an academic environment that encouraged debate and discussion.

Our professors are from accredited American, or I would say Western style, education and the way they teach their class is very liberal, so **we get to really express our idea** and also **open for discussion** during class. They actually encourage us to **challenge their ideas and not just accept what is being taught** like the normal Khmer style education.

(Participant B1)

Not only was the ability to express oneself an issue of comfort and greater learning, but at times safety and censorship.

One of the things that I like about American education is that it cherished diversities and you could be any in any form you like in any you know it's kind of like a way that you can find the best thing in you **without having to fear that people would judge you** and which **in Cambodian education they do that**. They have like a specific way to judge and determine people just by the way you think even if you think differently it might **not be acceptable in the curriculum**. (Participant B20)

One student explained that freedom of expression, in the way they understood it, is not the norm in Cambodian society.

Well, when the idea of 'express opinion' is that Cambodian culture is kind of...we are more restricted to the norm like **people are not mostly choosing to defy the society norm**. And it's not really matter what it is because if you're not talking about it how could you know about? Because...like some guy criticize the Cambodian [government]. And right now he's in jail. And I think that it's kind of weird to not say that. Like why?

Why you can't say that? So, it's the idea of expressing. So, let's study in this university I think that I would be able to talk more because knowledge itself and the environment give me an opportunity to do so. The **Khmer school is kind of not really great. You know sometimes you have to talk about some stuff you study about politics but you can't talk about politics** like it's kind of not right. (Participant L11)

Another student explained that there was a lingering fear among students who had attended Cambodian public schools of corporal punishment by teachers, which contributed to their hesitation about approaching professors for assistance.

But **we don't have the culture of going to the teachers for help** from a younger age, mostly probably from people from my generation and older, because back then **they still use some form of violence** and I guess if we were exposed, for those like myself who were exposed to that sort of, let's say, punishment as a child we sort of have this impression where **we want to keep distance between ourselves and our teacher**. We respect them when we like them and all but keep distance. And coming here [to ACC] the professors they're all very friendly, very personable, I know, I mean, I'm just like "Well, this is new!" (Participant B53)

The informal nature of interactions between professors and students was admired by students, who also saw their ACC professors as being of a higher caliber than Cambodian instructors due to their foreign credentials and points of view.

Low Quality Instructors

Students complained about the lack of qualifications for faculty in Cambodian institutions, as well as their style of interacting with students. Most faculty at public Cambodian universities have limited graduate study and training due to the fact that the country still needs to

rebuild its population of graduate degree holders who were targeted by the Khmer Rouge (Williams, et al., 2016, p. 179). As previously discussed, students saw their ACC and WU professors' foreign credentials, experience, and points of view as positives, so in contrast, they would view local credentials as provincial and an indicator of low quality. Additionally, they indicated that many teachers were recent graduates, and so lacked real world experience in the subjects they were teaching.

First of all, in terms of teaching, the professors [at ACC and in the dual degree program], most of them got very high qualifications like PhD in order to teach university like undergraduate students. But in Cambodia, for those who usually have ability that they can prove to the committee that they can teach they can all have time to teach, like **teachers sometimes they just graduate with the bachelor degrees so they can teach the freshmen in that field they have just graduated.** (Participant L21)

This fixation on foreign qualifications is reflected in marketing material from WU and ACC and is similar to the belief in rankings as a marker of innate quality. Having a PhD may not make one a better teacher, but students believed it meant that their professors had more experience, and therefore more knowledge, to teach their subjects. Whether or not students believed that Cambodian professors were intrinsically of a lower quality than foreign professors, or whether they grasped the deficits that the Cambodian education system is still trying to overcome due to the Khmer Rouge era purge of academics, is unknown. “Well although not all faculty [at ACC] are from America, but yeah most of them have received their education in America and also UK so **it feels like you are studying in America** although we are in Cambodia” (Participant B34). Overall, though, their feelings about the lack of professionalism among Cambodian professors were similar to critiques of Cambodian secondary school teachers. “In Cambodian universities,

most of the time the professor would not show up. Or he did not really pay attention to us” (Participant L23). Students also felt that their ACC and WU instructors were more confident in teaching the curriculum, as well as more approachable than Cambodian teachers and professors, something that they reported as valuable to their ability to learn new material.

Because like compared to education system I got in high school it’s definitely different like in terms of **teaching style** also **learning environment** and also **interaction with professors** like American professors they are more sure. And also, not really formal. (Participant B24)

[At ACC] you can **approach a professor at any time** and otherwise it’s still **independent learning, but you are not alone.** You have **emotional support** you have **academic support** like everything is already there for you. You just need to do your best and do the hard work and you will do well. (Participant B34)

Khmer Language and Culture

One of the other attractions of participating in the U.S. TNHE program was because of younger Cambodians’ overall familiarity with English and their belief that they could secure better jobs with an improved knowledge of English. Cambodian students expressed an attraction to English speaking countries, unlike in the past when they may have gone to France - the former occupying power of Cambodia - or the Soviet Union - one of Cambodia’s post Khmer Rouge benefactors. The attraction is based on their familiarity, however Cambodia’s increasing ties with China have not yet risen to a competitive advantage for Chinese universities as previously discussed. One of the reasons for the prevalence of English language ability among Cambodians, compared to neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, is the smaller population size of Cambodia, meaning there are fewer Khmer speakers globally and knowing Khmer is not usually a skill

outside the country. Additionally, the transition period post-Khmer Rouge saw a large influx of foreign aid workers to Cambodia who frequently used English to communicate. And lastly, the role of technology in spreading English is already documented in Cambodia. The rapid pace of new words being introduced into the Cambodian lexicon, particularly related to social media and technology, for which there are no Khmer equivalents, means English words have become a normal part of everyday life. “The lack of Khmer language learning materials – partly a legacy of the Khmer Rouge’s destructive philistinism – suggests that the language is at a semantic crossroads, with the juggernaut that is English looking unstoppable” (Roughneen, 2019). This holds true despite the rapid rise of Chinese investment and increasing use of Mandarin for business – the preference remains for English (Roughneen, 2019). In this way, it is not simply an attraction to English language training that drives students to ACC, but a real need for English skills in order to compete in the global marketplace. Currently, there are no other ‘Western’ universities in Cambodia, giving WU and ACC a competitive first mover advantage.

Most people, **they prefer to go to an English-speaking language country** because over these past two decades **Cambodia has completely transformed** from a country that doesn’t speak English to a country where **almost everybody speaks English**. So, you know they would want to go to a country that **helps better their English skills** as well as go to a country where they already know the language. If they were to go to a different country such as China or Japan or even Russia, they would have to learn a new language on the go so that might prove to be troublesome since those languages aren’t easily mastered in a year or two. So, they thought you know **since we already know English** might as well go to an English country where we at least understand what they're talking about. (Participant L22)

Another student stated that they did not want to study at a Khmer language institution, in part as they wished to continue practicing English, but the student also tied an English language medium of instruction to institutional quality. “[I came here] because I want a new environment, an environment that **I don’t have to speak Cambodian**. Maybe **better education quality**. I actually also speak English and Chinese at home” (Participant L23). Others insisted that because of their participation in the program, their English language ability and accent, in addition to their subject knowledge, was superior to students from local universities.

Yeah, compared to other universities in Cambodia, [ACC] has the most like American standard university since I went to competitions with other students from other universities as well and I feel like **my knowledge regarding like business aspect** as well as...**the pronunciation of all our team members from [ACC] is like a lot better**, and **like an American accent**. And for everyone else, it’s a bit like Cambodian accent like you can tell when you speak to them. (Participant B41)

Sources and Exacerbation of Perceptions and Attitudes

While students’ negative perceptions can often be attributed to their first hand experiences in Cambodia and with Cambodian public education, there is evidence that some of these perceptions were influenced by others, such as family and friends, but also by the way that the United States and U.S. higher education is marketed and spoken about to them by faculty and staff as well as other foreign contacts.

Marketing Materials

Some of the language the students used to describe education at ACC and in the TNHE program versus Cambodian education appeared to be a direct reflection of marketing material produced by the WU and ACC, which often cited American standards and higher quality faculty

than could be found at Cambodian institutions as defining characteristics of their programs. This can be seen on the website of ACC promoting the institution as the only higher education provider in Cambodia with U.S. accredited, internationally recognized dual degrees, and as an institution that had more qualified faculty than other institutions in Cambodia. ACC claims to only hire ‘highly qualified’ faculty, and that ninety percent of their faculty on staff have earned Ph.D.’s from either American or other western universities. ACC’s advertisements are both in Khmer and English, and they can be found in print media, social media, television, and radio ads throughout Cambodia.

It’s just that if we compare the American education with Cambodian education it’s **much higher**. Actually, the university was first recommended to me by my mom. **She heard it probably on television** and at the time they said it was, that it had **American standards**. ...So that’s why I enrolled in [ACC] because it’s that it had **an American standard**. And then we were informed that we would have dual degree with [WU]. And I think it’s a good opportunity. (Participant L14)

My parents...they want me to study at a private university. So somehow **my grandparents listen to the radio and they hear the promotion of [ACC]** saying that it’s **American standard curriculum and accredited program and dual degree**. So, they somehow talked to me that I should apply there, and I did. (Participant B34)

ACC’s faith in the soft power draw of U.S. higher education was so strong that “U.S. dual degree” was considered a top selling point, with no additional information needed about rankings or quality in most of the advertisements. This language is also cited on WU’s webpages promoting the program. Of the benefits to participating in a dual degree program, ACC promotes that students will take courses with American faculty and students and experience an American

learning environment. The idea being put forth then, is that exposure to American students and faculty, and an American style environment, are inherently beneficial experiences for Cambodians.

Staff and Faculty

As part of the study, a few faculty and staff from each institution were interviewed about their own perceptions. While not the main purpose of the study, some of their beliefs and attitudes about U.S. versus Cambodian higher education highlight why the marketing materials employ certain language and comparisons, and how faculty and staff recruit students to the program, with sentiments that were repeated by students in their interviews.

I think the **expectations are stricter with an American education than Cambodian education**. I think sometimes with Cambodians coming from a Cambodian education and then getting an American education at the college level **sometimes they're not adequately prepared to succeed**. And for **the rigors and demands, the style of teaching of professors**, I think once you normalize that and maybe if it's students at the lower levels of education before like maybe in high school or are aware or more aware we normalized American education like models and theories that they would come in more adequately prepared. I think **there's more opportunities with a U.S. degree** than other degrees abroad...Maybe it does promote the U.S. but at the same time I think it opens more opportunities for students both domestically and abroad to the U.S. So, I think **it's seen higher in the eyes of employers**. (Participant AS9)

Interestingly, even ACC faculty who were not American had begun to describe the benefits of American education in a similar way. When asked if students would be interested in a Western degree from another country, such as the UK, one staff member said they might be just as

interested in the degree but would not benefit as much. “From what I can see the students leaving high school in Cambodia **need a lot of the general education elements that they get from an American university**” (Participant PPS4). This same staff member believed that the students would also get both personal and professional skill development out of the TNHE program, especially with its broad curriculum and employment focused learning outcomes.

I think it will provide them with **greater confidence**. They will be more aware of their **soft skill development** as well as their development in areas of expertise in the major. So, I think they will be **more respected by prospective employers**, they will have greater opportunities to study abroad. They will have more confidence. [American style education means] a **higher quality** level, more higher and more standardized, quality levels is the main difference, I think. And that higher standard will be reflected in, for example, **smaller classes, greater access to the professors**. And the more standard quality levels would be **evident in the qualifications of the professors**, I think.

(Participant PPS4)

Faculty at ACC, like the students, also emphasized the role of rote learning and memorization in Cambodian public education versus in American education with an emphasis on critical thinking.

The way I look at it here is...there is a bit of a difference between what we would call American education let's say versus, I'll be more general than Cambodia, but Asian education, and of course this is a generalization, there are certainly exceptions, but Asian education basically, at least historically, has been pretty much **based on memorization and repetition**. So in contrast, my view of American education here is trying to get students to get beyond that, to actually not worry so much about just memorizing things but getting them to think about things, **look at things in different ways, make different**

opposing arguments on things, be more critical in their thinking... So that **critical thinking element** I guess to me would be the difference. (Participant PPF1)

Generally, the idea was that an ACC degree, and a WU degree, would be legitimizing credentials for the graduates - an issue in Cambodia where there has been a huge increase in private higher education institutions, many lacking genuine accreditations.

There must be something about the fact that they think they're getting an American style education. I do like, what is it, the motto, "Study locally, live globally." I think that's a very good one. I think that's what we're offering to students and it's important that **they feel like they're getting a legitimate education and that they can go on to graduate studies** and anecdotally from a couple of students I heard they went on to graduate studies, they said they felt like they were well-prepared for the graduate studies. And so that's a good thing. (Participant PPF4)

I definitely believe so [that students benefit], because for one thing their **level of English is very high**. Especially students in the [WU] program. So that's going to help them out. And even **in Cambodian jobs I think it'll help them out and get promotions and getting government jobs**. And I think that the [WU] degree will probably, would **carry much more significance than a regular Cambodian university degree**. I think there is a **perceived level of quality in that**. (Participant PPF10)

One faculty spoke candidly about apparent censorship in Cambodian higher education, and the fact that the dual degree program at ACC allowed students to express themselves more freely.

If it's a public [institution]...**I definitely see self-censorship**. I see groups that have a bit more camaraderie. So, example like the dual degree students together, I think, have a little bit closer relationship because of the program. And I think that **they feel more**

willing to be sort of honest, and they have a higher degree of trust, for example. And I think the sort of **impact of [ACC] is probably lower self-censorship than other institutions**, just thinking of the competitions and things like that that I've been a part of, where other universities, you can certainly tell there's self-censorship, and it's even addressed by the judges of the competitions. (Participant PPF9)

When asked how the increased freedom of expression would affect students, the same faculty member explained that though it may be controversial within Cambodian society, they were confident that the exposure would be positive, regardless.

I think [at ACC and in the program] they get probably **exposed to more ideas that may be deemed somewhat controversial**, then probably some other schools, I can think of a **local school, particularly where students are actively informed that they're not allowed to write papers on about four different topics**. [University B], specific to the law program around things considered, one example is landgrabs. They're not supposed to write any of their dissertation or their, sorry their capstone or their semester papers on that. So, in that case, I would say yeah, **we are succeeding and actually it's a net positive for them, intellectually or academically**. Whether that proves to be the case, professionally, or socially outside of the university, I'm not sure the long-term consequences or the long-term effects of that, but yeah. (Participant PPF9)

The idea that American education and society is inherently more merit based than Cambodia was something that both students and faculty echoed in the interviews. One faculty member explained that they felt foreign influence in Cambodian education was critical, because Cambodian society was too 'traditional' to produce competitive graduates.

I hate to imagine Cambodia without having any foreign influence in their higher education. You know American education if nothing else it's **kind of egalitarian**. I mean not completely but you know it's **more merit based** right. You know you do well in school you get a good job and you can succeed. **A lot of these societies are more traditional, and they're based upon connections** and things. I think it's good to be able to you know not break the mold but at least you know provide a suggestion that if you work hard and you study you get to learn things that you could be productive and succeed on your own. (Participant PPF4)

Faculty also felt that students were attracted to the U.S. programs because of students' attraction to U.S. values as well as its economic development, which was evidenced in the student interviews. "The **U.S. has the soft power** and sort of an **image of democracy and human rights** and all of this. So, for some students I think that's quite important. For others, it's because **the U.S. is a successful world economy** that shows business credentials [for TNHE degree holders]" (Participant PPF9).

All of this is not to say that faculty and staff intentionally spread Orientalist ideas to their Cambodian students. Indeed, many were keen to avoid pushing any kind of East versus West ideas within their courses and interactions with students. But the reality remains that in order to explain to a student why it is better for them to study at this American style institution and program versus a local Cambodian institution, comparisons will be made that often end up being expressed in such a dichotomous fashion. The zero-sum, pro-ranking culture emblematic of Western higher education systems is clearly present among the ways that faculty and staff involved in the higher education system in Cambodia discussed ACC as well as the WU TNHE programs.

Role of Parents

Besides faculty and staff, students' parents were sometimes a main source of criticism about Cambodian education, particularly if they had pursued a foreign education themselves or knew those who had. These preferences were not surprising given the state of Cambodian higher education at the time these students' parents likely would have been school age, during and post-Khmer Rouge.

So, my parents were actually the ones to discover the university and he **[dad] thinks that it's really good because it's associated with another university in America** which is [WU]. And he thinks that the quality is good and then I could use my bachelor's degree for a better job and maybe I have more experiences. (Participant L8)

Like all parents, Cambodian parents who had studied abroad wanted their children to have at least the same, if not better, opportunities as they had experienced.

[I applied to ACC and the program] **because of my dad**. He thinks that the [ACC] have **high quality and good professors** and the education in here is like **similar to the U.S.** So, I just want to go there. **He like American education a lot more than Cambodia's.** And...his friend Dara is studying also in here and so they share opinion about the education in Cambodia. And that the school is kind of good or something. (Participant B51)

Though these parents, long removed now from the Cambodian education system, may not have much exposure to contemporary Cambodian schools themselves.

One might assume that most Cambodians with the means would pursue study in the universities of their former colonizer, France, given the familiarity aspect. However, the Soviet Union was one of the first countries post Khmer Rouge to offer scholarships, a form of soft

power educational diplomacy, to Cambodians. The Soviet Union did so in an attempt to maintain a sphere of influence among socialist states in Southeast Asia in the later years of the Cold War.

So, I would like to say that **my parents always a big fan of U.S. because especially since the growth and development of the U.S. so he's kind of like criticized Cambodian education system** as well. It's too narrow and didn't get much exposures for students to be able to prepare for the future career and yeah, eventually look into this educational system and she agrees to it and **maybe it's because both of my parents they study abroad so they were went to Russia to study their master** and maybe because of that they have seen that **education from other country is much better than the local one**. So that's why they say you better go to [ACC] then. (Participant S5)

Quite a few students interviewed had parents who studied abroad in the Soviet Union. ACC's founder himself was one of the recipients of such a scholarship.

But even after the Khmer Rouge, of course, those people, those family members they were executed but those who are still alive, and the new generation in that period, until the Soviet occupation, they got a chance to **experience Russian education because they were given a scholarship** or like, a scholarship to study in Russia and that's how they, yeah even if **Russian education is not on the same level as U.S. education**, it is still higher education according to their standard. (Participant B52)

Importantly, these students' ideas about why their parents ended up in Russia or the Soviet Union despite the language barrier are similar to their own generations' feelings about studying in China. They did so because they received scholarships, though it was not their first preference, and the soft power waned as the scholarships dried up.

Yeah back maybe 20, no, about 30 years ago or 40 years ago the **Russian government came to Cambodia and had offered many free scholarships** so many people jumped on the opportunity to go and nobody else actually offered a free scholarship like Russia did. So, most people actually ended up going to Russia. **Nowadays people prefer to go to an English-speaking country, like Australia, UK, and America.** And in Russia, one of the main things is the language barrier, where my father and many people around his time had to be forced to learn Russian in a year to catch up with the rest of the Russian speakers. So that is a tough task if you're not ready to learn the new language you won't understand, and you will probably fail and get sent back. (Participant L22)

For some parents, the preference for foreign education was about maintaining family reputation and keeping up with the Joneses. It was expected that children of parents with foreign educations would also earn a foreign degree, because to do otherwise would be a potential embarrassment.

For me personally, it's my family [that] expects me to have a degree from abroad since **all my family, my relatives and everyone that we know**, their kids or their daughters or sons, **almost all have a foreign degree.** And it's like, reputation kind of thing.

(Participant B41)

For these parents, having their children attend ACC and earn a U.S. degree within Cambodia was the "next best thing" to allowing their child to go abroad, so much so that they had their children decline scholarships to even the most prestigious Cambodian university.

At first, when I graduated from high school, before we graduate, we were given this sort of national scholarship application which we can apply to several universities of our choice. And I actually got a scholarship from RUPP, the Royal University of Phnom

Penh, in International Relations. But as I was about to go take the entrance exam my dad just came to me and said “You know what, let’s just go there and tell them that **you’re dropping the scholarship because I’m enrolling you in [ACC]**”. I’m like “Pardon?”. Well to them, in my father's words, he said “**this is the next best thing I can give you because I can’t let you go abroad** but this is the next best thing I can give you” because he let my brother go abroad but for me he doesn’t, but he’s giving me the next best thing he said. He’s also trying to make up for it in a way. (Participant B53)

The sense that a foreign education was superior to a local education has clearly been passed down from the generation that survived the Khmer Rouge to their children, who now have additional influences besides their parents reinforcing that messaging.

Cultural and Institutional Outsiders

Not only did the students at ACC feel and absorb ideas that local Cambodian education was lacking in quality, but they encountered this same attitude from students in other Southeast Asian countries in the region. “People there are just, some of them are you know they're being disrespectful like for example, if I’m Cambodian and I go to Thailand for some reason I feel like Thailand people is discriminating against us” (Participant L19). One student on exchange in the region encountered these same negative attitudes.

So, I used to [participate in an] exchange program like to other country and when I tell them that I study at [American College Cambodia] and I’m doing dual degree of [WU], they tend to, ‘oh, really?’ or something [like] that because **their perspective to us as Cambodians, they think that we have a low education** or something like that...just like **some people they generalize Cambodia** as a whole because **they see news they see like, oh, we are in poverty** or something like that. (Participant B31)

Students felt proud to participate in a U.S. dual degree because it allowed them to challenge these attitudes from other Southeast Asian students, that Cambodia only had low quality institutions and graduates.

Ultimately, on one hand there are generally strong positive perceptions of the United States and U.S. higher education from students, their parents, program faculty, and staff. On the other hand, there appears to be almost universally negative perceptions of Cambodian higher education and towards certain aspects of Cambodia and Cambodian culture. This worsening of Orientalist attitudes towards Cambodia may further elevate the attraction of U.S. soft power resources in a feedback loop.

Synthesized Perceptions and the Resilience of U.S. Soft Power

Despite the negative perceptions towards U.S. politics and the United States' relationship with Cambodia, U.S. soft power remained strong enough that perceptions about the United States were still positive overall among the students. They still felt an attraction towards U.S. culture despite the negative rhetoric that was being put out at the time by Cambodian government affiliated news sources.

I want to say that like, **regardless of the relationship** of the Cambodian government with the U.S. government, people, **students will still participate** in U.S. and European style education. Because they just their version and **how they perceive those countries are idealistic** and **we would want to experience what they have over there.**

(Participant B52)

In this way, U.S. soft power remained strong among these students. Beyond their attraction to its institutions, students wished to take what they learned in their U.S. degree programs, remain in

their country, and apply it to those aspects of Cambodian development and society that they perceived as negative or needing development.

‘Improving’ Cambodia

One aspect that is important to highlight is that despite students’ strong attraction to the United States, nearly all the students expressed a desire to remain in Cambodia or settle there after some time abroad. Contacts in the United States would frequently ask if students wanted to get post-graduate visas to come work and live in the United States, but even among those who can afford it there have been very few even come to WU so far for graduate study. And among those that have, they have all returned home. “I think just to get my study and then work for a few years over there. And then I come back. **I want to be close to my family**” (Participant L23).

Yes, of course [I want to live in Cambodia]. Because I, especially my parents, they don’t want me to live abroad. Even if I go for a short period of time to study, they **always want me to come back**. They always explain to me that living in Cambodia is much better in terms of, we have, **we live in the place that we born** but I can go in a short period of time to travel or something but they prefer me to live and have family in Cambodia.

(Participant L21)

As noted, some students were encouraged to come home by their families, but this was not always the case. Some students wanted to remain in Cambodia despite their parents pushing them to pursue life abroad.

[My parents] said the U.S. I can go. Actually, they have a second option, I can go to Australia. Just not to live in Cambodia. But I said, **I want to live here, this is my country**. I’m not going to leave. (Participant L3)

Importantly, students did not just want to live in Cambodia, they wanted to use their education and knowledge to affect what they believed would be positive changes at home in various areas and fields, and not just in the capital Phnom Penh where one is most likely to find a well-paying job. This student wished to return to her home province of Kampong Thom and improve the education system.

I really want to go back to my hometown. Work there and improve there. Basically, at first I thought about education. So, my first thinking at first education, but then I took a peacebuilding class and then I'm turning myself into peacebuilding. So, I currently haven't known or understood about the issue related to peace in Kampong Thom yet. And most likely, I know that there will be **improvement for education**, but for **peace building**, I haven't like, find out what I can do for, in terms of those areas, that area yet.

(Participant S5)

Like her, other students felt that the entire point of their education was to give back to their communities. A business student felt going abroad would be a “waste” of his training. “I would say it will be quite a **waste to actually invest so much in education in Cambodia to just go abroad**. Like it makes sense to just work there for a few years but yeah, sooner or later I will come back. I choose that choice” (Participant B34). This civil engineering student felt similarly: “The thing is, for civil engineers, I think getting work experience abroad is important and to **bring it back home and improve your country and develop the country** with that experience” (Participant E6). As did a student of law: “I'd like to, you know, maybe **hope to better the legal system to give the people some justice**” (Participant L22). These students demonstrate probably the most essential proof of U.S. soft power impacting choices and actions - they wanted to take what they learned from a U.S. higher education and apply it back home where they had self-

identified deficiencies, ones where they felt the United States had superior knowledge. The role of the foreign educated class in a former colonized country “has been prescribed and set for it as a “modernizing” one, which means that it gives legitimacy and authority to ideas about modernization, progress, and culture that it receives from the United States for the most part” (Said, 1978, p. 325).

Desire for Development and Increased Ties with the United States

Somewhat paradoxically, despite their feelings that politics and education should be kept separate, and that U.S. politics had taken a negative turn both domestically and in foreign policy, student participants generally believed that the U.S. TNHE program’s presence benefitted U.S./Cambodian political relations.

It’s better that we **build connections** in bad times...well I would say in bad times it’s better because after that when the tension is resolved they’ll be **more appreciative** towards the established connections that we have. Also, it’s a matter of **sharing knowledge**. And I think politics shouldn’t be here to barricade the exchange. (Participant B33)

If go to study [at a U.S. university]...**Cambodia only gains the benefit** that I become, **I will become the human resource from the U.S.** and also **the U.S. government will get more popular** if they can prove that I will become the good human resource to Cambodia. (Participant L21)

Other students wanted the two governments to improve relations so that it would benefit their future careers as U.S. degree holders. If the countries had good relations, the idea is that business investments will also increase, which is something students were witnessing with China at the

time of the study. “I just hope that we still have a good relationship with the United States” (Participant B51).

I think it **helps the relationship between the countries** because from a selfish point of view, you’re holding a U.S. degree. And if like the tension is going and like, for example, like some companies that you’re applying to are move towards China...then they wouldn’t select you. It was like someone holding a Chinese degree is that so you would hope that the tension will decrease, or like you would be like you or else you would have to apply to an international company that are **not biased towards the political view**.

(Participant B41)

When asked how they would feel if the U.S. TNHE program or ACC was forced to close due to political tensions, similar to what happened at Zaman University, students felt that it would be a mistake and would not only be disruptive to their educations but would be a disservice to Cambodia as a whole.

I think of course, there should be a correlation between the two party and if I mean, it’s hard to answer the question related to political, like if the government, both government, they only fight with each other in terms of political, not focus on the, on youth or education is okay, but **what if the two really break up? And then no opportunity for students to go study abroad? That limit the opportunity** for traveling to the United States something like that. And I just think of those concerns as well. (Participant S5)

I would say that the **political tension didn’t really affect us** here, like getting education from Cambodia. But on the other hand, if [WU] didn’t give us an opportunity to get this program that **would be a shame**. Like, we really appreciate them, like **giving us a chance to learn**. (Participant B24)

Some students expressed the feeling that if WU, as a U.S. entity, unilaterally pulled out of Cambodia for political reasons, it would have further repercussions on how Cambodians viewed the United States.

In my opinion [it] **would be like I'm backing out of a country that desperately needs your alliance**, that that is very risky, because **that might create resentment in the future** when the situation improved, because people still in [their] mind[s] nowadays **hold the U.S. responsible** for the bombing of Cambodia, but that is another case but that is related as well. But I would say that U.S. campuses operate around the world in developing countries because **they only want to help the student[s], and help the student[s] better the situation in the country so they are responsible for that.**

(Participant B52)

Students articulated that Americans who disagreed with a U.S. university operating in Cambodia were not thinking about the potential economic benefits to both countries. “But in the U.S. if they said that they should not operate in Cambodia I think they’re more into politics instead of **thinking of the economic aspect** of the two countries.” (Participant B17)

I, what I would say it’s like the political view and side of like your **political side should not affect the educational side**, because **that’s just the government side**. And **education is the foundation for the economy** and for the population. So, education is more important. So, we shouldn’t let the political aspect affect the education aspect.

(Participant B41)

In some cases, students used neoliberal rhetoric to explain that the program’s presence helped train human resources to improve Cambodia’s economy, and politics should not interfere, because it would be economically damaging to the Cambodian market.

I think there **should be a clear division** about the governmental side and the educational side...it really doesn't affect the educational side because as a developing country, **Cambodia should open doors for investment** that we will **train the future human resource** to actually become more capable...to actually help the country to go up beyond the lower middle income country. (Participant B34)

Well if anything I would like to see more programs like a dual degree here, definitely, because it **opens up a lot of opportunities**...Also if more programs like a dual degree and so on open up in Cambodia I think that would **really help boost the economy in terms of producing more effective human resources**. (Participant B53)

Developing Cambodians as 'effective human resources' is something Said (1978) would say is evidence of the effects of Orientalism.

Another result is that the Western market economy and its consumer orientation have produced (and are producing at an accelerating rate) a class of educated people whose intellectual formation is directed to satisfying market needs. There is a heavy emphasis on engineering, business, and economics, obviously enough; but the intelligentsia itself is auxiliary to what it considers to be the main trends stamped out in the West. (p. 325)

Students expressed pride about having an American standard program in their country.

They felt that importing higher education from abroad could help Cambodia develop a better education system. The idea of importing Western models was something they would have grown up with during UNTAC. "Oh, they can **incorporate more of the learning style** to Cambodia to **develop the education system** in Cambodia if they receive a different education system" (Participant B17).

[I feel] proud, for a Cambodian institution to be able to **offer American standard degrees**. [It's a] good thing in Cambodia also it's the first one that with a university that is partner in Cambodia but there are other universities here like Zaman currently, Paragon, and CamEd, that they partner with the Ministry in Cambodia or have been and will use with universities abroad. But it's not like they're linked like here with [WU].
(Participant B33)

I think it's good to have like a dual degree program in Cambodia since [ACC] is the first university that brought that and I can see the growing of students that will apply to [ACC] because of dual degree since now **everyone could afford the tuition** that [ACC] is offering and it's very like relatively low to what we actually have to pay if we go to the States and [WU], which **is good for the population since many, many students will be able to afford the tuition and the education level in Cambodia will increase as well**.
(Participant B41)

Their desire for an increase in these types of educational partnerships was not just for the benefit of ACC. Students wanted to see U.S. institutions reach out to more Cambodian universities across the country.

Yeah, I think like I said before if [WU] or maybe any other university in the U.S. could come and offer courses in Cambodia like not specifically at [ACC] but the other schools, too. I think is better because we as a poor country will have a better, I don't know how to say this like, **we will have more educated people and it will help our country**, too.
(Participant L19)

I know Cambodia isn't really a great place to come right now. But **coming here to help us develop would mean a lot to us** and we would be very proud of that we are getting

help from people abroad and to **help develop us and improve our society** further into the future. (Participant E6)

Others felt that it was not just the education and economic systems that would benefit from the program, but other sectors, as well.

Yeah, because I found that the leaders also considering **improving the justice system**.

They are trying to **bring the skillful people from abroad** in order to **increase the ability of justice** in Cambodia. So, if [there are] Cambodians in the country you [that] can do it, it's going to be better. (Participant L21)

Most tellingly, the soft power of participating in U.S. higher education had an effect on some students politics, in what would probably be seen as a huge positive by the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, but a negative by the Hun Sen regime “[students] seem to see the importance of **U.S. trying to bring back the democracy** to Cambodia. So, it's **more positive that U.S. try to help Cambodia** get back to democracy” (Participant S5).

When globalization reaches traditional and conservative countries, Western ideologies and influence of people into believing that they deserve better, that they deserve democracy, they deserve a higher standard of living. So this is this is part of their, the Western influence but if we look at it another way, it's just part of like, economic growth when people are able to like, have the food to nourish them and have a higher education all over the world, not just Cambodians, people started to **demand for a change in the democracy** because [they] feel like **they are educated enough to like take part and in determining how the country will change**. (Participant B52)

Some students also believed that the educational exchange would allow people involved to understand more about each other. “Yeah, I think it's help improve [relations] because...I mean,

like they can **let the student who involved in education see...the truth** about anything related to U.S. and relations with Cambodia and U.S. perspective toward Cambodia” (Participant S5).

Ultimately, these sentiments are the real proof of soft power, that the students involved want the United States to be present and involved in their country. Not only at ACC, but at other institutions and in other sectors. They see the educational exchange with the United States as a positive for themselves and their fellow citizens. This feeling is maintained even with negative perceptions of U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy and interactions with the Cambodian government, and demonstrates young people’s admiration for the United States and feelings that the U.S. presence in Cambodia is a net benefit despite the United States’ often destructive history in the country.

Summary

The soft power resources of U.S. higher education, and of U.S. culture and values, remains extremely strong among Cambodian students, despite negative perceptions of U.S. politics. And their attitudes and beliefs about U.S. education contrast with their feelings about Cambodia and Cambodian higher education. These feelings are generally compounded by views from those they encounter both at home, at their internships, and at the university, and can be somewhat attributed to Orientalist attitudes. Overall, students found the program and their university experience to be beneficial not only to themselves but to relations between Cambodia and the United States, and they expressed a strong desire for additional educational partnerships between Cambodian and U.S. institutions. Finally, most students expressed an intent to live and work in Cambodia and use their knowledge and skills to benefit Cambodian society. The complexities of their ideas and beliefs about both the United States and Cambodia will be further discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover the perceptions of students enrolled in a TNHE program in the context of an unstable political environment that included increasingly tense relations between the TNHE program's home and host countries. Specifically, the study explored the perceptions, values, attitudes, and beliefs of students regarding their TNHE program, the United States, Cambodia, higher education, and politics, at the micro level of a U.S. program at a university in Cambodia, during a period of heightened political tension between the United States and Cambodia. Interviews were conducted with 41 students, staff, and faculty involved in the TNHE program, with the majority being students enrolled in the program. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are Cambodian TNHE students' perceptions about the United States and about Cambodia?
 - a. What are their perceptions about U.S. higher education and Cambodian higher education?
2. What are the sources and influences of students' perceptions about the United States, U.S. higher education, Cambodia, and Cambodian higher education?
 - a. How might their perceptions influence their attraction to U.S. programs over Cambodian programs?
3. How do the students perceive the impact of geopolitical tensions between the United States and Cambodia on their TNHE experience and future plans?

Utilizing the conceptual frameworks of soft power (Nye, 2004b) and Orientalism (Said, 1978), the findings exposed the influence of the United States' and U.S. higher education's soft

power as well as the undercurrents of Orientalism present in both the expressed perceptions of Cambodian higher education and internalized Orientalism expressed by the students. The findings have importance for understanding how the presence of the TNHE program affects participants' perceptions of the home country, its institutions, and whether they feel their participation will be beneficial not only to themselves in the future, but to U.S./Cambodian relations over time.

Summary of the Findings and Implications

In this study, the concepts of soft power and Orientalism were explored using the perceptions expressed by TNHE participants. While these concepts are somewhat related and the findings of the study often overlap, they are presented in two sections to highlight the importance of both concepts in understanding the phenomenon of TNHE and its impact on participants.

Soft Power in Context

The political tensions between the United States and Cambodia, ever present within the context in which the TNHE program operates, were a result of the United States' historic and contemporary involvement in Cambodian affairs including contemporary attempts by the United States to counter Chinese political, economic, and military influence in Cambodia. Nye's soft power framework (2004) was applied to the research questions to analyze participating students' perceptions of U.S. soft power resources such as culture, values, reputation, and its higher education institutions. The types of power outlined in Nye's power spectrum were used to analyze how students' beliefs, values, and attitudes towards the United States and its institutions influenced their perceptions of the program and its place in the geopolitical and educational context as well as their beliefs about the TNHE program's possible impact on U.S./Cambodian relations. Nye's theory posits that values, culture, and institutions attract people towards a

country, and constitute the soft side of power, as opposed to payments, bribes, sanctions, or physical force, which are all forms of hard power. Soft power is intrinsically harder to measure than hard power, given that it is forces of attraction rather than sums of money or troops.

“Attraction often has a diffuse effect, creating general influence rather than producing an easily observable specific action” (Nye, 2004b, p. 16). In the context of Cambodia, which has been subjected to extreme forces of hard power exerted by a variety of foreign countries over the course of its history, soft power, while harder to measure, cannot be ignored in terms of its impact.

While U.S. higher education’s draw among the students was very strong, students expressed their concerns about the failure of the United States to live up to its promoted ideals at home, and its xenophobic attitudes under the Trump administration. “Others watch how Americans implement our values at home as well as abroad...Perceived hypocrisy is particularly corrosive of power that is based on proclaimed values” (Nye, 2004b, p. 55). These negative perceptions of the United States could have acted as a direct threat to U.S. soft power. However, despite evidence of difficulties obtaining U.S. study visas, perceptions about domestic racism in the United States, and overall U.S. attitudes about global engagement under the Trump administration, the attraction to the soft power cultural resources of the United States and U.S. higher education remained strong among the students interviewed in the study. Their evaluations of the attractiveness of the United States were not only based on their own perceptions, but those of friends, family, staff, faculty, and media such as international university rankings. Regardless of whether or not we can, within the scope of this study, measure the impact of U.S. soft power in Cambodia, we can say that its higher education system acts as a significant soft power resource given its positive perceptions in the country and the resilience of those perceptions in

spite of negative perceptions about other aspect of the United States. The perceptions of the United States and its institutions compared to perceptions of Cambodia and Cambodian institutions, reinforced in the marketing of the program in order to justify its expense compared to local options, directly fed into the second framework used in this study.

Orientalism in Context

Said's (1978) Orientalism framework is clearly applicable to the findings of this study because the students had been presented with, and chosen, a Global North/Western program over the local Cambodian options for higher education available to them. To emphasize the value of the U.S. TNHE program over other options, the program is by default marketed as superior to Cambodian options by nature of its U.S. connections, curriculum, faculty, and credentialing. These ideas, that American is synonymous with superior quality and Cambodian synonymous with inferior, filter into students' perceptions and justifications for their participation in the program. By repeating the same assumptions about U.S. higher education, that it is inherently superior, they take part in replicating the 'othering' of Cambodia in comparison to the Global North. Said described the Western educated elite in the Global South as following:

Its role has been prescribed and set for it as a "modernizing" one, which means that it gives legitimacy and authority to ideas about modernization, progress, and culture that it receives from the United States for the most part....So if all told there is an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism, there is also a very powerful reinforcement of this in economic, political, and social exchange: the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing. (p. 325)

Students felt confident in their superior qualifications gained from the program, and in proving wrong the perceptions of others in the region about Cambodian students' abilities. However, it

would be wrong to claim that these students wholeheartedly accepted an East/West (or North/South) dichotomy without question. By articulating their complicated feelings about the United States and Cambodia, these students also made their own meaning out of their dual identities, as Cambodians and as students of U.S. higher education. Rather than contributing to fears about brain drain, these students synthesized both their educational advantages and community ties in making plans to stay (or return), work, and contribute to Cambodia in the future, blending their selected experiences and ambitions in a way that a purely dichotomous view of the TNHE program would fall short of understanding.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This study supports some of the existing findings in the literature regarding the soft power of U.S. international higher education, as well as the existence of particular Orientalist tropes both projected upon and internalized by students. Despite the contextual particularities of this case study, larger lessons emerged regarding how TNHE is perceived and interpreted by students in a politically sensitive context. These findings warrant careful consideration and planning for future Global North to Global South TNHE programs in similarly sensitive geopolitical contexts. Almost daily, new stories emerge about resistance and threats to TNHE partnerships (Krieger, 2013; Kurohi, 2019; Lee & Haupt, 2020; Murphy, 2021; Nachemson & Dara, 2016; Power, 2021). We also have a new presidential administration in the United States which has both expressed a desire to re-engage on the world stage, alongside U.S. congressional leadership which intends to increase scrutiny of international higher education partnerships (Green-Riley, 2020; Nunley, 2021). These are signals that the students' concerns, as uncovered in this study, about U.S. foreign policy and changing political values are not limited to this case study and will continue to influence perceptions of U.S. TNHE programs abroad, and the soft

power of U.S. institutions will continue to be entwined with the perceptions of U.S. policies and values. As TNHE grows in popularity, exponentially so in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these kinds of issues are taking on greater importance in the development and delivery of U.S. TNHE around the world.

Soft Power and International Higher Education

The strength of U.S. higher education's reputation and the lure of globally recognized credentials are factors that continue to make United States based TNHE programs attractive in the global education landscape (Ghosh, et al., in press). This is particularly true in countries with less developed local higher education systems but increasing levels of income and demand. Such TNHE offerings' potential has increased since the time of this study due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limitations on students' mobility. When it comes to soft power, this study contributes to existing research by examining the very real effects of changing U.S. foreign policy and politics on students' perceptions of the United States. These students' interactions with the United States through international education influences their perceptions of the United States in the future and when they become involved in the civic life of their country.

[Soft power] occurs through personal contacts, visits, and exchanges. The ideas and values that America exports in the minds of more than half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities and then return to their home countries, or in the minds of the Asian entrepreneurs who return home after succeeding in Silicon Valley, tend to reach elites with power. (Nye, 2004, p. 13)

The Trump administration's attitudes, not just towards foreign countries but towards racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, were salient for students in the TNHE program. Concerns about visas and how they would be treated were present in their perceptions of U.S. politics.

Overall, however, most students felt that the Trump administration's policies could only go so far in terms of disrupting their program.

Originally, I did believe that, what if the U.S. is, you know, canceling...what if Trump is canceling the accreditation part and stuff like that, would I still be getting a degree? But then if [ACC] has **already established such a reputation in our society** already. So, I think **I would be OK...even if the worst happened.** (Participant B20)

This is not to say that, if Trump had been reelected, that these concerns would not grow or be further justified by new policies. Students' parents' experiences in the Soviet Union, and student's perspectives about the Zaman controversy, may shape students' current concerns about studying in particular countries and systems, and explain the hesitancy for Cambodians to study in certain places and their preferences for the United States, despite the availability of other countries' scholarships for higher education. Additionally, if Trump had won reelection in the United States and continued his administration's xenophobic policies, real damage could have persisted to U.S. soft power through its higher education institutions. As evidenced in Li, et al. (2021), Chinese TNHE students' motivations for selecting TNHE programs are not primarily an attraction to the United States. This attraction is often assumed among practitioners, but clearly is not always the case for TNHE students. As more programs from other locations become available in Cambodia, students' perceptions of the host country may become more of a deciding factor in their selection of university.

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority. (Nye, 2004, p. 11)

Despite these negative perceptions and concerns, however, U.S. culture and U.S. higher education's soft power remained very strong among students. Their attraction to U.S. degree programs, and things that they admired about the United States, such as its diversity, development, and innovation, did not wane despite U.S. domestic politics. And, tellingly, they were not interested in pursuing higher education in China despite China's growing influence in Cambodia, Southeast Asia, and globally.

While this study employed Nye's soft power theory, it becomes clear through the ways the students described the United States, and the advantages they felt they would receive by earning a U.S. degree, that the dichotomy of soft and hard power needs to be examined further. As the United States and its HEIs continue to dominate through influence, coercion, and the normative nature of higher education, these students will continue to be drawn to them by default. In this way, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that this 'attraction' is indeed soft power. As Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2016) wrote, the "global imaginary has naturalized Western/European domination and capitalist, racial/colonial social relations and institutions, and projected a Western/European perspective as a university blueprint for global designs." It was evident from some students that they felt strongly about becoming 'human resources' for Cambodia, and that incorporating particular Western elements into Cambodian workplace culture and civic life was desirable to develop their country. Currently, these students do not have many other TNHE options in Cambodia. Even if, and when, they do, the power of the United States in the global economy, among students' future employers, and through university accreditation and rankings schemes means that U.S. TNHE programs will likely continue to be top choices. This is true particularly among those students who are increasingly wary of the other neoimperial power looming over Cambodia: China. The issue of China further complicates the

East/West or North/South dichotomy when discussing power relations between countries, as Cambodia's case illustrates that a more nuanced view of these frameworks is required to truly understand the context.

The Rise of China?

While several scholars contend that there is a coming global shift in soft power from West to East (Lee, 2014; Trilokekar, 2021), and that China's larger global leadership role threatens U.S. prominence and attraction, the results of this study indicate that that shift has yet to occur in the Cambodian context. Nye also wrote about the rise of China's soft power, albeit during the second Bush administration (2005). This is not to say that this shift is not coming, however recent polls and events indicated that if it does, it will not happen quickly. From the backlash against the proposed Chinese branch campus in Hungary (Hosokawa, 2021; Murphy, 2021), to global opinion polls indicating increasingly and historically negative views of China (Huang, 2020), the soft power of China does not seem to be as strong as one would expect with the country's resources. "When people define power as synonymous with the resources that produce it, they sometimes encounter the paradox that those best endowed with power do not always get the outcomes they want" (Nye, 2004b, p. 3).

The Cambodian university students in this study had strong antipathy to the idea of pursuing higher education in China and reported that their friends who had done so were not happy with their experiences in country. These real-world reactions to Chinese soft power attempts indicate that growing speculation about China's competitiveness in the global higher education marketplace may be premature. But as Chinese institutions continue to rise in the rankings (Kulkarni, 2020; Morrison, 2020), it is unclear if and when the scales will tip and the attraction and power of U.S. culture, values, and institutions is no longer enough to retain the

advantage in global student recruitment. Without strong scholarship opportunities for international students, U.S. higher education programs may find the playing field leveled not in their favor.

Orientalism and Student Perceptions

This study contributes to the existing literature on TNHE in that it presents insight into how students enrolled in TNHE programs navigate the geopolitical complexities of their identities and context. With the conceptual framework of Orientalism, we can see how students both contribute to, and challenge, assumptions about the dichotomous relationship between “East” and “West.”

The study confirms the presence of Orientalism, both projected and internalized, in TNHE operations. By default, comparison involves dichotomies, and when the options include U.S. higher education or Cambodian higher education, presentations and explanations of the two tend to fall into Orientalist narratives about standards, quality, and modernity. Students repeated these ideas even if they could not clearly articulate why the United States was ‘number one’ or its institutions were the ‘best.’ They simply accepted these narratives. This led to negative perceptions of Cambodian higher education and Cambodian institutions. Whether or not their evaluations of their home country and its institutions were justified is outside the scope of this study. But the presence of Orientalist narratives confirms the fears of skeptics who do not observe the benefits of TNHE to domestic higher education capacity building.

Implications for Future Practice

The findings presented in this chapter highlight implications of this study in a number of key ways. Firstly, there are implications regarding the impact of U.S. policies on the perception of U.S. soft power. Secondly, there are implications regarding the reinforcement of Orientalist

tropes among TNHE participants due to the way that TNHE programs are presented by faculty and staff, and the way that U.S. higher education is perceived by students, their families, and friends.

Soft Power and the Viability of Transnational Higher Education Programs

With the rise in the number of institutions becoming involved with TNHE provision around the world, as well as the complexities of international relations in a globalized society, TNHE providers cannot ignore the influence of soft power as well as the contextual realities of the locations where they intend to launch programs. “These IBCs are effectively embassies of knowledge, exporting an educational experience from one nation to another” (Lane, 2016, p. 354). While there are obvious limitations to onsite TNHE provision in certain countries, such as in Iran or Myanmar at present, the likelihood of developing a successful program in some newer markets is less clear. Cambodia, as a less developed country within a target region for TNHE, has not been a popular launch site for new TNHE ventures (Lau, 2021). However, that does not mean it is without potential. Universities seeking to enter new spaces normally begin with market research. The prevalence of positive attitudes towards U.S. higher education around the world is also very present in Cambodia, but so have been government tensions between the United States and Cambodian government. Most of the large TNHE hubs have grown at the invitation, and with the support, of host country governments. Globally, perceptions of the United States seem to have improved with the election of President Biden, and Cambodia has asserted it would like a reset of relations (Barrett, 2021; Parker, 2021). But like the Trump administration, there is no guarantee that Biden’s time in power will last beyond four years. While Cambodia, given its small size and influence in the United States, has largely flown under

the radar of those opposed to certain TNHE ventures, some of the same issues arise that have irked critics of university collaborations with China.

Much as with the current culture wars, colleges are feeling these geopolitical pressures from all sides: Students and professors question academic ties to places without the same protections for speech and expression, and government officials are wary of universities' willingness to engage with regimes that can be seen as hostile to American national interests. (Fischer, 2021b)

TNHE students are also keenly aware of how foreign students are treated in the United States and in other countries, and international students on university campuses in the United States both protest for and against collaborations abroad in particular countries. They pay attention to U.S. political rhetoric and policies and can comprehend possible ramifications that could affect their experience and their ability to further their educations in the United States or elsewhere. Even the rumor of increased U.S. visa denials or bans spread amongst the dual degree students at ACC during the time of this study, panicking many who wished to visit the WU main campus or apply to graduate school in the United States.

The biggest threat to the goodwill extended towards the United States by Cambodians is the perception of hypocrisy. "The way I see it, we have to respect each other. Every nation has its own culture, which is why U.S. foreign policy is so arrogant" once stated Phay Siphon, Cambodian government spokesman and dual U.S./Cambodian national (Nachemson, 2017). The volatility in U.S./Cambodian relations is a lesson in needing to understand and consider, contextual factors when deciding on the long-term viability of TNHE ventures. Cambodia's government has remained relatively stable, its relationship with China notwithstanding. Hun Sen has been in power for over 36 years. But the U.S. administration changes every four to eight

years. The U.S. “Pivot to Asia” under President Obama was basically abandoned under the Trump administration, whose sole contributions to U.S./Cambodian relations under Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had been an escalating war of words alongside faltering attempts at recruiting allies as proxies against China. And the Cambodian government used the perceived hypocrisy of the United States against it. “There seems to be an organized attempt by officials of the Hun Sen government to legitimize repression and human rights violations in Cambodia while rejecting U.S. criticism of Cambodian authoritarianism by referencing President Donald Trump as soft on these issues himself” stated Dr. Paul Chambers, Institute of South East Asian Affairs, in a March 2017 email to the Phnom Penh Post (Nachemson). The Cambodian government, as early as 2017, pointed to large scale U.S. protests against Trump as proof of “injustice in American society and racism” (Nachemson, 2017). And when it can, the ruling CPP (and at times the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia) highlights those U.S. foreign and domestic actions it sees as hypocritical in order to deflect criticism against its own actions (Dara, 2019b; Kijewski et al., 2017).

It is critical that practitioners are aware of the historical relations between countries and are sensitive to modern contextual realities. Ignoring the perceptions of their home countries, and being ignorant of current relations, means that practitioners could be caught off guard if things go south.

And to the extent they engage with political and cultural contexts that differ considerably from that of the home campus, the greater the responsibility and the opportunity to model the building of shared understanding and purpose. To retreat from such interactions is to renege on higher education’s responsibility to a global society. (Bloom, 2011)

In July 2021, in light of the ongoing deterioration of military cooperation and Cambodia's refusal to grant the United States full access to its Ream Naval Base to investigate claims of Chinese activities, the United States suspended the eligibility of Cambodians for scholarships to its service academies, including West Point, the Coast Guard Academy, the Air Force Academy, and the U.S. Naval Academy. This would have stranded six currently studying Cambodian cadets, who would have been forced to end their studies or pay their own way (Sao, 2021). Five of the six appealed directly to the U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia (Men, 2021). However, the Cambodian government released a statement that they would be fully supporting the students' tuition and fees. This is a clear example of geopolitics, international relations, and higher education becoming entangled, and the United States' hard power interests seriously impacting its soft power in Cambodia.

As evidenced, U.S. institutions have the ability to come together and challenge policies unfriendly to international students, such as when they banded together to challenge the Trump administration's changing rules on international student visas during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). The U.S. Departments of State and Education are also, under Biden, more sensitive to the value of the international education industry to the United States and are more aligned with the interests of U.S. higher education than they were during the Trump Administration. New policies have meant more positive perceptions of the United States among international students (O'Malley, 2021).

It is true that firms, universities, foundations, churches, and other nongovernmental groups develop soft power of their own that may reinforce or be at odds with official foreign policy goals. That is all the more reason for governments to make sure that their own actions and policies reinforce rather than undercut their soft power. And this is

particularly true since private sources of soft power are likely to become increasingly important in the global information age. (Nye, 2004, p. 17)

In July 2021, the U.S. State Department and Education Department released a joint statement on the “renewed U.S. commitment to international education,” indicating a future national strategy in the field (McLaughlin, 2021). Even so, certain policies have carried over, and international educational engagement with particular countries, such as China, are at risk (Lee & Haupt, 2020; Nunley, 2021).

Orientalism: Changing the Narrative

An understanding of how the promotion of TNHE programs affect participants’ perceptions of themselves is key to ensuring a positive embedding of TNHE programs within the local higher education landscape, one that does not reinforce harmful ideas about modernity and quality.

Rather than believing that East Asian students struggle to arrive at critical thinking because of a limitation within themselves or their culture, it may be more apt to ask if East Asian students would realise their critical thinking potential if it were not for the Orientalist labelling that they encounter at the hands of educators. Thus, the ramifications of internalising Orientalism can be wide-ranging and severe. (Moosavi, 2020, pp. 12-13)

Practitioners can examine how other university collaborations market themselves, and what language they use to promote programs to students. In the same vein, Leng’s (2015) research on mutuality in Cambodian higher education partnerships revealed the finding that patron-client relationships based on harmony ensure longer term interest in international higher education collaborations in Cambodia. The students in this study echoed these findings, expressing gratitude that WU was present in their country and hoping for additional collaborations to occur,

with the United States and other countries. This gratitude should not be taken as naive, or tolerant of Global North dominance, but as something to both acknowledge and respect.

Conducting this study and engaging in the literature helped me to realize that even my own attempts to subvert the superior/inferior Orientalist dichotomy inherent in TNHE provision have fallen short. While working at the WU program in Phnom Penh, I had attempted to present the idea of participation in the TNHE program as a sort of exercise in bilingualism, where the students could learn to navigate American as well as Cambodian higher education systems and cultures. I told them that they would emerge with superior experience because of their engagement across two systems. Even attempting to keep both ideas on the same level, as equal, still presented them as two separate and distinct entities. This is just another version of the Orientalist dichotomy. It is also false because the local partner is not a Cambodian style institution. Students are not engaging in Cambodian higher education as it exists elsewhere in the country. Students are educated consumers and critical thinkers, with ever increasing options in the TNHE market. And soft power comes when a country is consistent in actions and rhetoric. There needs to be an effort to interrogate not just differences between local and foreign education, but similarities, as Takayama (2008) challenges comparative researchers to do. By continuing to present an East meets West or even East versus West attitude about TNHE, as pointed out by Phan (2018), we perpetuate the notion of culture clash and ignore our shared realities in a globalizing higher education space.

The hope is that the results of this study will be beneficial to the TNHE students in this, and similar, programs as well as program staff and administrators. I also hope that the results of this study will give a better understanding of how TNHE programs impact students for both internationalization champions, as well as critics of TNHE programs. Additionally, given the

political climate and changing U.S. relations with many countries around the world, as well as the increased ambitions of U.S. institutions to internationalize and seek partnerships in ‘new markets’, the results of this study should prove useful to those who want to consider how their programs may be perceived abroad by students in countries with tense political relationships with the United States. Given the extreme swings in support for U.S. engagement, and university collaborations abroad, under the Biden and Trump administrations, practitioners and researchers alike should be prepared for further unforeseen shifts in the geopolitical and international education landscapes in the years to come, so that collaborations and students are shielded as best as possible from the sudden upheavals that can occur in TNHE operations (Fischer, 2021a).

Implications for Future Research

Critical thinking about TNHE programs has abounded in the literature alongside the rise and expansion of these programs globally. Research that allows us to investigate various aspects of TNHE challenges our assumptions and enables practitioners to be better informed about their operations and their impacts on students. Critical research, therefore, should be encouraged rather than feared by TNHE practitioners.

Human agency is subject to investigation and analysis, which it is the mission of understanding to apprehend, criticize, influence, and judge. Above all, critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and

patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction. (Said, 2003, p. xxix)

As illustrated by Said, taking the time to investigate these issues in context, rather than demonstrating knee jerk reactions to the ever more frequent critical news coverage about TNHE programs, will allow researchers and practitioners alike to more deeply understand TNHE's implications, impact, and future.

Transnational Higher Education

While confirming existing findings on soft power and Orientalism in international higher education, the study also extends the findings of the existing literature by examining whether there is real world fallout of U.S. politics on U.S. TNHE. Many researchers have pondered the decline of the United States, not just as a result of the rise of other countries' hard and soft power, and their higher education systems, but from the increased xenophobia and rejection of globalization that was laid bare by the Trump administration (Lee, 2014, Trilokekar, 2021).

Cambodia, a country with a particularly long and dark history with the United States, would seemingly be particularly sensitive to shifts in U.S. policies. The two governments' hostilities towards each other grew almost exponentially during the time of this study. Other transnational educational operations in Cambodia, such as the Zaman schools, shut down during the data collection period due to foreign political pressures.

However, despite the rise of China and its influence in Cambodia, the negative perceptions of the Trump administration, and the ever-present hostile relations between governments, the positive perceptions of U.S. higher education persisted. Students separated their feelings about U.S. politics from their attraction towards the United States and its higher education institutions. Whether this is a result of their own disassociation with Cambodian

politics, or their understanding that the U.S. presidential administration was, unlike the Cambodian administration in their lifetimes, temporary, is arguable and beyond the scope of this study. However, it is clear that these students were not dissuaded from their attraction to the United States because of contextual factors.

Without this specific contextual information, one might make assumptions about the soft power of U.S. higher education without understanding how, historically and contemporarily, that soft power manifests itself in particular ways in a given situation among TNHE students. This contextual information, rather than creating barriers to generalization, gives important insights as to how future studies should take contextual factors, such as macro level geopolitics, into account. Large, general studies about attraction and soft power are useful, but they may fail to factor in the variables or current events that have an impact on the level of attraction projected by U.S. (or other country) soft power resources. Like in Li et al. (2021), this study helps to shed light on the various factors, including macro level factors, influencing WU TNHE students' perceptions and attitudes.

Regardless of the optimistic assumptions about international education as a vehicle for soft power generation, there is no guarantee that more exchange will produce more understanding and cordial relations. This effect can occur, but under certain conditions - a list of which is far from defined at the moment. (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 354)

We do not know the strength of U.S. soft power among domestic university students in Cambodia. It is possible that local university students perceive U.S. higher education in the same way as the students in this study but were dissuaded from applying for entry because of costs, language ability, or other barriers. It is also conceivable that they do not hold U.S. higher education in the same high regard as the TNHE participants in this study. "IBCs generally attract

two types of students: firstly, those who want to acquire a Western education but because of lack of resources, cultural barriers, or visa restrictions cannot study abroad; and secondly, those from the local region who want to obtain a Western academic experience, but in a familiar set-up” (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 349). Local students, therefore, may just not be attracted to the United States., and capturing the perceptions of students who chose to pursue higher education in other countries could diminish our perceived soft power of the United States in Cambodia. Many Cambodian students study in other Southeast Asian countries, as well as France, Australia, and China. It is possible that if other countries with similarly strong academic reputations launch TNHE programs in Cambodia, that students would be persuaded to study elsewhere.

International and Transnational Higher Education Students

The findings presented in this study present intriguing ideas about future research into the perceptions of international students. Much of the existing TNHE literature has focused on students’ motivations for pursuing TNHE programs. Other research has examined how academically mobile international students perceive themselves and their ideas about how they are perceived by others at their host institutions. This study examined how TNHE students, who are not mobile, conceptualize themselves and others’ perceptions of them. Future TNHE research should further explore the implications of dichotomous TNHE marketing and rhetoric regarding how TNHE students perceive of themselves over the course of their programs. An important aspect that was outside the scope of this study was how other Cambodian students, who attend local institutions, perceive the U.S. TNHE program, its participants, and the United States generally. We cannot compare with this study how students who did not choose the TNHE program perceive of the same issues explored with the TNHE participants.

In terms of TNHE students' perceptions of themselves, especially regarding Orientalism, it would be worth further exploring how TNHE programs, especially originating in Global South countries, market themselves to students and their families in the host country. In this study, the repeated dichotomous comparisons between U.S. and Cambodian higher education was often repeated by the students themselves, making the Orientalist framework seemingly easily applicable to the context. Additionally, in locations outside of Asia, it would be interesting to explore how such 'Othering' is both similar and different, in particular those countries where the United States has less lengthy, or different, historical relations. For example, the Trump administration was, despite negative views globally, quite popular in Vietnam. This had mostly to do with the Vietnamese approval of Trump's stance towards China's aggression in the region, an issue that, despite its current importance in Vietnam, actually stretches back a millennium (Kauffner, 2020). And ironically, older Vietnamese Americans who largely fled the communist takeover during the American War in Vietnam supported Trump over Biden because of their rejection of what they believed to be socialism (Plesch, 2020). But in a country that suffered tremendously from U.S. hard power, it would be interesting to conduct a similar case study to determine contemporary attitudes towards the United States as it is now, and to compare those attitudes between northern and southern Vietnam due to the historical differences between each region's relations with the United States and other countries.

Finally, research should consider the rise of South-South TNHE programs. How a Malaysian program, for example, markets itself in Cambodia, or how a Indian program markets itself in Uzbekistan, both of which are real life examples, could be quite illuminating in terms of comparing the use of particular language, such as quality for example, as well as the impact of those ideas on students' self-perceptions. It is possible that the same tropes apply, however it is

also possible that both more cooperative and positive conceptualizations of the benefits of TNHE are already being used by non-Global North institutions.

IBCs, Lan (2016) claims, seem to be similar instruments of export of Western institutional, curricular, and philosophical ways of studying. However, since they are in the development phase, it still may occur that, unlike their predecessors, they will be used as vehicles to learn the local knowledge from places where they are located, and to tailor their offer when values are in conflict. (Wojciuk, 2018, p. 350)

Regardless, it is important to note that interpretations about university relations should take into account local cultural and political contexts and realities. As Nye reminds us, “power always depends on the context in which the relationship exists” (2004, p. 2).

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DUAL DEGREE STUDENTS

Dual Degree Student Participant Interview Protocol

(For students participating in a U.S. transnational higher education (dual degree) program at the American College Cambodia)

(After reading the consent form and upon signed approval)

“Hello [name of participant]! My name is Hillary Vance. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Before we start, I’d like to remind you of a couple of things. This interview will be recorded but your identity will not be linked to your responses. If at any time, you feel the need to stop, please let me know. I expect for the interview to last no longer than 60 minutes but feel free to cut it short if you need to or extend it if you would like to talk more about any specific topic.

*Do you have any questions for me before we start? (Answer any questions). Great! Let’s begin (**Start recorder**)*

1. To begin, could you please tell me what you are studying at the American College Cambodia?
2. Why did you want to study at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Was participation in a dual degree a factor in your decision to apply to the American College Cambodia?
3. Do you feel like you are getting an American education at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Is that important to you? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel like an WU student?
 - a. Is that important to you? Why or why not?
5. Why did you decide to pursue a U.S. university dual degree?
6. Had you considered applying to study in the United States? Why or why not?
7. How would you describe the current relationship between the United States and Cambodia?
 - a. Do you think relations between the United States and Cambodia have been getting better or worse? Why or why not?
8. Did the current relationship between the United States/Cambodia have any impact on your decision to apply to the American College Cambodia? Why or why not?
9. Did United States/Cambodia relations influence your decision to participate in a U.S. dual degree program? Why or why not?
10. Do you think that the United States/Cambodia relationship matters to Cambodian students who want to earn a U.S. degree? Why or why not?

11. Do you think if the relationship between the United States and Cambodia was more positive that more students would choose to participate in a U.S. dual degree program in Cambodia?
12. What concerns, if any, did you have about choosing to study in this program? For instance, were you concerned that the program might be forced to close?
13. Do you think that students would rather study for a degree from a different country other than the United States? Why or why not?
14. Do you ever talk about the relationship between the United States and Cambodia in your classes or with your classmates?
 - a. If yes, do you feel that opinions about the United States are negative or positive?
 - b. If not, do you have an opinion about why?
15. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
16. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at WU or the other U.S. partner university?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
17. How has your opinion changed, if at all, regarding the relationship between the United States and Cambodia since you started studying at the American College Cambodia?
18. What is your opinion if people say that U.S. universities should not operate in Cambodia because of the political situation?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we have not spoken about today?

Thank you very much for your time!

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SINGLE DEGREE STUDENTS

Single Degree Student Participant Interview Protocol

(For students at the American College Cambodia who are not participating in a U.S. transnational higher education (dual degree) program)

(After reading the consent form and upon signed approval)

“Hello [name of participant]! My name is Hillary Vance. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Before we start, I’d like to remind you of a couple of things. This interview will be recorded but your identity will not be linked to your responses. If at any time, you feel the need to stop, please let me know. I expect for the interview to last no longer than 60 minutes but feel free to cut it short if you need to or extend it if you would like to talk more about any specific topic.

*Do you have any questions for me before we start? (Answer any questions). Great! Let’s begin (**Start recorder**)*

1. To begin, could you please tell me what you are studying at the American College Cambodia?
2. Why did you want to study at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Was the availability of dual degree programs a factor in your decision to apply to the American College Cambodia?
3. Do you feel like you are getting an American education at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Is that important to you? Why or why not?
4. Why did you decide not to pursue a U.S. university dual degree?
5. Had you considered applying to study in the United States? Why or why not?
6. How would you describe the current relationship between the United States and Cambodia?
 - a. Do you think relations between the United States and Cambodia have been getting better or worse? Why or why not?
7. Did the current relationship between the United States/Cambodia have any impact on your decision to apply to the American College Cambodia? Why or why not?
8. Did United States/Cambodia relations influence your decision to not participate in a U.S. dual degree program? Why or why not?
9. Do you think that the United States/Cambodia relationship matters to Cambodian students who want to earn a U.S. degree? Why or why not?
10. Do you think if the relationship between the United States and Cambodia was more positive that more students would choose to participate in a U.S. dual degree program in Cambodia?

11. What concerns, if any, did you have about choosing to study at the American College Cambodia?
12. Do you think that students would rather study for a degree from a different country other than the United States? Why or why not?
13. Do you ever talk about the relationship between the United States and Cambodia in your classes or with your classmates?
 - a. If yes, do you feel that opinions about the United States are negative or positive?
 - b. If not, do you have an opinion about why?
14. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
15. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at WU or the other U.S. partner university?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
16. How has your opinion changed, if at all, regarding the relationship between the United States and Cambodia since you started studying at the American College Cambodia?
17. What is your opinion if people say that U.S. universities should not operate in Cambodia because of the political situation?
18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we have not spoken about today?

Thank you very much for your time!

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR WESTERN UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STAFF

Western University (WU) Faculty and Staff Interview Protocol

(For WU faculty and staff members involved in setting up or delivering a U.S. transnational higher education (dual degree) program at the American College Cambodia)

(After reading the consent form and upon signed approval)

“Hello [name of participant]! My name is Hillary Vance. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Before we start, I’d like to remind you of a couple of things. This interview will be recorded but your identity will not be linked to your responses. If at any time, you feel the need to stop, please let me know. I expect for the interview to last no longer than 60 minutes but feel free to cut it short if you need to or extend it if you would like to talk more about any specific topic.

*Do you have any questions for me before we start? (Answer any questions). Great! Let’s begin (**Start recorder**)*

1. To begin, could you please tell me what your role is in the partnership with the American College Cambodia?
2. How familiar are you with Cambodia?
3. Have you ever traveled to Cambodia?
 - a. If yes, what were your experiences like?
 - b. If not, do you want to travel to Cambodia?
 - i. What interests you about Cambodia?
 - ii. What do you expect is different from the United States?
4. What is your impression of the American College Cambodia?
5. What does it mean to you to deliver an American education abroad?
 - a. How would you describe an American education vs a Cambodian education?
6. Do you feel like students are getting an American education in the dual degree program at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Is that important to you? Why or why not?
7. What do you hope having a U.S. education will do for students rather than just a Cambodian education?
8. Do you think that students would rather study for a degree from a different country other than the United States? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe the current relationship between the United States and Cambodia?
 - a. Do you think relations between the United States and Cambodia have been getting better or worse? Why or why not?

10. Does the current relationship between the United States/Cambodia concern you? Why or why not?
11. Do you think United States/Cambodia relations have an impact on how the dual degree program operates in Cambodia? Why or why not?
12. Do you think that the United States/Cambodia relationship matters to Cambodian students who want to earn a U.S. degree? Why or why not?
13. Do you think if the relationship between the United States and Cambodia was more positive that more students would choose to participate in a U.S. dual degree program in Cambodia?
14. What do you think were WU's motivations for starting a program in Cambodia?
15. What concerns, if any, did you have about WU starting a program in Cambodia?
16. Were you ever concerned that the program might be forced to close?
17. How do you think others in the university community view WU's involvement in Cambodia? For example, do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at WU?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
18. Were you ever concerned about WU's reputation?
19. How do you think others outside the university community view WU's involvement in Cambodia?
20. Do you ever talk about the relationship between the United States and Cambodia with anyone?
 - a. If yes, do you feel that opinions about Cambodia are negative or positive?
 - b. If not, do you have an opinion about why?
21. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
22. How has your opinion changed, if at all, regarding the relationship between the United States and Cambodia since you started working on this program?
23. What is your opinion if people say that U.S. universities should not operate in Cambodia because of the political situation?
24. Does WU operating in Cambodia help U.S. relations there?
25. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we have not spoken about today?

Thank you very much for your time!

**APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMBODIA
FACULTY AND STAFF**

American College Cambodia (ACC) Faculty and Staff Interview Protocol

(For ACC faculty and staff members involved in setting up or delivering a U.S. transnational higher education (dual degree) program at the American College Cambodia)

(After reading the consent form and upon signed approval)

“Hello [name of participant]! My name is Hillary Vance. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Before we start, I’d like to remind you of a couple of things. This interview will be recorded but your identity will not be linked to your responses. If at any time, you feel the need to stop, please let me know. I expect for the interview to last no longer than 60 minutes but feel free to cut it short if you need to or extend it if you would like to talk more about any specific topic.”

*Do you have any questions for me before we start? (Answer any questions). Great! Let’s begin (**Start recorder**)*

1. To begin, could you please tell me what your role is at the American College Cambodia?
2. How long have you been working in Cambodia? Where were you before you came to Cambodia?
3. What motivated you to work at ACC?
4. What has your experience been like in Cambodia?
5. What is your impression of WU?
6. What does it mean to you to deliver an American education abroad?
 - a. How would you describe an American education vs a Cambodian education?
7. Do you feel like students are getting an American education at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. Is that important to you? Why or why not?
8. What do you hope having a U.S. education will do for students rather than just a Cambodian education?
9. Do you think that students would rather study for a degree from a different country other than the United States? Why or why not?
10. How would you describe the current relationship between the United States and Cambodia?
 - a. Do you think relations between the United States and Cambodia have been getting better or worse? Why or why not?
11. Does the current relationship between the United States/Cambodia concern you? Is there a reputational risk? Or is it rhetorical? Why or why not?

12. Do you think United States/Cambodia relations have an impact on how ACC or the U.S. dual degree program operates in Cambodia? Why or why not?
13. Do you think that the United States/Cambodia relationship matters to Cambodian students who want to earn a U.S. degree? Why or why not?
14. Do you think if the relationship between the United States and Cambodia was more positive that more students would choose to come to ACC and/or to participate in a U.S. dual degree program in Cambodia?
15. What do you think were WU's motivations for starting a program in Cambodia?
16. What concerns, if any, did you have about working for an American University in Cambodia?
17. Were you ever concerned that the school might be forced to close?
18. How do you think people in the larger community view ACC?
19. Do you ever talk about the relationship between the United States and Cambodia with anyone?
 - a. If yes, do you feel that opinions about Cambodia are negative or positive?
 - b. If not, do you have an opinion about why?
20. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to the staff or faculty at WU?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
21. Do you think the relationship between the United States and Cambodia matters to other staff or faculty at the American College Cambodia?
 - a. If yes, in what way?
 - b. If not, do you feel it should matter to them?
22. Is it possible to deliver a true American style education in Cambodia?
23. Are there ethical concerns when delivering a U.S. education in a country with different norms?
24. How has your opinion changed, if at all, regarding the relationship between the United States and Cambodia since you started working at ACC?
25. What is your opinion if people say that U.S. universities should not operate in Cambodia because of the political situation?
26. Does having an American university operating in Cambodia help U.S. relations?
27. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we have not spoken about today?

Thank you very much for your time!

**APPENDIX E: TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS:
U.S./Cambodian Relations, Program Milestones, and Case Study Highlights**

October 31, 2010:

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Cambodia, the first visit of a U.S. Secretary of State since Colin Powell in 2003. “Cambodia Foreign Minister Hor Namhong hailed Clinton’s arrival as a reflection that “the relationship between the government of Cambodia and the U.S. has grown closer” in recent years” (Miller, 2010).

November 19, 2012:

President Barack Obama visited Phnom Penh and met with Prime Minister Hun Sen. This was the first time a sitting U.S. President had visited the Cambodian capital. The meeting was solely devoted to addressing Cambodia’s human rights issues. The Prime Minister insisted that rumors about Cambodian human rights problems were “slander” and brought up the extensive Lon Nol era debt to the United States dating from the 1970s. The amount owed stands at over USD \$400 million (Kuch & Zsombor, 2012).

March 25, 2015:

Addressing First Lady Michelle Obama’s visit to Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen accused her of making “false promises” towards aiding the administration’s educational goals for female Cambodian students. He claimed that the Obama administration’s Let Girls Learn initiative left the Cambodian Ministry of Education to fund scholarships for students it had selected for higher education. The U.S. Embassy denied that the initiative intended to fund scholarships. The president of the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association criticized the Prime Minister’s comments and praised Obama’s visit (Tat & Vong, 2015).

January 26, 2016:

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Cambodia for trade discussions. Commenting on his visit and Cambodia’s increasing reliance on China, political analyst Kem Ley stated that “it is not different from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt and Morocco” stated Kem Ley, warning that favoring any one benefactor could result in Cambodia being forced into a later conflict (Neou, 2016).

February 5, 2016:

Exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy called for the United States to push for “free and fair elections” in Cambodia (Sok & Kimseng, 2016).

February 16-17, 2016:

Prime Minister Hun Sen traveled to the United States for a U.S./ASEAN Summit. Many hoped that the meeting between President Obama and the Prime Minister could help repair relations.

July 10, 2016:

Government critic and political analyst Kem Ley was murdered in Phnom Penh. The government contends that it was over a minor debt, but activists believe that this explanation was merely a cover-up (Seiff, 2016).

September 2016:

Western University signs TNHE program agreement with the American College Cambodia, set to launch in Fall 2017.

January 17, 2017:

Hun Sen cancelled U.S./Cambodian joint military exercises, weeks after the largest ever joint Chinese/Cambodian military exercises were conducted (Sokhean & Meyn, 2017).

February 28, 2017:

President Trump, during a congressional address, stated “America respects the right of all nations to chart their own path. My job is not to represent the world,” a quote the Cambodian government would later use to show U.S. hypocrisy towards Cambodia.

March 3, 2017:

U.S. State Department released a global human rights report. The Cambodian government decried the report’s charges of serious and systemic human rights abuses and extensive corruption in Cambodia as an attack on its sovereignty.

April 2, 2017:

Prime Minister Hun Sen appealed to the Trump administration to forgive Cambodia’s Vietnam era war debt (Wallace, 2017).

April 4, 2017:

U.S. Embassy in Cambodia announced that Cambodia ordered the U.S. Navy aid unit, known as the Seabees, to leave Cambodia. The unit, which made annual visits to Cambodia, subsequently had to cancel 20 construction projects planned for Cambodia including work at various schools and hospitals (Thul, 2017, April 4).

May 2017:

After State Department leaks showed that the U.S. was planning development aid cuts to Cambodia in 2018, Ambassador Heidt relays to Cambodian officials that the Cambodian government and NGOs in the country will need to increase their own funding for UXO clearance (Chheng et al., 2017).

August 23, 2017:

Cambodian government shuts down two Khmer language independent radio stations (Maha Nokor and Voice of Democracy (VOD)). Hun Sen threatens Cambodian Daily with closure over 'unpaid tax bill'. Maha Nokor leased program time to U.S. funded broadcasters. VOD had received funding from the U.S. government, EU, Danish, and Swedish governments. Cambodian government ordered the National Democratic Institute to close and expelled the staff to leave within one week. The week prior, NDI had been accused on Facebook of conspiring with the CNRP, despite the fact that NDI also worked on democracy training with the ruling CPP. Voice of America and Radio Free Asia have also been threatened with similar closures. (Al Jazeera, 2017, August 23). Eventually, 20 Khmer language radio stations were shuttered, including Radio Free Asia and Voice of America. Two journalists from Radio Free Asia were arrested on espionage charges and could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison (Boland, 2017).

August 5, 2017:

ASEAN released a joint communique regarding China's activities in the South China Sea, however observers noted it had been watered down from earlier proposed draft's likely due to Cambodia's reluctance to criticize its main ally (Sassoon, 2017). Mere days after the release of the communique, China announced a \$530 million dollar 'aid package' for Cambodia (Nachemson, 2017).

August 4, 2017:

Hun Sen stated his wish for his U.S. born grandchild to renounce their U.S. citizenship (Ven, 2017, August 4).

August 21, 2017:

Western University dual degree programs at the American College Cambodia were launched.

September 3, 2017:

Kem Sokha of CNRP was arrested at his home. The opposition leader was accused of treason and of being aided by the United States. The Cambodia Daily Newspaper, an often critical publication, was forced to close over allegations of unpaid tax bills.

September 12, 2017:

The U.S. Embassy in Cambodia began posting on its Facebook page that accusations against the United States in relation to the treason charges against Kem Sokha were nothing more than a red herring meant to detract from Cambodian government actions. The Embassy also issued a warning to U.S. citizens in the country about "anti-American" rhetoric used by Cambodian government officials. Hun Sen, speaking at a university graduation ceremony, derided the U.S. Embassy posts and again accused the U.S. of supporting regime change in Cambodia (Ven, 2017, September 12). The U.S. Embassy warning was classified by Hun Sen as a terror threat

alert, suggesting that if the situation was so dire that the Peace Corps should be evacuated. These comments were made at the same time the U.S. Embassy was holding a swearing in ceremony for 71 newly arrived volunteers. He also instructed his immigration department to root out American spies in the country who sought to foment a color revolution.

September 13, 2017:

Upon his return from a three-day trip to China, Hun Sen praised China's support and accused Western countries of attempting to interfere in Cambodian internal affairs.

September 14, 2017:

Prime Minister Hun Sen suspended the program assisting the United States with locating remains of U.S. service members killed or missing in action during the Vietnam War.

September 20, 2017:

In response to Cambodia no longer accepting the return of deported Cambodian nationals from the U.S., the U.S. Embassy announced the suspension of some visa types for Cambodians. "Cambodia still cooperates with the U.S. But while the U.S. tells the world that it respects human rights, in reality they don't. They just drop bombs to kill people" stated Phay Siphon, a Cambodian government spokesperson (Thul, 2017, September 20).

January 2018:

Germany enacted restrictions on visas for high ranking members of the Cambodian government (Beech, 2018).

February 27, 2018:

Trump administration cut aid to Cambodia declaring that the Senate elections "failed to represent the genuine will of the Cambodian people" (Beech, 2018).

March 18, 2018:

Joint UN statement condemning political repression in Cambodia signed by 45 countries, including the United States. Cambodia slammed it as politically motivated (Kijewski, 2018).

June 13, 2018:

The U.S. Department of Treasury sanctioned Cambodian General Hing Bun Heang, the deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the commander of the BGU. The sanctions were levied over his role overseeing the BGU while it "engaged in a series of human rights abuses," freezing his U.S. assets and preventing him the ability to obtain a visa (Dara, 2018, June 14).

June 15, 2018:

In response to the sanctions against him, Bun Heang “said he would retaliate against any U.S. national who does not respect his country’s sovereignty, has ambitions to invade Cambodia or indices “traitors” in the Kingdom to do so (Dara, 2018b). Bun Heang insisted that he wished to be friends with the United States but that he did not respect it. Other government officials planned to raise the issue of sanctions with the U.S. State Department.

July 29, 2018:

Cambodian national elections take place.

November 2018:

Zaman University forced to sell due to Turkish government pressure on Cambodia (Keeton-Olsen, 2019).

December 2018 - December 2019:

Qualitative interviews are conducted.

February 1, 2019: U.S. Embassy in Cambodia denies U.S. role in Lon Nol coup d’état of 1970. Statement also focused on Chinese support of the Khmer Rouge. Chinese Embassy ‘mocks’ U.S. embassy in reply (Dara, 2019a, 2019b).

February 2020:

Expansion of COVID-19 Pandemic.

August 12, 2020:

The European Union suspended its “Everything But Arms” trade preferences with Cambodia, restoring “tariffs on around a quarter of Cambodia’s exports” to the EU, due to its failure to address alleged human rights abuses (Strangio, 2020).

September 15, 2020:

The U.S. State Department sanctioned the Union Development Group, a Chinese state-owned company, “for its role in corrupt activities in Cambodia” (United States Department of State, 2020). The Union Development Group had been working on developments at Dara Sakor tourism zone in Koh Kong, Cambodia. The State Department believes that the Chinese developments in Koh Kong are a front for China developing a deep-water port for use by its military.

September 26, 2020:

Prime Minister Hun Sen, in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly, seemed to target the United States when he stated “unfortunately, all too often, depending on the political

ambition and hidden opportunistic agenda of some countries, Cambodia had to deal with hypocritical double-standards, biased and politically motivated decisions, in short, injustice” (Tan, 2020).

June 2020: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visits Cambodia to reset ties but is denied full access to Ream Naval Base.

July 2021: United States suspends scholarships for Cambodians at U.S. service academies. U.S. Department of State and Department of Education release joint statement on renewed U.S. commitment to international education in the United States.

APPENDIX F: LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABET	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology
ADP	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUB	American University of Beirut
ACC	American College Cambodia
BGU	Bodyguard unit (of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen)
C-BERT	Cross Border Education Research Team
CNRP	Cambodian National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
D2L	Desire2Learn (online learning platform)
EBA	Everything But Arms treaty
EU	European Union
GATS	General Agreement on Trade and Services
HEI	Higher education institution
IBC	International branch campus
IIE	Institute for International Education
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NUS	National University of Singapore
NYU	New York University
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PM	Prime Minister
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
TNE	Transnational education

TNHE	Transnational higher education
TPP	Trans Pacific Partnership
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
VOA	Voice of America
VOD	Voice of Democracy
WTO	World Trade Organization
WU	Western University

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