SUMMARY

In the twenty-first century, higher education has come to be considered a powerful tool to develop human capital for national competitiveness in the era of globalization. Meanwhile, the higher education sector in Cambodia has gained considerable momentum for the country’s development as its economy is moving toward a knowledge-based future. Notably, research on higher education in Cambodia has increasingly attracted attention from both international and national scholars, yielding a number of research publications. Despite this, previous research tends to overlook the stakeholder involvement issues in the higher education sector and very few studies focus on the institutional governance issues in the sector. This constitutes a critical lack of knowledge in this area. The research featured in this dissertation aims to fill this knowledge gap by examining the development of the higher education sector in Cambodia with a specific focus on stakeholder involvement and institutional governance since the sector has been privatized, along with limited public funding and insufficient resources. Therefore, this dissertation raises the following research question: “How does stakeholder involvement in the Cambodian higher education sector affect the governance of HEIs, upon the transition toward privatization, in shaping educational quality for the labour market in Cambodia?”

This study employs a qualitative method based on an interpretivist approach to inquiry in order to answer the above research question. It draws on data mainly generated from semi-structured interviews with 46 research participants from relevant institutions, namely the government institutions, development partners, higher education institutions (HEIs), and the private sector. Purposive and snowball sampling methods have been employed to select research participants for the study. In addition, the researcher constitutes a research tool negotiating with the participants as to how the data are constructed and interpreted. The data collection was primarily conducted from December 2012 to December 2013 with some subsequent interviews in 2014, in four regions in Cambodia: Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, and Kratie. The study employs the concepts of entrepreneurial university, triple helix model, and institutional governing body as guiding tools to analyse the development of HEIs, stakeholder involvement, and institutional governance of HEIs in Cambodia respectively.

The study has found that HEIs in Cambodia have appeared to exclude the entrepreneurial university model to adopt the profit-based business model, putting Cambodian higher education in a challenging position to move forward for national competitiveness. In
addition, the study has revealed that higher education stakeholders in Cambodia constitute four major groups: the government, development partners, HEIs, and private sector. These stakeholder groups have been involved in the sector albeit at different levels. Their collaboration is proved to be so limited that it could not bring about any significant changes to advance the sector. The limited collaboration results from the challenges at both national and institutional levels and is considered an impediment to the development process of the sector. This problem has posed a threat to the higher education quality in Cambodia in producing qualified graduates for the competitive labour market for the ASEAN Economic Community.

The study has also shown that the reforms in the Cambodian higher education sector in terms of privatization have direct implications for how HEIs are governed. Although institutional autonomy is granted to HEIs, it has yet to bring about any satisfactory improvements for institutional development. Notably, decision-making power has appeared to be concentrated at the top at the institutional level, following a top-down approach. HEIs have encountered an impediment to development, influenced by commercialization and politicization, constituting the main challenges for the responsiveness and effectiveness of HEIs to address the actual needs and interests of the stakeholders and to help develop the country’s economy. Implicitly, market and political forces have increasingly blurred the distinction between public and private HEIs.

The dissertation contributes to theoretical debates on stakeholder involvement and institutional governance in Cambodia and beyond. This research challenges the applicability of the triple helix model of innovation within the context of developing countries. The study argues that the model requires a contextual adjustment as in the case of Cambodia in which the fourth helix “development partner” is to be added to the original model, constituting “a quadruple helix model” to study stakeholder involvement in the higher education sector in donor-dependent Cambodia. Moreover, the practice of increased institutional autonomy requires a closer examination as it may result in profit-orientation and concentrated power of the ruling political party although it is expected to help enhance educational quality and develop institutions. This issue calls for further empirical studies in Cambodia as well as other developing and transitioning countries to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field.

Finally, the research has important implications for the development of the higher education sector in Cambodia and other countries sharing similar social, political and economic environment. It is important that HEIs start to work collaboratively with other external
stakeholders as they cannot work in isolation in order to secure their future and to improve the quality of their services. In addition, HEIs need to take the lead in the stakeholder collaboration and carry out entrepreneurial activities with the values added to their core functions of teaching, research and public services. Importantly, institutional leadership and management need to perform independently of political interference to improve educational quality and to create a culture of discussion and commitment in order to develop a culture of good governance within HEIs.