What drives failed policy at the World Bank? An inside account of new aid modalities to higher education: context, blame, and infallibility

Jeremy Rappleye & Leang Un

To cite this article: Jeremy Rappleye & Leang Un (2018): What drives failed policy at the World Bank? An inside account of new aid modalities to higher education: context, blame, and infallibility, Comparative Education, DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2018.1426534

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2018.1426534

Published online: 18 Jan 2018.
What drives failed policy at the World Bank? An inside account of new aid modalities to higher education: context, blame, and infallibility

Jeremy Rappleyea and Leang Unb

aGraduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan; bFaculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

ABSTRACT
This article analyses recent World Bank interventions aimed at improving higher education and local research capacity in low-income countries. Our empirical entry point is a critical analysis of the Development and Innovation Grant (DIG) scheme the Bank rolled out in Cambodia (2010–2015), a virtual carbon copy export of its Academic Initiative Fund in Bangladesh. Offering a rare insider perspective, we argue that the DIG scheme ultimately failed because the Bank so glaringly misunderstood the Cambodian context. We use this case to contemplate the deeper flaws in how the Bank ‘thinks’, highlighting how the world’s most powerful development institution manages to maintain faith in its own infallibility despite failure.

KEYWORDS
World Bank; global knowledge economy; failed development; policy transfer; context; nomothetic; faith

I. Introduction

In July 2010 the World Bank (International Development Association) extended its first-ever investment loan to Cambodia specifically targeting the higher education sub-sector. Classified under one of the newest World Bank Human Development Sector project lending themes, Education for the Knowledge Economy, the five-year USD $23 million Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project (hereafter HEQCIP) comprised four components: strengthening the capacity of the higher education system (Component 1), provision of competitive development and innovation grants (Component 2), scholarships for disadvantaged students (Component 3), and project monitoring and evaluation (Component 4). Components 1, 3, and 4 represented mere ‘upward’ extensions of long-standing Bank interventions at the primary and secondary levels: workshops and study tours for Ministry staff; pro-poor tuition and stipends for disadvantaged, female, and ethnic minority students; strengthening of Ministry management information systems, outcomes-based monitoring, and so on.

Component 2, however, was unique, both in the sense of having few precedents in other education sub-sectors and in other aid-dependent contexts globally. Component 2 would provide research grants up to USD 200,000 directly to Cambodian universities.
(called Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in World Bank nomenclature) to improve the quality of research, teaching, and learning. These funds – called Development and Innovation Grants (hereafter DIGs) – were to be allocated on a competitive basis and sought to ‘enhance the capacity of HEIs to seek innovative solutions to address national/local development issues’ (World Bank 2010, 6).

The wider backdrop to the HEQCIP intervention in Cambodia was a significant shift in World Bank lending priorities globally. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Bank began to pay greater attention to the role of tertiary education (World Bank 1994), a sub-sector it had largely neglected for decades under the influence of rate of return analysis in the 1970–1980s and policy preferences for expansion of basic education in the post-Jomtien era of the 1990s (Heyneman 2003). While critics would view this marked shift as part of the attempt to reinvent itself as a ‘global knowledge bank’ and thus regain legitimacy after the excesses of structural adjustment lending in the 1980s (Kamat 2012; see also Edwards and Storen 2016; Heyneman 2003), for those working inside the World Bank, this new policy focus was a rational response to a fundamental shift in the locus of wealth creation and growth in the ‘new global knowledge economy’. This new thinking inside the Bank was spelled out most explicitly in a seminal report entitled Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education (2002) that argued the following:

- Social and economic progress is achieved primarily through the advancement and application of knowledge
- Tertiary education is necessary for the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge and for building technical and professional capacity.
- Developing and transition countries are at risk of being further marginalized in a highly competitive world economy because of their tertiary education systems are not adequately prepared to capitalize on the creation and use of knowledge
- The state has a responsibility to put in place an enabling framework that encourages tertiary education institutions to be more innovative and more responsive to the needs of a globally competitive knowledge economy … (World Bank 2002, xix)

This new approach held that no matter where a country was located globally, what natural resources it had, or what macroeconomic policies might be in place, wealth could be generated by investing in universities to make them ‘more innovative’ and thus able to ‘capitalize on the creation and use of knowledge’. Development and innovation would now be coterminous; university research could become a leading engine of growth for low-income countries in the new knowledge economy.

This paper critically examines this recent World Bank emphasis on university research through a close examination of the unfolding of the DIG scheme in Cambodia between 2010 and 2015. Studies critical of the World Bank are, of course, not uncommon in the academic literature. Most frequently these take the form of critiquing the normative foundations of the Bank’s Education Sector Strategy papers (e.g. Robertson 2012) or analysing how the Bank successfully promotes an ideologically driven vision of change at the global level (Verger, Edwards, and Altinyekan 2014). These perennial themes are interspersed with other insightful critiques of how geo-politics, loan conditionality, contested claims to empirical verification, and constructed consensus combine to ensure that Bank policies are adopted in specific national contexts (e.g. Brehm and Silova 2010; Edwards 2012, 2013,
While this previous work is important, this paper diverges, redirecting the focus back to the substantial disconnect between Bank policy visions and realities on the ground in ‘client’ countries, taking as its empirical example the relatively recent move into higher education by the Bank as operationalised in Cambodia (see also Brehm 2018). We seek to shed further light on what has long been suspected, but rarely elaborated in sufficient empirical detail: how World Bank interventions are contextually blind and how this ultimately leads to project failure. By extension, our analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the roots of the overall failure of Western-led ‘development’ over the past 60 years to deliver on what it promises (e.g. Dichter 2003; Easterly 2006; Ferguson 1990). The uniqueness of the current piece is most evident, however, in the way we show how fundamental flaws in the Bank’s ‘thinking’ on context are later turned around and blamed on the recipient, allowing those within the Bank to maintain faith in Bank infallibility.

The findings and analyses presented here are based primarily on the lead author’s personal experience working inside the World Bank for two years as a Short Term Consultant supporting HEQCIP Component 2 (the DIGs). From autumn 2013 through autumn 2015, he was contracted by the Bank to provide intensive, hands-on academic support to Cambodian universities who were recipients of a DIG, but were failing. He made a total of 7 trips to Cambodia in the span of these 2 years, visiting all 45 sub-projects (24 universities) at least twice each, leading national-level research methods workshops, working closely with the Ministry’s Directorate General of Higher Education (hereafter Department of Higher Education (DHE)) Component 2 Project Teams, and participating in internal Bank missions, reporting, and evaluation exercises. Although explicitly critical of donor-led development prior to undertaking this (e.g. Rappleye 2011a, 2011b), the attempt to see educational development from the ‘inside’ seemed to be such a rare opportunity that it proved too much to turn down. That the Bank hired him despite his prior published academic critiques only corroborates one key hypothesis advanced in this article: the Bank, at least those in the field offices engaged in planning and implementation, does not seem to take account of the academic literature (research). The present article is the first of three planned articles aiming to elaborate the academic implications of these experiences.

The second author worked inside the Royal Government of Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, DHE (MoEYS-DHE) over the same two-year period. Formerly a lecturer at Cambodia’s leading university and also critical of foreign-led development (e.g. Un 2012, 2013), he relinquished his prestigious lectureship – at a substantial pay-cut due to the inability to take donor consultancy work – to join the Ministry when they needed someone with solid academic/research credentials to oversee the new DIG scheme. He was charged with overseeing the entire DIG project, becoming, in effect, the Ministry (DHE) counterpart to the Bank’s Short-Term Consultant (lead author). Through a close working relationship, the two authors were able to compare how the DIG scheme was viewed both inside and outside the Bank offices, where the differences in perceptions existed, and where blame was being assigned and where it was warranted. It was only through such a collaborative approach that we could develop a holistic picture of the primary factors leading to the failure of the DIG scheme in Cambodia we present below.
Two final points here at the outset. First, although critical of the DIG scheme in Cambodia, we do not claim that what we describe here is representative of all Bank work. We suspect it is so, to a greater and lesser extent, based on how the Bank conceptualises context, an approach that appears uniform in all Bank operations globally. Moreover, depending on where one is situated, one’s perception of the DIG scheme is bound to be different. Certainly, some universities were pleased to get the funds, whatever dysfunctions might come as a consequence. What we offer here then is a record of experience, awaiting a response by others, not a claim to have somehow achieved objectivity – a stance that would replicate the contextual transcendence illusion we critique below.

The second point is that given the emphasis we put in this paper on the importance of engaging with social science research, readers might well wonder how our approach fits. Our short answer is that what we aim to provide here is an account of significance from the point of view of participants, including ourselves, as a counter-balance to the depictions offered by the Bank. Here we are close to an ethnographic-style account, although some anthropologists would protest we do not let many informants other than ourselves speak. Unfortunately, there was not anyone else involved at these upper levels of policy than the two of us who were willing to speak frankly. Thus, although limited, our contribution does partially answer Anderson-Levitt’s (2012) recent call for ‘more fieldwork inside the World Bank…where received knowledge gets generated’ in order to ‘provide everyone with better tools for noticing and questioning hegemony’ (452). But again, in addition to concerns about power, we hope that our piece will stimulate deeper thinking on the classic theme of context and help us imagine what deeper logic generates contextual misunderstanding.

II. (Mis)conceptualising context: a basic scheme

Working directly within a World Bank field office provided a first-hand look at how the Bank conceptualises local ‘context’. What was most striking was how the Bank’s approach seemed unaffected by advances in scholarly research over the past several decades. In this section, we sketch a very basic conceptual schema of three different Bank approaches to understanding the Cambodian ‘context’,3 illuminating some of the evident problems as viewed from academic research (social sciences). Conceptual clarity here on the key issue of context at the outset helps us to pinpoint more specifically the origins of policy failure later.

It is not uncommon to hear World Bank staff, particularly foreign national staff, utilise terms like ‘Khmer culture’ to explain problems encountered on a daily basis. For example, ‘Khmer culture’ is frequently invoked to explain why, say, a particular Vice-Minister will not oppose the Education Minister on a key decision or why Cambodian staff sometime turn up for meetings 30 minutes later than expected. These visions – which we will term contextual clichés – utilise the multivocality of the complex concept of ‘culture’ to provide a nearly limitless list of possible explanations for why planned interventions fail to deliver expected results. Presumably, such clichés are the lingering ghosts of modernisation theory with its high-modern predilections for reifying culture and presenting it as the primary obstacle to positive, progressive change. Unexpectedly, this stance still haunts day-to-day sense-making at the operational levels within the Bank field offices, despite being widely discredited in recent scholarship for its static, ahistorical,
and essentialising view of the Other (e.g. Anderson-Levitt 2012; Kipnis 2011). However, such contextual clichés are virtually non-existent in official Bank publications since the 1980s and our own experience did not find serious evidence that such ‘folk understandings’ play any major role in key Bank planning decisions. Instead, this view of context functions as a fallback position to explain the day-to-day irritations after the programme hits difficulties in implementation.

A somewhat more sophisticated Bank approach to conceptualising context, one central to our overall argument, is one we will term here the common contextual categories approach. The approach here is deductive, generating a familiar view of national contexts by applying universally applicable categories. The official Bank Project Appraisal Document (PAD) for HEQCIP written in 2010 is representative:

The Cambodian higher education (HE) sub-sector has made significant progress and expanded in both the public and private sectors during the last decade. Enrollment has grown rapidly from a little over 10,000 in 1992 to 137,253 (including 12,802 scholarship students) in 2008, of which approximately 60 percent is enrolled in private higher education institutions (HEIs). Today there are 32 public and 45 private HEIs spread over more than 111 campuses (including branches, which are mostly in the provinces). (World Bank 2010, 2)

Although the PAD runs to 105-pages in length, this ‘Strategic Context’ section comprises a mere two pages. There are no deeper analyses of Cambodian universities therein except what is written above, nor in three key research papers prepared by short-term World Bank consultants in the identification missions leading up to the drafting of the PAD and the formulation of HEQCIP (McNamara 2007; Orivel 2008; Sloper 2004). The remaining 103 pages focuses mainly on macroeconomic indicators, how the project would be organised, detailed information on lending instruments, and various risk assessments (e.g. environmental impact).

We may pause to recognise three implicit assumptions embedded in the World Bank’s common contextual categories approach, each of them problematic. First, common categories implicitly project the image of common conditions. The PAD description above suggests that a university in Cambodia is equivalent to an ‘HEI’ anywhere else around the world. Second, the categories selected suggest themselves as leading cause(s). The PAD implicitly suggests that the key variables it highlights – enrolment figures, rates of expansion, geographical distribution, public/private balance – are the primary variables to consider when determining correlation and causality, and thus most important for project design. Third, common categories implicitly narrow the focus to variables derived from the institutional field of (higher) education alone, rather than in, say, wider historical, social, and/or political contexts. Although we recognise that a common contextual categories approach used formally certainly yields greater contextual awareness than contextual clichés used informally among some Bank staff, the former is potentially more misleading. The application of common categories helps to deduce a vision of ‘context’ but one that is in constant danger of confusing its own labels with substantive realities; one that eliminates from the outset finding variables unique/specific to a particular context.

Importantly, we note that the shortcomings of common contextual categories approach have been repeatedly spotlighted by scholars over the past 100 years, a period longer than the Bank itself has been in existence. The Bank’s common contextual categories approach is a prime example of what Max Weber once termed ‘ideal types’. For Weber, the central
methodological problems of all social sciences were generated, not solved, by ‘ideal types’: to what extent could abstracted, objectified categories formulated by an observer as a necessary precondition for thought approximate concrete, subjective meaning contexts of those s/he observes? Ideal types were one moment in an iterative, on-going process of abstraction and investigation, not a terminus. As early as the 1930s, successors to Weber, notably leading social scientists such as Alfred Schütz active in the United States, were already warning of the tendency for those utilising an ‘ideal type’ methodology to get carried away:

Observation of the social behavior of another involves the very real danger that the observer will naively substitute his own ideal types for those in the minds of his subject. The danger becomes acute when the observer, instead of being directly attentive to the person observed, thinks of the latter as a ‘case history’ of such and such an abstractly defined type of conduct. Here not only may the observer be using the wrong ideal type to understand his subject’s behavior, but he may never discover his error because he never confronts his subject as a real person. (Schütz [1932] 1967, 205)

These scholars emphasised how one always needed to ask how participants in a particular context interpreted significance, as one key determinant of social action, in order to achieve understanding (Verstehen) (see also Brehm 2017). Despite these well-known social science insights, the Bank’s dominant approach to conceptualising context – common contextual categories – has not only remained unchanged since its founding in 1944, it has arguably become progressively stronger. The Bank’s newest policy diagnostic tool, the Systems Assessment and Benchmarking for Education Results (SABER) (see Klees and Edwards 2014), is a prime example of its curious continuation of the application of a vulgar ideal-type approach.

At an even deeper level, neither contextual clichés nor common contextual categories approaches are inclusive of the Bank itself as contextual participant. That is, context for those working inside the Bank means only ‘things Cambodian’, an object somehow ‘out there’ and entirely separate from the Bank itself. From the Bank’s perspective, funds for HEQVIP are simply transferred to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, then transferred to the Ministry of Education, and – in the case of DIGs – then disbursed and used by university researchers. Although the Bank may tightly monitor the use of funds or supervise progress towards ‘Key Project Indicators’, it imagines a clear line between itself and the recipient. The self-image that prevails inside the Bank is one of a hermetically sealed border between the lender and recipient, a convenient conceit preventing the Bank from seeing itself as part of the Cambodian context.

Here again the Bank fails to heed the repeated warnings of many academic researchers that even when observing international education phenomena one always ‘plays a role and is not a distant, detached observer’ (Sobe and Kowlczyk 2014). Some scholars refer to the fallacy of being able to stand outside a context as the ‘God Trick’ that claims to ‘see everything from nowhere’ (Haraway 1988). Even at the level of the field offices whose staff are close enough to the ground to realise both observation and intervention are both at work on a daily basis, there appears to be little understanding – insofar as the Cambodian case is representative – that the Bank’s presence is very much part of the contextual scene there. We term this contextual transcendence and see it as ultimately the most damaging of the three concepts sketched above: with the Bank’s own work
operating in such a blind spot, causality for any failure that emerges later must necessarily be ‘found’ on the recipient side.

III. Policy model: Bangladesh’s Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project

Given the typical span of World Bank project cycles, it would take several years before the new directions outlined in Constructing Knowledge Societies (2002) would emerge in actual country-level Bank programming. In 2007 preparations began for the operationalisation of this vision in Bangladesh, gaining final board approval in 2009 as the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (hereafter HEQEP). The central pillar of the USD 91 million HEQEP intervention would be the Academic Innovation Fund (AIF).\(^4\) The policy vision was simple: to create a pool of funds universities could access to carry out research. Grants were to be awarded to both public and private universities on a competitive basis. Interested university leaders and researchers would make short, standardised applications of 3–5 pages. The pre-existing Bangladesh University Grants Commission (UGC) would handle application screening, selection, and administration of funds. Selection would take place each year, accepting applications across four ‘windows’, each discrete in thematic emphasis: ‘Teaching and Learning’ (Window 1), ‘Research’ (Window 2), ‘University Wide Technology Transfer’ (Window 3), and ‘University-Industry Linkages and Commercialization of Research’ (Window 4) (HEQEP 2013). Selection preference would be given to projects demonstrating an attempt to link up university and labor markets’ (HEQEP 2013, i).

Material resource acquisition was the primary focus of the AIF in Bangladesh. In the first two years of the project alone (2010–2011), 194 grants were awarded ranging anywhere from Taka 30 Lakh (USD 3700) to 500 Lakh (USD 60,000). These focused heavily on purchasing the latest scientific equipment, refurbishing laboratories, automating libraries, and digitising classrooms (whiteboards, projects, audio equipment, etc.). Non-infrastructure projects were limited to overseas travel and organising national/international seminars. As the HEQEP mid-term impact assessment report underscores, the main achievements of the AIF were in material improvements:

70 computer labs, 2236 computers, 768 multimedia equipments [sic] have been made available for the faculties and students for use; 30 world class laboratories with at least 41 state-of-the-art scientific equipments have been established which were not available in Bangladesh’s universities before; 27 departments constructed modern classrooms and 50 departments refurbished their classrooms and seminars; five universities have completed library automation…fifteen thousand books have been procured and access to 22 thousand online journal titles facilitated. (HEQEP 2013, ii)

The case of the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BNU), Department of Veterinary Science is instructive here. Awarded Taka 405 Lakh (USD 50,000), the Department spent over 90% of the money to renovate its classrooms, equipping them with projectors, computers, sounds systems, and office equipment. Another 5% went to purchase a large van to serve as a farm ambulance for on-farm disease investigation and the remaining amount sent five teachers for three days of hands-on training at a Malaysian university (HEQEP 2013, 1). Nearly all projects showed roughly similar allocations of funds.
Why would resource acquisition be the primary focus of HEQEP? The answer is that the Bank viewed Bangladesh as a national context heavy in PhD holders, but woefully facilities-poor, thus unable to turn advanced academic training of researchers into research output and innovation. Although estimates of numbers of PhD holders are inevitably suspect in contexts where degrees can be bought, forged, or completed with minimal effort, some estimates suggest that Bangladesh had some 5000–6000 PhD holders by the mid-2000s, out of a total population of roughly 140 million people. A more reliable picture emerges from narrowing the focus more tightly to, say, agricultural universities. One study found that among 17 leading agricultural universities and faculties across the country (including the flagship BNU above), the percentage of researchers with PhDs was 55% (Beintema and Kabir 2006) This figure was twice the average for those working in many government-sponsored research institutes, which was still impressive at roughly 25%. In 1981, the number of full-time researchers in these 17 faculties who were PhD holders was just 41, but by 2002 the number had nearly tripled to 119 (Beintema and Kabir 2006).

What accounted for this? Behind these figures – among the highest in South Asia – were two major factors: the historical legacy and a large number of donor projects over the preceding decades sponsoring PhD studies. Historically, with the British colonial capital located in nearby Kolkata until 1911, British efforts to ‘civilise’ India with Western learning, schools, and universities made this eastern edge home to many of the subcontinent’s first modern universities. These universities, derived from the British model, were focused on not simply teaching. For example, the University of Dhaka (DU) was established in 1921, with its first Vice-Chancellor, a British national former at the University of London, remarking at one of the earliest DU graduation ceremonies:

A man may be an excellent teacher of elementary subjects without the power to add to knowledge. But in advanced work I maintain that no one can really teach well unless he has the combination of imagination with critical power which leads to the original production (of knowledge), and for that if for no other reason, a university to be a true university must see that its teachers are men who are capable of advancing knowledge. (Hartog 1923)

Such ideas – ones that reveal a striking continuity with Constructing Knowledge Societies – meant that doctoral level study had a long history of support and encouragement there. This tradition carried on virtually unbroken in institutions such as DU from the British colonial era.

Arguably more decisively was the second factor: a large number of donor projects in Bangladesh from the 1980s forward had led to a large increase of those funded to undertake doctoral studies abroad. Supported primarily by USAID and the World Bank, these projects greatly expanded the number of PhD holders. Staying with the example of agriculture, the World Bank-funded Agricultural Research Management Project running from 1996 to 2001 allowed 106 researchers to obtain doctoral degrees (Beintema and Kabir 2006, 6). The problem the Bank’s HEQEP and the AIF ‘recognised’ then was not one of know-how, but instead of facilities and equipment: when this large influx of freshly minted PhDs returned home to Bangladesh, they were unable to continue with their research because of the resource-poor environment.5


IV. Policy export and ‘strategic vision’: Cambodia’s HEQCIP

Eighteen months after HEQEP was underway in Bangladesh, the World Bank began to design it first-ever investment loan to Cambodia specifically targeting the higher education sub-sector. A Bank staffer who had written major sections of the original *Constructing Knowledge Societies* (2002) and helped design the Bangladesh project decided the AIF model would be a good fit for Cambodia as well. In designing the details of Component 2 of the Cambodian project, she was joined by the leader of the AIF in the World Bank Bangladesh Field Office who would supervise both the AIF and DIG schemes simultaneously. Unsurprisingly, the Cambodian policy vision became virtually a carbon copy of the Bangladesh model, although the name was changed from AIF to DIG.

As in Bangladesh, the DIGs in Cambodia would be open to public and private universities and be disbursed under different windows: ‘Support to Teaching and Learning’ (Window 1) and ‘Solutions to Local Problems’ (Window 2). The maximum duration of the grant would be two years for larger grants and 18 months for smaller grants. The design called for the selection of 50 research grants in the first round, followed by 100 research grants in the second round (World Bank 2010), mirroring the rapid ‘scaling-up’ of the programme in Bangladesh. HEIs would apply directly for one of two types of grants: Type A Grants up to USD 50,000 and Type B Grants USD 200,000 Grants.

In these details, there could be found differences in degree from the Bangladesh interventional: the upper thresholds of the grants were nearly four times greater. Seventy per cent of grants would be Type A and 30% Type B and there would ‘be two or three calls for proposals over the five-year project period’ (World Bank 2010, 7). Yet, just as in Bangladesh, the duration of the grants was short: the maximum length would be two years for larger Type B grants and 18 months for smaller Type A grants. Although Cambodia did not have a pre-existing UGC as in Bangladesh, the Bank design called for a Research Grants Management Committee (RGMC) to be quickly established within the Ministry’s DHE to oversee the project. This RGMC would rely primarily on existing Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) staff, but provisions were made to allow for hiring some outside, short-term consultants for limited periods, if the need arose.

At the HEI level, this process was to be led by a newly formed University Research Grant Committee (URGC) headed by the university Rector or Department Head. The vision called for the URGC to do a pre-screening at the HEI level to select its most promising applications, then forward it to the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE). If short-listed, the URGC would help the research team to elaborate the proposal in various ways, including spelling out university contribution. The minimum threshold for university financial commitment was 5% of total funds requested, but this could be paid in kind (electricity, water, equipment usage, motor vehicles, and petrol receipts). These three conditions – proposal, formation of the URGC, and 5% contribution – were the only official requirements for universities to apply for and receive a DIG.

For those awarded a DIG (each called ‘sub-projects’), work needed to begin immediately given the short-time frame of 18–24 months (later sub-project teams would be allowed to officially request 6 months extensions if needed). Universities would receive, after opening a commercial bank account, an initial 5% of their total grant. This would be for petty cash and start-up costs. Subsequent funding would be dependent on completion and approval of a more detailed Financial Plan and, most importantly, a
Procurement Plan. The Operations Manual emphasised that although the money would be channelled through the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE), procurement had to be ‘carried out in accordance with the World Bank procurement guidelines’ (MoEYS-DHE 2011, 14).

These World Bank-turned-Ministry guidelines laid out in extensive detail the different procedures needed to procure goods, works, consultants, and so on. All sub-projects procurement requests would be submitted to the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) for screening and approval according to a standardised format, but before any money could be released, the DHE would first need to obtain a Non-Objection Letter (NOL) from the World Bank. For their part, the HEIs were obligated to ‘each nominate and assign at least two staff with relevant qualifications as the focal point for their respective procurement and training by the international consultant under the project’ (MoEYS-DHE 2011).

In terms of technical (i.e. academic) support, the Bank vision was that the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) would take the lead. It would ‘oversee on-going Sub-projects’ implementation and field supervision to monitor activities’ (World Bank 2010). Few additional details were provided. Apparently, this was because the process of revising the proposals was viewed as the chief and only academic (‘technical’) input of the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE). Once the assigned Ministry team approved the best proposals, the lead researchers within universities were envisaged as taking over, autonomously carrying out their research. In Bangladesh, where the focus was primarily on resource acquisition, this meant that the national grant management agency – UGC – had little role beyond merely disbursing necessary funds and following up on quarterly ‘progress reports’. The idea was that in Cambodia, the project would also be virtually self-functioning once the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) selected the best grant applications.

In November 2010, the first-round selections of DIGs were finalised by the Ministry according to this plan and work began at HEIs from January 2011. This represented the first time ever that research money from the government had been given to Cambodian universities. The Bank hailed it as an inspiring new era for Cambodian higher education, the first step for Cambodia into the new global knowledge economy.

V. Policy failure: PhDs, procurement, context, and blame

The problems with the DIG scheme were apparent right from the outset. Myriad small logistical problems arose, as they arguably do for any new project. These are not our focus here. Instead, we critically analyse those problems that erupted from a much deeper level: the incongruence between the Bank’s policy vision, its assumptions about ‘context’, and the actual Cambodian context. For succinctness, we restrict the analysis to the issues of PhDs and procurement, as these two domains most illuminate our larger argument about the interrelationship between ‘context’, context, and blame. Given additional length, we could have added another 3–4 major issues that confirm the general conceptual scheme we describe above but we must leave those to future work.

1. Failure 1: lack of PhDs

Two months after the initial call for proposals went out in September 2010, the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) encountered a major problem: low overall interest and very few initial
proposal submissions. In fact, the DHE had received only a handful of applications by late October 2010 and the quality was deemed poor – mostly proposals to carry out, say, awareness-raising campaigns about climate change or build new fish ponds (aquaculture) in 100 poor rural villages to increase caloric intake. The proposals were not research, but more ‘classic’ development-style implementation projects. It seemed the HEIs had misunderstood the purpose of the programme. Initially, it was posited that perhaps as a result of so many years being told what to do by foreign development agencies, researchers were afraid to ‘think for themselves’. Upon follow-up consultations within universities, however, the problem was recognised as far more severe: few HEIs had any idea what research meant, let alone how to construct multi-year research projects with large amounts of funds (USD 50,000 dollars was a very substantial amount of money in resource-poor Cambodia).

The Ministry thus scrambled to provide workshops to explain what research was and how to write grant proposals and, in the process, formulate ‘viable’ projects. To do so, it flew in scholars – at the behest of the Bank – from American universities successful in grant writing. Unfortunately, these American consultants had never been to Cambodia and were completely removed from the concerns of the participants: they focused on how to land major multi-million dollar grants from US-based agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Participants were bewildered, not the least because these events were carried out in English.

Subsequent, simpler workshops were led by the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) Chief Technical Advisor, an Australian national who had formerly worked at an Australian university, that focused on explaining the basics, such as how to fill out the English-language DIG application form. That is, what HEIs should write on standard applications that said, for example, ‘Summarize the research methodologies, outputs, and outcomes to be delivered by the Project (Maximum 350 words)’. This terminology of ‘outputs’ and ‘outcomes’ was, we note, borrowed directly from the Bank’s universal Results Chain framework, as a way of making later monitoring and reporting easier for those in the Bank’s Cambodia field office.

Despite such intensive work, the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) received fewer than 60 initial proposals. These came from just 22 institutions, 12 public, and 10 private, even though Cambodia had 97 universities at the time. Public universities made 47 proposals, with most coming from the faculties of the 3–4 leading universities in the country: the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Royal University of Agriculture (RUA), Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC), and the National University of Management (NUM). All of these universities were based in the capital Phnom Penh. In line with decentralisation priorities, the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) had introduced a quota system requiring that at least 25% of the DIGs be awarded to institutions outside Phnom Penh, meaning that virtually anyone applying from HEIs in the provinces was accepted, regardless of the quality of the proposal. Eventually, 31 projects were selected in the first round, a figure far below the 50 initially envisaged in the original Bank plan. Interested readers can find a list of all the projects in a public Stocktaking Report published by the Ministry in June 2015 entitled Development and Innovation Grants, Stocktaking Report 2015 (available online).

More disturbingly, despite the continuation of workshops and a belated media blitz calling for proposals, in the second year, the number of initial proposals submitted dropped to 30, made by just 19 universities. So low was the quality of these Second Round proposals that, in the end, only 14 grants were made to 13 institutions (10 in
Phnom Penh, three in the provinces). This was an even further cry from the 100 projects the Bank policy vision had called for in the second year. The Bank had envisaged rapid progress and uptake, but the reality was the opposite.

One would imagine that the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE), despite being forced to award grants to sub-standard proposals, would have followed up with intensive support to place the projects on stronger research fundamentals. Why it failed to do so is another vantage point from which to see the overall disconnect between the Bank policy vision and the Cambodian context. Put simply, there were very few PhDs in Cambodia, whether in the universities or in the Ministry itself. At the Ministry’s DHE, there was only one PhD holder. He served as the head of the Department of Scientific Research, but was quickly deemed by the Bank to be operationally incompetent (because his research was deemed to be too theoretical) and was thus not invited to take any part in HEQCIP implementation. About a year later, a young PhD holder from a leading university was asked to lead both Component 1 and Component 2 until a full-time hire could be made to oversee the DIGs, preferably someone holding a PhD and more knowledgeable about university research. This later hire – the second author of the current paper – was finally made in 2013 nearly three years after the project officially began.

Within universities, the situation was arguably only slightly better. Several universities did not have a single PhD holder on their entire faculty. Those who did hold a PhD were almost immediately promoted to Dean or Vice-Rector. A look at Cambodia’s very top institution is illustrative. The RUPP which received a total of 6 DIGs had, at the time HEQCIP was being designed around 2009, just 11 PhDs out of a total teaching staff of nearly 300 (Development Research Forum in Cambodia 2010) – just under 4%. Moreover, several of these PhD holders were actually non-Khmer foreigners, some who had left their jobs back home to try to contribute to Cambodian development. The Ministry later informally estimated that some 50% of the proposals for the DIGs had been written by foreigners working within or somehow connected to Cambodian universities (in at least three cases the grant proposal was sent out of the country, written entirely by a foreign friend/associate, then sent back and submitted to the Ministry).

The effects of the sheer lack of PhD holders for the success of the project cannot be overstated. Without the advanced research training that the PhD represents and certifies, the initial DIG proposals were of extremely low quality. Yet, without PhDs within the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) to screen, oversee, or later support the universities, those poor quality projects were selected and funded. Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) and Bank sponsored trainings utilising foreign consultants (such as the first author) did little, not simply because they were out of touch with local conditions and delivered in English, but because it is fundamentally impossible to teach ‘how to research’ in two or three short weekend sessions. A PhD takes, after all, a minimum of three or four years of intensive study; effectively managing a grant of USD 50,000–200,000 arguably takes even greater research and management skills.

This lack of understanding among universities about what research entailed became most obvious in the details of the budgets they proposed in the DIG application: HEI leaders rarely proposed allotting money to consultants to help them understand ‘research’. They simply did not know what they did not know. Indeed, without a trained, forward-looking PhD to lead each sub-project the entire policy vision imported from Bangladesh crumbled: Cambodian researchers were unsure what to ‘research’, few knew what
laboratory instruments they needed (i.e. what they did not have), or what books/resources either domestically or abroad would help them. They often did not even know what research question they were pursuing, let alone its significance on a global scale or how it was to produce ‘innovation’.

Instead, most of the sub-projects proposed spent their money on either (i) travelling abroad to investigate roughly similar projects or programmes in surrounding countries, or (ii) buying equipment that would allow them to offer a particular development ‘innovation’ to surrounding communities (i.e. buying materials for constructing fish ponds in rural villages (aquaculture); purchasing equipment to set up improved local cassava processing/storage facilities). In other words, there was no sign of rigorous research, let alone ‘innovation’. Unfortunately, some finance and procurement specialists in the Bank were quick to view the proposed use of funds as somehow sophisticated corruption schemes (‘they are just trying to use the money to travel abroad’), but many DIG holders legitimately thought this was what research was. More than any other single factor then, failure across all aspects of the DIG scheme was rooted in the lack of PhDs in the Cambodian system.

But what accounts for this lack of PhDs in Cambodian universities? How could the Bank have so misunderstood the context? Most readers will have already suspected that the decimation of the country’s intelligentsia under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) was the critical factor. To be sure, there were other factors that confront all low-income, previously colonised countries – disadvantages of language for non-Western students, stiff entry requirements to foreign universities, lack of surplus money and time, few domestic institutional opportunities – but none was as decisive as history for Cambodia. From the outset, the French colonial authorities had not invested seriously in education (including higher education). After independence in 1953, several modern universities emerged, most famously the Royal Khmer University in 1960 (now the RUPP). Enrolments rose and students began to seek higher degrees, both at home and abroad. Yet when the Khmer Rouge swept into Phnom Penh in April 1975, all universities and schools were shuttered or destroyed; the population was sent out to the countryside and subject to ‘re-education’. The already educated posed a particular problem and this became the primary target. The more educated, the more suspect. Research suggests that 75% of teachers, 96% of university students and 67% of all primary and secondary pupils were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime (Ayers 2000). University faculty, those with higher degrees or international experiences died in disproportionate numbers.

Although less than four years in duration, this period was ‘an era of almost incomprehensible social change, where aspects of Khmer cultural and economic life, which had developed over centuries, were totally ruptured’ (Ayers 2000, 95). Academic traditions arguably suffered the most from this ‘total rupture’: after the Khmer Rouge regime ended in 1979 and with virtually no one holding advanced degrees, who would train a new generation of university students, let alone Masters and PhD candidates? As the system was quickly put back together in the aftermath, the focus became teaching, not just because of the return to normalcy it projected, but because there were literally no more researchers alive. Overseas study (mostly to the Soviet Union in the 1980s) filled the gap in advanced ‘training’ to some degree, but this was not academic research and few had a chance to study beyond the Masters levels before being asked to return to Cambodia to take up leading positions in universities that were just getting back on their feet. The Khmer Rouge legacy continues to be everywhere evident to this day: almost everyone
over roughly 40 years of age lacks advanced degrees, although they hold leading academic posts; few universities offer PhD programmes because of lack of capacity; the focus of university life revolves almost entirely around teaching. This includes salary payments which are based solely on teaching load, as there is no precedent for research. As if to underscore these points, the Ministry had to hire the second author of this paper – a young man of 35 freshly back from PhD study in northern Europe – to lead the DIG scheme because it did not have any have any ‘capacity’ (read: personnel with capability) within the Ministry.

But again how could the Bank have so misunderstood this context? During two years of work inside the Bank offices in Phnom Penh, we came to understand that the Bank’s common contextual categories approach to understanding context was a major source of the problem. At the design stage, the Bank team paid virtually no attention to the specific features of Cambodia. The lead author of the current paper searched long and hard to find evidence that the Bank team (who completed their work three years before he had arrived) had actually undertaken a deeper study – one that might begin with ideal types but was augmented with ground-level empirical, interpretive–style research within the country. However, the search turned up nothing. None of his Bank colleagues who had been around at that time could recall original research being conducted at the project identification stage (i.e. design stage). Instead, with the Bangladesh AIF vision firmly in mind, the Bank team at that time applied a universal template comprising common categories to Cambodia. This allowed it to generate the obligatory, if cursory view of ‘context’ customary in Bank documents: an overview of macroeconomic indicators, gender and equity disparities, and then onto enrolment rates and projections.

In the only two paragraphs devoted to the ‘Historical Context of Higher Education Sub-Sector’ in the key project formulation document (PAD Section I.A.4 directly transposed to the Operations Manual Section 1.2) there is not a single mention, as we quoted already in full above, of the legacy of the Khmer Rouge period or its connection to the central issue of the dearth of PhD holders, its lasting consequences in the singular emphasis on teaching, or the lack of capacity for academic research. In fact, the only mention of the Khmer Rouge from the Bank comes in the far more general ‘Country Context’ section, that states tersely and disappointingly that:

In April 1975, after a five-year struggle, Communist Khmer Rouge forces captured Phnom Penh and evacuated all cities and towns. A December 1978 Vietnamese invasion drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside. (World Bank 2010, x)

Deduced from common contextual categories utilised inside the Bank, ‘context’ is quickly produced as a paper-thin and bland run-down of numbers and quantitative trends.

Here is where we can draw larger insights into lacunae emerging from the Bank’s way of ‘thinking’. The common contextual category of ‘university’, when applied to Cambodia, implicitly replaces realities on the ground with the Bank ideal of an institution, filled with PhD holders, and dedicating itself to teaching, research, and national development. It is a clear illustration of an observer ‘who naively substitut[e]s his own ideal types of those in the minds of this subject’ (Schütz [1932] 1967, 205). What is most striking is not that the Bank distorts interpretation of key contextual variables, but instead that it ignores them. Adopting a common contextual categories approach effectively means the Bank operates in a closed communicative system with no possibility that context (as opposed to ‘context’,
i.e. the paper-thin image of context generated out of common contextual categories and published in Bank documents) can influence its ‘thinking’, even as it never discovers its own errors. That something so widely known and deeply influential as the Khmer Rouge legacy could be ignored suggests just how blind the Bank can be.

2. Failure 2: procurement and personnel

While many DIG recipient universities continued struggling quietly to understand how to conduct and manage research, a far more explicit, immediate and burdensome problem they faced was procurement. This linked, in turn, to the issue of personnel, i.e. who would carry out the research and administration of the DIG funds. For those less familiar with donor finance jargon, procurement refers to the purchasing of goods, training, works, and so on needed to implement a given project. To prevent corruption and misuse of funds, donors frequently place numerous rules on procurement-related activities such as advertisement and bidding regulations, transparent selection procedures, receipts, and reporting, as well as what types of items money can be spent on. Depending on the country, the Bank applies different levels of stringency in procurement. In Cambodia, given the perception of endemic corruption and a high-profile fiasco in 2006 when the Bank froze three loans to protest against misappropriation of funds (Ear 2013, 45–47), Bank procurement regulations were among the most stringent anywhere in the World. This also meant that the regulations were the most complex. In the HECQIP project, it meant requiring the Ministry to clear every purchase with the Bank and receive the aforementioned NOL before it could release funds to the DIG holders. Importantly, these strict procurement procedures were in place before HECQIP project design began.

In Bangladesh procurement for AIF had reportedly posed few major problems. Why? One reason was higher levels of English at universities (all Bank procurement globally has to be done in English in case legal disputes arise), another was that Bank procurement regulations were less strict there. Yet, the decisive factor was that AIF grant money could be utilised to hire and pay salaries for full-time staff within the university, those who would work solely on finance and procurement. With the focus on resource acquisition, these full-time contract staff would need to create and clear one or two major procurement packages (e.g. lab equipment, computers, etc.) and then their duties would be complete. In other words, in Bangladesh part of the AIF grant money could be used to pay or supplement staff salaries for the extra work.

By contrast, the Cambodian DIG recipients were forbidden to utilise any of the money to pay staff who administered the DIG. This meant that Cambodian university administrators had to learn and execute highly complex Bank procurement procedures using English as a working language, in addition to their regular job duties. Keeping in mind that the DIGs were, on average, three to four times larger than the AIG grants in Bangladesh, applied completely foreign accounting rules, and involved sums far in excess of what most university administrators had ever handled before, this represented an exponential increase in work, but with no extra pay.

What was the origin of this problematic arrangement? Since the 1980s donors in Cambodia paid money (called ‘incentives’) for their Cambodian counterparts to administer and implement their projects. The logic was simple: no one would work for free to build schools, undergo training, or take on extra work needed for, say, awareness-raising
campaigns in a time when subsistence itself was a life-or-death struggle. Donor incentives were paid to both government and non-government staff alike. Yet, as the economy of Phnom Penh grew in the 1990s and more donors entered the field, there emerged an inflationary spiral for these services with donors paying more and more each year to keep up both with rising salaries in the capital and competing among themselves ‘to get the best people’. This raised donor project costs considerably. There were also serious concerns that these incentives fuelled more corruption as projects were selected by the Cambodian government not based on local need, but on how much money would come in the form of incentives. In Cambodia, as in so many places globally, these donor funds were the grease that kept the wheels of patronage rolling and a major source of ‘distortion’ of policy priorities.

Bank economists were aware of this, but conceptualised it more in terms of economic distortions created by government-style subsidies. That is, they thought that there were so many aid dollars flowing into Cambodia that it was distorting the entire labour market. For example, paying an upper-ranking Ministry bureaucrat USD 30 in per diem (daily allowance) to attend a donor workshop meant that in 10 days alone, he could match his modest government monthly salary of USD 300. Under such a system there were no serious incentives for the government to raise civil servant salaries and no connection between the USD 30 premium for working on donor projects and the ‘market rate’: the price tag was simply a reflection of how much donors were willing to pay to introduce their projects.

The Bank economists thus informed the Cambodian government around early 2010 that it would forbid any of its money to be used in the form of ‘incentives’ (i.e. payment for Cambodian civil servants to work on donor projects) and cajoled the Ministry of Finance and Economics (MEF) to make this a blanket rule applicable to all donors. The MEF complied because it rarely received such incentives (as it did not implement projects) and thought in similar economic/market terms. However, the decision upset many in other ministries who relied on ‘incentives’. The Bank’s unilateral action also upset other international donors. In response, ministries and other donors found various creative ways to get around the rule, recognising that it would be absurd and impossible to ask for participation in donor projects without giving any extra money. To this day, donors such as UNICEF, JICA, and the Asian Development Bank continue to pay these ‘incentives’. However, the Bank itself stuck to its own rule: no incentives would be paid for HEQCIP which was being designed in the same year the new ‘no incentive’ rule was promulgated. Although initially some of the Bank staff working on education recognised that this could hinder the HEQCIP project, they had little power to confront the economists in the Bank. In effect, this meant the Bank would be insisting that in HEQCIP Bank procurement – among the most stringent anywhere in the World – be carried out in universities by regular staff who could not be paid any extra money out of the DIG funds. They were asking for free labour.

Ultimately, it was this combination of complex procurement and this personnel-cum-incentive issue that constituted a second major reason for failure of the DIG scheme in Cambodia – a procedural failure. This came to dominate the project at all levels. As an illustration, take the case of one agricultural project in a small provincial university awarded a $166,000 grant. The lead researcher had a PhD and the project was one of the most academically well designed, allowing us to focus on the procurement-personnel-procedural
variable. The sub-project sought to research which combination of crop rotation would best replenish soil nutrients that were depleted by year-round mono-cropping of cassava by poor farmers. The researcher intended to use a standard randomised control block design and plant crops such as soy-beans, mung beans, maize at different intervals over the two-year project cycle, then pre-test and post-test key soil nutrients (potassium, nitrogen, and phosphorus).

Despite a straightforward research design, competence, and commitment, Bank procurement killed the project. Specifically, the researcher required a large amount of cow dung to fertilise the large test plots. This would cost upwards of USD 1000 (but less than 1% of total project costs). He had to purchase this in small batches from local farmers, as there were no commercial farms. Villagers did not issue receipts and most could not read the official bidding forms. Yet, Bank procurement rules stated that only for values under USD 50 paid out of petty cash were receipts unnecessary. However, only one item could be purchased in this way. As such, there was no way for the researcher to get the manure, but without it he could not start his research.

There was only one administrator at this small university. He spoke no English and his accounting skills were restricted to disbursing government funds to Department heads and collecting student fees. This forced the lead researcher himself, as sub-project manager, to make repeated trips to Phnom Penh (four hours one way if one could find a good vehicle) to try to find a solution and get his funds disbursed. As a result, the planting cycle was missed in the first year, meaning that the project had to wait one whole year to start again (given rainy season and seasonal flooding). By the end of Year 1 of the 24-month project, the researcher had only managed to spend $27,000 (16% of the budget). None of the university staff was paid incentives for their extra work. While the Ministry and Bank engaged in protracted discussions about how to procure manure legally, both the lead researcher and administrator eventually became disenchanted and just gave up on procuring manure and planted without it in the next season. When we personally visited the university, the entire three-hour discussion revolved around procurement and manure, not technical (i.e. research-related, academic) issues. When we finally visited the test plots outside, only a few sickly looking plants were sprouting up from the sandy and saline soil of the lower Mekong earth. Not ‘innovation’ then but failure.

More generally, without incentives and faced with the complexity of the Bank procurement process, the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) had to spend inordinate amounts of time traveling out to train staff at DIG institutions. In the first year of the project, even the Ministry itself did not fully understand the Bank procedures: nearly all requests were denied via the withholding of the Bank NOL. Meanwhile, the Bank staff who handled the requests were finance and procurement specialists with no understanding of scholarly research. When they saw requests for USD 1000 manure and no receipts, for example, they immediately presumed it was a corruption scheme. Eventually, more than 70% of the university staff designated by their institutions to handle DIG procurement quit, both in silent protest and out of fear that they would be held legally responsible for mismanagement of funds. Their replacements had to be retrained by the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) staff, severely overstretching the Ministry; they had, it must be remembered, other duties in the Ministry and were not being paid for the additional work.
Nevertheless as it became clear that the DIG scheme was failing, the Bank strongly criti-
cised the Ministry for not working hard enough to support the institutions. Those inside
the Bank seemed unable to recognise that it had created these problems, an illustration of
contextual transcendence that cleanly removed the Bank from the possible list of variables
for project failure. As a consequence, the ‘mistakes’ of the Ministry staff and university
researchers were identified as the source of failure.6

VI. Conclusion: from failure to blame, then back to infallibility and faith

The Bank’s legitimacy depends on the authority of its views; like the Vatican, and for similar
reasons, it cannot admit fallibility. (Wade1996, 34–35)

This paper has described and critically analysed a relatively novel World Bank project
design and aid modality to higher education, as implemented in Cambodia from 2010–
2015/2016. In providing research grants directly to universities in low-income countries,
the Bank has sought to prepare countries for its vision of a new ‘global knowledge
economy’. From a policy vision first outlined in Constructing Knowledge Societies (2002),
the Bank operationalised its vision in the AIF in Bangladesh around 2008, then exported
that model to Cambodia in 2010. Despite the Bank’s ambitious global vision and millions
of dollars mobilised to realise it, an inside look reveals the Bank’s efforts failed to produce
research, let alone ‘innovation’.

In addition to relating these empirical details, we have sought to spotlight an issue that
extends far beyond any single Bank project or novel aid modality: how the Bank concep-
tualises context, the problems embedded therein, and the failures-turned-consequences
that result. To complement a growing body of critical academic work on the Bank, we
sought to advance a largely unique argument: given the way the Bank ‘thinks’ context,
it is prone to miss even the most significant of contextual variables, but given the Bank
cannot see its own participation in the policy environment, it inevitably must blame
failure on the recipient country. The result is that the Bank emerges with its paradigms
and self-image unscathed because it fails to recognise its own errors. Put in a slightly
more nuanced way, the field offices who write loans according to ‘contextual’ needs
emerge unscathed, thus inevitably Washington does as well since headquarters already
knew so little about context. In conclusion, we now summarise and elaborate this larger
argument more explicitly. As touched upon in the introduction, we emphasise that
rather than merely ideological fundamentalism, we found that the triad of blame, infallibil-
ity, and faith constitute the chief obstacles preventing those inside the Bank from chan-
ging how the world’s most powerful development institution ‘thinks’.

Before doing so, however, we feel compelled to pause briefly to answer some potential
objections to our critique. Here, those sympathetic to Bank policy preferences would prob-
ably object that every project, but especially those experimenting with a new aid modality,
faces obstacles, snags, and wrinkles, but the learning that takes place is part of progress
itself. ‘One needs to start somewhere, right?’ would be the casual reply. Indeed, we
heard this numerous times in Phnom Penh. We would agree that international support
is possible and work must inevitably ‘start somewhere’. But we would suggest a more
modest, long-term strategy, and – more than anything else – one grounded in the realities
of the context. For example, why not spend the USD 4.58 million to fund young, promising
Cambodian researchers at leading universities already holding Masters degrees to complete their PhD studies? Why not implement a post-doctoral scheme to give promising PhD holders time for research, thus helping to rebuild the Cambodia intelligentsia and professoriate, the intellectual core of higher education? Why not spend a substantial amount of project money to create a national forum for Cambodian leading researchers to think about their own priorities for higher education reform, rather than flying in Bank consultants to set these priorities for them? Instead of linking Cambodia to the ‘global knowledge economy’, why not provide funds for fully thinking through the lasting destruction of the Khmer Rouge period, a decade of civil war following the Khmer Rouge, and – more boldly – the impact that billions of dollars of foreign aid money has had on the policies, priorities, and perspectives within the country?

Moreover, if truly committed, why not unhook university research projects from Bank finance, procurement, and operations guidelines? University research never moves in a linear fashion from Point A to Point B as accountants might envisage. ‘Innovation’ does not unfold like planned development. It is indeed ironic that the Bank has long been averse to planning, but through finance and procurement protocols ensures even new modalities explicitly aimed at innovation unfold as planned. ‘Development and innovation’ make strange bedfellows. Our recommendations for improvement would instead centre on taking an inductive approach that would let Cambodians answer the question of where the needs and future lies.

We must also recognise that not all of the individual DIG projects were failures. There was indeed some ‘successful’ research conducted. In fact, at the close of the scheme in November 2015, nine projects were officially recognised with awards. Inside the Bank these projects have been featured in various forums to make the case the DIG scheme was an overall success. Yet, the awards scheme, which the two current authors personally designed, was mostly an incentive scheme for projects to finish by the deadline. It was based mostly on the criteria of (i) completing on time and (ii) spending the fully allotted amount. The number of awards was set in advance, so it was relative success within the 45 projects, a point on which the Bank remains silent. Moreover, the truly academically successful projects (we estimate just three), only bolster our overall case: these projects started with trained PhDs and/or had full-time procurement specialists assigned to the project, paid by their universities.

Returning to our larger argument, while many scholars are still concerned about contextual clichés still haunting the Bank, we suggest that only by looking at the Bank’s approach to context at a deeper level can we locate the roots of policy failures. To date, understanding this deeper, basic grammar of how the World Bank ‘thinks’ has not been a major target of scholarly critique in educational research. To renew critical research along these lines, we are arguing that the common contextual categories approach is the origin of policy failure, while contextual transcendence transforms that failure into blame. Common contextual categories generate contexts by deducing from a common set of ideal-type indicators that never really capture anything except the observer’s preconceptions. This allows even the biggest contextual factors, even something as conspicuous as the lasting impact of the Khmer Rouge on Cambodian higher education, to be missed. If that tragedy can go undetected, it is not hard to imagine that virtually anything can. As we highlighted at the outset, social science researchers have long critiqued this
ideal-approach approach as inherently flawed and even dangerous because, as Schütz warns us, it blinds us to the very errors it generates.

Contextual transcendence derives, in large part, from the fact that the common contextual categories never include the ways that the Bank itself influences context. Examples we reviewed above included the stringency of Bank procurement regulations or how Bank rules made it necessary that Cambodian researchers would essentially work for free. These regulations and rules were simply objective ‘givens’ in the Bank worldview. There was no serious thought given to the fact that such measures might make certain project designs impossible. As such, everything else except the Bank becomes a variable in understanding failure, i.e. everything Cambodian. When this view is the starting point, it inevitably leads to blame. For example, the lack of PhD holders became a failure at the Ministry (MoEYS-DHE) to provide enough technical support or workshops in training methods, not a problem created by original project design. The failure to navigate procurement became a failure of commitment among university leadership and the Ministry in their duty to conduct training and support in procurement. Failed procurement was not viewed as the result of a fundamental contradiction between Bank economists and human development specialists, i.e. a problem on the Bank side.

When the second author who led the DIG scheme protested that all of the training and procurement was taking up too much Ministry staff time (after all, they still had all their other duties), the World Bank repeatedly argued that the Ministry staff were ‘negligent in their duties’ and implicitly punished them by taking away the few ‘incentives’ that still existed in the fine details of the projects – overseas ‘capacity building’ trips, planning retreats by the seaside, and so on. Sceptics might question whether we are too generous to the Cambodian side, but in the lead author’s two years working alongside the Ministry and universities it was clear that most of the Cambodians were trying to do what they could, whilst behind closed doors those in the Bank offices often portrayed them as incompetent, uncommitted and – occasionally – ‘corrupt’. This is certainly not to deny corruption exists in Cambodia (Brehm 2018), but to emphasise that often the label is used to explain away deeper structural problems, in this case project design flaws.

What is more disconcerting is that, if we step back for a moment, all this signifies that there is no obvious entry point for fundamentally reforming the Bank’s ‘thinking’. As we have seen, the Bank seems to pay no attention to (or ignores) rich scholarly work on how to understand (educational) context, either in the specific case of Cambodia or more generally along the methodological lines of social science already discussed. In parallel, the Bank operates in an organisational culture that is unable to recognise its own past mistakes and failures in the field because these are transformed to blame the instant these become visible. Our conclusion then, one borne from inside experience, is that currently the institution thus appears wholly incapable of learning. This is an unexpected diagnosis for the ‘Global Knowledge Bank’, which seeks to lead the World in higher learning, research, and innovation.

But if the Bank fails to account for either scholarly research on context, contextual specificities themselves, or reflection on past policy failures, we must question what then is driving Bank policy visions and project design? Here we invite readers to contemplate whether the concepts of faith and infallibility might be useful concepts to move future analysis to a deeper understanding of the enduring quasi-religious character of the whole enterprise (Rappleye 2018; Rist 1997). Our experiences suggest to us that what is
driving Bank policy visions and project designs is actually faith: a faith within the Bank of its own infallibility driven by a larger faith in the general logic of 'development'. Faith signifying such a strong belief, one bordering on a fundamentalist religious dogma (for us, actually derived from it), that is so powerful as to believe it is able to actually enact reality.

Inside the Bank, particularly within the Human Development Sector and in the field offices, we encountered many staff members who explicitly disavowed both neo-liberal fundamentalism and its recent derivatives. Many could see through, albeit to greater and lesser degrees, its ideological character. The reason they continued working at the Bank nonetheless was that they viewed 'development' as an unquestioned good. Even if there were obstacles, snags, and wrinkles, the fight, they would sometimes passionately argue in response to our continual concerns about the failing project, is always worth it and always right.

But these staff members unwittingly always placed 'development' policies on nomothetic, nomological premises. That is, the fundamental grammar of thought was that there must be one correct answer ('best practice'), applicable the World over, at all times. Such a view is precisely what makes the Bank's deductive approach possible. The crusade to first find, then implement this trans-historical 'law' was the driving motivation and key goal we encountered repeatedly inside the Bank. Here we are gesturing towards an alternative to the political-economy explanation for understanding the dominance of economics and economists in the Human Development Sector of the Bank: it is the social science discipline that comes closest to laying claim to being a nomothetic discipline (by virtue of the Law of Supply and Demand). Instead of a neo-liberal political takeover then, the preponderance of economists at the Bank is the manifestation of a whole culture of nomothetic thought.

What replaces the openness to external stimuli and learning for the Bank then is a belief in the existence of the Good, one possessing divine-like qualities in its constancy, infallibility, and absolute character. Instead of Weber's iterative advance towards Verstehen, the Bank looks 'up there'. Instead of negotiating the complexities generated by a constantly moving reality and the static constructions of thought, the Bank averts its eyes from history and fixes them firmly on 'the future'. But when Truth is already 'up there' not 'out there', the Bank's tremendous investments in generating global data are rendered meaningless by the nomothetic categories these are contained within.

To the degree that our diagnosis of an incurable religious worldview holds, our ultimate conclusions can only be even more pessimistic. To preserve this religious outlook, context – empirical realities – cannot simply be ignored but must be actively rewritten to conform to the Vision. This is what we mean by enacting reality. It all the more disconcerting to find the Bank still 'cannot admit fallibility' (Wade 1996, 34) given its efforts to promote the image of Knowledge Bank and the Global Knowledge Economy, and even after the policy failures of the 1980s (see Weaver 2008).

In the end, what we are arguing is perhaps less a problem of openly admitting problems, more one of seeing where they come from in the first place. This blindness is why development failures, such as the DIG scheme, can only be met with more 'development' and acceleration of the status-quo, not with self-reflection, learning, and paradigm shift. In this sense, it is not simply that no amount of scholarly evidence, argumentation, or empirical evidence can change the Bank, it is that the Bank will eventually need to change all of these to secure its worldview. As concerned scholars, we must then ask ourselves:
what avenues are still open to us to change the course of the world’s most powerful ‘development’ institution? And for how long, as the World Bank now aims to change higher education itself as part of its on-going enactment of the Global Knowledge Economy?

Notes

1. The DIG scheme was extended until December 2016 owing to the fact that the majority of projects could neither finish their research on time nor spend their allotted money. The reasons for this are outlined in this article.

2. For simplicity, throughout this paper we refer to the ‘Ministry’; however, the more accurate term is the Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE or simply DHE, to use Bank shorthand). The DHE was the implementing agency of the HEQCIP project. In Cambodia, the DHE is not under complete control of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) as many HEIs are under the jurisdiction of other Ministries, a legacy of Soviet-era organisation of ‘staff colleges’ that would supply government functionaries (cadres). These details do not need to concern us here, but we do retain the somewhat long-winded abbreviation ‘MoEYS-DHE’ when referring to the Ministry to keep that distinction clear for readers interested in the specific details of the Cambodian context.

3. At times when it could be otherwise unclear, we put the word context into single quotes to draw a distinction between the World Bank’s narrow portrayals of ‘context’, as distinct from the wider, more complex socio-historical and institutional realities of Cambodia one experiences in the field. The distinction is a necessary one for advancing our argument, particularly in conclusion.

4. There is some evidence to suggest that antecedents to this programme can be found in Chile and Argentina, drawing off examples from the UK (see Marquis, 2000). It seems plausible that the movement of the model from Latin America to ‘East Asia and the Pacific’ coincided with the arrival of a new sector manager from Latin America. The arrival of other programmes of Latin American origin such as Escuela Nueva in Vietnam around the same time would support this view. To the degree this is true, it supports what Steiner-Khamsi (2004) has previously called the ‘Maris O’ Rourke Effect’.

5. Note that we are not claiming that the AIF in Bangladesh was a ‘success’. A personal visit sponsored by the World Bank by the second author to Bangladesh raised numerous concerns, although these did not feature in an official World Bank record of the trip (see World Bank 2014). We simply aim to highlight that from the way the Bank understood context, the project was designed in a way that ‘made more sense’ as compared with the Cambodian case. Future research should follow-up on HEQEP. One reviewer asked us if it was ‘simply luck’ that HEQEP made more sense for Bangladesh. It is an important question, but one that we cannot answer without a deeper understanding of Bangladesh and that project. We are here trying to avoid replicating the type of thinking that prevails in the Bank: making claims about context based on experiences elsewhere, although we feel it necessary to give a cursory sketch of differences to show contrast with Cambodia.

6. We note that a similar pattern has been identified in recent research on organisations such as the OECD and McKinsey, whose education work increasingly overlaps with that of the World Bank (Auld and Morris 2016)

7. For complementary critiques see Klees and Edwards (2014), Verger, Edwards, and Altinyekan (2014), Heyneman (2003), and Jones (2007). Outside of the field of education, see also Broad (2006) and Wade (1996). At risk of overgeneralisation, these critiques mostly focus on ideology and the material ways/means through which a paradigm is maintained. In other words, elaborating ideology and materialist/realist dimensions. These are indeed important. In contrast, our work emphasises the deeper structures of thought (perhaps one might say cultural) and the approaches these generate, in particular: a deductive approach, nomothetic assumptions, and an ontological premise of material objectivity, as elaborated below. For further discussion readers may refer to Rappleye and Komatsu (2017).
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Jeremy Rappleye is Associate Professor at Kyoto University, Graduate School of Education and a member of the Hakubi Project, a special research fellowship provided by Kyoto University. His research on the ‘developing’ world has focused on issues of policy transfer, conflict and education, and theories of the development. He has published mostly on Nepal, including a special issues of Globalisation, Societies, & Education entitled ‘Education Reform in Nepal: From Modernity to Conflict’ (with Stephen Carney, 2011) and a chapter entitled ‘Different Presumptions about Progress, Different Prescriptions for Peace: Connections Between Conflict, “development”, and Education in Nepal’ (in a volume edited by Julia Paulson, 2011). He worked as a Short Term Consultant (STC) for the World Bank between 2013 and 2015.

Leang Un was educated in Cambodia, the Philippines and the Netherlands. Upon completion of his PhD, he served in the graduate programme in education at Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and was technical adviser to Action Aid, Cambodia and the World Bank. In 2013, he was appointed as Deputy Director of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. In 2015, he was promoted to Deputy Director General, Directorate General of Policy and Planning – the chief educational policy planning organisation of the country. In 2016, he stepped down and returned to RUPP. He is currently Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at RUPP. His research interests and publications focus on education policy and its contribution to development, particularly the consequences of donor discourses on heavily aid-dependent countries such as Cambodia.

References

Easterly, W. 2006. The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good. London: Oxford University Press.


