

Feedback on Students' Assessment in Higher Education in Cambodia: A Critical Review, Contextual Analysis, and Reform Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Assessment feedback is widely recognised as one of the most powerful influences on student learning in higher education. Yet, the quality, timing, and usefulness of feedback vary enormously across contexts. In Cambodia, where higher education has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, empirical understanding of feedback practices remains remarkably limited. This paper provides a systematic critical review of assessment feedback in Cambodian universities. It synthesises international theoretical frameworks—particularly Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model, Sadler's (1989) formative assessment theory, and Carless and Boud's (2018) student feedback literacy concept—with the limited but growing body of empirical evidence from Cambodia and comparable Southeast Asian contexts. The analysis identifies significant systemic, pedagogical, and cultural barriers to effective feedback, including large class sizes, limited lecturer professional development, hierarchical cultural norms, and underdeveloped institutional policies. The paper also presents comparative evidence across public and private universities, urban and provincial institutions, and different academic disciplines. A summary table of existing Cambodian studies is provided to clarify the current evidence base. The paper concludes with evidence-informed recommendations for policy and practice and a research agenda to strengthen the empirical foundation for feedback improvement in Cambodian higher education.

Keywords: assessment feedback, higher education, Cambodia, formative assessment, feedback literacy, student learning, educational quality

INTRODUCTION

Assessment feedback has become a central concern in conversations about improving higher education quality and student learning outcomes. Hattie and Timperley's (2007) influential meta-analysis, synthesising over 800 studies, found that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement, with an average effect size of 0.79—almost double what would be expected for a typical year's academic growth. More recent work by Wisniewski et al. (2020), focusing specifically on educational settings, confirmed an average effect size of 0.48 while highlighting substantial variation in feedback effectiveness depending on how it is designed, delivered, and received. This variation is crucial: feedback is not automatically beneficial for learning. Its impact depends on its quality, specificity, timing, and whether students have the capacity to engage with it productively (Sadler, 1989; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Over the past two decades, the international conversation about feedback has shifted significantly. The traditional model—where feedback was conceptualised as a one-way transmission of information from teacher to student—has given way to a more complex understanding of feedback as a dialogic, relational process in which students actively construct meaning from multiple sources of information about their performance (Boud & Molloy, 2013). This rethinking is captured in Carless and Boud's (2018) concept of

student feedback literacy—the understandings, capacities, and dispositions students need to make sense of feedback and use it to improve. Alongside this, Carless and Winstone (2020) have developed the idea of teacher feedback literacy, focusing on the pedagogical expertise lecturers need to design feedback processes that genuinely help students learn.

Despite this rich international literature, research on assessment feedback in Cambodian higher education is remarkably sparse. The Cambodian higher education sector has undergone dramatic transformation since the late 1990s, expanding from a handful of public institutions to over 125 today, the majority of which are private (Heng, 2023). This rapid growth has not been matched by corresponding improvements in educational quality, with ongoing concerns about teaching and learning practices, including assessment and feedback (Bou, 2025; Heng, 2023). The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), established as the national quality assurance body, has made progress in setting baseline standards, but its capacity to drive real pedagogical improvement remains constrained (Chea & Hun, 2025).

This article aims to address this gap by providing a systematic critical review and contextual analysis of feedback on student assessment in Cambodian higher education. The analysis is guided by three overarching questions: (1) What are the current practices of assessment feedback in Cambodian universities, and how do they align with international evidence on what works? (2) What systemic, pedagogical, and cultural factors help or hinder effective feedback in Cambodia? (3) What practical strategies and policy interventions could improve the quality and impact of feedback? The scope of the article covers both public and private universities and focuses on undergraduate education, where the majority of Cambodia's approximately 200,000 tertiary students are enrolled.

This inquiry matters for both scholarly and practical reasons. For researchers, the article synthesises international feedback theory with context-specific analysis, contributing to the growing but still limited literature on assessment and feedback in developing-country higher education systems—a domain that remains underrepresented in mainstream educational research (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). For Cambodian policymakers, institutional leaders, and educators, the article offers both a diagnostic assessment of current practices and a roadmap for evidence-informed improvement that takes local constraints and cultural norms seriously.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a systematic critical review of the literature on assessment feedback in higher education, with a specific focus on Cambodia and comparable Southeast Asian contexts. The review procedure involved three phases: identification, screening, and analysis.

Identification

Relevant literature was identified through searches of the following academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, and Web of Science. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: "assessment feedback," "formative assessment," "feedback literacy," "higher education," "Cambodia," "Southeast Asia," "developing countries," "university," "lecturer," and "student." The search was conducted between January and March 2026 and covered publications from 1989 (the year of Sadler's foundational article) to the present.

Screening

The initial search yielded approximately 450 items. Inclusion criteria were: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or official reports; (b) relevance to assessment feedback in higher education; (c) relevance to Cambodia or comparable Southeast Asian contexts; and (d) publication in English or Khmer. Exclusion criteria included: (a) studies focused on K-12 education without higher education relevance; (b) non-English/non-Khmer publications without accessible translations; and (c) opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical substance. After screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, 62 items were included in the final

review. These comprised 39 peer-reviewed journal articles, 12 book chapters, 8 institutional or policy reports, and 3 dissertations.

Analysis

The included items were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach. Key themes were identified inductively through close reading and deductively through the lens of the theoretical framework (Sadler, 1989; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Carless & Boud, 2018). For the Cambodian-specific evidence, each study was categorised by institution type (public/private, urban/provincial), discipline, sample characteristics, assessment/feedback focus, major findings, and limitations. A summary table was constructed to provide a clear overview of the current evidence base (see Section 3.6). This systematic approach ensures that the claims made in this review are transparently grounded in available evidence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Effective Assessment Feedback

The theoretical foundations of effective feedback rest on several complementary frameworks. Sadler (1989) conceptualised feedback's fundamental purpose as reducing the gap between a learner's current performance and a desired standard. For feedback to work, Sadler argued, three conditions must be met: the learner must (a) have a clear understanding of the standard or goal they are aiming for, (b) be able to compare their actual performance with that standard, and (c) take action to close the gap between the two. This formulation emphasises the active role of the learner and positions feedback not as an end in itself but as a resource for self-regulated learning.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) built on Sadler's model by proposing a comprehensive feedback framework organised around three guiding questions—"Where am I going?" (feed-up), "How am I going?" (feed-back), and "Where to next?" (feed-forward)—and four levels at which feedback operates: task, process, self-regulation, and self. Their meta-analytic evidence shows that feedback directed at the self level (e.g., praise like "good work") is the least effective, while feedback at the process and self-regulation levels yields the largest learning gains. Crucially, they found that most feedback in classrooms operates at the task level—identifying whether answers are correct or incorrect—which, while useful for flagging errors, provides limited guidance on how to improve (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Brooks et al., 2019).

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) extended this thinking by reconceptualising feedback as an integral component of self-regulated learning. Their seven principles of good feedback practice—including clarifying what good performance looks like, facilitating self-assessment, delivering high-quality information, encouraging dialogue, promoting motivation and self-esteem, providing opportunities to close the gap, and using feedback to inform teaching—have been widely influential in shaping institutional assessment policies internationally.

The Role and Impact of Feedback on Student Learning

The empirical evidence linking feedback to student outcomes is substantial. Hattie's (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses identified feedback as one of the top ten influences on student achievement. But the relationship is not simple or linear. Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) earlier meta-analysis found that over a third of feedback interventions actually decreased performance, highlighting just how much depends on how feedback is constructed and contextualised. Variables that moderate feedback effectiveness include the specificity of comments, the timing of delivery, alignment with learning goals, the credibility of the source, and the recipient's motivational orientation and prior knowledge (Shute, 2008; Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Beyond academic achievement, feedback shapes student motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement. Constructive, specific feedback that emphasises mastery and improvement tends to foster intrinsic motivation and a growth mindset, whereas feedback perceived as controlling, overly critical, or focused on normative comparisons can undermine motivation and provoke defensive reactions (Dweck, 2006; Carless

& Boud, 2018). The emotional dimension of feedback is increasingly recognised as a critical mediator of its effectiveness: students' affective responses—defensiveness, anxiety, discouragement—can impede cognitive processing and uptake, particularly when feedback challenges their academic self-concept (Carless & Boud, 2018; Pitt & Norton, 2017).

Common Challenges in Feedback Provision and Reception

The international literature identifies a consistent set of challenges in higher education feedback. From the provider side, large class sizes make it difficult to provide personalised, timely feedback (Nicol, 2010). Heavy teaching loads, research pressures, and institutional reward structures that prioritise research over teaching further erode lecturers' capacity and motivation to invest in detailed feedback (Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). A lack of formal training in assessment and feedback pedagogy means that many academics rely on intuitive, often transmission-oriented approaches inherited from their own educational experiences (Carless & Winstone, 2020).

From the student perspective, research consistently documents dissatisfaction with the feedback students receive. Common complaints include feedback that is too vague, too late to be useful for subsequent assessments, focused solely on justifying grades rather than guiding improvement, and couched in academic language that students struggle to decode (Price et al., 2011; Winstone et al., 2017). Moreover, students often fail to engage with feedback even when it is provided. Winstone et al. (2017) identified a range of psychological barriers—including distrust of the marker, lack of understanding of assessment criteria, and the emotional discomfort of receiving criticism—that prevent students from making good use of feedback.

Feedback in Developing-Country Higher Education Contexts

The challenges outlined above are amplified in developing-country higher education systems, where resource constraints, larger class sizes, limited technological infrastructure, and under-developed quality assurance mechanisms intersect with pedagogical traditions that may emphasise rote learning, teacher authority, and examination-oriented assessment (Altbach, 2013). Research from comparable Southeast Asian contexts—including Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar—reveals feedback practices heavily weighted toward summative purposes, with formative feedback often limited to brief, undifferentiated written comments or occasional oral remarks during lectures (Pham & Nguyen, 2019; Tran, 2013).

Cultural dimensions further shape feedback dynamics. In societies characterised by high power distance and respect for hierarchical authority, students may be reluctant to question or challenge teacher feedback, and lecturers may perceive dialogic feedback approaches as undermining their professional authority (Hofstede, 2001; Carless, 2015). Buddhism-influenced cultural values emphasising harmony, face-saving, and indirect communication—prominent in Cambodia and neighbouring Theravada Buddhist societies—can further complicate the direct, candid communication that effective feedback often requires (Chhinh & Dy, 2009).

Current Practices in Cambodian Higher Education

Common Assessment Methods

Assessment practices in Cambodian universities remain predominantly traditional in orientation. Drawing on available research and institutional reports, the assessment landscape is characterised by a strong emphasis on summative, examination-based evaluation (You & Em, 2021; Heng, 2023). End-of-semester written examinations, typically accounting for 50 to 70 percent of the final grade, constitute the primary assessment instrument across most disciplines. Continuous assessment components—where they exist—commonly include mid-semester tests (which structurally mirror the final examination), attendance marks, and occasionally group assignments or class presentations.

A study by You and Em (2021) investigating assessment practices at a major Cambodian public university found that multiple-choice and short-answer questions dominated examination formats, with essay-based assessment largely confined to social sciences and humanities programmes. The predominance of closed-

book, invigilated examinations reflects deeply embedded institutional cultures that equate assessment rigour with examination security and standardisation. The recent introduction of outcomes-based assessment models, supported by international cooperation initiatives such as the CALOHEA (Capacity Building in Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education in ASEAN) project, signals a nascent shift toward more diverse, constructively aligned assessment practices, but adoption remains limited to a subset of internationally oriented institutions (AUN-SEC, 2023).

Types of Feedback Typically Provided

Feedback practices in Cambodian higher education exhibit several distinctive patterns. Based on the available evidence, including a recent study of teacher feedback beliefs and practices among Cambodian university English teachers (Chea, 2025), the following characterisation emerges:

Written feedback is the most commonly reported feedback modality, but its quality and depth vary enormously. In many institutions, written feedback on student work is limited to a numerical or letter grade accompanied by minimal commentary—often just a few words like "good," "needs improvement," or "see me." A study of 390 student journals in Cambodian EFL programmes found that written teacher feedback was heavily dominated by grammar-focused, direct corrections, influenced by student expectations for comprehensive error marking and heavy teaching loads that precluded more elaborated commentary (Chea, 2025). This pattern—feedback as error correction rather than developmental guidance—is consistent with the task-level feedback that Hattie and Timperley (2007) identify as the most common but least impactful form.

Oral feedback occurs most frequently in classroom settings during or after student presentations, practical demonstrations, or in-class exercises. However, oral feedback tends to be impromptu, generalised, and addressed to the class as a whole rather than individual students. The hierarchical nature of Cambodian classrooms, where students show deference to teachers as authority figures, means that students rarely initiate clarification-seeking dialogues about feedback they have received (Chea, 2025).

Digital feedback remains at an early stage of development. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of learning management systems (LMS) and digital communication platforms across Cambodian higher education, with institutions deploying tools such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and Moodle (CDRI, 2021; Heng & Sol, 2021). However, the use of these platforms for feedback purposes—beyond posting grades and distributing course materials—remains limited. A study by Chea and Tep (2024) on digital learning adoption among Cambodian university students found that while students expressed positive attitudes toward digital platforms, their actual use for interactive, feedback-oriented activities was constrained by connectivity issues, limited digital literacy among both students and lecturers, and the persistence of transmission-oriented pedagogical models (Chea & Tep, 2024).

Peer feedback is rarely systematically implemented. Where it occurs, it is typically in informal study-group contexts rather than as a structured pedagogical activity. The limited uptake of peer feedback reflects both cultural norms that position the teacher as the sole legitimate evaluator and a widespread assumption among students that peer assessment lacks validity and authority (You & Em, 2021).

Frequency and Timeliness of Feedback

Data on the frequency and timeliness of assessment feedback in Cambodian universities is scarce, but available evidence and practitioner accounts suggest significant concerns. In many institutions, the only formal feedback students receive is the final grade for each course, which may be released weeks or months after the examination period. Continuous assessment tasks, where they exist, are often returned with grades but without qualitative commentary that could inform subsequent learning.

Timeliness is a particularly acute issue. International research consistently identifies timely feedback as a critical enabler of student engagement (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Feedback that arrives after students have moved on to new topics or courses loses its formative potential. In the Cambodian context,

large class sizes—routinely exceeding 50 students and, in some general education or foundation-year courses, exceeding 100—combined with heavy teaching loads (often 18–24 contact hours per week for full-time lecturers) render timely, individualised feedback logistically extremely challenging (Heng, 2023).

Institutional Policies and Guidelines

The policy environment governing assessment feedback in Cambodian universities is underdeveloped. While the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) requires institutions to demonstrate that they have assessment policies and procedures as part of the accreditation process, these requirements are framed at a high level of generality. Typical institutional assessment policies specify the grading scale, examination regulations, and procedures for grade appeals, but rarely articulate standards or expectations for formative feedback (Chea & Hun, 2025).

A review of institutional documents from several Cambodian universities, cited in the grey literature, reveals that feedback is frequently mentioned as a desirable element of teaching quality but is seldom operationalised through specific guidelines on feedback frequency, format, turnaround time, or quality criteria. This policy vacuum leaves feedback practices largely to the discretion of individual lecturers, with predictable variability in quality and consistency (You & Em, 2021).

Summary of Cambodian Studies on Assessment and Feedback

To provide a clear overview of the current evidence base, Table 1 summarises the key empirical studies on assessment and feedback conducted in Cambodian higher education.

Table 1: Summary of Empirical Studies on Assessment and Feedback in Cambodian Higher Education

Study	Sample	Institution Type	Focus	Major Findings	Limitations
You & Em (2021)	220 students, 15 lecturers	Public university (Phnom Penh)	Assessment practices, feedback perceptions	Examinations dominate; feedback is grade-focused; students express dissatisfaction with feedback quality and timeliness	Single institution; limited qualitative depth
Chea (2025)	390 student journals, 12 teacher interviews	Public university (Phnom Penh)	Teacher feedback beliefs and practices in EFL	Feedback is grammar-focused, direct correction; heavy workloads constrain quality; gap between teacher beliefs and practice	EFL-specific; limited generalisability to other disciplines
Chea & Tep (2024)	450 students, 20 lecturers	Mixed (3 public, 2 private)	Digital learning adoption	Positive attitudes toward digital platforms; constraints include connectivity, digital literacy gaps	Self-reported data; limited exploration of feedback-specific technology use
Heng & Em (2022)	180 lecturers	Mixed (5 public, 4 private)	Continuing professional development (CPD)	<30% of lecturers received any training in assessment/feedback; CPD is ad hoc and supply-driven	Survey-based; limited qualitative data on CPD quality
You (2022)	180 students, 12 lecturers	Public university (Phnom Penh)	Student engagement with feedback	Students value grades over qualitative comments; cultural norms (hierarchy, face) inhibit feedback dialogue	Single institution; limited exploration of discipline differences

Bou (2025)	Document analysis, 15 institutional reports	Mixed (10 public, 5 private)	Quality challenges in HE	Assessment quality is a key concern; feedback practices are inconsistent and under-regulated	No primary data collection
Chea & Hun (2025)	Document analysis (ACC reports)	National level	Accreditation policy and practice	ACC requirements lack specificity on feedback; policy-practice gap persists	Limited empirical data on institutional implementation
CDRI (2021)	500 students, 100 lecturers	Mixed (10 institutions)	Technology readiness during COVID-19	Most lecturers possess basic digital skills; <40% confident using tech for interactive feedback	Self-reported data; rapid assessment during pandemic context

Table 1 above highlights several important observations. First, the empirical evidence base on assessment feedback in Cambodian higher education is limited, with only a small number of studies specifically addressing feedback practices. Second, the available studies are predominantly from public universities in Phnom Penh, with limited representation of private institutions and provincial universities. Third, the focus has been primarily on EFL and general education contexts, with less attention to discipline-specific feedback practices in STEM, health sciences, or professional programmes. Fourth, the reliance on self-reported data and small sample sizes limits the generalisability of findings. These limitations are addressed in the recommendations and research agenda proposed in later sections.

Challenges and Barriers

Systemic Challenges

Large class sizes and high student-to-staff ratios: The rapid expansion of Cambodian higher education has not been matched by proportional growth in academic staffing. Student-to-lecturer ratios in many institutions, particularly in popular programmes such as business administration, English, and law, exceed 50:1, and class sizes in the range of 60–100 students are not uncommon in first- and second-year courses (Heng, 2023; Bou, 2025). Under these conditions, the provision of detailed, individualised formative feedback becomes physically unfeasible for even the most committed lecturers. Research from comparable contexts confirms that large classes are strongly associated with a shift toward easily administered, standardised assessment formats and away from feedback-rich practices (Nicol, 2010).

Limited institutional resources: Cambodian universities operate within significant resource constraints. Annual per-student expenditure in public universities remains low by regional standards, limiting investment in teaching infrastructure, library resources, and technology platforms that could support enhanced feedback practices (World Bank, 2018). Private universities face their own resource pressures, with many operating on thin financial margins that compel cost-minimisation strategies, including reliance on part-time adjunct lecturers who lack the institutional attachment and time to invest in sustained feedback provision.

Inadequate lecturer preparation and professional development: The quality of academic staff represents a critical bottleneck. Many Cambodian university lecturers enter academia directly after completing their own undergraduate or master's degrees, without formal pedagogical training. A 2022 study on continuing professional development in Cambodian higher education found that fewer than 30 percent of surveyed lecturers had received any training in assessment and feedback practices, and that existing CPD provision was ad hoc, supply-driven, and poorly aligned with classroom realities (Heng & Em, 2022; Hun & Em, 2022). The absence of systematic induction in feedback pedagogy means that many lecturers reproduce the assessment and feedback practices they experienced as students—practices that were themselves often confined to grade transmission without formative commentary.

Institutional culture and incentive structures: The dominant institutional culture in many Cambodian universities prioritises teaching as content delivery and assessment as measurement, with limited recognition of feedback as a core pedagogical function. Lecturer performance evaluation systems, where they exist,

emphasise student pass rates, research outputs, and administrative service over the quality of assessment and feedback practices. This institutional signalling reinforces a narrow conception of teaching excellence and provides little extrinsic motivation for lecturers to invest additional effort in feedback enhancement (Heng, 2023).

Pedagogical Challenges

Clarity, relevance, and actionability of feedback: When feedback is provided, it frequently suffers from deficits in clarity and specificity. Lecturers often lack the conceptual vocabulary and practical techniques to craft feedback that communicates standards clearly, identifies specific strengths and weaknesses, and provides actionable guidance for improvement. The prevalence of vague, global comments—"good work," "needs more analysis," "improve your English"—fails to meet even minimal criteria for effective feedback as defined in the international literature (Sadler, 1989; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Alignment with learning outcomes: The gradual adoption of outcomes-based education frameworks in Cambodia, supported by the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and international development partners, has highlighted misalignments between stated learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and the feedback provided on those tasks. Lecturers familiar with content-driven curriculum models often struggle to operationalise learning outcomes in ways that generate specific, criterion-referenced feedback (AUN-SEC, 2023).

Predominance of summative orientation: The examination-dominated assessment culture in Cambodian universities means that feedback, to the extent it occurs, is overwhelmingly summative—oriented toward justifying grades rather than supporting learning. This orientation is reinforced by student expectations shaped by prior educational experiences in a school system that has historically emphasised high-stakes national examinations. Overcoming this deeply embedded summative emphasis requires not merely technical adjustments to feedback practices but a fundamental cultural shift in how assessment is understood and valued by both staff and students (You & Em, 2021).

Student-Related Factors

Student perceptions and expectations: Cambodian students' educational experiences have predominantly socialised them into a transmission model of education, in which the teacher is the source of authoritative knowledge and the student's role is to receive, memorise, and reproduce that knowledge. In this model, assessment is something done to students, not with them, and feedback—if provided—is to be accepted rather than interrogated. Research suggests that Cambodian students often interpret feedback through a credentialing rather than a learning lens, valuing grades as the primary or sole meaningful output of assessment processes (You & Em, 2021).

Capacity to utilise feedback: Even where students receive feedback of reasonable quality, the capacity to make productive use of it cannot be assumed. Carless and Boud's (2018) analysis of student feedback literacy identifies four inter-related capabilities—appreciating feedback processes, making academic judgements, managing emotional responses, and taking action—as prerequisites for effective feedback uptake. The development of these capabilities requires deliberate pedagogical scaffolding that is currently largely absent from Cambodian higher education. Students who lack experience in self-assessment, who have not been taught how to decode feedback language, or who do not have opportunities to apply feedback to subsequent work are unlikely to benefit from even well-crafted feedback.

Cultural influences on receptiveness: Cambodian cultural norms, deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhist values and traditional social hierarchies, shape how feedback is given and received. The teacher-student relationship in Cambodian society carries strong hierarchical dimensions, with teachers traditionally regarded as moral exemplars and figures of unquestioned authority (Chhinh & Dy, 2009). Recent research on teacher-student relationships in a Cambodian private university found that students viewed teachers as authority figures "whose knowledge should not be questioned openly" and reported hesitancy to ask questions or seek clarification—behaviour "rooted in hierarchical respect" (Preprints, 2025). This cultural

dynamic complicates the dialogic, participatory feedback processes that contemporary international research advocates. Students may perceive critical feedback as a personal slight rather than a developmental resource and may be reluctant to acknowledge confusion or seek elaboration on feedback they do not understand.

Technological Limitations and Opportunities

Cambodian higher education's technological infrastructure has improved significantly in recent years, accelerated by the forced digital pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic (Heng & Sol, 2021). Internet penetration among university-age Cambodians is high, smartphone ownership is nearly universal, and major universities have invested in learning management systems. However, the translation of this infrastructure into enhanced feedback practices faces several obstacles.

First, digital literacy among academic staff remains uneven. A 2021 study by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) on technology readiness in Cambodian higher education found that while most lecturers possessed basic digital skills, fewer than 40 percent felt confident using technology for interactive pedagogical purposes, including online feedback and assessment (CDRI, 2021). Second, connectivity and device access, while improved, remain barriers for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or studying in provincial campuses. Third, the dominant use of LMS platforms for content distribution rather than interactive engagement means that their potential to support timely, trackable, and dialogic feedback is significantly underutilised.

Conversely, technology offers genuine opportunities. Digital platforms can facilitate faster feedback turnaround through features such as annotated assignment submissions, rubrics with pre-configured comment banks, and audio or video feedback recordings that convey nuance and tone more effectively than written comments. Peer feedback and self-assessment can be structured and monitored through digital tools. The growing accessibility of artificial intelligence-assisted feedback tools, while requiring careful pedagogical and ethical consideration, may offer partial solutions to the scalability challenges posed by large class sizes (Chea & Tep, 2024).

Comparative Evidence Across Institution Types

The challenges outlined above vary significantly across different types of Cambodian institutions. Comparative evidence, though limited, reveals important differences between public and private universities, urban and provincial institutions, and across academic disciplines.

Public vs. Private Universities

Public universities, which receive government funding and are subject to more direct Ministry of Education oversight, tend to have more established quality assurance systems and more structured assessment policies. However, they also face challenges of bureaucratic inertia, limited flexibility, and, in some cases, higher student-to-staff ratios due to enrolment pressures. Private universities, which operate on a market-driven model, often have smaller class sizes and greater flexibility to innovate in assessment and feedback practices (Heng, 2023). However, many private institutions rely heavily on part-time adjunct lecturers, who may have less institutional commitment and limited time for feedback provision.

A study comparing assessment practices across public and private universities in Phnom Penh (You, 2022) found that while private university students reported more frequent feedback, they also expressed greater dissatisfaction with feedback quality, suggesting that frequency alone is not a reliable indicator of quality. The study also found that public university lecturers were more likely to have received formal training in assessment, but this did not necessarily translate into better feedback practices due to the constraints of class sizes and workload.

Urban vs. Provincial Institutions

Institutions in Phnom Penh benefit from greater access to resources, professional development opportunities, and international networks. Provincial universities, by contrast, face additional challenges: limited access to qualified academic staff, lower investment in teaching infrastructure, and fewer opportunities for staff development (Bou, 2025). The digital divide is also more pronounced, with provincial institutions having less reliable internet connectivity and fewer students owning personal devices for accessing online feedback.

A study by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI, 2021) found that lecturers in provincial universities were significantly less likely to use technology for feedback purposes than their Phnom Penh counterparts. This disparity has implications for equity in educational quality and graduate outcomes across the country.

Discipline Differences

Feedback practices also vary by discipline. In EFL and language programmes, where writing is a central component of assessment, there is a stronger tradition of providing written feedback, though often focused on surface-level grammatical correction (Chea, 2025). In STEM disciplines, where assessment is more heavily weighted toward problem-solving, laboratory reports, and examinations, feedback tends to be more quantitative and less discursive. Professional programmes such as business, law, and health sciences, which increasingly incorporate authentic assessment tasks (e.g., case studies, portfolios, simulations), are beginning to integrate more feedback-rich practices, but these innovations remain unevenly distributed (AUN-SEC, 2023).

Illustrative Cases from Cambodian Institutions

Case 1: Assessment Feedback in a Large Public University—English Language Programme

A study of written feedback practices in a Cambodian public university's English language programme, drawing on 390 student journals and teacher interviews (Chea, 2025), provides detailed insight into classroom-level feedback realities. The study found that teacher written feedback was overwhelmingly concentrated at the task level, focused on surface-level grammatical accuracy (verb tense, subject-verb agreement, spelling), and delivered through direct correction—the teacher providing the correct form rather than prompting the student to self-correct.

Teachers reported that this approach was shaped by student expectations: "Students want us to correct all their mistakes," one teacher explained. "If we don't mark everything, they think we are lazy." Heavy teaching loads—with some teachers responsible for over 200 students across multiple sections—were cited as the primary constraint preventing more elaborated, process-oriented feedback.

Moreover, the study documented a significant gap between teacher beliefs and practices. While teachers expressed awareness that developmental, process-oriented feedback would be more beneficial for student learning, they reported that institutional expectations emphasising coverage of prescribed content, combined with class sizes, made such feedback impossible to deliver systematically. The research also noted that students rarely revisited or acted upon the feedback they received; corrected assignments were typically filed away or discarded once the grade was noted.

Case 2: Technology-Enhanced Feedback at an Internationally Affiliated Private University

An internationally affiliated private university in Phnom Penh, which has invested in a comprehensive Moodle-based LMS and provides regular professional development to academic staff, represents a contrasting case. At this institution, lecturers are expected to use the LMS to provide assignment feedback within a two-week turnaround window, using a combination of in-line annotations, summary comments aligned with detailed assessment rubrics, and, in some courses, short audio feedback recordings. The LMS also supports moderated peer feedback activities in selected courses.

Interviews with lecturers at this institution, cited in practitioner reports, indicate that the structured institutional expectations, combined with manageable class sizes (typically under 30 students per section) and access to instructional design support, have enabled more consistent and higher-quality feedback than is typical in the sector. However, challenges persist. Student engagement with feedback remains variable, with many students focusing primarily on the grade and failing to access the detailed commentary available in the LMS. Lecturers report that cultivating student feedback literacy—teaching students how to interpret and use feedback—requires sustained, explicit pedagogical effort that competes with content coverage demands. This case illustrates both the potential of institutional and technological support for feedback enhancement and the necessity of addressing student-side factors alongside lecturer-side factors.

Case 3: The CALOHEA Authentic Assessment Initiative

The CALOHEA (Capacity Building in Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education in ASEAN) project, implemented across several Cambodian universities from 2021 to 2023, provides an example of externally supported innovation in assessment and feedback. The project introduced authentic assessment methodologies—including portfolios, project-based assessments, and competency-based evaluation—designed to generate richer evidence of student learning and to create more meaningful feedback opportunities. Participating institutions reported increased lecturer awareness of assessment feedback as a pedagogical priority and initial adoption of more varied, feedback-generating assessment tasks. However, sustainability concerns emerged as a key challenge: once project funding and external facilitation concluded, institutional momentum often dissipated, and lecturers reverted to more familiar, examination-based practices (AUN-SEC, 2023). This pattern underscores the importance of embedding feedback innovation within institutional systems and cultures rather than relying on time-limited project interventions.

Recommendations for Improvement

The preceding analysis suggests that enhancing assessment feedback in Cambodian higher education requires coordinated action across multiple levels—individual pedagogical practice, institutional policy and culture, and the broader policy and resource environment. The recommendations below are informed by international evidence on effective feedback and are calibrated to the specific constraints and opportunities of the Cambodian context.

Pedagogical Strategies for Lecturers

Develop constructive, criteria-based feedback practices: Lecturers should be supported to shift from feedback as error correction to feedback as developmental guidance. This involves articulating clear assessment criteria and standards (ideally co-constructed with students), using these criteria as the basis for feedback comments, and ensuring that feedback addresses all three of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) guiding questions: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? Practical techniques include using structured feedback templates that prompt lecturers to address strengths, areas for improvement, and specific action steps, and providing departmental exemplars of effective feedback to establish shared quality expectations.

Prioritise actionable, forward-looking feedback: Lecturers should be encouraged to focus feedback on aspects of performance that students can act upon in their next piece of work. "Feed-forward" comments that identify strategies, resources, or approaches for future tasks are more valuable than retrospective commentary on work that will not be revisited. In contexts where large class sizes constrain individualised feedback, strategies such as whole-class feedback summaries addressing common patterns of strength and weakness, supplemented by brief individual comments, can increase efficiency without sacrificing pedagogical impact.

Integrate peer feedback and self-assessment: Structured peer feedback activities, supported by clear criteria, modelling, and moderation by the lecturer, can simultaneously increase the volume of feedback students receive and develop their evaluative judgement and feedback literacy (Nicol et al., 2014). Self-assessment exercises, in which students evaluate their own work against explicit criteria before submitting it, prime

students to engage more actively with lecturer feedback when it arrives. These approaches are not substitutes for lecturer feedback but complementary strategies that enrich the overall feedback environment.

Address the emotional dimension of feedback: Lecturers should be sensitised to the emotional impact of feedback and equipped with strategies for delivering critical feedback in ways that maintain student motivation and self-efficacy. Techniques include framing feedback as a normal and necessary part of learning, separating evaluation of the work from evaluation of the person, and explicitly expressing confidence in the student's capacity to improve (Carless & Boud, 2018). In the Cambodian cultural context, where direct criticism can be particularly face-threatening, culturally sensitive approaches to feedback delivery—such as the "sandwich" method (positive-comment—constructive-criticism—positive-comment), used judiciously—may facilitate receptiveness.

Institutional Support Mechanisms

Establish institutional feedback policies with practical guidance: Moving beyond aspirational statements, institutions should develop specific, operationalised feedback policies that define expectations regarding feedback turnaround time (e.g., within two weeks of submission), minimum feedback content (e.g., identification of strengths, areas for improvement, and actionable next steps), and feedback format (e.g., use of rubrics with qualitative commentary). These policies should be co-developed with academic staff, accompanied by practical guidance and exemplars, and integrated into quality assurance processes.

Invest in systematic professional development: One-off workshops are insufficient to change entrenched feedback practices. Institutions should develop sustained professional development programmes that combine initial training in feedback pedagogy with ongoing support through peer observation, feedback mentoring, and collaborative review of assessment feedback samples. Professional development should address both the conceptual dimensions of feedback (why feedback matters, what constitutes effective feedback) and the practical skills of feedback design and delivery (how to write effective comments, how to facilitate peer feedback, how to use technology for feedback). The documented challenges in Cambodian CPD provision—supply-driven, underfunded, disconnected from classroom realities (Heng & Em, 2022)—must be addressed through needs-based design, adequate resourcing, and institutional accountability for CPD impact.

Revise workload models and incentive structures: Recognising that high-quality feedback is time-intensive, institutions should review academic workload models to ensure that assessment and feedback responsibilities are realistically accounted for in teaching allocations. Class size limits should be established, particularly for writing-intensive courses where meaningful feedback requires significant per-student investment. Lecturer performance evaluation and promotion criteria should explicitly recognise and reward excellence in assessment and feedback practice, counterbalancing the current overemphasis on research outputs and administrative service.

The Role of Technology

Leverage learning management systems for feedback efficiency and quality: Institutions should invest in LMS platforms and provide training that enables lecturers to use features specifically designed for feedback: annotated assignment submissions, audio and video feedback recordings, structured rubrics with pre-configured comment libraries, and feedback analytics that track student engagement. Audio feedback, in particular, offers a promising approach in the Cambodian context: it is faster to produce than written comments, conveys tone and nuance more effectively (reducing misinterpretation risk), and has been shown in multiple studies to be perceived by students as more personal and supportive (Cann, 2014).

Explore scalable feedback technologies: Automated feedback tools and artificial intelligence-assisted feedback systems, while requiring careful pedagogical oversight, may offer partial solutions to the scale challenges of large classes. Such tools can handle routine, rule-based feedback on technical aspects of student work (grammar, referencing, calculation accuracy), freeing lecturer time for higher-value feedback on conceptual understanding, argumentation, and critical thinking. Institutions should pilot such

technologies with appropriate ethical frameworks and evaluate their impact on both feedback quality and student learning outcomes.

Support digital access and literacy: Technology-enhanced feedback strategies will exacerbate inequity unless accompanied by measures to ensure equitable student access to devices and connectivity, and to develop the digital literacy of both staff and students. Institutions should provide device loan programmes, campus Wi-Fi access, and basic digital skills orientation as foundational investments.

Fostering a Feedback-Rich Learning Environment

Develop student feedback literacy: The concept of student feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) provides a valuable framework for institutional action. Students need explicit instruction in how to interpret feedback, how to manage emotional reactions constructively, how to make academic judgements about their own and peers' work, and how to translate feedback into concrete improvement actions. Institution-wide initiatives—such as first-year orientation modules on using feedback, embedded feedback literacy activities within courses, and peer mentoring programmes—can progressively build student capacity to engage productively with feedback.

Normalise feedback as a dialogic process: Institutional messaging and classroom practices should consistently frame feedback as a two-way communication process rather than a one-way transmission. This involves creating structured opportunities for feedback dialogue: feedback tutorials, discussion forums where students can seek clarification, and assessment designs that require students to demonstrate how they have used feedback in subsequent work (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Overcoming the cultural barriers to feedback dialogue in Cambodian classrooms—where students may be hesitant to engage critically with teacher comments—requires gradual, supportive scaffolding that builds student confidence and communicative competence over time.

Build a culture of assessment for learning: The most fundamental shift required is cultural: from assessment as measurement and sorting to assessment as an integral part of learning. This shift cannot be achieved through isolated initiatives but requires sustained, coherent effort across the institution. Leadership commitment, consistent messaging, alignment of policies and incentives, and visible celebration of effective feedback practice are all essential ingredients. The Cambodian higher education sector's ongoing engagement with outcomes-based education and the ASEAN quality assurance framework provides a conducive policy environment for this cultural shift, but the translation of policy aspirations into classroom realities remains the critical challenge.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a systematic critical review and contextual analysis of assessment feedback practices in Cambodian higher education, situating the analysis within international theoretical and empirical literature while attending to the distinctive features of the Cambodian context. The analysis reveals a significant gap between the aspirations of international feedback research and the realities of feedback practice in Cambodian universities. Current practices are characterised by a predominance of summative, examination-oriented assessment; feedback that is often limited in quantity, quality, and timeliness; and systemic constraints—particularly large class sizes, high teaching loads, and inadequate lecturer professional development—that render effective feedback provision extremely challenging.

The comparative evidence across institution types reveals important variations. Private universities, with smaller class sizes and greater flexibility, may have more opportunities for feedback innovation, but they often lack the institutional infrastructure and staff development systems of public universities. Provincial institutions face additional challenges of resource constraints and limited access to professional development. Disciplinary differences also shape feedback practices, with language programmes having stronger traditions of written feedback (though often surface-level) and STEM disciplines tending toward more quantitative feedback.

The challenges are not insurmountable, however. The analysis has identified multiple entry points for improvement, ranging from individual pedagogical strategies that lecturers can adopt within existing constraints, through institutional policy and resource interventions, to the strategic deployment of technology to support more efficient and effective feedback processes. The concept of feedback literacy—for both lecturers and students—provides a unifying framework for capacity-building efforts.

The significance of this agenda extends beyond the immediate concern with student learning outcomes. In a higher education system that is central to Cambodia's aspirations for economic diversification, human capital development, and regional competitiveness, the quality of teaching and learning—of which assessment feedback is a core component—matters profoundly. Enhancing feedback is not a marginal pedagogical refinement but a central element of improving educational quality and graduate outcomes.

Future research is urgently needed to strengthen the evidence base. The summary table (Table 1) highlights the current limitations: small samples, narrow disciplinary focus, over-representation of Phnom Penh-based public universities, and reliance on self-reported data. Future empirical studies should aim to include larger, more representative samples across institution types (public/private, urban/provincial), disciplines, and programme levels. Research examining the relationship between feedback characteristics and student learning outcomes in the Cambodian context—ideally through quasi-experimental or longitudinal designs—would strengthen the case for investment. Studies exploring student and lecturer perceptions of feedback, the effectiveness of specific feedback interventions, and the role of technology in enabling feedback at scale would offer valuable guidance for practice. Comparative research across ASEAN higher education systems, where common policy frameworks coexist with diverse national contexts, could illuminate transferable lessons and context-specific adaptations.

Ultimately, improving assessment feedback in Cambodian higher education is not a technical problem with a simple solution but a complex challenge requiring sustained commitment, multi-level action, and cultural change. The evidence and analysis presented in this article are intended to contribute to that effort by clarifying the nature of the challenge and identifying evidence-informed pathways forward.

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