

An Overview of Professional Learning Communities in Cambodian Higher Education

Mam Sary*

Directorate General of Higher Education, MoEYS, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Corresponding Author: Mam Sary

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800732>

Received: 24 August 2026; Accepted: 29 August 2026; Published: 16 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have gained recognition worldwide as a promising approach to helping educators grow together, improve teaching, and boost student outcomes. While PLCs have been studied extensively in K-12 schools across North America, Europe, and parts of Asia, much less is known about how they work—or whether they can work—in higher education, especially in a place like Cambodia with its distinct cultural and institutional landscape. This paper offers a broad look at PLCs in Cambodian universities, exploring what they are, why they might matter, the benefits they could bring, and the real-world challenges that stand in the way. Drawing on international research and the emerging literature on Cambodian higher education reform, I identify several key factors that could make or break PLC efforts here: culturally sensitive facilitation, genuine buy-in from institutional leaders, carving out time and resources, and connecting PLC work to national quality assurance goals. I close by suggesting directions for future research that could help build a stronger evidence base for PLC practice in Cambodian higher education.

Keywords: Professional Learning Community, higher education, Cambodia, faculty development, collaborative learning, educational innovation, institutional improvement

INTRODUCTION

Universities around the world are under growing pressure to prove they're delivering quality education and continuously getting better at it. In response, many institutions are moving away from the old model of professional development—those one-off workshops that feel disconnected from daily teaching—and toward more collaborative, ongoing approaches where faculty learn from and with each other (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become one of the most influential frameworks in this shift, organizing educators around shared goals for improving instruction and student success (Stoll et al., 2006).

The PLC concept draws on several intellectual traditions: organizational learning theory (Senge, 1990), situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). In K-12 education, scholars like Shirley Hord (1997) and Richard DuFour and his colleagues (2016) developed and popularized the model, emphasizing shared leadership, collective creativity, supportive conditions, and a relentless focus on student learning outcomes. Over the past twenty years, research has shown that well-implemented PLCs can lead to real improvements in both teaching and student achievement (Vescio et al., 2008; Lomos et al., 2011).

But most of what we know about PLCs comes from Western K-12 contexts. Applying the model to higher education is more recent and less well understood. University faculty work under different conditions—they have more autonomy, deeper disciplinary specialization, and less routine peer observation—yet they still need meaningful conversations about teaching with colleagues (Cox, 2004; Shulman, 2004). In Southeast Asia, and

particularly in Cambodia, the PLC model bumps into distinct cultural, institutional, and resource realities that require careful thought.

Cambodia's higher education sector has grown dramatically since the late 1990s. From just a handful of institutions recovering from the Khmer Rouge era, it now includes over 120 universities and colleges enrolling more than 200,000 students (Heng, 2023; MoEYS, 2022). But this rapid expansion has outpaced the development of quality assurance, faculty qualifications, and teaching capacity (Chen et al., 2023; Un & Sok, 2018).

The government has taken steps to address this through the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia, internal quality assurance systems, and the Cambodia Qualifications Framework (MoEYS, 2019). Still, a gap persists between policy and practice, especially when it comes to supporting faculty professional development.

I argue here that PLCs offer a promising and cost-effective way to bridge this gap—but only if they're implemented with a real understanding of Cambodia's higher education context. In the sections that follow, I define the core elements of PLCs, assess their relevance and potential benefits for Cambodian universities, identify current trends and challenges, and suggest strategic considerations for building sustainable PLCs. I end with a call for empirical research that can ground PLC practice in local evidence.

Defining Professional Learning Communities

A Professional Learning Community isn't just another meeting or committee. It's a group of educators who share a genuine commitment to improving their practice and student outcomes through ongoing, collaborative inquiry. Drawing on foundational work in the field, here are the characteristics that distinguish an effective PLC.

Core Characteristics

Shared values and vision: Effective PLCs are built on a common understanding of the institution's mission and what quality teaching and learning look like. This shared sense of purpose gives coherence and motivation to the group's work (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006).

Collective focus on student learning: The point of a PLC isn't just socializing or professional camaraderie—it's about making a measurable difference in student learning. DuFour et al. (2016) argue that PLCs fundamentally shift schools from a teaching focus to a learning focus, moving from inputs to outcomes.

Collaborative culture: PLCs depend on trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Collaboration here means more than just being friendly—it involves critical friendship, constructive debate, and opening up one's practice to others. Stoll et al. (2006) describe this as moving from "contrived collegiality" to genuine collaborative inquiry.

Deprivatized practice: In a mature PLC, members are willing to invite colleagues into their classrooms, share teaching materials, and talk openly about both successes and failures (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Reflective dialogue and inquiry: PLCs engage in cycles of questioning, gathering evidence, analyzing it, and taking action. This inquiry-based approach draws on action research and data-informed decision-making, ensuring that changes are grounded in evidence rather than anecdote (Vescio et al., 2008).

Sustained engagement: PLCs aren't one-time interventions. They involve regular, structured meetings over time, allowing relationships to deepen and instructional changes to take root (Bolam et al., 2005).

Supportive leadership: While PLCs emphasize shared and distributed leadership, institutional leaders—department heads, deans, rectors—play a crucial role in creating the structural and cultural conditions that allow PLCs to thrive (Hord, 1997; Harris & Jones, 2010).

Theoretical Foundations

The PLC model is built on several intellectual foundations. From organizational learning, Senge's (1990) idea of the "learning organization"—where teams continuously expand their capacity to achieve results—provides a guiding metaphor. From social learning theory, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" explains how newcomers gradually acquire expertise by working alongside more experienced practitioners. Wenger's (1998) elaboration of "communities of practice"—groups bound by mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire—offers a framework for understanding how professional identities are shaped through communal participation.

Together, these theories suggest that faculty learning is fundamentally social, situated, and best developed through sustained interaction with colleagues who share common problems of practice.

Relevance and Potential Benefits For Cambodian Higher Education

Cambodia's higher education context presents both opportunities and challenges for PLC implementation.

Addressing Faculty Qualification Gaps

One persistent challenge is the limited number of faculty with doctoral degrees. Estimates suggest that fewer than 15% of academic staff in Cambodian universities hold a PhD, with wide variation across institutions and disciplines (Heng, 2023; MoEYS, 2022). This gap affects teaching quality, research productivity, and institutional accreditation. PLCs can't replace advanced disciplinary training, but they can accelerate pedagogical skill development among early-career and mid-career faculty by creating structured opportunities for peer mentoring, collaborative lesson design, and shared reflection on teaching.

Enhancing Teaching Quality and Pedagogical Innovation

Lecture-based, teacher-centered pedagogy remains common in many Cambodian university classrooms (Chea & Sath, 2021). PLCs offer a way to introduce and sustain student-centered approaches—active learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning—through a supportive peer environment where faculty can experiment, get feedback, and refine their practice without fear of judgment. International evidence suggests that PLC participation leads to more diverse instructional strategies and greater faculty confidence (Vescio et al., 2008; Owen, 2014).

Strengthening Curriculum Coherence

Cambodian universities have struggled to align curricula with the Cambodia Qualifications Framework, ASEAN Quality Assurance standards, and labor market needs (Un & Sok, 2018). Discipline-based PLCs can serve as vehicles for collaborative curriculum mapping, developing shared learning outcomes, and aligning course sequences. This collective work distributes the intellectual labor of curriculum design and builds departmental ownership of program quality.

Promoting Research Collaboration

Research output from Cambodian universities remains low compared to regional peers, constrained by heavy teaching loads, limited funding, and insufficient mentorship (Kwok et al., 2025; Heng, 2023). Research-focused PLCs—sometimes called "writing circles" or "research clusters"—can provide structured peer support for research design, data analysis, manuscript preparation, and navigating the publication process. The

communal nature of these groups helps overcome the isolation many faculty feel when pursuing research on their own.

Fostering a Culture of Continuous Professional Development

Cambodian faculty professional development has historically relied on short-term, externally funded workshops that rarely last or become institutionally embedded (Chen et al., 2023). PLCs represent a shift from episodic training to continuous, job-embedded learning. They position faculty as producers rather than just consumers of professional knowledge and build institutional capacity that outlasts any single project or funding cycle.

Cost-Effectiveness in Resource-Constrained Environments

Given Cambodia's relatively low public investment in higher education—government spending on education remains below regional averages (World Bank, 2021)—PLCs offer a financially sustainable professional development model. They leverage internal expertise and peer support rather than relying exclusively on expensive external consultants or international programs. Initial investments in facilitation training and meeting infrastructure yield ongoing returns through the organic growth of collegial learning networks.

Current Trends and Challenges in Plc Implementation

Despite their potential, systematic PLC implementation in Cambodian higher education remains in its early stages. Several interconnected challenges shape the current landscape.

Limited Awareness and Conceptual Clarity

A basic challenge is that many people don't fully understand what a genuine PLC is, as distinct from departmental meetings, committees, or informal peer discussions. Without clear conceptual models and examples, institutions may adopt the PLC label without implementing the substantive practices—a phenomenon Stoll et al. (2006) call the "loose use of the term," which risks diluting the model's effectiveness.

Hierarchical Institutional Structures

Cambodian higher education institutions tend to operate within hierarchical organizational cultures, shaped by both traditional Khmer social norms emphasizing seniority and respect for authority, and the legacy of centralized governance models (Un & Sok, 2018; Chen et al., 2023). PLCs, which thrive on distributed leadership, open critique, and egalitarian participation, may face friction in these contexts. Junior faculty may hesitate to offer candid feedback to senior colleagues, and senior faculty may perceive collaborative inquiry as an implicit challenge to their expertise.

Faculty Workload and Time Constraints

Cambodian university faculty often carry heavy teaching loads—frequently exceeding 20 contact hours per week—plus administrative responsibilities and, for some, supplementary employment to supplement relatively low base salaries (Heng, 2023; MoEYS, 2022). Under these conditions, finding protected time for regular PLC meetings, reflective practice, and collaborative inquiry is a significant obstacle. Without institutional recognition of PLC participation as valued professional work rather than an additional burden, sustained engagement is unlikely.

Gaps in Facilitation and Inquiry Skills

Effective PLCs require skilled facilitation—the ability to design purposeful agendas, guide productive dialogue, manage group dynamics, and maintain focus on evidence and student learning. These competencies

aren't typically developed through doctoral training in a content discipline. Cambodian faculty may benefit from targeted professional development in PLC facilitation, collaborative inquiry methods, formative assessment design, and using student learning data to inform instruction.

Cultural Dimensions of Feedback and Collaboration

Cambodian cultural norms around face-saving, harmony, and indirect communication may affect how PLC members engage in the critical dialogue essential to genuine collaborative inquiry (Chea & Sath, 2021). Offering constructive feedback on a colleague's teaching, openly discussing instructional challenges, or acknowledging student learning gaps can be culturally delicate. PLC implementation in Cambodia therefore needs culturally responsive protocols—for example, starting with appreciative inquiry approaches, using structured protocols that depersonalize critique, and building relational trust gradually before moving to more

English-Medium Instruction Challenges

A growing number of Cambodian universities offer programs taught in English, reflecting internationalization strategies and ASEAN integration goals. However, faculty proficiency in academic English varies considerably, and engaging in nuanced pedagogical discourse in a second language adds cognitive and linguistic demands (Heng, 2023). PLCs operating in English-medium contexts may need to attend explicitly to language support and consider bilingual facilitation strategies.

Limited Institutional Leadership and Resource Commitment

PLC sustainability depends on institutional infrastructure: dedicated meeting spaces, access to student learning data, recognition in workload allocation and promotion criteria, and visible leadership endorsement. In many Cambodian universities, these enabling conditions aren't yet in place. Department heads and deans may themselves lack familiarity with the PLC model and may not be equipped to champion its implementation.

Defining and Measuring Impact

A final challenge concerns assessment. How should Cambodian universities measure whether PLCs are working? What counts as credible evidence of impact on teaching quality or student learning? Without clear, feasible metrics and systematic data collection, PLCs may struggle to demonstrate their value to institutional stakeholders and secure ongoing support.

Considerations For Establishing and Sustaining PLCs

Drawing on the international literature and the specifics of the Cambodian context, I propose the following strategic considerations for policymakers, institutional leaders, and faculty developers.

Pilot Programs and Phased Implementation

Rather than institution-wide mandates, a phased approach starting with voluntary pilot PLCs in receptive departments allows for contextual learning, adaptation, and the development of local success stories that can inspire broader uptake. Early adopters become internal advocates and mentors.

Clear Institutional Mandate and Strategic Alignment

Leadership at multiple levels—ministry, institutional, departmental—should articulate PLCs as a core strategy within the institution's quality assurance framework and strategic plan. This signals institutional priority and provides a rationale for resource allocation and workload adjustments.

Protected Time and Dedicated Resources

Institutions should explore ways to incorporate PLC participation into workload models—for example, designating a specific number of hours per semester for collaborative professional learning, or reducing teaching loads for PLC facilitators. Physical and virtual meeting infrastructure should be provided.

Targeted Professional Development

Workshops and ongoing coaching are needed to build faculty capacity in the specific skills that underpin effective PLCs: meeting facilitation, collaborative inquiry, data literacy, formative assessment, peer observation protocols, and intercultural communication. Such training should model the participatory, inquiry-based pedagogy it seeks to promote.

Leadership Development

Department heads and deans need professional development that helps them understand the PLC model, model collaborative behaviors, protect PLC time, and create psychological safety for open professional dialogue. Leadership is a critical mediating variable in PLC effectiveness (Harris & Jones, 2010).

Culturally Responsive Facilitation

PLC protocols and facilitation approaches should be adapted to Cambodian cultural communication norms. Practices such as structured turn-taking, appreciative framing, using student work as a depersonalized focus of discussion, and starting meetings with relationship-building activities can help bridge the gap between the Western, often direct-communication origins of PLC models and the Cambodian context.

Focus on Actionable Goals and Evidence

PLCs should establish specific, measurable goals related to teaching and student learning, and should be supported to collect and analyze relevant evidence—including student assessment data, peer observation notes, student feedback, and faculty reflections—to inform their practice.

Recognition and Incentives

Institutions should develop systems for recognizing and rewarding PLC participation and contributions, whether through formal mechanisms such as promotion and merit criteria, or informal mechanisms such as awards and public acknowledgment.

Inter-Institutional Networking

Facilitating connections between PLCs across different Cambodian universities—through symposia, online platforms, and collaborative inquiry projects—can reduce the isolation of pioneering groups, enable the sharing of contextually relevant practices, and build a national community of PLC practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Professional Learning Communities hold real promise for advancing faculty development, teaching quality, and institutional improvement in Cambodian higher education. The model aligns with international evidence on effective professional learning while offering a cost-effective and adaptable strategy well-suited to the resource constraints and developmental priorities of Cambodia's system. However, translating PLC principles from their predominantly Western, K-12 origins to Cambodian universities requires deliberate contextualization—paying attention to cultural communication norms, hierarchical organizational structures, workload realities, and the need for institutional infrastructure and leadership commitment.

The way forward isn't about wholesale adoption of imported models but about thoughtful adaptation, piloting, and evidence generation. There's a pressing need for empirical research that documents PLC implementation processes in Cambodian higher education settings, examines the conditions under which they work best, and measures their impact on faculty practice and student outcomes. Such research would not only inform Cambodian policy and practice but also contribute to the broader international literature on PLCs in diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

Ultimately, the question isn't whether Cambodian university faculty can benefit from collaborative professional learning—the international evidence strongly suggests they can—but how institutions, leaders, and policymakers can create the conditions where this potential can be realized.

REFERENCES

1. Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A., ... & Smith, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* (Vol. 637, pp. 1-210). Research report.
2. Chea, S., & Sath, R. (2021). Improving the quality of Cambodian higher education: Key challenges and suggestions. *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, 1(2), 40–58. <https://cjerjournal.com/index.php/cjer/article/view/113>
3. Chen, L. Y., Liu, Y., & Wang, J. (2023). Establishing a professional learning community for cultivating future talents in higher education. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, Article 739. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02239-x>
4. Cox, M. D. (2004). Introduction to faculty learning communities. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2004(97), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.129>
5. Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute.
6. DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (3rd ed.). Solution Tree Press.
7. Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2010). Professional learning communities and system improvement. *Improving Schools*, 13(2), 172–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480210376487>
8. Heng, K. (2023). Challenges facing higher education in Cambodia and ideas for reform. *Cambodian Education Forum*. <https://cefcambodia.com/2023/08/13/challenges-facing-higher-education-in-cambodia-and-ideas-for-reform/>
9. Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
10. Kwok, K. W., Heng, K., & Sok, S. (2025). Enhancing research on academic research capacity in Cambodian higher education. *Discover Education*, 4, Article 723. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-025-00723-z>
11. Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Lomos, C., Hofman, R. H., & Bosker, R. J. (2011). Professional communities and student achievement: A meta-analysis. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 22(2), 121–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2010.550467>
13. Louis, K. S., & Kruse, S. D. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools*. Corwin Press.
14. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. (2019). *Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023*. Royal Government of Cambodia.
15. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. (2022). *Education congress: The education, youth and sport performance in the academic year 2020–2021 and goals for the academic year 2021–2022*. Royal Government of Cambodia.
16. Owen, S. (2014). Teacher professional learning communities: Going beyond contrived collegiality toward challenging debate and collegial learning and professional growth. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 54(2), 54–77.

17. Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Doubleday.
18. Shulman, L. S. (2004). *Teaching as community property: Essays on higher education*. Jossey-Bass.
19. Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-006-0001-8>
20. Un, L., & Sok, S. (2018). Higher education systems and institutions, Cambodia. In P. Teixeira & J. C. Shin (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_494-1
21. Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.01.004>
22. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
23. World Bank. (2021). *Cambodia economic update: Recovery and reform*. World Bank Group.