Integrating the Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework into the Masters Curriculum at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), Cambodia

Serey Sok¹ and Vanny Sok¹

¹Research Office, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia
E-mail: sokseray@gmail.com

Abstract

The Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework was developed by John Willison in 2006, and it has been widely applied by faculty at the University of South Pacific in Fiji. In late 2016, the Australian Government Department of Education and Training funded Dr. John Willison to introduce this framework to the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). This paper illustrates awareness and capacity building, integration means, potentials and challenges for applying the RSD at RUPP. In order to build capacity at RUPP, various events, i.e., training sessions, workshops and international exchanges, are arranged to raise awareness and to share experiences and examples of good practice related to the framework. At RUPP, the RSD framework could probably be integrated by starting from Masters level; good practice and experience may later help to spread this to bachelor degrees. Interest from the management team at RUPP is promising; however, insufficient internal resources and faculty participation present constraints to the implementation of the framework.

Keywords: Research Skill Development, Master course, and curriculum integration

Introduction

The Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) is Cambodia’s oldest public university, as well as being one of the largest. It hosts more than 12,000 scholarship and full-fee paying students, across a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. It is unique in Cambodia for offering specialist degrees in fields including the sciences, social sciences and humanities, as well as professional degrees in fields such as
information technology, electronics, psychology, social work, and tourism. RUPP also provides Cambodia’s foremost degree-level language programs through the Institute of Foreign Languages. Due to its many achievements, RUPP has full membership of the ASEAN University Network (AUN).

With a unique vision ("To become Cambodia’s flagship in teaching, research and community services"), RUPP has shifted from teaching to a focus on research and communities. Through these three components, we aim to foster the spiritual, intellectual, humane, social and physical development of our students, nurturing them to become confident, caring leaders who possess integrity, perseverance and a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. However, RUPP still needs to improve staff development in relation to research and community services. Many lecturers at RUPP have so far focused on teaching because they have no financial resources and limited capacity for conducting research. When lecturers are not actively engaged in research, they have failed to keep up to date with new issues, information and knowledge, and to link to these in their teaching materials.

Obviously, few lecturers are conducting research. However, lecturers have a strong capacity to mobilise resources from international research institutions. Without internal funds, most lecturers have never tried to apply for research grants, as they are not confident in writing research proposals, conducting field work, completing data entry and analysis, and writing academic articles for publication. As the teaching staff has limited capacity and competency for conducting research, the integration of the Research Skill Development (RSD) framework will be the best alternative to improve the research skills of both faculty and students.

In this paper, I will discuss (1) awareness and capacity building relating to the RSD frameworks, (2) integration of the RSD framework into the Masters curriculum; and (3) potentials and challenges in applying the RSD framework at RUPP. The analysis of this paper is based on a qualitative approach relating to events organised during Dr John Willison’ trip at RUPP, lessons learned and best practices from an exchange visit to Fiji, as well as personal discussions with individual deans, vice deans, course coordinators at the RUPP.

**Awareness and Capacity Building on RSD Frameworks**

The Research Skill Development (RSD) framework is a conceptual framework designed to be used from primary school to the PhD level. It was developed by John Willison and Kerry O'Regan, with much trialling by Eleanor Peirce and Mario Ricci in 2006, and a revision 2016. The Research Skill Development (RSD) framework is a ‘conceptual framework for the explicit, coherent, incremental and cyclic development of the skills associated
with researching’. The RSD describes a continuum of five levels delineating the extent of autonomy – the conceptual space – that students are given or experience when using skills associated with research (Willison & O’Regan 2006/2013; Willison et al., 2017). In late 2016, Dr John Willison introduced the RSD framework to RUPP.

Table 1 illustrates events carried out by the University of Adelaide and the RUPP to raise awareness and build the capacity of faculties and students in relation to the RSD framework at the RUPP. The project helps to build RSD-related knowledge and competency through workshops and seminars organised for December 2016, an exchange visit at the University of the South Pacific in July 2017, and a presentation at the International conference on Models of Engaged Learning and Teaching at the University of Adelaide in December 2017. The research office at the RUPP is a focal point for Dr John Willison to build the capacity of teaching staff and to communicate with the university management team about the possibility of integrating the RSD into the curriculum at the RUPP. According to the head of the Research Office, the events organized at the RUPP, USP, and the University of Adelaide (in late 2017) are an important start to capacity-building and in drawing the attention of RUPP faculty and management towards considering integration of the RSD framework [Pers. Comm. P1].

Table 1. Events relating to awareness and capacity building in relation to the RSD framework

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Events organised at RUPP</td>
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| High-level meeting with the Vice Rector in charge of research | • To introduce the RSD framework.  
• To gain support from RUPP management.  
• To discuss future cooperation in order to integration of RSD framework. |
| Meeting with deans and the Vice Dean | • To introduce the RSD framework.  
• To discuss curriculum development at faculty level.  
• To explore potentials for integration of RSD framework. |
| Meeting with research teams     | • To introduce RSD framework.                                               |
| Faculty-wide events             | • To provide training about RSD framework among lecturers.                 |
The framework is new to our university, and more capacity is required for teaching staff and to build cooperation within teaching staff. Initially, on-the-job training will be needed to help teaching staff become familiar with the tools (for example, the facets of inquiry and the levels) [Pers. Comm. P2]. In addition, the Vice Rector in charge of research is optimistic that the framework holds potential for Masters curricula. However, teaching staff must be familiar with the six facets of the research process, i.e., Embark and Clarify, Find and Generate, Evaluate and Reflect, Organise and Manage, Analyse and Synthesise, Communicate and Apply [Pers. Comm. P3]. They must also be familiar with the seven levels of research (The University of Adelaide, 2017).

**Integrating RSD Framework into Masters Curriculum**

During the meetings and workshops organized at the RUPP among the Vice Rector, deans and vice deans, faculties, researchers and students, all confirmed and supported the significance of the RSD framework as a source of improvement for their teaching and research skills. The RSD framework may be implemented in individual departments at Masters level. It would be very hard to immediately enforce the RSD framework into the curricula of whole faculties. At the first stage, it would be best to pilot the integration of the RSD into Masters courses [Pers. Comm. P2]. According to Lal et al., (2014) the RSD must be integrated into each discipline within two years, and an assessment-based approach can be used to integrate the RSD in course assignments and the design of marking rubrics. During the interview, the Vice Rector in charge of research at RUPP proposed that:

‘When good practice and experience earned from the implication at Master Course; the RSD framework may be integrated into bachelor curriculum. Among the five faculties (i.e., science, social science and humanities, engineering, development studies and education) and Institute of Foreign Language; the
Facility of Science and the Development Studies are heading research-oriented programmes. At the initial stage, the possibility of the RSD framework integration could be made at the Master course in development studies, in biodiversity, and in climate change’ [Pers. Comm. P3].

An assessment conducted by USP showed that significant improvements in research skills were indicated in all six facets, particularly in critical engagement processes (Nand, 2017). Yet there is more work to be done by the research office and by Dr John Willison in order to support faculties and staff during the integration of the RSD framework into the curriculum [Pers. Comm. P2]. To make the integration possible, the research office of the RUPP and Dr John Willison will need to work closely with them. RSD training will be required for all the faculties and staff at the three Masters courses to become familiar with the framework. In addition, technical support will need to be provided to develop course syllabuses, teaching techniques and evaluation forms [Pers. Comm. P1]. In addition, it would be useful for the course evaluation be conducted each semester in order to track progress and to evaluate the effectiveness of the integration within 3 years after implementing the RSD framework [Pers. Comm. P2].

**Potentials and Challenges in Applying the RSD Framework**

The usage of this RSD framework in the Foundation Accounting courses at the USP provided a change to its assessments; the six facets include a holistic approach to learning and assessment in terms of building research skills (Fatiaki, 2017). The newly-developed RUPP strategic plan 2014-2018 includes a long-term vision for the university to become Cambodia’s flagship university in teaching, research and community services. In order to support research-related activities, one of the six missions is for the university to become the leading institution for the provision of high-quality research, consultancy and community service. In late 2016, the RUPP released US$80,000 to support research grant activities among faculties. As a result, 24 research projects have recently been funded at all 5 faculties and the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL) [Pers. Comm. P1]. The research grants provided to teaching staff are the first initiative by a university in Cambodia to promote research at the university level. In this light, the management team of the RUPP has strongly supported all related research activities. Research is one of the most important courses that all Masters students are required to take. All the Masters programs have gradually increased their attention to the integration of research skills; Masters students at RUPP are required to complete a thesis to fulfil graduation requirements. At the present time, theses or research-related work are not compulsory for bachelor courses; the curricula focus on skills and competency [Pers. Comm. P2].
There were various challenges and constraints in introducing and applying the RSD framework at Masters level; resources are only one of the major problems. In order to introduce and apply the RDF, mobilisation of human resources and finance were the first consideration. At the moment, RUPP does not have sufficient budget to support each Masters program to build capacity and to provide technical assistance [Pers. Comm. P1]. Obviously, focal points connected with Dr John Willison at the Research Office could support them by providing training and organisation of the workshop. In addition, resources and budget to develop tools, guidelines and manuals will be required from external funds. Incentives for faculty members to apply the RSD framework are another big challenge [Pers. Comm. P3]. At RUPP, teaching receives a small fixed salary from the government, with extra incentives from teaching hours. If they apply the framework; they may do more work after teaching (for example, frequent marking of assignments, filling evaluation forms, and development of creative teaching methods and tools) [Pers. Comm. P2]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the introduction of the RSD framework holds significant potential for increasing the achievements of the RUPP strategic plan 2014-2018. The awareness raising, capacity building and international exchange visit have been part of the process of curriculum integration involving the RSD framework. In the future, integration would start from individual courses at Masters level, for example, the Master of Development Studies, Biodiversity and Climate Change course. After completing a pilot study in those three courses; experience and good practice would be used to apply for other courses, especially at bachelor level. According to results from the project implementation led by Dr John Willison and the Research Office, there are various potential avenues for the application of this RSD framework at RUPP; they include the interests of the management team of the RUPP, and urgently needed skills and tools. However, insufficient human and financial resources at the RUPP present the main constraints. In particular, the participation of faculty is important; they may not accept the extra burden of work if they do not receive some more incentives from teaching and preparation.
References


Annex: Interviewees at the RUPP

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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pers. Comm. P1</td>
<td>Research Office of RUPP</td>
<td>September 2017</td>
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<td>Pers. Comm. P2</td>
<td>Masters course coordinator of RUPP</td>
<td>September 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pers. Comm. P3</td>
<td>Vice Rector in charge of research of RUPP</td>
<td>September 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pers. Comm. P4</td>
<td>Workshops and meetings organized at RUPP</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
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