Assessing Social Sciences and Humanities Research Capacity in Cambodia

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A Research Project for the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) with Support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through The Asia Foundation's Ponlok Chomnes Program Phase II

Rationale

1. Research performance in Cambodia remains low, especially in the field of social sciences and humanities
2. The shift of research focus from social sciences and humanities towards STEM (+Agriculture)

The focus and objective

The focus in on social sciences and humanities research in Cambodia with the objectives to explore

(a) research skills among Cambodia researchers

(b) institutional capability to support research in both university and non-university settings

Research Questions

(a) How do Cambodian researchers in the field of social sciences and humanities perceive their level of research skills?

(b) What is the degree of institutional capability to support research in the social sciences and humanities in Cambodia?

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Research Methodology

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Mixed-method approach

Desk Review: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Performance in Cambodia

Survey: Assessment of Research Skills

Semi-structured Interviews: Assessment of Institutional Capability to Support Research

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Desk Review

To gain insights into Cambodia's research performance by surveying the number of publications available related to social sciences and humanities in Cambodia

Limitation:

Mostly consist of literature in English language

International quality of academic standards.

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Survey: Assessment of Research Skills

Three groups were selected to join online survey via Google Form:

1. Future Forum and Cambodia Development and Resource Institute (CDRI)
2. Researchers from local universities across Cambodia and local research institutes who have participated in the research training workshops on social sciences and humanities organized by the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Royal University of Phnom with technical support from the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) since 2022
3. Members of the public Telegram group “Research Training” who are early, middle, and late-career researchers from various backgrounds and mostly working in local academic institutions. (https://t.me/ResearchTraining2023)

About the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was structured into 4 sections:

1. Personal information
2. Research experience
3. Self-evaluated research skills
4. Perception of research performance in Cambodia, specifically in social sciences and humanities

Research Skills Framework

Within the scope of research and context of Cambodia, **six research skills (each with their sub-skills)** were identified and used to assess Cambodian researchers' capacity in research:

1. Searching Skill
2. Planning and Organization Skill
3. Data Collection Skill
4. Data Analysis Skill
5. Reporting and Communication Skill
6. Linguistic Ability (English Proficiency)

Graded on five scales from "Very Poor", to "Poor", "Basic", "Good", and "Expert"

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Interview to assess Institutional capability to support research

- Method: Semi-structured interviews
- Focus on three main aspects which influences on research performance:
  1. Research funding,
  2. Capacity development, and
  3. Research infrastructure
- Interviews were in both Khmer and English according to the preference of the interviewees.

Key informants' background

- Nine key informants (7 male, 2 female), from six universities and three research institutes participated via face-to-face and ZOOM between May 21 to June 11, 2024.
  - American University of Phnom Penh (AUPP)
  - Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Royal University of Phnom Penh
  - Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University
  - Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA)
  - Culture and Innovation Research Center, Royal University of Fine Arts
  - Future Forum
  - Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI)
  - EFFO Siem Reap Center
  - Yosothor

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Findings and Discussions

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Research output by ASEAN countries

Country	Document results (by country)		Top 5 Subject areas
	All over the world	Within country	
Indonesia	128,685	82,163	Social sciences, Environmental science, Agriculture and biological sciences, Earth and planetary sciences and Medicine
Malaysia	109,456	79893	Social Sciences, Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture and biological sciences, Environmental science
Thailand	98,652	62442	Medicine, Agriculture and biological sciences, Social sciences, Environmental science, Engineering
Singapore	65,830	33927	Medicine, Social Sciences, Engineering, business, management and accounting, arts and humanities
Viet Nam	60730	13133	Medicine, Environmental science, Social sciences, Agriculture and biological sciences, Earth and planetary sciences
Philippines	54,067	19914	Social Sciences, Medicine, Agriculture and biological sciences, Earth and planetary sciences, Environmental science
Cambodia	13,819	3,584	Medicine, Social sciences, Environmental science, Agriculture and biological sciences, Earth and planetary sciences
Myanmar	15,026	3117	Medicine, Social Sciences, Agriculture and biological sciences, Earth and planetary sciences, Environmental science
Brunei	3,529	1,464	Social Sciences, Agriculture and biological sciences, Medicine, Engineering and Environmental science
Lao PDR	2,288	1124	Medicine, Agriculture and biological sciences, Social sciences, Environmental science and Immunology and Microbiology

Documented from Scopus: 11 May 2022

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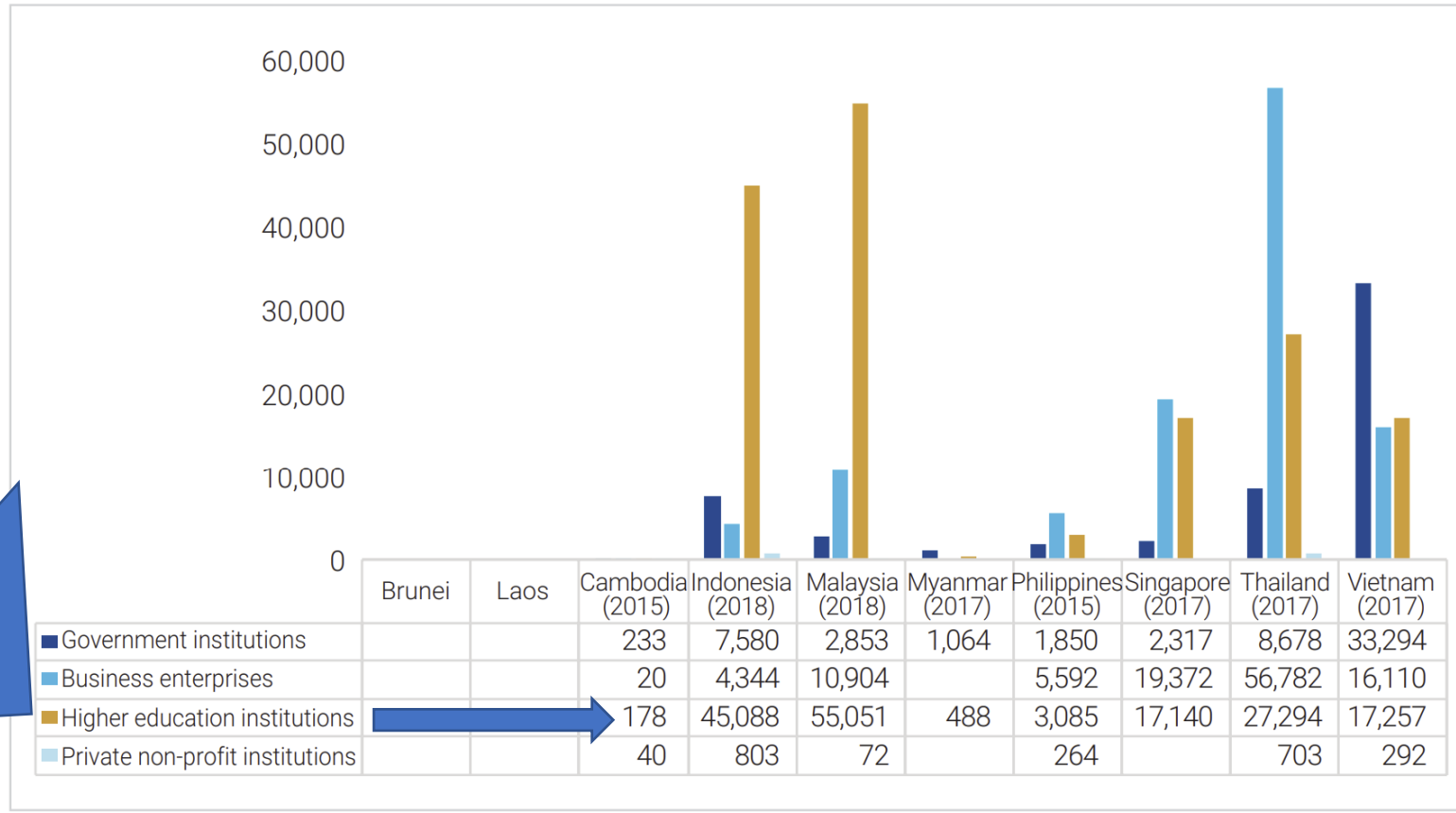
Number of researchers per million inhabitants, by sectors, of ASEAN countries



	Brunei	Laos	Cambodia (2015)	Indonesia (2018)	Malaysia (2018)	Myanmar (2017)	Philippines (2015)	Singapore (2017)	Thailand (2017)	Vietnam (2017)
Government institutions			233	7,580	2,853	1,064	1,850	2,317	8,678	33,294
Business enterprises			20	4,344	10,904		5,592	19,372	56,782	16,110
Higher education institutions			178	45,088	55,051	488	3,085	17,140	27,294	17,257
Private non-profit institutions			40	803	72		264		703	292

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics Data, retrieved on 22 June 2021
Note: The data reported is that from the most recent year available from each country. Cambodian data is for 2015. There is no available data from Brunei Darussalam and Laos.

Internal and systematic Challenges

- *Funding and financial issues: Low R&D*, undiversified income generating sources for university
  - lack of incentives for researchers, inadequate academic salary
  - Lack of resources necessary to support research at the institutional level –such as data analysis software, subscription to journal outlets, travel costs for researchers
- *Research competencies issues:*
  - Research skill and research grant management
  - Lack of qualified and committed researcher
- *Academic and research culture issues:*
  - Mostly teaching oriented university,
  - Lack of recognition and promotion…

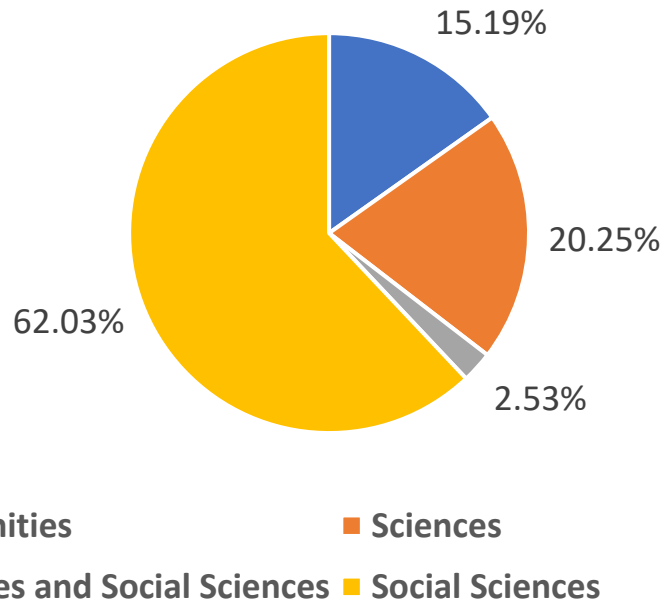
External factor: Existence of external-driven research works

- Mostly in the form of consultancy (baseline, assessment, monitoring & evaluation) commissioned by specific projects
- Pull in (qualified) researcher due to its high paid fee, and if they are pulled into research network, most often as research assistant or at best as collaborator with foreign researchers
- Three factors that should be highlighted here:
  - Lack of long-term thematic approach
  - Issue of soundness of research
  - Issue of validity of research

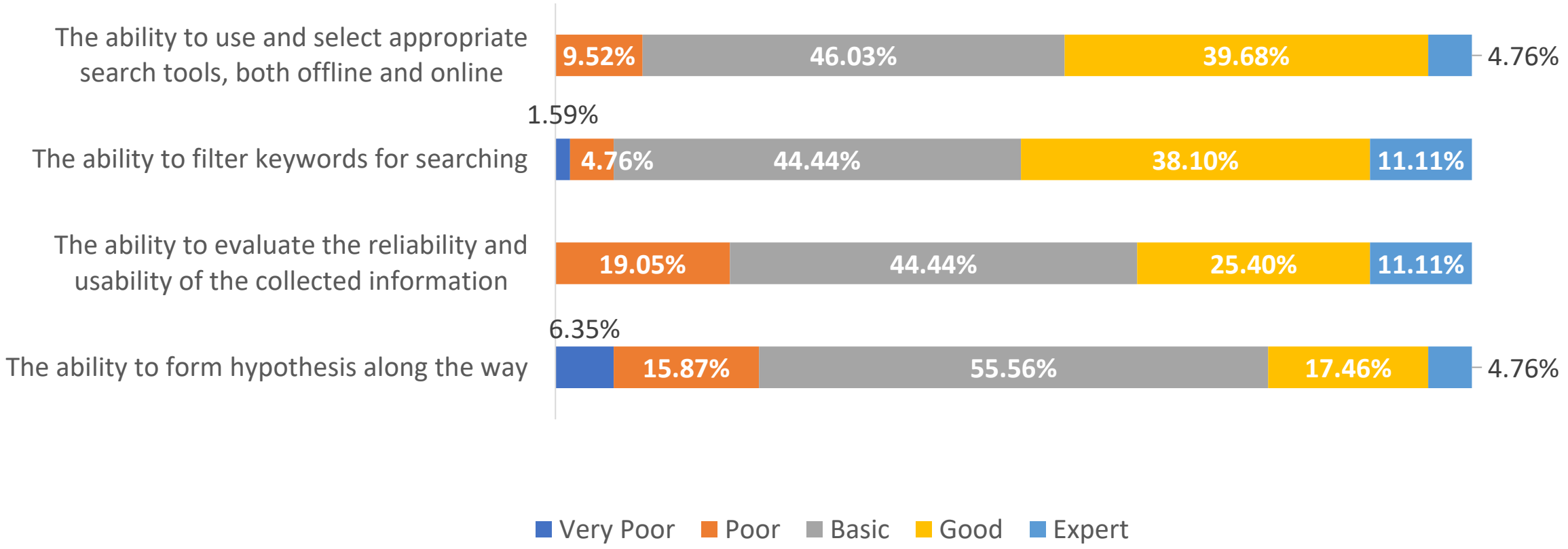
Survey Respondents' General Information

- The survey received a total of 104 responses.
  - 73.1% are male and 26.9% are female
  - 76% considered themselves as researchers.

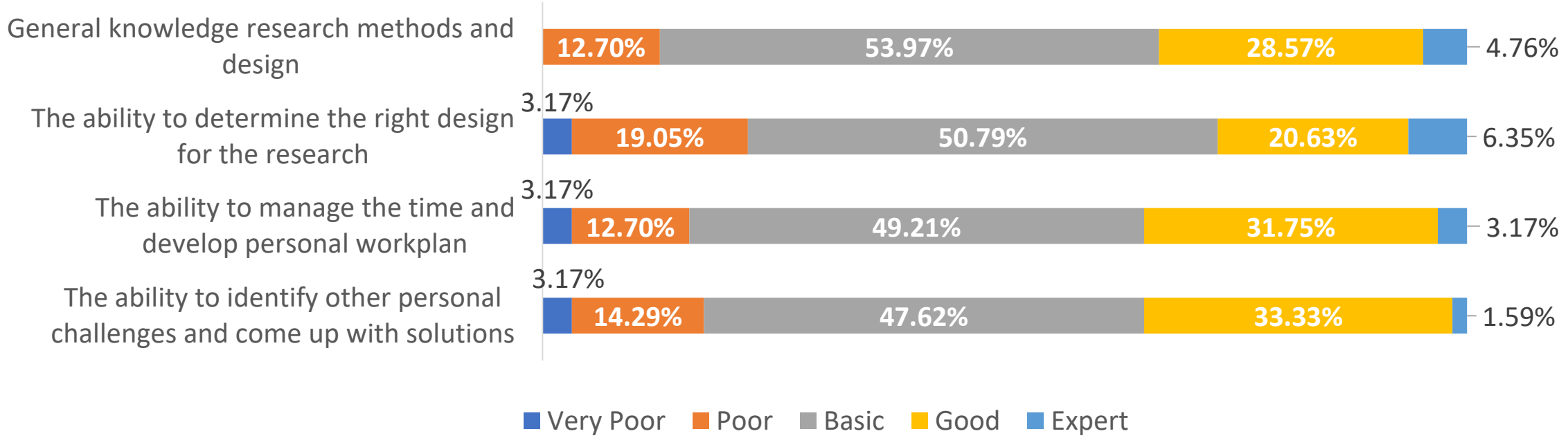
Figure 2. Research Discipline that Respondents Engaged In



Research Skills – Searching Skill



Research Skills – Planning and Organization Skill



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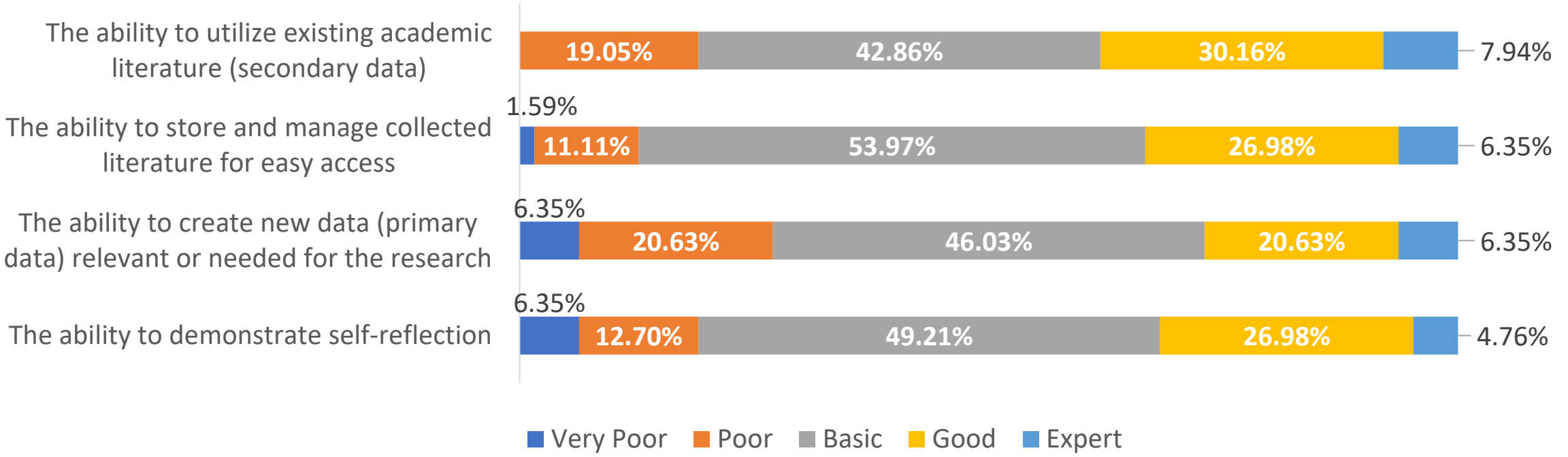
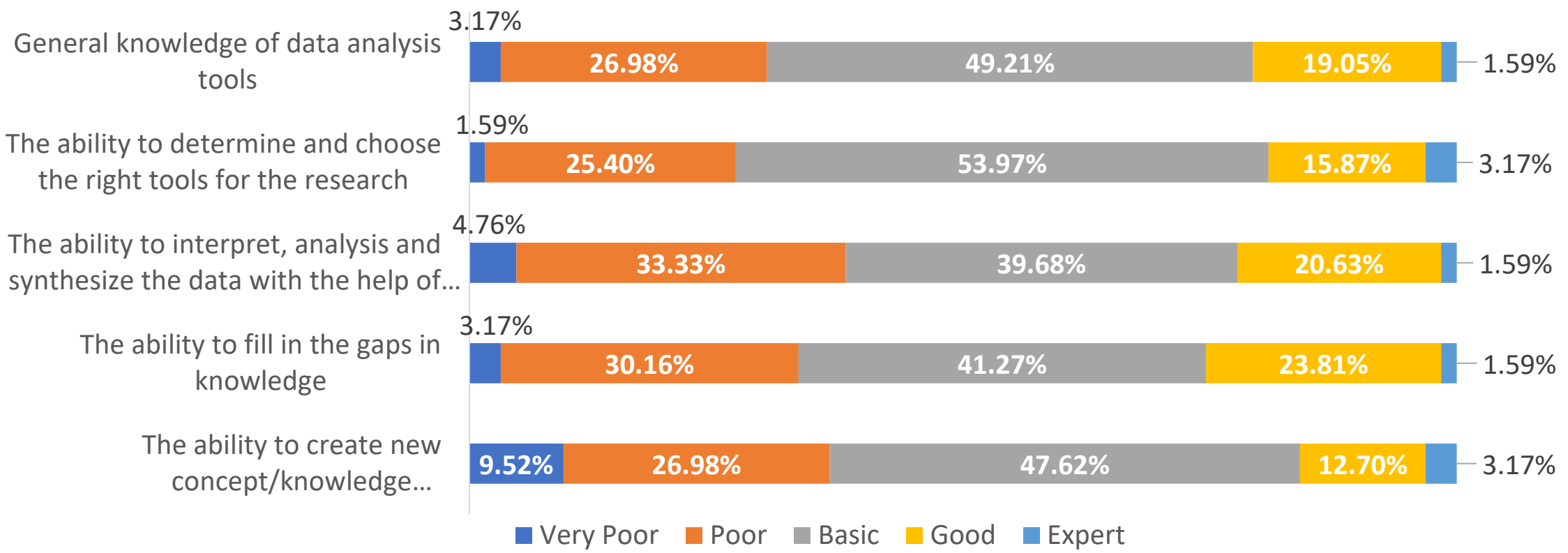
Research Skills – Data Collection Skill



Research Skills – Data Analysis Skill



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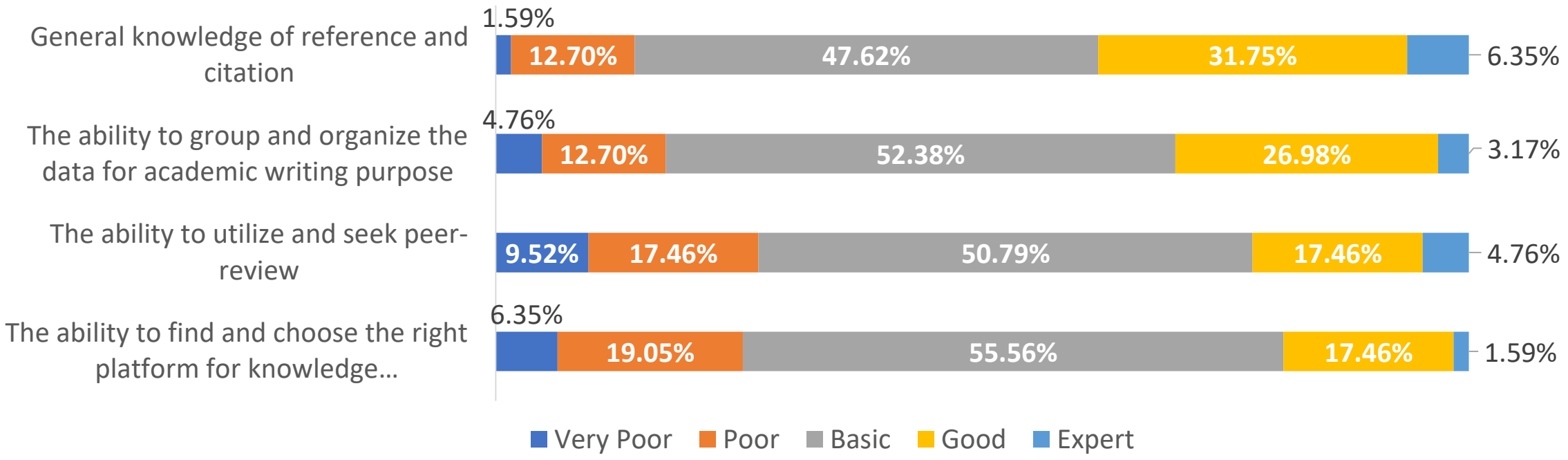
Research Skills – Reporting and Communication Skill



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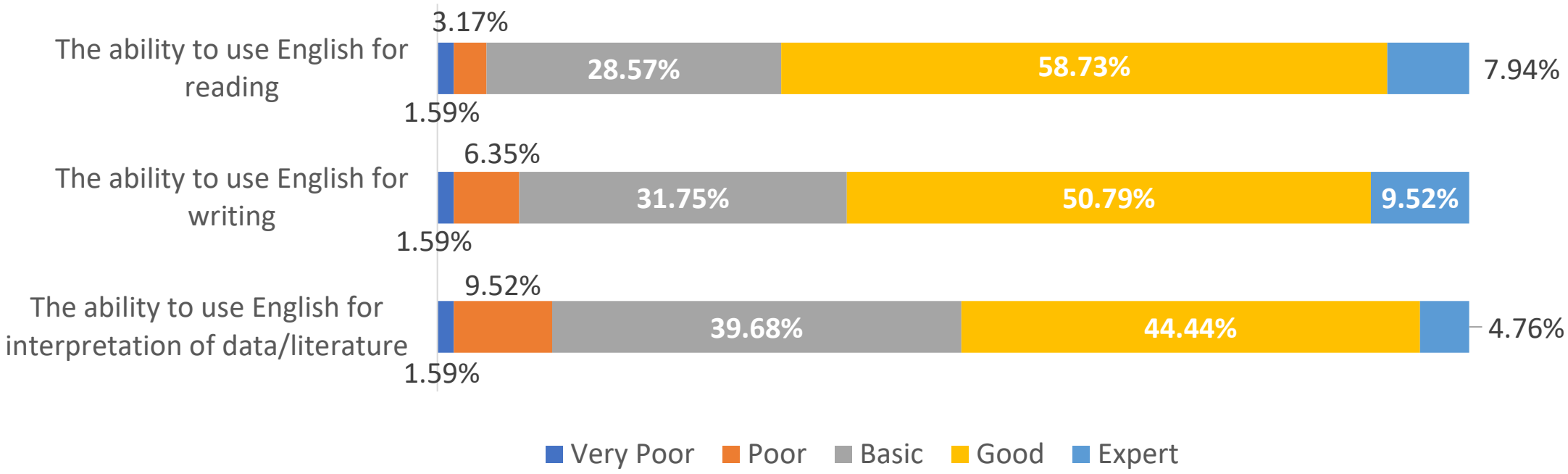
Research Skills – Foreign Language (English) Proficiency

Need to be interpretated carefully, as general English and academic English is rather differently



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Institutional Capability to Support Research

Financing Research and Researchers

Capacity Development

Research Infrastructure

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In a few words!

- While financial support for research endeavors has improved, research performance remains limited due to a shortage of manpower, lack of clear career paths and incentives for researchers.

Financing Research and Researchers

- **Higher education institutions (HEIs)**
  - Teaching-oriented and prepare students to navigate the labor market and not focus much on research.
    - Some universities do not mandate thesis dissertation for undergraduate or graduate students, and research activities are very limited. The case is truer for private HEIs.
  - Public HEIs have access to internal research funding, research grants from the government and external funding from overseas.
    - However, concerns remains on how to sustain such funding.
    - Some universities' research departments are underdeveloped due to limited funding, manpower shortages, lack of formal research teams, time constraints, and administrative hurdles, including budget allocation issues and fund diversion.
    - Manpower shortages stem partly from insufficient incentives, compensation, and the absence of a clear academic career path for researchers.

Financing Research and Researchers

- **Research institutes:**
  - SSH research are very much dependent on external support sources of funding that mainly comes from Western donors.
  - Observed the increase in funding opportunities, but not all research institutes have guaranteed funding
    - An increasingly competitive because of the growing number of newly established research institutions
  - It is worth noting that access to funding, research opportunities, and support is open to all researchers, regardless of gender.
  - Different from HEIs, at the research institute, researchers can perform their research without adding much of the burden.

Capacity Development

- Informants noted an enhanced institutional learning culture, with training activities conducted for research institute fellows and university students and staff.
  - The survey confirms improved support for capacity building in research, with 86% of respondents having attended training, primarily provided by local universities, followed by local research institutes, project-based training, and foreign institutions.
- Capacity development approaches vary by institution.
  - Some research institutes and think tanks integrate training into all their activities, while others offer it as an additional component.
- HEIs also provide diverse research training, addressing skill gaps in students and educators through curricula integration, lectures, and seminars.
- Common training topics cited include research methodology, importance and significance of research, data entry and analysis, writing and reading techniques, and report writing.
- However, research conduct is also hindered by a lack of mentoring and limited language (English) proficiency.

Infrastructure

- Access to online and offline academic resources in Cambodia is constrained by high subscription costs and ineffective library systems.
  - The survey found that university libraries remain the primary source of knowledge for social sciences and humanities students and researchers.
  - Other visiting resource center include: the Hun Sen Library, National Library of Cambodia, Senate Library, American Corner Cambodia, Buddhist Institute Library, National Archives of Cambodia, Bophana Center, DC-Cam, and the Center for Khmer Studies to a lesser extent.
- JSTOR is the most widely used platform by Cambodian researchers, but researchers also often rely on personal accounts or colleagues abroad for broader resources.

Conclusion and Recommendations

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Recommendations – Research Skills

1) Searching Skill

- Provide training on how to evaluate the reliability of the information/literature and forming research hypothesis to help them in the early stage of the research process
- Provide training that encourages researchers to use key terms or filters that capture gender (beyond binary), accessibility needs, ethnicity, language, and other relevant social dimensions along with their main research questions.

2) Planning and Organization Skill

- Provide training on research project management, interpersonal communication skills and critical thinking as well as practical problem-solving skill
- Provide training on analytical frameworks like the Gender Analysis Framework and Intersectionality Analysis are also important

Recommendations – Research Skills

3) Data Collection Skill

- Provide trainings that focus more on inclusive sampling methods that ensure diverse representation
- Provide trainings on how to evaluate existing academic literature (secondary data) which focuses on a conceptual and theoretical framework

4) Data Analysis Skill

- Provide trainings on data analysis through a GEDSI lens, emphasizing how to interpret data in ways that reveal disparities and inequalities and the use of intersectional approaches in data analysis
- providing training on social theory and theory in humanities, especially with key concepts in these fields to guide their data analysis.

Recommendations – Research Skills

5) Reporting and Communication Skill

- Provide trainings on how to formulate policy and program recommendations that take into account the needs and interests of marginalized groups and how to ensure that data is systematically organized, tagged, and structured in a way that enables diverse user groups to easily find, access, and use it
- Provide trainings on how to navigate and find top journals

6) Foreign Language (English) Proficiency

- Provide training courses on English for academic purposes with an emphasis on key terms in the field of social sciences and humanities

Recommendations – Institutional Capacity to Support Research

1) Creating an Endowment Fund for inclusive research projects, and encouraging more research that addresses gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion.
2) Requiring graduate students who complete their study with thesis writing
3) Establishing a career path for researchers
4) Incentivizing researchers with reasonable tangible and intangible benefits
5) Organizing regular capacity-building programs for researchers
6) Establishing a clear structure and job descriptions within the research institutes and universities so that researchers will not be overwhelmed by administrative tasks, enabling them to focus solely on conducting research in a timely and efficient manner
7) Modernizing research infrastructure to support research and researchers, especially library resources.

Thank you!

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