4 Higher education: Towards international standards in a neo-liberal world

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Higher education: Towards international standards in a neo-liberal world

Introduction

The quality of higher education (HE) has deteriorated sharply in Myanmar since independence when Rangoon University was seen as a leading HEI in the region. Today, HE is seen as a key part of the education reform process as well as a driver for future change with regard to employment and Myanmar’s desire to catch up with the ASEAN region. HE can have a catalytic role in recovery and development of conflict-affected societies (Milton and Barakat, 2016), as seen in post-Soviet countries (Fullan, 2001) and in periods following regime change (Couch, 2019; Esson and Wang, 2018). However, evidence demonstrates that reform strategies need to account for economic growth, human rights and national identity to support national development (Couch, 2019). Therefore, a balance needs to be struck between engaging with international organisations to link with global scholarship (Altbach, 2009) whilst accounting for local contexts and conditions (Naidoo, 2007).

This chapter reviews how the reforms have impacted Myanmar’s universities across the country, starting with a snapshot of Yangon and Mandalay Universities in 2005 and 2006, when the author was teaching there during the summer months. The chapter then moves to the main HE reform agenda including the development of the National Institute of Higher Education Development (NIHED)¹ that has started training senior academic staff across the HE sector, as well as other new HE-related structures that have been put in place by the NESP. The chapter engages with the vexed issue of decentralisation, including the rotation of staff appointments, the changing role of research and how universities are
starting to engage with issues of access, quality and designing their own curricula. At the time of writing, HE, though almost free and despite there being over 150 institutions across Myanmar, is only accessible to a small number of mostly middle class students, with the poorer students enrolling in one of the world’s largest, but possibly also worst, distance HE systems. The chapter discusses the inequalities, particularly the issues of limited access of ethnic minority young people due to a severe language disadvantage that emanates from their lack of access to basic education. Unless engaged with, this is likely to lead to long-term structural inequity problems. As observed by the ADB in an analysis of the financing of HE in Asia: ‘Any higher education system that fails to cultivate the breadth of talent in society – men and women, rural and urban, rich and poor – is sacrificing both quality and efficiency’ (ADB, 2016). The risks of ignoring inclusive growth could lead to a long-term stalling of the reforms, lower growth and rising inequalities that could result in socio-economic tensions, including armed conflict. However, Myanmar’s HE reform is driven first and foremost by the desire of policymakers to regain international respect for the Myanmar universities, which means that issues of inclusive growth and inequalities are seen as less important than creating an elite system with the support of international universities and a new drive for top universities to look for partnerships as part of their internationalisation process.

**Background**

Modern HE came to Myanmar through British colonialism. Rangoon College was opened as an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta in 1878. It became ‘University College’ in 1920 shortly before being amalgamated with the Baptist Judson College to form Rangoon University. Mandalay University was added in 1925. Further teacher training, medical and agricultural colleges were added to Rangoon University between 1930 and 1938, although during World War II, the university was shut down. A year after independence, in 1949, the Burmese Government re-opened Rangoon university by bringing together relatively autonomous colleges and making them into university faculties. Mandalay University was established as a separate university in 1959, and both Yangon and Mandalay Universities were placed directly under state control in 1963 soon after the Ne Win military coup. A year later, the technical faculties of education, engineering, economics and medicine were removed from both Yangon and Mandalay Universities, given degree-awarding powers
as separate technical and professional institutions, leaving both universities with the liberal arts, science and law. In effect, the amalgamation of previous years was reversed, creating a larger number of smaller, specialist universities, akin to the system India was also developing. The 1973 University Education Law consolidated the new division between arts and science universities and technical institutes (*CESR, 2013: 4*). The same University Education Law explicitly deprived HEIs of financial autonomy. As with other state institutions, universities had their budget estimates approved by the state and had to ensure that all expenditures were consistent with state-approved norms (*CESR, 2013: 7*). In 1982, English was re-introduced as the official medium of instruction.\(^\text{5}\)

**1988 and the student protests**

Student protests in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the closure of universities for extended periods. In Yangon, universities were closed for 10 of the 12 years from 1988 to 2000. In light of the protests, the government decided to relocate much of the country’s undergraduate provision outside of the urban centres, making it harder for students to engage in politics and protest. A number of these institutions were new HEIs registered with other ministries. Mandalay and Yangon Universities lost their undergraduate programmes (*CESR, 2013: 5*).\(^\text{6}\) Needless to say, universities that had been isolated from the rest of the world throughout the ‘Burmese way to Socialism’ years became even more isolated after the protests. Myanmar academics had very little opportunity to go abroad and foreigners were not allowed on any of the campuses. Only a few academics received scholarships to complete doctorates, mainly in Japan, returning to teach in the Myanmar system upon return. Without access to international research, new books, journals and the internet, Myanmar’s HEIs simply became a form of schooling that used set textbooks and rote learning without any research input or innovation. Laboratories were under-resourced, libraries stocked materials that were obsolete and out of date and teaching spaces were old and dusty. The universities therefore deteriorated rapidly.

**The universities in 2004, 2005 and 2006**

In the early 2000s, there were hardly any academic links between Myanmar universities and international HEIs or foreign academics,
especially from the West. Limited contact continued through doctoral scholarships with Japanese HEIs. All contact between university staff and foreigners was tightly controlled. Myanmar academics needed approval from the MoE for any travel abroad and permission to invite any foreigners onto their campus. The only programme to support Myanmar academics in the social sciences was set up by Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing, a Myanmar academic who had completed his PhD at Cornell University in the US, and was at the time based at the National University of Singapore. With financial support from the German political foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), whose regional headquarters were in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, he developed a programme to enable foreign (including Western) academics to come and teach intensive courses to Myanmar junior academics at Yangon University. After lobbying helpful regime contacts, Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing and Professor Robert Taylor, a long-time Myanmar specialist, managed to get permission from the government for foreign academics to teach at Myanmar universities. The programme ran for the first time in the summer of 2004 with academics mainly based at National University of Singapore, a few of whom were American citizens. In the summer of 2005, the programme was again conducted, and this time included an academic from the University of London and one from the Hiroshima Peace Institute in Japan, with the team being allowed to teach not only in Yangon University, but also in Mandalay University. These academics between them offered ‘updates’ in anthropology, international relations, political economy, history and research methods, and despite being recorded, they could say anything and teach what they wanted. Money from KAS was used to purchase suitcases full of books to bring into the country, and these were then left for the university libraries. Most of these books would have been photocopied and passed on amongst academics, as it was impossible at that time to purchase books from the outside (Lall, 2016a). The programme ran again in 2006, although only in Yangon and only for Yangon University academics, with an even wider variety of subjects and international staff, one of whom had travelled from the US. In the summer of 2007, the teaching programme ran into some trouble as the permission to teach at the university was withdrawn at the very last minute, after the academics had arrived in Myanmar. The experience was eye opening to those who had come from outside Myanmar, in that many of the young university teachers were completing their PhDs with little or no access to contemporary or up-to-date materials in their subjects. Staying in touch post-programme was also challenging, as their email communications were monitored. The experience was eye opening
Higher education today

At the time of writing, there are 174 HEIs in Myanmar (MoE, 2016) under the jurisdiction of eight different ministries and these fall into two broad categories: arts and science universities and the technical and professional universities. In 2012, there were only eight universities permitted to award doctorates. At the time of writing, all the HEIs are state-financed and accept students after matriculation, depending on their grades. The HE GER is low, at 15.96 per cent (UNESCO, 2019a). In 2018, arts and science universities had 266,833 registered students, technological universities had 75,455 registered students and the recently added teacher education colleges (dealt with in Chapter 5) had 20,069 registered students bringing the grand total to 362,357 students (MoE, 2019c). Those who cannot afford to live away from home access the very poor quality distance education programme that serves around 500,000 students. The total number of students enrolled increased by 14.5 per cent from 2016–7 to 2017–8 (MoE, 2019c: Fig 2.6.2, 52) and the total number of foreign students in the country was 425 in 2017–8, alongside 176 foreign experts (MoE, 2019c: Fig. 2.6.5 and 2.6.6, 54) with 62 per cent of those from China (MoE, 2019c: Fig. 2.6.10). There are 13,610 teachers in HE (MoE, 2019c: 147–8). According to the CESR, 82.6 per cent of academic staff and 60 per cent of students in 2012 were female (CESR, 2013).

To date, Myanmar’s universities have operated quite differently from most other HE systems in the world. Everything is very centralised and the universities have hardly any autonomy. The curriculum and the assessment are set by the MoE. The hiring of staff is also coordinated by the government and most staff are rotated every two to four years to universities around the country, making the setting up of research teams almost impossible. The centralised ‘command and control’ system has resulted in strict hierarchies with many senior academics worried about taking decisions that might be counter to the ministry’s wishes. Although the elite universities have been promised limited autonomy from the education reform process – such as being able to hire local staff and choose their students – the fact that the government controls the budget means that the reality of university governance is severely limited. There
are large differences between regional universities in remote areas, especially in ethnic states, and urban institutions. For example, universities in ethnic states will often have some local staff, who will not necessarily be rotated as part of the national system.

**University-led research in Myanmar**

There has been no systematic research culture at Myanmar universities for a number of decades. It is true that even today after almost eight years of education reform, academics at Myanmar universities are not research active in the same sense that Western universities would understand the term. There are multiple reasons for this – not least the job rotations every few years where academics are assigned to a new university anywhere in the country. This makes developing a personal research portfolio challenging and it is almost impossible to develop a stable research team. In addition to this, the process of getting permission to undertake research is complex and as with everything else in Myanmar, is a top-down process with little input from the bottom. There is no incentive for academics to add to what is already a very full workload of teaching and administration. Research is not only inadequately supported, but does not count formally in the promotion structure (CESR, 2013: 32). This, however, does not mean that research is not taking place at universities. Senior staff of 11 universities from around the country took part in a one-year HE leadership and management programme, entitled ‘Transforming Higher Education in Myanmar’, set up in partnership with the MoE in Myanmar, the Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (IPE) and the BC and run by the UCL Institute of Education in 2018 (Figure 4.1). As part of the programme they were asked to present one research project of their institution that either had been published or was going to be published. The results were surprising in the diversity and depth of what was presented. Some research was part of newly established international collaborations, other research was led by individual academics, other research again focused on improving the teaching and learning experience of their students. The research projects were later presented at Myanmar’s first HE conference attended by Dr Myo Thein Gyi, the Union Minister for Education (Figure 4.2). Linking research to community benefit and teaching is new and still in the very early stages, however it is clear that given the space, academics will want to undertake research. According to the CESR, centres of research excellence were just beginning, but these were: ‘still not well benchmarked
Figure 4.1 Transforming Higher Education Programme, senior management from 11 universities, 2018. Source: Author.

Figure 4.2 First National Higher Education Conference with Minister of Education, 2018. Source: Author.
against international standards, and funding arrangements for them are unclear’ (CESR, 2013: 32). This development means that it is likely that elite universities will start to develop a more sustained research culture, most likely with the help of some of the internationalisation processes and links with international universities (further discussed below).

**Teaching and learning challenges**

Higher education curricula and subject syllabuses are out-dated because teaching is not linked to research, and because Myanmar HEIs have not had access to international content, models and standards for a number of decades. The ministry has traditionally set what is taught, including choosing textbooks. Students are expected to learn content by heart and demonstrate their ‘knowledge’ of the subject in an exam. The teaching methodology, which resembles the rote learning or ordinary school classrooms, is part of the problem. This means that students are not expected to use what they have learnt to solve problems or demonstrate independent critical thinking skills. The CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education (CESR, 2013) pointed out that no feedback on either the curriculum or teaching and learning experience is collected from students, and that employers and industry have no opportunity to contribute to curriculum development, making graduates woefully inadequate for the labour market.

To start to address this, the BC funded a short programme to help improve HE teaching methodology. It was offered both in Yangon and Mandalay Universities in 2017 and the report on the programme concluded that: ‘The workshops proved without doubt that there is an appetite for changing professional practice in HE and that once new practices have been modelled with participants they are adopted enthusiastically’ (Wright and Stoakes, 2017: 5–7). It was reported that the staff who took part were interested in receiving more staff development so that their practice would be closer to what is practiced internationally. The report also explained that part of the problem was that university teachers had had no pedagogical training, and whilst they knew their subject, they were used to teaching from the textbook. The experience is similar even at very senior levels. Many of the university staff such as rectors, pro-rectors and heads of department who took part in the ‘Transforming Higher Education in Myanmar’ training mentioned above, also expressed a great desire for more autonomy in the classroom, on what to teach and how to teach it – especially those from the elite
universities who now have increased access to resources. Things are even more difficult in universities in remote parts of the country where there is little internet access and where books and materials are still out-dated. However, two (both located in ethnic states) of the 11 participating universities undertook a project on student experience and changing teaching methods as an experiment to see how this would affect students. The feedback they received showed that the more interesting classes resulted in reduced student absenteeism. This was also reflected in the earlier BC study that focused on teaching methods, where HEI teaching staff had come to the conclusion that in many cases the reasons for absenteeism was the lack of motivating classes, often due to the textbooks but also the lack of teaching skills and the failure to constructively align the teaching, learning and assessment: ‘If the mode of assessment is usually an end of year/semester exam which asks students to memorise knowledge from the textbook, there is little reason to attend the classes’ (Wright and Stoakes, 2017: 23).

The NESP does put the issue of quality at the heart of HE reform, linking its problems to the centralised model of governance, the inadequate infrastructure and the lack of staff training in ‘experiment-focused’ methodologies. However, the NESP also explains that: ‘University education is criticised for too much emphasis on a rote-learning culture and not providing students with knowledge and skills relevant to Myanmar’s societal and employment needs’ (MoE, 2016: 55). This means that teaching methods need to improve and university staff need support at different levels. For example, class sizes, access to the internet, up-to-date materials and the assessment system are all barriers to improving the teaching and learning experience at Myanmar universities.

A key part of the problem also relates to the language of instruction being English, when so many Myanmar students leave school without a decent grasp of the language, and while so many university teachers also lack fluency.

A report on the workshop on the issue of English as the university language of instruction, organised by the British Academy and École Française d’Extrême-Orient, notes that national law allows individual universities and departments to choose their preferred language of instruction, either English or Burmese or some combination of the two, but that in practice Myanmar universities have adopted a policy whereby English is used as the sole medium of instruction with explanations of terminology or concepts in Burmese if necessary (British Academy and École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2015). The policy emanates from the perception that English is important for the students to master and
that any quality international HE system needs to be conducted in English. In 1962, the Ne Win Government had overseen a ‘nativisation’ of university materials, many of which were translated into Burmese in order to remove what was perceived as the ‘colonial legacy’ of the British from Myanmar’s education system. However, this period is also associated with poverty and economic decline, and consequently, Burmese language is associated with economic failure and insularity and people ‘think of the Burmese language as somehow not sufficient’ (British Academy and École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2015: 6). Consequently, in 1985, English textbooks were reintroduced into the universities and by 1990 the use of English at universities had become the norm. In light of this, it is interesting to note that before the 2015 election, the NLD suggested that the: ‘Medium of instruction shall be decided independently by each university (for example, English, Burmese, etc.)’ (Mackenzie, 2013: 16).

In practice, however, it is clear that many of the academic staff tasked to teach in English have not mastered the language well enough and that students do not understand sufficient English to follow classes either. This became apparent when, at the BC–IPE-funded programme of ‘Transforming Higher Education in Myanmar’, a translator was required to summarise all English lectures by the visiting international staff to make sure that all senior academics were able to follow the proceedings. There is also a discrepancy between staff in Yangon and Mandalay Universities and staff in universities across the country. Therefore, the adoption of English as the language of instruction is highly problematic and makes university education even less accessible to ordinary Myanmar citizens, especially those of ethnic backgrounds whose mother tongue is not Burmese and who have struggled to understand their Burmese-speaking teacher at school. This language disadvantage, discussed in detail in Chapter 6 of this volume, remains one of the biggest barriers for ethnic students to access HE.

**Higher education in reform**

Higher education reforms began in 2012 just like the reforms of the other education sectors under the CESR. However, the first indication of the changes that were to come was during Vice President Dr Sai Mauk Kham’s visit to Mandalay University in July 2011 (New Light of Myanmar, 2011). His address included the message that an educated society was needed to: ‘lead the establishment of a modern and developed nation’
and that whilst the government had spent a lot of money on establishing HEIs and there were more and more graduates, the quality of the graduates was ‘lower gradually’ and ‘the qualification of faculty members is also declining’. This was the first time such a senior member of the Myanmar Government admitted that Myanmar’s HE system had quality issues. Dr Sai Mauk Kham, himself an ethnic Shan, also referred to inclusive and equitable HE (New Light of Myanmar, 2011: 16): ‘University is a garden where students like colorful flowers blossom. Faculty members are like gardeners. Only when over 100 species of flowers blossom, will it be a beautiful garden.’

These concerns were reflected in the CESR reports, but were largely absent from the new law. A key part of the reforms was the drafting of the National Education Law in 2014 that defined the key issues facing HE in Myanmar as: university autonomy, the right to form unions and the right of universities to formulate their own curriculum (Kamibeppu and Chao, 2017). The National Education Law (2014, amended 2015) was not without controversy; as mentioned in Chapter 2, student protests occurred in the streets of Yangon and other cities in Myanmar. As discussed earlier in this volume, student protests have been part of Myanmar’s political scene since independence, but tight controls meant that hardly any protests took place between 1990 and 2014.\footnote{Rose Metro argues that student protests are linked to the country’s history as students have protested for decades not only on education issues, but also on social and economic issues (Metro, 2017). After the new National Education Law was made public, the students organised themselves under the banner of the ‘Action Committee for Democratic Education’ (ACDE) and went back onto the streets (The Irrawaddy, 2015).\footnote{Some of their 11 demands\footnote{Metro argues that the National Education Law makes it clear that the three governments – the SPDC (1988–2010), the Thein Sein USDP-led government (2011–5) and the NLD-led government (2015–onwards) – have very similar conceptions of ‘democratic education’ and want to centralise control of HE and HEIs (Metro, 2017: 211). She argues that the autonomy promised to universities by the National Education Law is largely symbolic, as the NEPC will retain control over the curriculum. ‘… the law functions like an elaborate shell game, in
which autonomy is promised to regional and local authorities, but actual decision-making power remains in the hands of the central government’ (Metro, 2017: 213). Students felt this way as well, and the initial student protests began in May 2014. These were followed by a 4-day march in November 2014 and a 60-day ultimatum to the government to organise a quadripartite meeting that was to include the student leaders, the NNER, members of parliament and the government. The Minister of Education, Dr Mya Aye, urged the students to meet with EPIC. When the students’ ultimatum expired, protesting students from around the country went on a 404-mile march. The first quadripartite meeting took place in February 2015. At the start of that meeting, the NLD issued a statement that the leader of the NNER, Dr Thein Lwin, who had until then been an NLD central committee member, did not represent the party, disowning him and the NNER movement completely. This came as a shock to students who could not understand why the NLD would not support them at such a crucial time. It also showed that the NLD would side with the government rather than the protesting students when it came to governance, centralisation and control issues. The quadripartite negotiations did not reach a satisfactory conclusion and student protests continued. In March 2015, the government used force, cracking down on the students, beating them with batons in the streets and arresting them. 18 Ultimately, the contentious National Education Law was revised in 2015, but there were only minor concessions from the government and it remained largely as it had been originally drafted.

The National League for Democracy’s (NLD) higher education reform project

Education has remained a key priority of the NLD Government. Former Rector of West Yangon University, Dr Myo Thein Gyi, a hardliner during the 2014 student protests, 19 was appointed Minister of Education by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. 20 Since 2016, he has headed the education reform process focused on delivering the priorities as defined by the NESP.

Three strategies for HE reform are identified in the NESP (MoE, 2016), based on the National Education Law and the CESR. These are: ‘to strengthen higher education governance and management capacity; to improve the quality and relevance of higher education; and to expand equitable access to higher education’. The NESP expects universities to gradually become more autonomous. Whilst devolution offers universities the opportunity to take control, the biggest hurdle remains the centralised
budget that does not allow individual institutions to make their own decisions. Universities will, therefore, face challenges to develop their own research agenda. Curricula that have traditionally been passed down from the MoE to teach subjects will have to be revised, and courses supplemented with new and relevant material for which individual universities and not the MoE will be responsible, without much in the way of resources for making such changes. For the first time, universities will have to engage with issues such as ethics, student engagement, international engagement and at high-level meetings new ways of funding are being discussed which could mean significant changes for the way universities operate. The first steps in this direction have been taken with Yangon and Mandalay Universities being allowed to select their students, and it is expected that as a next step they will be allowed to hire some of their own staff, with this being a test case for granting autonomy.

The NLD’s focus has been on the historical flagship of Yangon University, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pushing to restore it to its former ‘glory’ as one of Asia’s leading universities. She personally asked both Britain and Australia to support Yangon University’s development. In fact, Yangon University was expected to become the first autonomous arts and science university, although interviews at the MoE in September 2019 showed that the MoE planned to have 14 universities reach autonomy across two clusters – Yangon and Mandalay – by the end of 2020. In his early assessment of Myanmar’s HE system and the potential for reforms, Professor Kenneth King had noted that academic freedom was key to some, but less so to others whose priorities were more around a more balanced teaching schedule:

Academic autonomy meant different things to different people. Academics were in fact civil servants and many were not in fact anxious to change this status. For others, academic freedom meant a change to the situation in which they had almost no free time. For staff in regular arts and science universities there were major demands on their time from the several cycles of assessment, and intensive 10-day preparation, related to the requirements of the distance university students. This was compulsory for them, so their concern was not so much academic freedom, but they had almost no free time at all during the year. (Mackenzie, 2013:16)

Before coming to power the NLD had promised: ‘educational freedom in order to increase opportunities for learning, raise the secondary school
completion rates and the quality of education’ (Thein Lwin, cited in Mackenzie, 2013:16). The recommendations go on to promise: ‘There shall be academic freedom in research and freedom to publish the findings. Universities shall have the freedom to engage with different universities and institutions around the world for educational purposes’ (Thein Lwin, cited in Mackenzie, 2013:16). The BC report points out that: ‘the same “Recommendations” suggest that although different university departments should write their own curriculum, they also say that the university’s council should compile a draft curriculum, and then send it up to the Universities Central Council for approval’ (Mackenzie, 2013:16), so it is unclear how much autonomy and academic freedom will actually be given.

Yangon University’s test case shows how the top-down nature of education reforms is likely to impact universities in a rather more cosmetic than substantive way. Drawing on Arnhold et al.’s educational reconstruction conceptual framework (Arnhold et al., 1998), Esson and Wang analysed the reform process of Yangon University in 2013 and argued that efforts have failed to consider the ideological and psychological reconstruction of the university within the reform process (Esson and Wang, 2018). Esson and Wang describe how, in November 2012, a special parliamentary committee personally chaired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was formed to oversee the reform of Yangon University. Once Yangon University was designated as a ‘Centre of Excellence’ and given priority to upgrade its facilities to international standards, the physical reconstruction began with (in 2012–3) a budget of MMK 6446.6 million (approximately USD 7.2 million) – just in time for President Obama’s visit. Government funds were supplemented by a donation of MMK 500 million (approximately USD 555,000) made by Yangon University alumni. According to Esson and Wang, the money was spent mostly on cosmetic changes such as painting and decorating while the staff and students would have prioritised upgrading basic facilities such as water and electricity supplies (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1184–90).

Esson and Wang go on to describe how a library officer complained that despite the reforms: ‘both of the main libraries still do not have a computerised search facility, and people still have to use manual card-catalogues for book searches’ (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1190). In keeping with the traditional top-down way of implementing change, policies have been implemented with little or no consultation with staff and/or students (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1192). The article does describe other positive changes that have emerged as part of Yangon University’s change in status – one being that staff are now allowed to engage internationally
and enter into international collaborations, principally with the aim to facilitate staff capacity building. More on this is detailed below.

Myanmar’s new higher education institutions

The NESP requires new HE coordinating bodies to be established to underpin the change process in HE. This includes the NEPC in 2019, NIHED and the Rectors’ Committee (established in 2018). The NEPC is the overarching body, independent from the MoE, and focused on the formulation and implementation of the reform of education policy. It was designed to have an executive role in advising and coordinating HE policy and legislation in the form of Myanmar’s 30-year Long-term Education Development Plan as well as coordinating with development partners (Channon, 2017). At the time of writing, the NEPC comprises three committees: the National Curriculum Committee, the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC), and a Rectors’ Committee, as well as an affiliated National Institute for Higher Education Development.

The Rectors’ Committee was established in March 2018 with representatives from 173 of Myanmar’s public universities. It is a coordination, collaboration and negotiation body that is supporting universities with reform, and is meant to guide the process leading to autonomy, starting with limited decentralisation. It is expected to become the collective national HE governance body representing and taking collective responsibility for a system of autonomous universities.

NAQAC is responsible for quality policies for the entire education sector. Currently, NAQAC is focusing on developing standards and guidelines for accreditation and quality assurance for Myanmar’s HEIs, based on the relevant ASEAN instruments. At the time of writing, it is unclear how institutions will relate their own governance and quality structures to NAQAC.

NIHED was established: ‘to improve higher education governance and management’ and ‘build individual skills and strengthen institutional capabilities’. Its mandate included supporting policy makers through research and supporting HEI senior staff through training so as to sustain the reform process. The BC–IPE-funded programme of ‘Transforming Higher Education in Myanmar’ was tasked with training the senior trainers of NIHED and co-constructing part of a leadership and management curriculum with them.

These new administrative structures are meant to support the HE reform process and move universities towards more autonomy, yet in
many ways they maintain traditional hierarchies. Structural change is also not sufficient in achieving what is a monumental shift. The sectoral needs assessment undertaken by the Leadership Foundation (UK) in 2016–7 suggested that senior HE staff needed training at three levels – system, institutional and personal. This included training in funding, quality assurance, institutional accountability, information management, planning and reporting, governance frameworks, leadership behaviours, institutional strategy development and how quality systems can be set up to improve research, teaching and assessment. It also included practical management skills such as leading and managing change, motivational skills, stakeholder management (including with potential international university partners), analysis and critical thinking and effective decision making. The main challenge for the university staff is how to work in an increasingly autonomous system, rather than take orders from above.

At the moment, it looks like the NEPC may simply replace the MoE in the top-down role it has played, unless the academic staff receive relevant training to change ways of working across the system. To remedy this, the Leadership Foundation suggested that development for rectors and pro rectors: ‘should focus on strategy, quality assurance, management information and sources of funding’ and that: ‘training for administrative Heads and Registrars should focus on data, governance and strategy issues’ (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 2016: 17).

Distance education: Increasing access?

There are a number of reasons why Myanmar hosts one of the world’s largest (but also possibly worst) distance education systems, with around 500,000 part-time students. In part, distance education offers access to the poorer sections of society, where students can study part time whilst still working and living at home. It also received state support as a result of the 1988 and 1990 student protests – students who are not living together in university residences are less likely to get involved in national protests. The current system is coordinated by two distance education universities, Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) for Lower Myanmar, and Mandalay University of Distance Education (MUDE) for Upper Myanmar. There are 19 bachelor-level courses delivered by 35 learning centres (15 for YUDE and 20 for MUDE) in day universities providing national coverage (Fawssett and Gregson 2016: 3). However, teachers have not been trained to deliver courses appropriately through a distance learning pedagogy. Distance education arts students attend
the day university twice a year, once to enrol, between January to March, the other time for 10 days to prepare for and sit the exam at the end of the academic year (October–November) for what is in effect a cramming session that covers the same material as what is usually delivered over four months for full-time students. Science students are additionally required to attend 12 weekends over the year for practical sessions. There are no dedicated distance education staff. All sessions are delivered by day university teachers mostly in Burmese – something they have to do on top of their regular workload of teaching day students. Since the exam preparation cramming sessions cover the same material the students have been asked to learn at home, students do not always attend for the whole 10 days although it is compulsory (Fawsett and Gregson, 2016: 20–1). Some teachers also offer private tuition for both full-time and distance students, which allows students to engage with the teachers directly. Most people in Myanmar are aware of the low quality of the distance education system, yet interestingly research by the Open University found that employers (that were interviewed for that research) said they did not distinguish between distance education and full-time HE degrees, rather employment depended on the skills of the candidates (Fawsett and Gregson, 2016: 27).

Inclusive higher education?

Given that HE is almost free and there are over 150 institutions around the country and a large distance education system for those who have to work or cannot live away from home, one could imagine that Myanmar has an inclusive tradition of HE. Yet the CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education quotes that only 11 per cent of Myanmar youth are able to access HE (CESR, 2013). Entrance to university depends on students’ scores in the matriculation exam, taken in Grade 10 at the age of 16. According to the MoE, 35 per cent of those sitting pass the exam, and of these 40 per cent are from urban areas, 32 per cent from rural areas, and 21 per cent are from poor families (MoE, 2014: 21). There are important regional differences, with Chin State having the lowest matriculation pass rate at 17 per cent. It is clear that students from urban areas are almost twice as likely to go to university as poorer students from rural areas, who would additionally have to bear the cost of boarding, a major disincentive for poor families. The fact that there are few scholarships, and those that do exist are so low (sometimes just a few hundred MMKs
a month) that they barely warrant the effort of the application compounds the problem, so it is not enough that fees are low.\textsuperscript{28}

There are also substantial gender differences in HE. Girls overall tend to do better than boys although rural girls are still at a disadvantage.\textsuperscript{29} In fact, superficially, the gender disparity seems to go against boys and men with significantly more female students enrolled than male students. This is even more pronounced in the arts and science HEIs. There are also more female university teaching staff – mirroring the imbalance of female–male teachers in schools, largely because the low salaries make the profession unattractive to men. Disaggregated figures for HE are not available, however the IHLCS shows that, for the overall education sector, employment represented 1 per cent of the overall male workforce, compared with 4.9 per cent for women (\textcite{Mackenzie, 2013: 27–8}).

Traditionally, the main focus of ‘inclusion’ in education in Myanmar has been on poorer sections of society through donations to monasteries to support monastic schools (as seen in \textsuperscript{Chapter 3}), rather than equality and equity pertaining to the unequal access to education of different ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{30} This inequity has been brought to the fore through the incomplete peace process that has run in parallel with the wider education and other reforms (\textcite{Lall and South, 2018}). It is generally recognised that ethnic students have had less access to education as a whole, and HE in particular, largely because of lasting disadvantages due to the language barrier at primary school level. Currently, there is no ethnic breakdown of participation of ethnic students in HE.\textsuperscript{31} The CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education had already identified this gap, saying it was unclear how Myanmar’s wide ethnic diversity was represented in HE (\textcite{CESR, 2013: 1}). Equity in this report is represented in terms of a traditional belief in: ‘the five pillars of Myanmar society – farmers, workers, students, monks and the military’ and the need to unite them (\textcite{Channon, 2017: 22}). This is to foster an atmosphere of: ‘empathy and trust … in the pursuit of a common goal’ which is posited as: ‘the development of the nation’ (\textcite{CESR, 2013: 22}). The difficulties involved in achieving this are acknowledged and inequality and poverty are cited as major obstacles. Two recommendations in this CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education included, first, to support modelling exercises designed to determine the relative costs and benefits of widening access to HE, including the option of raising fees; and second, to develop an index of minimum quality using teacher-to-student ratios. In comparison with the CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education, which identified barriers to access on the basis of ethnicity as a key
priority (explicitly referencing the Rohingyas), the CESR Phase 2 Report (Brady and CESR, 2014) shied away from explicitly addressing exclusion resulting from ethnicity, gender, religion, language or disability (Channon, 2017). Emerging out of the CESR reports, one of the NESP strategies for the reform and development of the HE sector is to expand: ‘equitable access to higher education’. It is unclear who is included in this definition of ‘equity’ but one can deduce from the wider text that the prime focus is on the poor as opposed to those from minority backgrounds, especially those whose first language might not be Burmese. The recommendations include creating a good learning environment (including good dormitories for those coming from distant locations) and promoting student support programmes so that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access and complete their studies. This last NESP component is rather thinner than the others and the language is significantly watered down from the original CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education.

Senior MoE staff are aware of the issues of inclusion, widening participation and inequity between ethnic groups and regions. This was evident when a member of the NEPC gave a presentation at the second National Conference on Higher Education in October 2018 in Yangon’s Diamond Jubilee Hall. His presentation entitled ‘Equity in Myanmar’s Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges’, emphasised that engaging with these issues was still a major priority of Myanmar’s HE reform. Explaining the disparities across Myanmar society based on geographic regions, ethnic groups (in this case, based on numbers of people living in ethnic states as opposed to an ethnic breakdown), socio-economic status, disability and gender, he held that increased disparity would widen the social divide, gradually leading to social unrest, and conflict and chaos in the society. Therefore ‘equity interventions’ were needed to reduce disparities and include marginalised groups to ensure social justice, and facilitate social cohesion, peace and prosperity of the whole society. Based on data from the 2014 census, examples of inequity presented included the higher urban rates of education completion, much higher numbers of urban female than male students enrolled in HEIs, and 68 per cent of young people from the richest quintile attaining education levels beyond secondary education versus only 1.2 per cent of those from the poorest quintile going beyond secondary education. Although not explicitly expressed, it was acknowledged that rural-based ethnic young people are, therefore, least likely to achieve similar education outcomes to their Bamar urban counterparts.
Referring to the relevant policy texts of the 2008 Constitution, the
2014 and 2015 National Education Law, the 2015 Law for Protection of
the Rights of National Races and the 2015 Law on the Rights of Persons
with Disability, the senior policy official explained that Myanmar, as
part of its reforms, had made commitments to reduce inequity from a
legislative perspective, but that programmes were needed to put these
into practice. One way forward, he suggested, was to establish more
HEIs across the country to address the imbalanced distribution reflected
in too many students (60 per cent) enrolling in the low-quality distance
education programmes. The urban and rural divide is also seen in the
allocation of resources, reflected in regional universities having much
worse teacher-to-student ratios than urban institutions, with a teacher-
to-student ratio of 1:5 in Yangon University but 1:29 in Kalay University
in the west of the country. The key challenge that emerged from the
conference keynote was that of balancing equity and inclusion on one
hand, and quality and excellence on the other, captured through the
phrase ‘Inclusive Excellence’. Figure 4.3 shows the follow-on session
where participants were asked to think about how to work on inclusion
at an institutional level.

Figure 4.3  Second National Higher Education Conference, 2018:
Building Quality and Equity in Higher Education. Source: Author.
This policy perspective is supported by Lynne Heslop’s interviews of two MoE officials, who saw the government’s efforts towards peace-building reflected in the opening of universities in rural and ethnic areas to enable greater access and participation of marginalised and conflict-affected communities (Heslop, 2019). One of them is quoted as saying: ‘We would like to consider the inclusive and equitable access for the education, because Myanmar has very diverse ethnic groups. That’s why in every region and state there are universities for social science, science and engineering and computer universities’ (Heslop, 2019: 184–5). Heslop argues that, on the one hand, the opening of more universities in ethnic states can be seen to contribute to a more equitable access to HE, but that on the other, keeps ethnic intellectuals separate from the Bamar majority areas, to possibly counter student activism and possible challenges to the state.

Competing with the region and international collaborations

As mentioned in the introduction, Myanmar’s HE reform has been driven by the desire to catch up with the rest of the world and to give students suitable skills for the job market. Much of what is happening in HE is, therefore, being contextualised within ASEAN and Myanmar’s desire is to adopt ASEAN standards as benchmarks for its own reform goals. The CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education also saw adapting to ASEAN benchmarks as a way to engage with Myanmar’s issues of wider societal inequalities and social justice (CESR, 2013: 2):

Myanmar’s Human Development Index (HDI) remains low in comparison with those of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Income distribution remains unequal, with significant disparities evident between rural and urban incomes, and geographically. A Gender Inequality Index (GEI) of 100 is higher than neighbouring ASEAN member states. Rates of poverty declined from 32.1% in 2005 to 25.6% in 2010 – but these figures do properly reflect the extent of the poverty gaps between rural and urban populations, ethnic groups, and combinations thereof. The UNDP's Human Development Report for 2011 showed over 23% of the population suffering multidimensional poverty, 13.4% of the population as being vulnerable to poverty, and 9.4% of the population as being vulnerable to extreme poverty. HDI scores, though up from 0.30
in 1990 to 0.48 in 2011, remain the lowest for Southeast Asia. Myanmar’s global HDI rank is currently 149, of a total country count of 187. These circumstances impact directly on educational participation and progression.

It is clear that the current state of Myanmar’s HE system compares unfavourably with its neighbours in the region in terms of investment in education, research output, knowledge economy indices and enrolment ratios. The government has recognised that alongside the need for infrastructure development to match modern universities in the region, there is also a need for capacity building in teaching, administration and research quality as significant priorities if Myanmar is to be comparable to its neighbours and wider afield. In fact, the evidence from the CESR and the NESP suggests that Myanmar wishes to align its HE system with its neighbours in order to move to become a world-class HE system that can enter global university rankings. Multiple interviews with the Department of Higher Education at the MoE have shown this to be a prime motivator and that both the MoE and the senior staff of the NEPC want to see Yangon University listed in a recognised rankings system. In order to do this, Myanmar HEIs have begun the process of integration into the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance Framework (AUN-QA). The aim is not solely academic – adapting to shared and recognised frameworks is also driven by the concern to develop a recognised qualifications system that will promote greater workforce mobility. Human capital creation and a qualified workforce is part of NESP’s mission statement (MoE, 2016: 188): ‘to produce graduate human resources who possess the required qualifications for the construction of a new, modern, developed, disciplined, democratic nation’, requiring graduate qualifications to be accepted outside of Myanmar. This is also why Myanmar is taking part in the EU-funded SHARE programme that focuses on quality assurance and transferability of degrees. SHARE’s overarching objective is to: ‘strengthen regional cooperation, enhance the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN HEIs and students, contributing to an ASEAN Community beyond 2015’. SHARE activities build on the related ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) Task Force that is being developed by the ASEAN–Australia and New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA). Part of the work is also to develop a credit transfer system that aims to facilitate student mobility, that in turn is supported by intra-ASEAN and ASEAN–EU scholarships.
International engagement and international partnerships

Funding to HE by international donors and agencies has been limited – in fact, Heslop argues that HE has been largely neglected by development partners and international aid agencies (Heslop, 2019). A range of short-term capacity-building programmes have been funded by UNESCO, the BC and the Open Society Foundation. While Australia, the UK, Japan and China offer scholarships, JICA is the only development partner that has a sustained programme of support for some of Myanmar’s technical HEIs, in particular, Yangon Technological University and Mandalay Technological University. The representative for JICA in Tokyo mentioned that their particular focus is on engineering, the medical and agricultural sectors. Overall, JICA is collaborating with six technical universities in Myanmar, including establishing labs at Yangon Technological University as well as sending academics in residence to Yangon Technological University and Mandalay Technological University to help enhance research capability and the quality of undergraduate teaching. Beyond this, Japan is supporting 26 Myanmar HEIs by strengthening the Engineering Education ASEAN Network (Phase VI, 2018–21). Aside from offering scholarships for 44 doctoral students at Japanese universities, JICA also supports HE by linking HEIs with industry, sending university students to companies for internship in Thilawa SEZ, which is largely run by Japanese companies.\(^{38}\)

Most of HE’s international engagement seems to be through university partnerships where Myanmar universities have signed MoUs with international counterparts. At the start of the reforms, in 2012, such MoUs were signed without much thought of how to leverage them to the advantage of the Myanmar HEI. In 2014–5, the MoE reported 102 MoUs and MoAs with foreign institutions, falling to 51 and 29 in the subsequent 2 years (MoE 2019c: 53, Fig. 2.6.4). Many ended up in a filing cabinet without much follow up. Most international universities have been particularly interested in engaging with Yangon or Mandalay Universities as opposed to regional universities, or technical specialist universities in Yangon and/or Mandalay. Esson and Wang describe how Yangon University has developed its programme of internationalisation through: ‘visiting academics programmes with the Open Society Foundation, two centres of excellence – one in collaboration with the University of Cologne (Germany), and the other a joint venture with Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Chung Aung University (South Korea), and the e-Tekkatho project (an on-line and off-line library database project) with
the University of Manchester (UK)’ (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1191). These collaborations have not been without challenges and whilst staff and students in Esson and Wang’s research hope that such exposure will serve as a catalyst for change, all those taking part still face the challenge that any fieldwork that might be required still has to be authorised, and are subject to ‘long standing and ingrained attempts to control academic freedom’ (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1192). Their research shows that academics in the sciences had more freedom to conduct the research as they wished compared to those in the arts and social sciences.39

Lynne Heslop’s doctoral work examining the international collaborations of four Myanmar HEIs (three government universities and one private HEI) with British institutions, shows that the benefits of such collaborations are also limited for the Myanmar partner universities. Her study exposes the injustice in the HE international interactions as well as how the internationalisation processes that are supposed to help build the capacity of Myanmar HEIs actually end up: ‘entrenching inequalities in the global circulation of knowledge production, perpetuate the epistemological subordination of Myanmar researchers, and create or maintain economic, cultural and political hegemonies in resources and power, reproducing the dependencies of Myanmar public HEIs and privileging Northern HEI partners’ (Heslop, 2019: 5). Her work, focused on answering the question in how far HEI partnerships could improve social justice in Myanmar, concludes that these kinds of interactions do not in general allow for greater social justice within Myanmar or between Myanmar and the wider world of global academia.

**Mid-Term Review of the NESP**

As already discussed in Chapter 2, in the summer of 2019, the NESP reached its mid-point and the MoE organised a MTR (MoE, 2019b and 2020) to establish if the reforms were ‘on track’. For HE, this meant reviewing the three drivers for change.

With regard to ‘Strengthening Management (including autonomy)’, the MTR reports that the Rectors consider ‘Autonomy’ the highest priority reform. While the NESP does not envisage full independence of HEIs, it was envisaged that they should have autonomous decision making over elements such as: governance and management; academic profile and curriculum; external and financial partnerships; and research. The MTR reports that the Department for Higher Education has increased
technical support to an initial lead batch of (no more than eight) HEIs: ‘to make integrated progress with establishment of new arrangements for autonomy, piloting of new admissions process, piloting quality assurance processes, providing management and leadership support to Rectors’ and HEI management’ (MoE, 2020: xiii). Autonomy was officially granted to 16 HEIs in September 2016.

In regard to the driver of ‘Quality and Relevance’, which includes developing a quality assurance framework for all sub sectors so as to provide a framework for, and assessment of, the achievement of quality of education against standards, with the aim of sustaining the reforms over the long term, the MTR reports that: ‘Progress has been made: an external quality assurance system for Higher Education is in development’ and due to be implemented in 2020 (MoE, 2020: x–xi).

There is less of a review of what has been achieved in relation to ‘Equitable Access’. The MTR reviews distance education and concludes that it is: ‘widely available but needs significant improvement’ as the number of students accessing this system of HE: ‘is now approximately equal to the number of students attending university’. The MTR seems to conclude that least progress has been made in this area as: ‘There appears to be little investment in the development of online resources or the development of dedicated delivery platforms. There was little investment in developing quality face-to-face events to supplement the individual, home based learning’ (MoE, 2020: x–xi). No more is said on how to rectify the inequities within the system.

Conclusion

As Myanmar embraces a globalising world, HE in Myanmar is poised for a deep transformation. Developing indigenous HE systems has been a pathway out of dependence on colonial powers (Castells, 1994). However, neo-liberal policies can function to recreate dependent relationships, especially if international standards become the domestic benchmarks and links with global universities are the main medium for quality enhancement. The international markers for success may need to be adapted with new criteria and incentives (Naidoo, 2007).

As discussed by Kandiko-Howson and Lall, there are possibilities for developing countries such as Myanmar to showcase models for excellence that build on traditional values, notably inclusion, care for the environment and more sustainable ways of living (Kandiko-Howson and Lall, 2020). However, while the pathway of internationalisation
that Myanmar’s HE system has chosen might take it out of international isolation, there is a risk of creating new exploitative relationships (through the MoUs universities are signing that benefit the international partners more than themselves). In order to become ‘recognised’, the universities in Myanmar have to accept international practices. Some of these will improve the quality of their research and teaching, others, such as competition for funding, will just reproduce neo-liberal policies that are failing in other countries. The desire to promote (and to financially support) developing competitive research-intensive universities places pressure on flagship urban institutions to work towards international levels of research and publications, whereas regional universities are not brought into this discourse. This is likely to increase stratification of the system, exacerbating the urban and rural divide and subsequent consequences for equity across the country. For example, a neo-liberal push for international collaboration with urban flagship universities is at odds with local needs for HE to promote integration and social justice across ethnic regions and conflict-affected regions within the country (Heslop, 2019). Domestically, it is clear that a tiered – perhaps even three-tier system – is being proposed, with Yangon and Mandalay Universities at the helm of an elite system, and regional universities in ethnic states at the bottom of the pile, not being given the required autonomy, and not benefitting from greater investment. This, in turn, will embed the disparities between ethnic students who manage to get into universities close to home, compared to the Bamar students accessing urban HE provision, in turn, exacerbating the already existing social inequalities. What is proposed is a system that will not be able to increase social justice. Second- and third-tier universities, their staff and students are unlikely to receive the same recognition and respect as their elite counterparts. The NESP MTR already shows that issues of equity and access are not the sector’s top priority.

Notes

1 The author was part of a small team training the NIHED senior trainers and supporting NIHED in its first HE training of 11 universities.

2 There are over 500,000 students at the University of Distance Education (Yangon) that serves Lower Myanmar and at the University of Distance Education (Mandalay) that serves Upper Myanmar. The largest Open University in the world is India’s Indira Gandhi Open University with around 4 million students, however, it offers both distance and face-to-face education.

3 This is a double disadvantage as HE is supposed to be in English, and the books are in English, even if the actual teaching is in Burmese. Many ethnic nationality students are unable to matriculate because of their poor levels of Burmese, making it impossible for them to access HE. Those who do make it then find that following course materials in English presents a double challenge.
Renamed when Rangoon was renamed Yangon.

Having been replaced in 1962 by Burmese.

This has recently been reversed as part of the education reforms with both universities now having resumed undergraduate provision.

The author was the academic from the University of London.

U Than Aung was the Education Minister with whom Professor Robert Taylor and Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing negotiated the first few teaching programmes at Yangon and Mandalay Universities. He was replaced by Dr Chan Nyein who cancelled the programme for the MoE, so it was arranged to move the teaching to the Myanmar Fisheries Federation (MFF) and the students came from Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). More on the role of MFF in Lall, 2016a.

‘Yangon University, Mandalay University, Yangon Institute of Economics, Yangon Institute of Education, Mawlamyine University, Monywa Institute of Economics, Meiktila Institute of Economics, and Yangon University of Foreign Languages. About 2,000 candidates were enrolled in PhD programmes across these eight institutions – but this figure may not be entirely reliable. Possibly, as many as one-half of these candidates were enrolled at the University of Yangon’ (CESR, 2013: 8).

Universities have: ‘no authority on appointments, travel, research, promotion, curriculum development, disciplinary association conference, even the planning of a golden anniversary university conference’ (senior staff comment). Another rector noted that there was ‘no authority to appoint even lower order maintenance staff, even a window-cleaner. Everything had to go up ‘through proper channels’. Even when a member of staff is invited to a prestigious conference in the region, the conference date may have passed before any decision is taken “on high”. If someone is allowed to travel to a meeting, their passport has to be returned afterwards.’ […] HEIs have been formally without financial autonomy since the 1970s. However, from 1998, there has been the possibility of a measure of income generation through what are termed Human Resource Development (HRD) courses in most if not all HEIs under the MoE. These often take place early in the day, before regular working hours, or after work. As the CESR notes, the scale and the income associated with what are in effect parallel courses are not well known. But in at least one major university, the HRD numbers in masters and diploma courses are almost 50 per cent of the entire university enrolment. Also, CESR notes that the total number of HRD courses are 195 as compared with regular courses which are 215 (CESR, 2013).

Yangon University, Yangon Technological University, Yangon University of Education, Yangon University of Economics, Medicine 1 (Yangon), Mandalay University, Mandalay Technical University, Yein Agricultural University, Taunggyi University, Sittwe University and Myitkyina University.

The BC-funded training focused on managing change and engaging senior staff with issues pertaining to developing their own curricula and assessments, and developing a research strategy as well as developing international partnerships with foreign universities. The author was part of the training team.

Burmese – which is the official language – is the native spoken language of approximately 30 million people out of a total population of over 53 million (British Academy and École Francaise d’Extrême-Orient, 2015: 5).

But presumably not including any ethnic languages.

There were some protests in Yangon in 1996, but they were put down very quickly.

Discussed also in Chapter 2.

The 11 demands are as follows:

- Inclusion of representatives of teachers and students in legislation process of education policies and laws, by-laws and other related laws
- The right to freely establish and operate student and teacher unions and legal recognition for them
- Establishment of National Education Commission and University Coordination Committee mentioned in the approved National Education Law
- Self-determination and self-management on educational affairs of individual state/regions and schools
- Modifying current examination and university matriculation system
• Modifying teaching methods to such that ensure freedom for thinking and self-studying of students
• Inclusion of a provision in the National Education Law that ensure freedom for the practice of ethnic languages and mother tongue-based multilingual education for ethnic populations and tribes
• Inclusive education for all children including children with disabilities
• Resumption of enrolment for students previously expelled from schools due to the student uprisings
• Allocation of 20 per cent of national budget for education
• Regulating of free compulsory education up to middle school level rather than primary level

20 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had appointed herself Minister of Education before the new role of State Counsellor was created for her.
22 This of course is bound to create a difference between locally hired staff attached to individual universities versus staff hired by the MoE, who rotate between institutions and have government employee status. Whilst the universities are aware that this will create issues, at the time of writing, no solutions have been proposed.
23 In September 2020, 16 universities were granted autonomy.
25 There is a system of rotation (Fawsett and Gregson, 2016: 8).
26 University entrance is being changed as part of the ongoing curricular and examination reforms process. It is unclear at the time of writing if the matriculation will stand, and be taken in Grade 11 or 12, and/or if universities will offer their own entrance exams (as in Japan).
27 Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR, 2013). According to a preliminary analysis of data from the IHLCs (IHLCs, 2011: 9) in Myanmar in 2009–10, the net enrolment rate of young people aged 18–21 in HE was 10.6 per cent, but with some marked disparities between different groups of young people. Among urban households, almost 30 per cent of 18 and 19 year olds were enrolled in HE, compared with about 9 per cent for rural households, and less than 5 per cent for poor rural households.
28 ‘[… ] in the interests of equity, tuition fees are kept low, with 20,000 MMK (USD 23.50) commonly cited. A policy of having low tuition fees is very much in accord with regional initiatives to move towards more inclusive HE models, which do not discriminate against the poor, rural dwellers, women and ethnic minorities. In HEIs managed by the Ministry of Defence and all students are employees and have military ranks, no fees are applied, a practice that, according to one Rector allowed these HEIs to ensure that perhaps half their intake came from rural areas, with another 30% coming from poor families’ (Mackenzie, 2013:18).
29 To remedy this, the pass mark for university entrance for boys has dropped (Fawssett and Gregson, 2016: 8).
30 Myanmar has 135 recognised ethnic groups and seven ethnic states that have a majority of ethnic residents. More on this in Chapters 6 and 7 of this volume.
31 The 2014 Census shows the break-down of people whose highest education attainment is post-secondary education by state, but not by ethnic group. In any case, the percentage of those having completed tertiary education in ethnic states is lower than the national average of 9 per cent (GoM, 2017: 56).
32 And who are therefore disadvantaged for life as they will have done less well on the school matriculation examination that to date is the entrance exam for all universities.
33 See Kandiko-Howson and Lall, 2020 for more detail.
34 The ethnic breakdown figures in and outside the ethnic states collected in the 2014 Census remain unpublished. See Chapter 6 in this volume for more details.
35 Bamar (Burman) are the dominant ethnic group.
38 Interview with Tokyo- and Yangon-based JICA staff on the HE reforms in 2018 and 2019.
39 One head of department based in the arts explained that all research proposals have to be submitted to the MoE not only for funding, but general approval, and the Ministry does not approve research topics deemed ‘politically sensitive’ (Esson and Wang, 2018: 1192–3).