

Rebuilding social science research systems in Myanmar: The past informs the future

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Abstract

International interest in Myanmar increased exponentially from 2010 when the first quasi-democratic election was held, signalling the beginning of transition from military to democratic rule. Major reforms were needed to facilitate Myanmar's economic and social development. However, decades of social isolation, distrust in government, and stagnation of the education system degraded Myanmar's research capabilities to a point whereby no meaningful data was available to determine areas of critical need or baseline positions to support donor-assisted development. A decade later, research data on Myanmar has developed greatly but remains largely controlled by foreign entities. An assessment of Myanmar's research environment undertaken in 2019 utilising the Global Development Network's research assessment framework identified key actors in social science research and significant barriers to local research capacity development in the higher education sector. A critical factor to address in order to achieve meaningful change in Myanmar's higher education research systems is the relationship between central government and higher education institutions. This step is essential in progressing Myanmar's higher education autonomy and academic freedoms.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Myanmar was identified as a target country by the Global Development Network (GDN) for the scaling up of its international program "Doing Research Assessment" during the proof of concept phase (Global Development Network, 2020).¹ The program aims to map research environments in developing countries, to inform local research policy and capacity building. It has a social science research focus acknowledging the general lack of public sector research in science, health, and technology across developing nations, due largely to cost and paucity of infrastructure. Prior to 2011, Myanmar

¹ The DRA Myanmar project was undertaken in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada through its Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative (<https://www.idrc.ca/en/initiative/knowledge-democracy-myanmar>). The GDN DRA tools have developed following pilot studies in 11 countries. Myanmar is one of four countries selected to trial the survey tools (<http://www.gdn.int/doingresearch/about>).

was the only country in Southeast Asia where government spending on the defence sector was consistently higher than spending on health and education combined (Turnell, 2011). This generated reports on Myanmar's current higher education (HE) research systems and confirmed its depleted state (Asian Development Bank, 2013; Esson and Wang 2018). Myanmar is a developing country in political transition – under military rule from 1962–2010, the nation experienced a decade with elected governments and re-engagement with the international community prior to the military coup of February 1, 2021. The government's reform agendas, articulated in the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2018–2030, were aligned with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2018).² Significant progress has been made across all sectors, though the country is still faced with many challenges which served to prolong conflicts that have plagued Myanmar's development since its independence (Simpson and Farrelly, 2020).

When scoping the Myanmar project, it rapidly became apparent that the social science research sector is dominated by foreign agencies and researchers – INGOs and UN agencies, usually with foreign Principal Investigators (PIs) and Myanmar research assistants. Nearly all social science research data generated in Myanmar occurs through foreign-led projects and donor-funded programs, a situation not unusual in developing countries. The scoping phase also brought into focus that while Myanmar has an established higher education (HE) sector, it was not generating research or actively participating in research that linked to or was directed by government policies and objectives. While this situation has been anecdotally known to both Myanmar and foreign researchers and policymakers, no formal analysis of the HE social science research environment had been undertaken.

Myanmar's government has ambitions to develop its own research infrastructure, as outlined in the National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021 (NESP1) and to be expanded in the framework for NESP2 2021–2030 (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, effective planning can only be undertaken when the existing research environment is well understood. It was decided that the GDN study could be well used to focus on a preliminary investigation of the research systems of Myanmar's HEIs, to assist government and donors develop applicable strategies for capacity building within this sector. This paper outlines the broad methodology of the DRA project undertaken in Myanmar. The selected results for discussion in this paper focus on systemic issues within the HE sector that are seen to be hindering social science research development. To consider how these may be addressed, mapping Myanmar's research history provides valuable context for developing effective strategies to boost public sector research capabilities.

Throughout the paper, when referring to and discussing the survey results and interview responses, "academic" and "researcher" refer to those engaged in social science disciplines. The interview responses reflect the views of those involved in social science research, though the structural issues identified within Myanmar's HE sector apply across all discipline areas.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken by the Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD), a Myanmar-based research centre. The GDN Doing Research Assessment (DRA) survey tools were reviewed and where appropriate minor changes were made to the standard questionnaires and interviewer tools to best suit Myanmar's own cultural circumstances and terminology usage. As part of the DRA process, a context analysis was completed to place Myanmar's research systems in a political, international, economic, and historical context. The DRA survey tools consider identification of research actors, and their involvement in research production, diffusion, and uptake. Key actors are researchers, researcher

² In this paper, "government" refers to the government elected in 2015. The elections were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, and Aung San Suu Kyi was appointed to the role of State Councillor. The research was undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup, and now acts as a placeholder for the state of Myanmar's research capacity prior to global and internal disruptions.

administrators, and members of the policy community (GDN, 2020).³ Survey respondents were drawn from INGOs, NGOs, government departments, and government-funded HEIs. Non-government HEIs were excluded as they are not formally linked to Myanmar's education system nor regulated by any national body. Legislation was being prepared to change this during the course of the DRA project. For the Myanmar study, the researcher group was divided into academic and non-academic researchers in recognition of the separation of research activities identified in the scoping phase. The academic research group was further divided into those from research-oriented HEIs (with PhD research programs) and non-research-oriented HEIs. The target population was skewed to the two major cities of Mandalay and Yangon as nearly all major research functions – production, dissemination, diffusion – occur in these areas where infrastructure exists to support research, such as functioning libraries and internet access. This clustering enabled for manageable sampling size. A weighted representative sample was then chosen from each cluster for the survey phase.

To maximise the benefit of the DRA, it was decided to focus on the research framework of Myanmar's public HEIs administered by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which is responsible for the majority of universities and where most social science research occurs. HEIs are funded solely by the government and managed by their respective line ministries – for example, the Ministry of Health manages universities of medicine and nursing. The MOE has lead responsibility for the development of the NESP1 and the planning for the NESP2 (2021–2030). The practicalities of obtaining official permission for research also directed focus to MOE-managed universities. As this is a base-line study, it is anticipated that further studies will extend into other university sectors undertaking social science research such as medical universities which engage with public health concerns.

Sixteen universities engaged in social science were selected for the first stage and a weighting criterion was used to create three sub-groups – professional universities (admitting students with the highest matriculation rankings), computer studies universities (require high entrance scores), and arts and science universities. The selection drew on participating universities and academics at the 19th Research Conference of Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science, the pre-eminent national academic conference. Non-academic social science researchers were targeted through direct contact and the snowballing method along with two public calls through social media networks for participation.

The project sampling consisted of surveys of researchers (n = 114, 85 academic/university researchers, five NGO/CSO researchers, 23 independent consultants, and one researcher from the private sector), and research administrators (n = 14, four from each of the HEI sub-groups). The number of research administrators is relatively low, but is indicative of the research environment, whereby undertaking or participating in any research involving INGOs and external government-funded bodies requires extensive layers of permissions before staff can engage in the research activities. The survey forms included a statement outlining the purpose of the study and the role of CESD in implementing the study. Participation was entirely voluntary and any identifying information was disassociated from the survey results.

The researcher survey comprised 31 questions regarding the researcher's research environment. Simple responses were required rating satisfaction or effectiveness. For example: "Please rate your satisfaction with your institution in the following areas of research capacity building" – with a scale rating from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, or no answer. Quantitative information was also collected, for example, numbers of publications generated, and hours spent on research. The research administrator survey comprised 20 primary questions with sub-questions aimed at eliciting responses regarding research systems and their effectiveness. For example, "Is there a national research body mandated to oversee social science research in your country?" If yes, sub-questions exp and on the simple answer. Responses are rated on a scale of very effective to ineffective. Both surveys allow for additional free responses. Again, quantitative responses were elicited such as number of social science conferences held in the past year, and percentage of academics with PhDs. The KoBo Toolbox was

³ Details of the GDN Doing Research Assessment Framework is available at <http://gdn.int/doingresearch/methodology>.

used to digitise and collect data from the DRA surveys. A desk assessment was conducted to collate data. The desk survey drew out issues within the public sector system that were barriers to research. This became the focus for the interview phase of the project.

Using the snowballing method, the team conducted interviews with 14 research administrators (HEI academic staff), eight policymakers, and 29 local non-academic researchers. The majority of interviewees were at senior level and known to CESD. Senior CESD researchers conducted the interviews either in person or by skype. Interviews lasted for 1–2 hours. Interviews were preceded with an explanation of the project, the purpose of the interview, and likely use of results. Participants were advised they could choose not to answer any questions, and any identifying information was disassociated from the interview results. That there is a selective representation from the research community is a noted limitation to the study and is indicative of the current research environment. Full methodologies and research findings are available in the final GDN DRA Myanmar report (Lee *et al.*, 2020).

3 | RESULTS

The DRA framework is designed to be flexible, however, in the Myanmar context the effectiveness of the surveys and interviews was challenged. A significant barrier to effective implementation of the survey tools was the hierarchical nature of Myanmar's official structures that inhibit open engagement with this type of research. Even with official permission, there is a strong reluctance to say anything negative or critical of government in survey form. This became very clear during the recruitment phase, and in the disparities found between survey results and face-to-face interviews. Another factor limiting effectiveness is the lack of connection between research activities undertaken in the INGO/NGO, HEI, and central government sectors. This was noticeable in the survey results whereby there were different responses to understanding of research and Myanmar's research environment between the groups. The DRA tools, while designed for developing countries, assume that where there is a functioning HE system, there is also a social science research component that engages with external research activities. However, social science research at Myanmar's HEIs is almost no presence outside of the HEI system. It was therefore decided to shift the focus of the interviews towards gaining a better understanding of the current HE research environment. While the quantitative results provide baseline data on tangible factors, such as numbers of publications produced and time social science academics spend on research, the qualitative outcomes identified numerous factors that are challenges to building research capacity in the HEI sector. These can be broadly broken down into HEI administration, legacy issues relating to past political structures, and existing research frameworks. Key points are:

- Funding for research in HASS is very low – in 2017, 78.75 per cent of expenditure on research and development (R&D) was allocated to the public sector, with the remainder channelled into HE. R&D spend across the education sector was 0.03 per cent of GDP (c.f. Thailand 1 per cent, Vietnam 0.53 per cent, Indonesia 0.23 per cent) (World Bank, n.d.). In 2017, all R&D was allocated to STEM disciplines (UIS, n.d.). There are no discretionary budget funds for universities to support academic staff research.
- The organisational structure at public universities does not incentivise higher-quality research production. Academic staff's role as "teachers" first and foremost, particularly early career academics, means that administrative duties and heavy teaching loads leave little time or incentive to undertake research.
- For staff who have undertaken research degrees overseas, on return to the Myanmar HE system, there is little time or resources to continue research.
- There are no models for international research collaboration or for applying for or receiving independent grant funding (to be addressed in NESP2).
- National curricula inhibit development of creative research (to be addressed in NESP2).

- A system of regular staff rotation to different universities discourages the establishing research cultures within academic units or engagement with long-term research activities.
- There is no national research body or research policy, and no close alignment between HEI research and national and regional priorities as outlined in national planning documents such as the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2018).
- There is no formal peer review system in Myanmar, nor a formal ethical research framework. Research approvals are granted by university committees, but ethical frameworks are not clear.
- With English as the international language of many research disciplines, overall standard of English amongst mid-career academics is poor due to previous isolationist policies.
- As a legacy of previous socialist military regimes, linkages between researchers, organisations, and policymakers develop through informal networks. Government research commissions strongly favour researchers with long-standing relationships and strong rapport with policymakers with trust being of prime importance.
- There are no formal research links between the government and HEIs.

Other subjective responses suggest that HE research is not seen as being independent, reliable, relevant, or of high quality. Overall, the findings highlight the imperative for significant investment and capacity building within Myanmar's HEIs to develop a robust research capability in support of Myanmar's development plans.

4 | DISCUSSION

Reports into the HE sector have focussed on all of sector reform – curriculum review, degree structures, and achieving international benchmarking standards (Chinlone, 2018; Institute of International Education, 2013). The MOE is currently developing the next 10-year strategic framework, the NESP2 (2021–2030), and it includes a strong focus on strengthening the research system in HEIs. Strategy and reforms based on the experience of other developing nations are often used to inform domestic policy changes; however, the GDN study indicates that Myanmar has very specific issues to tackle. Central to this is academic independence and trust between HEI researchers and government, whereby researchers are enabled to conduct research without fear of negative repercussions and policymakers have confidence in the reliability and relevance of their own HEIs to undertake significant research that will inform their policy decisions.

Some systemic factors will take time to remedy. The majority of current mid- to senior-level staff have had little exposure to international university research models. Many have weak English language skills. After the 1962 coup, Burmese became the official language for HEIs and English was no longer a compulsory subject in schools. A recent English Proficiency Index ranked Myanmar 86th out of 100 countries, denoting a “very low proficiency” of English skills (Education First, 2019). While this has now changed and English is again compulsory in primary schools, a generation of Myanmar students and educators missed out on gaining strong English language capacity and this has direct impact on capacity building in the HE sector. English is an official language of instruction in Myanmar's HEIs, but many lectures and lessons are predominantly delivered in Burmese due to poor English proficiency of tutors and professors (Dinmore, 2015). This does not auger well for engagement with international research literature and critical evaluation of contemporary concepts and methodologies where much is written in English. English language proficiency is in part being addressed through foreign-led programs but will take time for improvements to be seen across the sector (Ulla, 2018). Research undertaken by the private or development aid sector is primarily conducted in the English language and results are only sometimes translated to Burmese. This also distances HEIs from engaging in local research results. The trend revealed by the various interviewees is worrisome: while opportunities and platforms for public debate are increasing in Myanmar, very few are conducted fully in the local language.

Reliance on donor-funded social research significantly inhibits local ownership over the research agenda. As a report from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs states, “the increased engagement of Western aid donors in Myanmar has not been followed by strategies for knowledge production” (Stokke, Vakulchuk and Øverland, 2018). As a consultant historian explains, “in Myanmar, research institutions are not seen as independent researchers providing independent research and following their own agenda; rather the funding institutions set the research agenda”. That current social research is donor-dependent is not necessarily problematic if projects include meaningful capacity building of local researcher skills. These gaps need to be addressed if the creation of knowledge is to meet local needs or the interests of the global community of scholars and donors (Alatas, 2000). In a positive development, current capacity building activities in the HEI sector are increasingly focusing on providing research methodology training as part of their project plans.

Interviews with research administrators and policymakers revealed that research funding in the public sector is very low and often comes with stringent budgetary rules, making it very difficult to manage research projects. This severely constrains longer-term research studies or the ability for research projects to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances or policy demands. International donor reporting requirements impose additional demands on top of those of local administrators and policymakers. The in-depth interviews revealed that while academic researchers compete with non-academic researchers for government-commissioned projects, they are often awarded to non-academic researchers because of their greater capacity for research and their longstanding reputation and professional networks.

In spite of liberalisation of the education sector in 2018 (PWC, 2018), the government relies on foreign aid contributions to finance gaps in the education budget (UNICEF, n.d.). Moreover, there are insufficient resources to fully develop new curricula and engage in contemporary teaching methodologies. While the government is demonstrating policy commitment to furthering HEIs the procedures for achieving the policy objects remain absent. More specifically, the government’s R&D push is heavily inclined towards STEM subjects, with little support for the social sciences. This is evident in the allocation of GERD. In 2017, this was entirely allocated to STEM subjects (UIS, n.d.). Increasingly foreign investors are seeing Myanmar’s higher education as a high-potential sector (Park, Khan and Vandenberg, 2012), generating domestic research demand for the private sector. Yet, the financial autonomy and processes that would allow for HEIs to cater to this growing demand is still beyond reach, even where academic staff have the skills to undertake research.

While these factors are evident, the survey results and in-depth interviews revealed a more intangible barrier to Myanmar’s social science research system, namely a lack of trust among stakeholders. A reality exists where access to data is contingent on research actors’ rapport with political leadership and engagement with their informal networks. Even when data exists, the owners of the data, often government departments or the Central Statistical Organization, are not willing to share them with other researchers or research institutions. One research administrator explained, “data sharing is very rare among government institutions, and many of them keep their data for internal use only”. The rationale for this lack of sharing is an important area for future research as overcoming this barrier is essential if HE research is to benefit the nation. One area that is gaining attention is the perception of the government that students at HEIs act as disruptors to government structures (Hong and Kim, 2019). Until this is resolved there will be little opportunity for faculty to access nationally strategic data for research, for fear by government it may be used for anti-government political purposes. Trust dynamics were stated to also be present with development aid-funded research projects, whereby the data guardianship of certain research actors further limited the credibility and independence of the data collected. Moreover, the resulting projects often overlap and become siloed, and national development plans and the research data needed for evidence-based policymaking become disjointed.

More specifically, HEIs are viewed as not being independent of government and hence research outputs are not seen as impartial. In order to address these recognised shortcomings, a group of 16 universities were granted autonomy in 2020 (Thet Zin Soe, 2020) and international assistance has been provided to guide the process (Iwinska and Matei, 2014). Despite these encouraging developments, progress has been very slow. Senior academics involved in undertaking the reforms have lim-

ited experience of independent academic governance, and government ministers involved in approving proposals have even less experience. While a policy framework is in place, taking the necessary steps will require a great deal of trust by the government to ensure HEIs are able to undertake the reforms without fear of reprisals. That trust has not yet been earned. As Howson and Lall recently discuss, conflicts between the goals of academic independence and a HE system that exists to support national development is far from resolved (Howson and Lall, 2020). Research produced by HEI academics is still viewed as less reliable than that done by foreign researchers even when research methodologies appear sound. The tensions between government and HE researchers that have developed over generations will be hard to overcome. Foreign or private sector expertise is still seen as more reliable and independent regardless of the research actors' reputation for academic work or research, internationally or domestically.

Further exacerbating the weak domestic research capabilities is the limited access HEIs have to international research. This is improving, with international aid supporting access to major online scholarly databases and publications. But an emerging worrisome reality is the obstruction or ban of certain research topics via articles of the telecommunications law which effectively censors available materials and affects journalists, activists, and researchers engaged in areas or subjects that are deemed controversial, and arrests can follow (Athans 312, 2019; Burma Campaign UK, n.d). It is noted that all of these challenges have been experienced to varying degrees throughout the execution of this project.

After decades of "teaching only" in HEIs, transitioning academic roles to include research is challenging. This becomes a resource issue – to free up time for research, more teaching staff are needed. There are no designated "research-only" roles within HEIs. With little to no financial, reputational, or career incentives to produce research, interviews from the academic sector stated that research studies in HEIs are largely self-funded and driven by a personal commitment, with a small number that are funded by external parties. Academic researchers also reported lower levels of satisfaction with the time allocated for research, noting the administrative duties that they are tasked with as civil servants. Thus, for academic staff at HEIs, lack of funding and lack of time appear to be the two most significant constraints to research production.

When asked about quality of incentive systems, academic researchers consistently report much lower averages in terms of financial benefits and career incentives compared to their non-academic, private, and development sector counterparts. In-depth interviews revealed that recent graduates from local universities and abroad are often discouraged from pursuing an academic research career, noting the far less competitive wages than in other more lucrative careers. This is consistent with the trend that is observed across many developing countries (Gindling *et al.*, 2019).

At present there is no formal channel for external students to enrol into PhD programs to pursue a career in academic research. PhD holders in Myanmar are heavily concentrated in the urban cities of Yangon and Mandalay, with the University of Yangon and University of Mandalay producing the majority of PhD holders in the country between 2013–2017. With most PhD candidates being civil servants or faculty members of universities that award the PhD, there are no pathways for non-civil servants to pursue a PhD. This is limiting Myanmar's ability to expand its domestic research capabilities.

More broadly, there is no formal peer review culture in Myanmar. Survey findings indicate a poor understanding of peer review, revealing a lack of conversation about research quality. Universities produce their own research journals, usually a compilation of research papers produced by professors across faculties, and papers are vetted internally by senior academics. With no national research body, academic research is further isolated from policymakers, as there remains little to no alignment between research undertaken in HEIs and national and regional priorities articulated in national planning documents.

With the democratic reforms and economic progress of the last decade, foreign-educated skilled Myanmar nationals have been encouraged to return home (Chinlone, 2018). This should provide a rapid injection of expertise into local research and HEIs. Even so, as an experienced Myanmar scholar argued during an interview, "the skilled diaspora that Myanmar has abroad could help fill

this capabilities gap. However, the incentives and environment must be conducive to retain national talent [and] foster a much-needed research culture". A two-pronged approach to strengthen research training and improve research career prospects in public universities and other local research organisations is needed.

Informality remains prevalent in the linkages between researchers, organisations, and policymakers. This longstanding trait is a legacy of the socialist regime and the SLORC period, when research that was favourable to government policy could be reported and research not favourable was hidden. To hide unfavourable research outcomes, informal networks allowed for research to be "buried" if necessary. Therefore, these informal networks hinged on a high degree of trust between the researchers and those participating in the research. While reporting mechanisms are now much improved, the ongoing political uncertainties, both nationally and particularly in ethnic regions, will likely see the importance of these networks continue.

Researchers have low formal participation in policymaking with just 3.5 percent of academic researchers and 17 percent of non-academic researchers surveyed being members of a policy advisory body. A measure of informal collaboration is the frequency of interaction with policymakers. Interviews conducted with leading researchers revealed that the process from bidding for research projects, access to data and implementing surveys, to stakeholder engagement and diffusion of research products remain riddled with informal dynamics. A clear implication of such a system is that it rewards previously established relationships rather than institutionalising good practice among researchers.

In the course of the interviews, it became apparent that there are underlying issues that contribute to the disconnect between government and its policymakers, and HEIs. One interviewee for the GDN project pointed out that the main underlying factor is the lack of trust on the part of policymakers in what researchers will do with the information once the research is completed. This lack of trust has been exacerbated by Myanmar's management of the Rakhine crisis and ongoing conflicts in other ethnic areas such as Kachin and Shan States, where the state's actions have not aligned with stated policy objectives (Breen and He, 2020). The role of a social science researcher to objectively report and analyse data is severely constrained when it contradicts official government rhetoric.

It is against this complex backdrop that the challenges and constraints to reforming social science research in Myanmar's HEIs were identified in the DRA survey. In the HE sector, the tensions between government and HEIs are often expressed indirectly. Academics who may cause any offence to government, real or unsubstantiated, are punished in subtle ways – overlooked for promotion, refused permission to attend a conference, transferred to an undesirable location. Causing offense to influential private citizens will yield similar outcomes. There are no transparent systems for appeals, or reviews of decisions. For sector reform to be effective, the reasons for mistrust must be identified and mechanisms to address these put in place.

Reflecting the survey outcomes back on the initial context analysis undertaken as part of the DRA project, it becomes evident that Myanmar's HEIs have been at the forefront of all major political upheavals and transitions. Established under British colonial rule and administered along British HE models since the 1920s, Myanmar's university environment was a fertile ground for the independence movement that rose within Rangoon University (Fuqua, 1992; Steinberg, 1950; Taylor, 2009). Encouraged by an environment that allowed free speech and open debate, the Rangoon University Student Union, established around 1931, became central to the independence movement with a number of its leaders forming part of the first post-independence government in 1948. With a vibrant parliamentary democracy, the university system enjoyed strong government support and flourished (Maung, 1953; Badgley, 1969; Steinberg, 2013). In the early 1960s, popular resistance to the rise of General Ne Win's socialist agendas was driven through student protests, resulting in a mass crack-down on student activism and complete quashing of HEI independence when the military junta took control in 1962 (Thein, 2004; Saw and Arnold, 2014; Raynaud, 2014). When pro-democracy protests escalated in the 1980s, HEI students and staff were again central to driving actions against the unpopular state administration. The large-scale protests were eventually violently suppressed by the military in September 1988 and the HEI system was further repressed, repeatedly closed for periods over the next decade

to disrupt opportunities for organised protests (Smith, 1992; Seekins, 1999; Skidmore and Wilson, 2008).

Since the 2010 elections, when Myanmar again experienced a period of quasi-democracy, there has been significant revitalisation of the HE sector (Ministry of Education, 2016; Howson and Lall, 2019; Howson and Lall, 2020). However, as political uncertainty started to emerge in 2019 ahead of the 2020 elections, HEIs are again targets with a curtailing of recently gained freedoms. Increasingly, access to information and its diffusion is being obstructed or banned via telecommunications law (Athar, 2019), directly affecting university researchers. More recently foreign academic visitors to universities must be approved by central government, a return to past practices – in a further restriction on academic exchange, the request is handled by the Foreign Affairs office, not the MOE. These restrictions are being implemented at the same time as 16 universities have been granted autonomy (Thet Zin Soe, 2020).

While unable to determine the rationale for this apparent contradiction in government actions, a historical pattern of political instability linked with significant restrictions imposed on Myanmar's HEIs is evident.

5 | CONCLUSION

The GDN project is the first study to focus on scoping Myanmar's social science research environment. The full results, while including important baseline data across a range of parameters, drew attention to more opaque issues that must be addressed before deep change in HE research can be achieved. As this paper has outlined, Myanmar HEIs have been associated with all of Myanmar's major political upheavals since their formation. Uprisings and agitation for political change have given rise to a reputational link between universities as learning institutions and centres for political dissent.

Myanmar's HEIs have been in existence for longer than any of Myanmar's post-independence governments. Many of today's parliamentarians have gone through Myanmar's HE system and perhaps should be more forthright in supporting HE policy that promotes critical thinking knowing the positives this can bring to a developing nation. However, this is tempered by ongoing distrust between the mechanism of government, which is still without stability, and the HEIs that have enabled much of Myanmar's political reforms. Given Myanmar's ongoing political issues, any critique or criticisms of government policies is not well-received. Even though policy supports academic capacity building, in the absence of meaningful university autonomy, Myanmar's academics are not independent of government and are not expected to be critical of their "employer", nor do they have the confidence to do so without fear of repercussions. Distrust between government and HEIs remain, whether real or imagined.

Robust social science research is needed to further Myanmar's development goals. This is best done by those who will feel its impact. International support can help develop a local research culture that is based on local society's expectations and norms. All foreign researchers should be cognisant of Myanmar's political history as it relates to HEIs as this should guide expectations and approaches to capacity building. Without appreciating these close links, attempts to reform the sector will likely fail or produce further conflict between HEIs and central government. Trust-building between HEIs and government is an essential foundation to future growth and stability. All future reform processes should address this issue overtly.

Post-February 1 2021 Coup

On February 1, 2021, hours before the swearing in of the government democratically elected in November 2020, Myanmar's military staged a coup. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) rapidly emerged as a passive protest against the military take-over. Many academics and students across Myanmar have openly declared their support for the CDM. Many universities locked their gates. Within four weeks of the coup, military personnel had taken up residence at dozens of major universities. Students and teachers have been arrested, others have gone into hiding, some have lost their

lives. Regardless of the outcome, reforms in Myanmar's HE sector have been set back dramatically (Galloway, 2021). International engagement has ceased. Collaborations have stalled and development projects suspended. The NESP2 (2021–2030), which was to have included pathways for research development within HEIs, is on hold. Academic staff are being asked to sign papers renouncing the CDM and are suspended until they do. Many are choosing to resign rather than return to the HE sector in the current political environment. These events make knowledge of Myanmar's recent past even more important as resolutions to what now appears to be a repeated cycle are being sought locally and internationally. When re-engaging with Myanmar's HEIs, the relationship between government and universities, particularly their mutual expectations, must become central to any reforms and research development.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/issj.12312>

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