



MAPPING OF NATIONAL ACTORS

DATA AND INDICATORS ON SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

# DOING RESEARCH IN MYANMAR

## Country Update - Excerpts

Centre for Economic and Social Development &  
The Global Development Network

January 2022

ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTEXT



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## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of GDN, IDRC or its Board of Governors.

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Canada

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# Foreword

In January 2019, IDRC and GDN entered into a partnership agreement, funded by IDRC and implemented by GDN in close collaboration with the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative team. The objective of the partnership was to strengthen evidence on the state of Myanmar's research systems, with a focus on social science research applied to policy challenges, across the production, diffusion and uptake of research-based evidence by key local stakeholders. IDRC also wished to use this system-level picture of the research system to better understand the promise and impact of its work program in Myanmar. This joint effort aimed to inform policy debates and decisions on research reforms in Myanmar at a time when the country was investing heavily in the reform of its higher education institutions and research governance. In line with IDRC's vocation and the focus of GDN's Doing Research program, the emphasis of the project has been on strengthening local research capacity in social sciences, after decades of systematic dismantling of this sector in Myanmar, and promoting evidence-based system-level investments in research among domestic and international actors.

This was done through the inclusion of Myanmar in GDN's global Doing Research Initiative, which generated the first systematic study of the national research systems, in the form of a bilingual report (See: Doing Research Assessment report on Myanmar)<sup>1</sup> and its dissemination at the national and international<sup>2</sup> level through a number of events in both English and Burmese.

Following the February 1st military coup in Myanmar, in spring 2021, we were forced to change plans. GDN pivoted the funding originally earmarked for a second edition of the Doing Research Assessment in 2021, to the regional level –pivoting towards a focus on strengthening access (by Myanmar actors) to the experience of research governance and system strengthening of neighboring countries.

The revamped work plan leveraged the partnership between GDN and the Asia Research Centre (ARC) at Universitas Indonesia to look into the role played by social sciences in COVID-19 responses across 11 South East Asian countries, including Myanmar. The project mobilized local researchers across 11 countries in the region to produce country notes on the topic, and concurrently strengthens the capacity of ARC to operate at the regional level. The compendium of notes on single countries and a regional synthesis has recently been published and disseminated at the regional level.

Yet, the current domestic situation, however complex and fluid, also needs continued attention. The current report titled "Doing Research Assessment in Myanmar – 2022 Update", has been produced by the Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD), who authored the DR Assessment in the first phase of the grant. The 2022 Update includes commentaries on the national situation by Zaw Oo, the Executive Director of CESD, and a commentary on the role of international donors interested in higher education reform in the post-coup era, by Prof. Charlotte Galloway (ANU/Myanmar Research Centre), who has been supporting GDN's work in Myanmar since its inception. The update was carried out at the time following both the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic

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1 <http://www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/Myanmar%20Country%20Report.pdf>

2 <http://gdn.int/doingresearch/myanmar>

and the military coup of 1 February 2021. Despite the opportunities opened by a sudden end to 'helicopter research', with most international researchers blocked out of the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic first, the political situation had drawn many researchers to leave the country, or lay low for fear of personal repercussions. Accordingly, the contribution of social scientists to the policy process remains increasingly marginalised in Myanmar, particularly as many informal channels and networks have

frozen. As international agencies explore ways to support HE from afar, and very few international donors remain to support research on the country, this 2022 Update wants to be a reminder to the international community that the future of the country depends also on its next generation of social scientists, at home and in exile. Social science research has now become a dangerous career for most academics as a result of these dramatic events, and international support might be more essential than ever.

# Reflection on the Present and Future of International Support to Higher Education and Research in Myanmar

**Dr Charlotte Galloway, Honorary Associate Professor, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University**

## Introduction

Myanmar is in the midst of another turbulent period in its history. Since the collapse of the monarchy and start of British colonial rule in 1885 Myanmar has yet to find a sustainable political framework. As a result, Myanmar has not been able to achieve extended periods of economic and social development and is near the bottom of almost all development indicators. There is good evidence that Myanmar has great development potential. The gains made during two brief periods of quasi-democratic rule (1948-1962 and 2011-2021) can be seen as strong indicators for positive change. During both periods significant donor support and international engagement facilitated capacity building across all sectors.

For higher education (HE) the post-Independence era (1948-1962) saw a flourishing of Myanmar's university sector. There was an active international exchange network and the University of Rangoon was one of the region's most highly regarded tertiary institutions. Research was robust, as indicated by the numerous scholarly publications generated. The military coup of 1962 saw the expulsion of foreigners and severing of most international support.

The HE sector and its research capabilities stagnated. As Myanmar's economy collapsed so too did infrastructure spending. Myanmar's HE sector fell well behind international standards and was cut off from education innovation. All education was centralised with standard curricula across the country. A return to quasi-democratic governance in 2011 benefitted the HE sector through re-engagement with international donors who supported capacity-building projects, and policies that facilitated international academic collaborations. Government strategic plans pointed to a positive future for Myanmar and international support was rapidly forthcoming to help Myanmar achieve its development goals.<sup>3</sup> However, the military coup of February 1, 2021 has derailed Myanmar's development plans. During what is likely to be a prolonged period of political instability, what does the future of Myanmar's HE look like?

## Higher Education: The Last Decade 2011-2021

From the outset, the 2011 quasi-democratically elected government, the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party), showed strong interest in HE reform. Myanmar actively sought out international partners to support a comprehensive review of the HE system. The Comprehensive Education Sector Review was set up in 2012 and in 2014 a new Education Law was passed which would facilitate changes.<sup>4</sup>

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3 UNESCO has played a major role in coordinating all of sector reform, including the overhaul of teacher education and preparing new national school curricula. <https://bangkok.unesco.org/theme/education-myanmar>

4 Reports available at <http://www.cesrmm.org/> For the Education law see <https://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/laws/myanmar-laws-1988-until-now/union-solidarity-and-development-party-laws-2012-2016/myanmar-laws-2014/pyidaungsu-hluttaw-law-no-41-2014-national-education-law-burmese-and-english.html>

Concomitant with overhauling an out-dated teaching and learning system and addressing major resource gaps such as access to contemporary research publications, was a policy to decentralise university control. University autonomy is seen as a key element for pursuing educational and research excellence.

The National Education Strategic Plan 2016-21 (NESP1) was endorsed by the newly elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government in 2015. The NESP1 states that 'Higher Education is responsible for nurturing skilled human capital needed in government, business and industry. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a key role to play in undertaking research and incubating the innovative and creative thinking needed for globally and economically competitive society' (NESP1, 11).<sup>5</sup> These words indicate that Myanmar aims to have a HE system that is robust and flexible, adaptive to development needs. Yet the slow rate of change within the sector is indicative of the many challenges that face meaningful reform. Key are administrative and financial independence and academic freedoms.

## Governance

Under the former military regime university independence was dismantled. Budgets, staff movements and curricula were centralised and nationalised. There was no university autonomy. Universities were broken down into smaller discipline-based units, a technique used to disperse students and discourage activism. Teacher and student unions were disbanded. Over the course of 40 years expertise in contemporary university

management was lost. Research capabilities evaporated – academic staff had no funds for research, and social science research was moved centrally. Most importantly the ruling junta tolerated no discourse that in any way criticised their actions. Censorship laws made open academic debate impossible. Universities in Yangon, the centre of student protests, were closed in Yangon for most of the period 1988-2000. Higher degree research became very limited in scope without access to international research trends.

The centralised hierarchical management of HEIs only allowed for top down management. Policy changes were being made by those with little knowledge of current-day students and their aspirations. There has been little, if any, research undertaken that links future development goals and central government targets with HE needs to support these goals. There are other barriers to effective improvements to the HE system. Management of HEIs is spread across nine government departments – for example the Ministry of Health and Sports runs the universities responsible for training of doctors and nurses. There is a hierarchy of universities, with University of Yangon at the top of the list, and only 8 universities are approved to offer PhD degrees. A Rectors Committee was established by the National Education Policy Commission in 2018 to help coordinate the reform agenda.<sup>6</sup>

In September 2020 the Ministry of Education granted autonomy to 16 universities.<sup>7</sup> This was an important step towards improving

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5 [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/myanmar\\_national\\_education\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2016-21.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/myanmar_national_education_strategic_plan_2016-21.pdf)

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6 For an overview of the composition, reporting structure and duties of the Rectors Committee see <http://www.moe.gov.mm/sites/default/files/1%20Dr%20Zaw%20Wai%20Soe%20PPT.pdf>

7 <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/govt-plans-to-grant-autonomy-to-14-universities>

HEI standards. However, it also posed other issues. With around 174 HEIs in Myanmar a two-tier system would be inevitable. Competition for places in the autonomous universities would be high (at present universities cannot directly admit students, this is managed centrally). There would be a further marginalisation of universities in remote, ethnic and poorer areas.

Autonomy was not actioned before the February 1 coup. The universities struggled with writing their own charters, a requirement for autonomy. Many of Myanmar's approval systems run on consensus rather than a majority vote, a situation that only serves to impede progress. While not often discussed openly, to observers the system is a reflection of the 'fear of failure' that pervades the HE environment. Unanimous decision-making protects group members from higher-level punishment.

## **Curriculum Reform and Pedagogy**

A national curriculum committee determines any revisions to the curriculum. Each discipline area has its own committee of senior academics who agree on recommendations for change. These are implemented nationally. Most curricula have remained little changed for decades. For example, the Archaeology syllabus recommends some texts published in the 1950s, indicative of the knowledge gap that has arisen under the former military rule, when access to foreign resources was almost impossible. Most degrees are structured within disciplinary frameworks, with no allowance for undertaking courses across disciplines. There are fixed 1-2-3 year degree program plans. Some students will be invited to enrol in a Masters degree in their discipline, and then a PhD. In both cases they take on teaching/tutoring responsibilities.

Universities do not have 'teacher-training'. Academic staff learn from their peers. It is a hierarchical structure that does not encourage innovation. There is little knowledge of current international educational approaches. Writing 'learning outcomes' is a new concept. Assessment is graded on the ability to complete tasks and regurgitate course material through exams. Reform will require extensive and intensive cooperation and donor support over a number of years.

While these observations can be seen as negative they are more than made up for in the enthusiasm of the teachers who are generally in favour of reform. There has been donor support for curriculum review but it has been haphazard. In discussions, it is clear that a full overhaul of the curriculum and degree structure is wanted, but it is a herculean task. Re-structuring degrees to make them more flexible and interdisciplinary requires a complete re-structure of university departments, and the universities themselves. For example, economics is taught at a separate university, as are foreign languages. For students wanting to study international relations or history, there are no mechanisms to study across these institutions.

## **Research**

Research within the HE sector is basic across most disciplines. STEM disciplines are disadvantaged due to poor infrastructure. A number of senior professors have gained PhDs overseas (on government exchange programs, many to Japan). However, they are unable to continue their research when returning to Myanmar as laboratories are poorly equipped, and most contemporary technology is unavailable to them. As one professor explained, students are having to undertake basic experiments that have remained unchanged for decades. HASS disciplines are also resource-disadvantaged.



Both sectors suffer additional restrictions due to lack of funding and the inability to source external funds for research. This was to be addressed through university autonomy however there were signals prior to the coup that financial independence was going to be a very real challenge to achieve.

As the DRA Myanmar report details there are numerous barriers to social science research, and it is likely these findings extend across all research areas.<sup>8</sup> The MOE made research publication targets compulsory for academics seeking promotion. This was implemented in 2019 and is a very blunt instrument. There are no quality frameworks that adequately define the value of a research output. In the Myanmar context it is a judgment made by senior colleagues. Initial informal feedback has been that it is placing more burden on junior staff who have full teaching and administration loads. Given there are few avenues within Myanmar to publish, achieving the targets is difficult.

Research independence is not part of Myanmar HE culture. MA and PhD thesis topics are recommended by the supervising senior professor. In some departments at UY, and anecdotally at other universities, foreign academics have been asked to examine theses, and attend thesis defence sessions. Others have joined candidate PhD supervisor panels, as external advisors. This can be an effective way of enhancing research quality. In the absence of formal plans to facilitate these initiatives it is generally up to each Head of Department to support or initiate these activities.

Research approval is usually granted by a university committee of senior academics.

There are no formal ethics guidelines and 'ethical research' is poorly understood. From an international perspective the absence of research standards renders research results in Myanmar of little academic use. This is particularly an issue in the social sciences where survey participation and data collection may not be subject to detailed informed consent. Collaborative research with an international partner can mitigate risks, as the ethical components of the study will be subject to the partner institution's research requirements.

Knowledge of contemporary research methods is low. There is little research methodology training. At a micro level academic staff require skills in abstract writing, research essay writing, and research presentation skills. Tools have been developed for teachers and students but are not widely used. Mote Oo Education has teacher and student manuals for social science and the humanities.<sup>9</sup> The Inya Institute produced bi-lingual manuals on social research methods with donor funding from the Open Society Foundations and LIFT, a Yangon-based donor program managed by UNOPS.<sup>10</sup> These are both fine quality resources, however, they are not widely used within the HE sector, likely because they are not part of a formal syllabus.

There are numerous initiatives, short courses and workshops run by international donors to help HEIs develop research capabilities. But overall improvement is very slow. Without the required structural reforms to frame research activities within HEIs – including the ability to undertake externally funded projects – embedding change within the system is extremely difficult. The regular transfer of staff

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8 [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/myanmar\\_national\\_education\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2016-21.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/myanmar_national_education_strategic_plan_2016-21.pdf)

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9 <https://www.moteoo.org/en/social-science>

10 <https://www.inyainstitute.org/research-library-and-publications/>

to different HEIs makes sustained research capacity building very difficult.

## International Networks

Following the official swearing-in of the elected 2011 government, donor support for the HE sector has been very generous. Some of the more significant projects include the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs major grant (2014-2016) to Australian National University (ANU) to build research capacity at the University of Yangon (UY). This project also involved academic exchange and facilitated cross-institutional collaboration which has continued. Since 2015, under Australia's New Colombo Plan students from Australia have been welcomed to UY on exchange scholarships. The joint Myanmar/Australian government program, My-Eqip was established in the Ministry of Education (MOE) and has been closely involved in developing Myanmar's education strategic plans.<sup>11</sup> The Central European University have supported HE reform since 2012 with a focus on governance issues including the framework for the National Education Policy Commission and revitalisation of the University of Yangon, including the UY Master Plan. Academic exchange has also been a key feature of this program to support governance experience.<sup>12</sup>

International engagement was upscaled after the NLD government was elected in

2015 and NESP1 was endorsed. Significant donor funding was forthcoming to drive capacity building in education reform. The British Council has been a major contributor, supporting relationship-building between UK and Myanmar universities, and HE teaching-training.<sup>13</sup> The Chinlone Project (2012-2020) funded by the European Union supports modernization of the HE sector. Four reports have been published.<sup>14</sup> The first highlighted many of the deficiencies of the current HE system. Open criticism of the HE system in such public documents was in itself a new concept, and the report was not widely circulated. Significant funding through the EU's Erasmus+ project also contributes to HE development.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from large-scale projects there have been innumerable smaller donor-funded activities. The British Academy in partnership with the École française d'Extrême-Orient investigated English-language usage in HE. The report revealed that while English is usually the preferred language of HE instruction, many academics were poorly equipped with English language skills to support new curricula or to participate effectively in capacity building training in pedagogy or curriculum design.<sup>16</sup> International aid programs have supported volunteer placements in some universities. Individual academics and faculties formed teaching links, mostly with the UY and University of Mandalay.

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<sup>11</sup> The Australian Government has supported all of education sector reform through the My-Eqip program. The support aims to implement quality improvement systems and monitoring/evaluation tools across all levels of education. See <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/my-equip-myanmar-education-quality-improvement-program-presentation.pdf> and [https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/myequip-mid-term-review\\_191020.pdf](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/myequip-mid-term-review_191020.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2017-02-06/ceu-key-partner-advancing-higher-education-reform-myanmar> The UY Master Plan is available at <https://www.uy.edu.mm/master-plan/>

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.britishcouncil.org.mm/programmes/education/reform>

<sup>14</sup> The reports are available at <https://site.unibo.it/chinlone/it/report>

<sup>15</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/asia-central/myanmar\\_erasmusplus\\_2019.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/erasmus-plus/factsheets/asia-central/myanmar_erasmusplus_2019.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See [https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1066/Myanmar\\_Workshop\\_Report\\_English.pdf](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1066/Myanmar_Workshop_Report_English.pdf)

In the last 5-7 years there has been a steady increase in foreign academics visiting Myanmar universities for short-term teaching. These arrangements have often been driven through personal connections. Networks in Myanmar develop organically and play an important role in paving the way for visa permissions and engaging with academics on campus. As highlighted in the DRA Myanmar report these informal networks are embedded within Myanmar culture and play an important role in negotiating outcomes.<sup>17</sup> There is a reluctance to commit anything to paper without consultation and informal networks allow for 'pre-screening' of written requests. Within the academic networks foreigners can take years to build a trust relationship with Myanmar counterparts, whereby Myanmar academics can be confident in supporting the foreigner's activities.

With the escalation of donor funding and interest in the HE sector many MOUs have been signed with foreign universities. At the University of Yangon a British foreign relations coordinator was funded to assist in setting up international relations policies and procedures. Foreign students were also accepted on exchange to Myanmar universities. This can be seen as a very positive step to start developing networks amongst the younger generations.

## The Unwritten Hurdles

The DRA Myanmar surveys have yielded valuable baseline data about Myanmar's research environment.<sup>18</sup> Research capacity is very low in HEIs, and nation-wide research

still lies firmly in the hands of foreign researchers and donor funds. Central government does undertake research, but much is supported by foreign funds and foreign PIs (primary investigator).

Within HEIs research is basic at best. Some specialist HEIs interact more with government, such as the computer/technology universities, but for the most part HEI research is not connected to government needs, and is not deemed reliable or independent. There is a deep mistrust between central administration and HEIs that will take decades to overcome – unless the issue is confronted.

Myanmar's complex internal politics also hampers research capabilities. The majority of Myanmar's population identifies as Bamar (over 60%) and their geographic location ensures that the majority of researchers will be Bamar, as they are concentrated around Myanmar's major cities and the more affluent regions of the country, and have more opportunities to access HE. Having Bamar researchers undertaking research on ethnic groups cannot be seen as objective by those who feel marginalised. Ongoing armed conflict distances many of Myanmar's minorities from participating in a developing economy and society, further disadvantaging them. There are some affirmative actions in place to encourage minority participation in HE, however, the financial barriers of relocating to a major city can be too much to overcome. Factional politics also impact the decision-making process. In efforts to avoid claims of exclusion, policy forums are very inclusive, an inefficient way of managing reform processes. Multiple committees exist to support HE reform, but with a newfound and fragile democracy decision-makers appear reluctant to make decisions. Nearly all reform items are sent to the State Counsellor for sign-off.

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<sup>17</sup> DRA in Myanmar Country Report <http://www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/Myanmar%20Country%20Report.pdf> 84-85.

<sup>18</sup> DRA in Myanmar Country Report executive summary <http://www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/Myanmar%20Country%20Report.pdf> 12-14.

Myanmar's history of international relations is fraught. While donor funding and foreign expertise is essential for Myanmar's development, the current management of foreign partners can do more to hinder effective delivery of reforms than assist. There are no stakeholder forums whereby all agents can be briefed on active projects and coordinate resources or project outcomes. Rather, projects tend to operate in isolation. As it stands, it is difficult to find out what other parties are engaged in activities to support the HE system. This inevitably leads to duplication and confusion and is frustrating and inefficient for donor agencies. It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for this lack of group donor engagement. It may reflect the inexperience of administrators in managing multiple international projects. It may also be a strategy to control donor activity while assessing individual project outcomes. Often HEI administrators have no choice but to accept donor engagement – this has been particularly true in the absence of autonomy. Large donor funded projects are organised at diplomatic, and ministerial level, and local HEIs may have little say about the implementation of a project or its immediate relevance. Some areas of government have developed stakeholder meetings, but it is not a characteristic of HEI donor management. In many respects, the past policies that stripped HEIs of independence and broke down HE sector cohesion have left the HE sector in a more disadvantaged position than other government sectors.

## Since 2021

Since the military coup of February 1 2021 there has been no HEI activity. Universities had already closed to undergraduates due to COVID-19. Some online learning was taking place but access to resources (internet, laptops etc) meant this was not equal across

disciplines or the country. After the coup many HE staff and students participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in protest. All CDM staff have been either stood down, suspended, or arrested. Many have gone into hiding, others have fled the country in real fear of their lives. As the delta variant of COVID-19 hit, academic staff are among those who have died from the virus. Teacher and Student unions have been shut down. In March the military moved into many university campuses across the country to stop the peaceful protests and dissuade people from supporting the CDM.<sup>19</sup> Many students and teachers live on campuses, and many left in response to the military's presence. The junta announced 134 universities would re-open on 6 May for final year and higher degree students, but hardly and staff or students returned. At the time of writing nearly two years have been lost to students following both COVID and the coup.

Within weeks of the coup most donor funded projects were suspended and many have since been cancelled. The UN suspended all dealings with the new administration and activities by subsidiary agencies such as UNESCO also halted. The My-Equip project is one example. Based in the MOE the team were central in the preparation of the NESP2 (2021-2030). NESP2 component drafting had been contracted out to many different international partners. The ANU team was the successful tender for drafting ten HE components relating to research, staff development and curriculum reform.<sup>20</sup> The components had been

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210318173848391>

<sup>20</sup> The tender was managed by ANU Enterprise, and I was the Primary Investigator. The scope of the tender is available at <https://ngotenders.net/international-consultant-nesp2-chapter-7-university-education-research-and-innovation/>



developed by senior level committees in Myanmar including the Rectors Committee and MOE officials, with the assistance of international experts. The intent of the components was clear – Myanmar aimed to push forward with HE reform and develop capacity as quickly as possible. The components include development of a research and innovation strategy, establishing a national centre for research, science and technology, and creating a national research centre. Another key feature of the components was strengthening international partnerships and constructing frameworks for student and staff mobility. The plan had been to meet again with Myanmar counterparts after the new government was sworn in on February 1. As the post-coup period extended and it became clear that the situation would not be resolved in the near-term the project was concluded. The My-Eqip project has been cancelled by the Australian government.

There are many other examples of foreign expertise associated with the HE sector being withdrawn from Myanmar. Local expertise has also been lost. Chair of the Rectors Committee Dr Zaw Wai Soe (former Rector of the University of Medicine -1 and second-in-charge of the Yangon region covid-19 response team) has joined the National Unity Government (NUG) as Minister for Health and Education. The military has issued a warrant for his arrest. Other are in similar situations and will not work with the junta. In short, going forwards all international engagement will need re-building, and donor agencies will have to consider carefully with who and how they interact, as reputational risk takes on almost paramount importance.

The situation is still very unstable. At time of writing ASEAN announced it would not invite Myanmar's military leader to its

next head of state summit.<sup>21</sup> The decision is welcomed by most of the international community but also potentially signals a longer term of international isolation. However, there are signals that donors are looking at ways to re-engage with Myanmar for the benefit of the people. More than ever social science research will be needed to assess the true impact of both covid and the coup on Myanmar's economic and societal health. Once health concerns from COVID-19 are mitigated it is likely that some agencies will return foreigners to Myanmar and re-start programs. However, local research capacity will have decreased. While not quantifiable yet, it is known that local NGOs have been closed and staff threatened or arrested by the junta for providing food and health resources to the public. The junta has imposed strict rules on the employment of foreigners, and made it difficult for INGOs to receive funds and pay local staff.<sup>22</sup>

For the HE sector, already struggling with reform, this disruption is likely catastrophic. The junta has long been suspicious of universities and will undoubtedly not pursue any plans for autonomy. History also suggests foreign engagement with the HE sector on matters such as governance and curriculum reform will be rejected. Academic staff are in a very difficult position. Those who have remained in the sector are viewed by former colleagues and students as supporters of the junta. This is simplistic. Some are placed in the very difficult position of choosing between supporting their families or facing serious hardship, others have possibly been threatened should they not stay. Some may believe it is better to remain and support ongoing education as best they can.

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21 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/asean-to-exclude-myanmars-leader-from-summit-in-key-rebuke/>

22 <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-ngos-human-catastrophe/a-57887423>

Many academic staff are currently under suspension. They have until November 2021 to declare their rejection of the CDM and protests or will lose their jobs. This is a serious dilemma. Some need incomes and may return. However, anecdotally it is emerging that suspended staff will be carefully watched when they return to work and their teaching and actions monitored. As most staff have experience of this under the former regime, the threats are very real to them. If they do not return, there will be little chance of future re-employment in the HE system while the military remain in charge. However, there is also the risk of threats from CDM supporters when they do go back. There is no easy decision.

The importance of HE to Myanmar is evident in the rapid setting up of alternative means to facilitate ongoing student engagement in HE. The NUG has planned courses to allow students to continue their university education under the newly formed Federal University. The model will parallel the current HE system.<sup>23</sup> This is progressing slowly, and it will not be possible to support ongoing study across all disciplines. The Spring University Myanmar (SUM) has gained momentum and exists 'for continuous education during revolution'. It is well organised, is attracting donor funding support for course content and delivery.<sup>24</sup> There are other initiatives being organised along similar lines. These models offer some degree of hope for staff and students to progress their research and learning. Support has been gained from universities and individual academics globally.

Nearly all were engaged with Myanmar's HE reform prior to the coup. Donor funding is forthcoming – the projects offer a model for maintaining education not just for Myanmar but for other countries in crisis and the lessons learned will have future applications.

The DRA Myanmar report highlights the almost total disconnect between HEIs and policy research.<sup>25</sup> These parallel systems offer potential to fast-track models for social science research that connects government to HEIs. The NUG will need data to plan its own strategies and these parallel HE systems can engage academics and students in Myanmar directly with the NUG through research projects collaboratively undertaken with internationally-based academics.

For students there are many issues to resolve such as how credit can be earned through completion of courses, and how their degree program can be completed. But most important is support for continuing education and engagement with the international community. International donors could support these initiatives with a framework that plans for eventual integration with Myanmar's HE system when the democratically elected government is returned. It is hoped that some will do so. However, should the military regime consolidate its position and continue to rule for some years these alternative education systems may become ineffective. One possibility to acknowledge student achievements in the alternative systems may be to find ways to integrate into the private university sector, assuming these are allowed to continue.<sup>26</sup>

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23 <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210721150221771> and <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-emerging-alternatives-to-military-slave-education/> To date two Federal Universities, and a Virtual Federal University have been announced by different groups.

24 <https://springuniversitymm.com/>

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25 <http://www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/Myanmar%20Country%20Report.pdf> 47-48.

26 Private universities were only just starting to become accredited prior to the coup. For example, see Parami University <https://parami.edu.mm/>

The broader international community understands the importance of HE for a country's development. This is a feature of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals which Myanmar also supports. To avoid a prolonged loss of education options for Myanmar's future generations donors will likely be looking for ways to re-engage with HE reform and research capacity building even while the junta is in control. We have seen how quickly programs can be upscaled, evidenced in the advances of the last 5-6 years, but this will only occur if the foundations of foreign assistance are in place.

Donors engaging with the junta will run reputational risks and these will need to be managed carefully. Supporting the reform agendas put in place under the former government (which were also supported for the most part by the military with their 25% share of government vote) will be one way to minimise risk. Supporting any new agendas would not be favourably received by observers. On the other hand, if the NUG remains a 'government in exile', donors supporting their endeavours will likely be excluded from any in-country engagement. For foreign academics re-engagement with their Myanmar peers will likely be a personal choice. Circumstances vary considerably and the informal factors will in part determine how this re-engagement is viewed. International sanctions will also impact the participation of donors and foreign academics in re-activation of HE capacity building.

Sadly, whatever the political outcome it will be some years before international re-engagement will return to the levels needed to progress HE reforms. The rapidity of the coup reinforces the fragility of Myanmar's governance systems making long-term donor engagement difficult – yet this is what must happen for Myanmar to advance its HE standards and capacity. International

collaboration and exchange is also essential for a robust and creative HE sector and this will be slow to recover. New relationships must be built between the donor community, HEIs and central administration. This will also take time. These are only a few of the challenges facing HE capacity building. Myanmar's own internal politics and social complexities, as alluded to at the beginning of this paper, all feed into the ability of HE to develop effectively.

The GDN DRA Myanmar project aimed to provide a starting point for improving the HE system. Through mapping of the current research systems and identifying the main actors within the research environment, the study highlighted the very particular issue in Myanmar of the HE-Government relationship. Regardless of the ruling administration this relationship must be considered by donors and other external actors when re-engaging with Myanmar's HE sector. The challenges going forwards are multi-factorial, however, they are not insurmountable. Time and patience is required, though Myanmar will again face an unnecessarily hard road to re-join the international community and reach full potential.

## Additional Resources

Research associated with Myanmar's education system had increased dramatically prior to the February 1 coup. Some recently published resources are listed below, along with links to commentary about the effect of the coup.

Kyaw Moe Tun. 2021. We need authoritarian-proof higher education models. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/we-need-authoritarian-proof-higher-education-models>

Lall, Marie. 2020. *Myanmar's education Reforms. A pathway to social justice?* London: UCL Press. Open Access <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/139468>

Moon Suk Hong and You Jin Chun. 2020. Symbolic habitus and new aspirations of higher education elites in transitional Myanmar. *Asia Pacific Education Review* 22, 67-76.

Nay Chin Khin. 2021. Integration of Technology in Higher Education in Myanmar: A Review of University Teachers' Perceptions of Barriers and Supports. *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 15, 89-98.

Soe San. 2021. Beyond the coup in Myanmar: Don't let the light of Education be extinguished. *Just Security* <https://www.justsecurity.org/76921/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-dont-let-the-light-of-education-be-extinguished/>

Zin Mie Sharr. 2021. Analysing Higher Education Policy Change with respect to Universities' Autonomy in Myanmar. MA Thesis, University of Oslo. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/88246>





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