DATA AND INDICATORS ON SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

DOING RESEARCH
IN MYANMAR

Country Report

Centre for Economic and Social Development &
The Global Development Network

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Country Report

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THE DOING RESEARCH PROGRAM

Bridging the research gap and improving development policies

Today, governments and donors alike have little systematic information about the state of social science research, except for in a few developed countries. Yet, the implementation of the global agenda for sustainable development requires local research capacities to ensure that the scientific community is equipped to critically analyze development and policy challenges, and to accompany actions and reforms with contextualized knowledge of the local environment.

An in-depth analysis of research systems is key to understanding how to bridge this gap and raise the profile of research generated in developing countries. Research systems analysis can help policymakers, donors and academics answer the question: What can be done to further generate and mainstream local research as a key input to public debate and sustainable human development policies?

Assessing and benchmarking social science research systems

Doing Research (launched in 2014) is an initiative of the Global Development Network (GDN) that aims to systematically assess how the features of a national research system[1] impact the capacity to produce, diffuse and use quality social science research to the benefit of social and economic development. A pilot phase (2014-2017) in 13 countries

was supported by the Agence Française de Développement, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. In 2017, GDN conducted a synthesis of the pilot studies[2] and developed a standard methodology for studying social science research systems in developing countries,[3] the '**Doing Research Assessment**'. Since 2018, GDN has been implementing Doing Research Assessments in partnership with competitively selected national research institutions, with the aim of generating evidence on research systems. The program also aims to support the emergence of a network of research institutions in the Global South dedicated to informing national research policies, using new research-based, comparative evidence.

Doing Research National Focal Points – A Southern network of local 'research on research' expertise

Through the collaboration between GDN and these local institutions, the program aims to inspire research policies, map research strengths, support research capacity-building efforts and enhance the quality of research that can be used for policy decisions and local democratic debate in developing countries. Social science research provides a critical analysis of societies and human behavior and contributes to a better understanding of development challenges – which is fundamental to realizing national and global development agendas. Country reports, comparative global reports and data will inform actors from research,

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1 In this document, the terms 'research system' and 'social science research system' are used interchangeably.

2 www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/GDN-2017-DR-pilot-synthesis.pdf

3 www.gdn.int/sites/default/files/GDN%20-%20Theoretical%20Framework.pdf

development and policy communities about their policy-oriented research environment and how it can be improved.

Doing Research Assessment: to understand, map and assess research systems[1]

A unique feature of the Doing Research Assessment[4] is the equal importance the methodology gives to production, diffusion and uptake factors and actors in the analysis of systemic barriers and opportunities for social science development.

It involves three steps for analyzing the factors that impact the social science research system in a given country or region,

Steps and activities for implementing a Doing Research Assessment

Context analysis

Mapping of research actors

Doing Research Framework

Collection of new data at country level

Publication of the Doing Research Assessment

National seminar and dissemination

which will lead to several knowledge outputs and awareness-raising efforts.

Doing Research Framework: the core of the assessment

The Doing Research Framework is a mixed-method research module that allows a contextualized comparative enquiry into a national research system, looking at key factors that determine the production, diffusion and uptake of social science. It would typically serve as a magnifying glass to identify aspects that need the attention of the regulator, or to provide a baseline for strategizing investments in capacity-building for research production, its diffusion or its use.

The Framework acts as the basis for comparing and benchmarking research systems in different countries and includes 54 indicators. These indicators are populated according to the national context framed by the National Focal Points (NFP); these follow the project guidelines while adapting them to their national environment. Therefore, each country follows the same framework and general guidelines, allowing for comparisons between different reports of the indicators that define the Doing Research Assessments (DRA). The same is true for the Country Reports, which follow a similar structure.

	1. Production	2. Diffusion	3. Policy uptake
Inputs	1.1 Research inputs	2.1 Actors & networks	3.1 Policy-friendly research
Activities	1.2 Research culture and support services	2.2 Research communication practices	3.2 Research-based policymaking
Outputs	1.3 Research output & training	2.3 Research communication products	3.3 Research-based policy tools
Outcomes	1.4 Opportunities & sustainability	2.4 Popularization of science	3.4 Research for better policies

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4   www.gdn.int/doing-research-assessment

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As Myanmar continues its transition from a closed society to an open economy, linking research to policy and evidence-based policymaking are critical in making this a success. The Doing Research Assessment (DRA) in Myanmar is an essential study of how the country is utilizing research and evidence as the basis for formulating public policies, undertaking institutional reforms and integrating with the global economy. As part of the global think tank community, we are particularly grateful for this opportunity to contribute to this important piece of work. Given the nascent evolution of the research ecosystem in Myanmar, identifying and analyzing the different aspects of the research process (production, diffusion and uptake) was an arduous task and one we would not have achieved without the support of fellow researchers, particularly those from newly emergent think tanks in Myanmar. In dealing with this challenge, we would like to acknowledge the valuable guidance and assistance provided by the International Development Research Centre (Canada) and the Global Development Network.

This DRA uses a methodology agreed upon and standardized by GDN, to be used in a cohort of international case studies. In Myanmar, the Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD) implemented three comprehensive surveys conducted by a team of 12 researchers, 15 interns from the Yangon University of Economics and Yangon University of Computer Studies. Their tireless hard work conducting face-to-face interviews with individual researchers was crucial in helping senior researchers to carry out additional surveys as well as key informant interviews with research administrators and policymakers. The data collection process was further strengthened by guidance from the National Advisory Committee, research administrators from various higher education institutions in Myanmar, who helped to clarify the policies and processes of the research system. We would particularly like to thank Dr. Charlotte Galloway of the Australia National University for her work in mentoring the research team at CESD throughout the assessment, and Dr. Katri Pohjolainen, Senior Research Advisor for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, for her valuable review during the webinar launch of the study in May 2020.

We see the DRA as a starting point that will help the Government of Myanmar and development partners to plan and prepare for developing an inclusive and productive research system for effective public policymaking in Myanmar. We hope that our study will provide a reference point for essential dialog on mobilizing existing resources, both international and domestic, to empower Myanmar researchers. We recognize that the recommendations in our report could be refined and improved on in the light of new insights, better data and a fresh vision.

Our sincere thanks go to the Chairman of the National Education Policy Commission, the Chairman of the Rectors Committee, and the Director General of the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education for their guidance and direction. We are particularly indebted to Dr. Tin Maung Maung Than, Member of the National Human Rights Commission for his role in facilitating consultations with international partners. We would also like to express our deep appreciation to other senior government officials who shared their valuable insights and experiences, all of which helped to enrich our analyses. In addition, we value the opportunity of collaborating, learning and sharing experiences with colleagues from

the Asia Foundation, LIFT, the British Council, Michigan State University, the International Food Policy Research Institute, the Embassy of Canada and other experts. Finally, we could not have conducted the DRA exercise successfully without the hard work and professionalism of researchers under the leadership of Ngu Wah Win, Senior Policy Coordinator at CESD. We look forward to working with all stakeholders to advance the actions identified in this DRA study.

The authors of the Doing Research Assessment Myanmar report (by alphabetical order)

- Zu Xian (Anders) Lee
- Jana Rue Glutting
- Naing Lin Htet
- Ngu Wah Win
- Nyein Chan Aung
- Thaint Zar Chi Oo
- Zaw Oo

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASEAN   Association of Southeast Asian Nations

CSO   Civil Society Organization

DACU   Development Assistance Coordination Unit

DFID   Department for International Development

DRA   Doing Research Assessment

GDN   Global Development Network

GERD   Gross Expenditure on Research and Development

HEI   Higher Education Institution

IDRC   International Development Research Centre and Global Affairs Canada

INGOs   International Non-governmental Organization

JICA   Japan International Cooperation Agency

LIFT   Livelihoods and Food Security Fund

MDI   Myanmar Development Institute

MISIS   Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies

MMRD   Myanmar Marketing Research & Development

MOE   Ministry of Education

MOLIP   Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population

MSDP   Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan

NESAC   National Economic and Social Advisory Council

NESP   National Education Strategic Plan

NGOs   Non-governmental Organizations

NIHED   National Institute for Higher Education Development

NLD   National League for Democracy

PWC   PricewaterhouseCoopers

SLORC   State Law and Order Restoration Council

TVET   Technical and Vocational Education Training

UIS   UNESCO Institute of Statistics

Executive Summary

Despite nearly a decade of political liberalization and economic reforms, and a growing demand for evidence-based policymaking in Myanmar, there remains fundamental weaknesses in the country's social science research system. As in other developing countries, the instrumentality of social science is often overlooked by the government and its partners in the pursuit of national development objectives and specific policy goals. This is exacerbated by financial constraints, and the immensity and range of development priorities. In Myanmar, international actors play an important role in national development, but this often means that too little attention is given to growing the local research system.

This report aims to offer a holistic understanding of how the research landscape works, to ensure that actions and reforms are informed by contextualized knowledge of the local environment. Employing a mixed-method approach, quantitative data were collected through questionnaires targeted at researchers, research administrators and members of the policy community; qualitative data were collected during scoping interviews and subsequent in-depth interviews.

The Doing Research Assessment (DRA) methodology is comprised of three components. First, as part of the context analysis, the research team used secondary data and interviewed key stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the state of Myanmar's social research system. Second, the research team again used secondary data and information from the scoping interviews to identify and map key actors (stakeholder mapping) and gain insights into the dynamics between and among the groups of stakeholders. Third, we quantified and qualified the research findings using a common framework, the DRA Framework (GDN 2017), which allows us to study the research system in relation to those in other countries, across a number of sub-themes.

Main findings

Research funding for social sciences remains low on the list of government priorities. This is evident in the allocation of gross domestic expenditure on research and development (GERD) in 2017: social sciences and humanities had a mere 0.38 percent share of the budget for research – as opposed to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) with 32.8 percent, agricultural sciences with 32.6 percent, medical sciences with nearly 30 percent, and natural sciences with 4.22 percent. The allocation is unsurprising, given the content of the National Education Strategic Plan 2016-2021, which emphasizes the promotion of research and development for STEM subjects.

Research funding disbursed to higher education institutions (HEIs) and other public research institutions comes with stringent budgetary rules, which makes it difficult to manage research projects. This severely constrains longer-term research studies or the ability of research projects to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances or policy demands. International donor reporting requirements also impose additional demands on top of those of local administrators and policymakers.

There is currently no national research policy in Myanmar. In the absence of a national research policy, the current emphasis on decentralizing HEIs may further weaken the institutionalization of research, particularly in regard to social sciences. It also perpetuates the lack of emphasis on social

research in broader higher education policy, reflecting its peripheral role and the national emphasis on science and technology.

As 'civil servants', **academics in public universities are often burdened with administrative duties,** the supervision of students or heavy teaching loads. Promotion often entails taking on greater administrative responsibilities, diverting time away from research projects or teaching.

Women make up 75 percent of researchers in Myanmar. This is a reflection of social and cultural norms that often mean that women are the secondary household earners. Given the low salaries of university staff, men are less likely to work in the higher education sector.

There is limited collaboration or partnership among government research institutions, public HEIs and other relevant government departments. This means that research is often 'owned' by specific government departments. This results in overlapping and duplicated research, and makes it very difficult for researchers to access reliable or up-to-date data.

There is no formal peer review culture in Myanmar, reflecting the lack of a conversation about research quality. Universities in Myanmar's major cities, where research is heavily concentrated, as well as the many regional universities, produce their own university research journals. These operate as repositories of locally produced research that is vetted according to the specifications of individual universities. Quantity prevails over quality, both in terms of publication and academic promotion. In the absence of a peer review culture, standards remain low.

Popular opinions supersede research evidence in policy discussions. The reliance on platforms such as Facebook for official and unofficial communication on 'hot topics' politicizes dissemination. Many researchers are now discouraged to discuss their findings through social media and, as a result, the diffusion of research evidence through Facebook is limited.

Informality is prevalent in the linkages between researchers, organizations and policymakers. Unlike elsewhere, it is not the dearth of research inputs that limits evidence-based policymaking, but the top-down nature of the policymaking process, which means that evidence is often neglected. All too often, work commissioned by the government is conducted in a relatively informal manner, and is undertaken by researchers or organizations as a means of developing or maintaining a rapport with policymakers. As such, the notion of grants, or a more formal manner of commissioning work, is less widespread, and much of the work remains 'under the radar'.

Levers of change

Establish a national research body that will oversee, facilitate, coordinate, support and document research activities conducted in Myanmar, and a structure that ensures that sufficient attention is paid to social sciences as part of the national research system. Such a body could also facilitate and develop close working relationships between and among different research organizations and government research institutions, and promote crosscutting conversations about research quality and ethics.

Set up a robust and functioning research evaluation mechanism/peer review system for research in HEIs. A peer review system would greatly benefit the nascent research system, and potentially expand its impact and reach beyond the libraries of university campuses. Improving the quality

of research papers would also increase the uptake and use of research outputs by policymakers and the general public.

Prioritize investment in research capacity, infrastructure and funding for HEIs as part of the HEI reform agenda so that they can meet the growing demand for evidence-based policy research. Demand for evidence-based research is increasing and changing from more narrowly defined scientific research to broader social science research that assesses the fundamental mechanisms of policymaking, outcomes and impacts. These demands come not just from central government planners but also a myriad of other policy actors: regional governments, parliamentarians, political parties, private sector associations and international organizations.

Empower local researchers to provide relevant and timely technical assistance to policymakers. The choice of policy options is context-specific. Local researchers are best placed to choose the most appropriate course of action from among the different policy options provided by outside experts. Whenever possible, local researchers can be seconded to work on commissioned research undertaken by international organizations or foreign experts on behalf of the Government of Myanmar. Interaction with local research will not only stimulate joint policy learning but also build local capacity to effectively develop public policies in the future.

Enhance collaboration and partnership among government research institutions, public HEIs and other relevant government departments. Collaboration between government departments and research institutions will promote the sharing of and access to reliable and up-to-date data. Moreover, collaboration is likely to promote

research uptake and the production of research-informed policy, particularly if the views of all partners are incorporated, from the outset, in the design of research studies.

Increase the budget for research and improve flexibility. The Ministry of Education budget almost tripled between 2012/13 and 2019/20, of which the Department of Higher Education received 15-16 percent. Although there are some allocations for undertaking research, projects need to follow annual budgetary rules, as well as provide evidence for auditing purposes, which makes it difficult to undertake multi-year research projects.

International funding for research in Myanmar needs to be effectively coordinated. A large chunk of donor assistance is commissioned to international experts to research, assess and advise on policy inputs for the government. Thus, local knowledge and research is often overlooked by international organizations and, consequently, in many instances research is not properly contextualized and produces inappropriate operational recommendations.

Strengthen international funding support to boost quality, ethics and equity in the research system. While many important initiatives are being undertaken at the ministerial level by key bodies such as the National Education Policy Commission, the Rectors' Committee and the Department of Higher Education, international funding remains the main source of research funding in the country. Beyond commissioning research and increasing the share of research commissioned to local researchers, these funds can support debates and processes that strengthen quality, ethics and equity in Myanmar's research landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Highlights

- The instrumentality of social sciences is often neglected and overlooked by the government and its partners in the pursuit of national development objectives and specific policy goals.

- Development agencies and international actors play an important role in assisting Myanmar in navigating its political trade-offs and achieving the desired national developmental goals.

- Myanmar's education spending has almost tripled since 2010; however, the budget for research activities and institutions remains unchanged.

- This Doing Research Assessment (DRA) intends to study the architecture of the social research system in Myanmar – a country that, now more than ever, requires a sound research system to successfully further its economic and political transition.

- In light of the DRA exercise, the Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD) and the Global Development Network (GDN) aim to situate Myanmar's experience and current research dynamics within the diverse pool of research environments. This comparative analysis will serve as a tool for Myanmar's policymakers, higher education institutions (HEIs) and development donors interested in contributing to the development of a sound national research system.

Social Science Research in Myanmar

Research findings are critical for debate, policy formulation and developing comprehensive national priorities. While research and development continue to garner political interest in Myanmar – reflected in R&D national funding commitments – research funding is primarily allocated to 'hard sciences' and technical research. As in other developing countries, the instrumentality of social sciences is often neglected and overlooked by the government and its partners in their pursuit of national development objectives and specific policy goals. This is exacerbated by financial constraints and the immensity and range of development priorities that encompass a large variety of thematic areas and timescales. As a result, social science is low down on the list of priorities on the research agenda. In addition, political ideology and popular persuasion often supersede the use of research evidence and data analytics in policymaking. Amid such a paradigm, development agencies and international actors play an important role in assisting Myanmar in navigating its political trade-offs and achieving the desired national developmental goals. Social research is critical helping in navigating these complexities.

Currently, as in many developing countries, Myanmar's social science research is funded by international actors and development donors, both for use in their respective development projects and to aid domestic policymaking. However, the development and strengthening of the social research architecture is rarely seen as a development objective in itself. At the same time, national governments are often encouraged to allocate a greater share of public finance to the education sector. This is particularly true

for Myanmar, where education spending has nearly tripled since 2010. However, the budget for research activities and institutions remains unchanged. Given the critical role that social research plays in informing policymakers, it is important, as a first step, to develop a holistic understanding of the research landscape. This report provides an assessment of the architecture of the social research system in Myanmar – a country that, now more than ever, requires a sound research system to successfully further its economic and political transition.

The report is structured as follows: The second chapter provides a contextual analysis, the first component of the DRA. The third chapter looks at stakeholder mapping, building on the analysis in the previous chapter including the sampling strategy and its limitations. The fourth chapter discusses the findings from the DRA as well as the interlinkages between the quantitative and qualitative assessments, and the analysis from the previous chapters. Finally, the fifth chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations for research stakeholders.

By shedding light on the current research architecture, this report aims to examine the underlying dynamics between the range of identified actors in Myanmar's research ecosystem. It seeks to provide a baseline analysis that will allow for sound policy recommendations for the overhaul of the higher education system and improvements to national knowledge production. In light of the report's findings and recommendations, CESD and GDN aim to situate Myanmar's experience and current research dynamics within the diverse pool of research environments. This comparative analysis serves as a tool for Myanmar's policymakers, higher education institutions (HEIs) and development donors interested in contributing to the development of a sound national research system.

Definitions and Scope

In this report, social research is defined as research that is either categorized within the social science[5] discipline, or generates and contends scholarly knowledge on society and human behaviors (GDN 2017). Conducting this type of research is considered an exercise in connecting social research with the various stakeholders broadly defined in the DRA Framework: researchers, research administrators and members of the policy community. The various types of social research considered in this report will be discussed in the stakeholder analysis.

In this report, a categorical distinction is made between academic and non-academic social researchers. Academic researchers are defined as those employed in public HEIs, while non-academic researchers encompass those working outside of these institutions. It is important to note that in a strong research system, a considerable amount of research output is held up to academic scrutiny. Quality research is defined as rigorous and reliable, and adds to the existing body of knowledge. Often it is regarded as relevant to local contexts and/or local topics and global development challenges (ibid). However, in Myanmar there are no institutionalized systems in place to assess research output – an issue for both academic and non-academic researchers and their products.

Research administrators are defined as the managers of research production and dissemination. They include the heads of

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departments and rectors of HEIs, as well as research managers from the various non-academic bodies.

The policy community includes policymakers and decision-makers from various research and higher education-related government bodies, as well as key departmental heads who oversee the production and utilization of public data. In addition, international actors directly linked to policymaking in the higher education system or to research funding are also included in the analysis.

The stakeholders in this report participate in and shape the research system, which comprises of a set of institutions, practices, structures, rules and norms that determine the dynamics of the research cycle. The research cycle is the process of production, diffusion and uptake of social research (ibid). A strong research system is one that features formal, institutionalized channels and linkages for research products, which flow from one stage to the next with little disruption. Research management, rigorous social research methodology, and research dissemination infrastructure and strategies are imperative for the production of high-quality research. Furthermore, this framework promotes the incorporation and use of social research at the policymaker level. It is evident that doing social research is a political and social process of critical assessment, which translates into an important exercise in addressing development challenges (ibid).

Social science as an overarching concept has always been one that defies definition, even within academia. In Myanmar, this term was only introduced to the public conscience following the establishment of Rangoon University in 1920. In the absence of more formal attempts to define the term in the context of Myanmar, this report will define 'social sciences' based on the courses offered at public HEIs. At present, this includes anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, international relations, law, linguistics, political science, psychology and social work. Given the prioritization of the information and communications technology (ICT) sector by the government, as well as the sector's robust research production and the high levels of ICT research uptake by the private sector, this study also covers areas of advanced computer studies that contribute to addressing traditional social science issues.

Finally, for the sake of brevity, and for readers who may not be familiar with the sociopolitical developments in Myanmar, the report will use the geographic nomenclature most widely accepted and adopted today. As such, the country will be referred to as Myanmar throughout the report, except in specific cases where the term 'Burma' is more relevant to the context. Similarly, names of places will follow the names adopted by the Union Government and international organizations such as the United Nations.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Highlights

- The establishment of Rangoon University in 1920 introduced social science research to Myanmar for the first time.

- The protracted armed conflicts in the ethnic states of Myanmar since the 1950s have resulted in displacement and huge disruptions in education service delivery in these regions.

- Given the years of isolation and academic suppression, the pedagogy of the public education system, including higher institutions at all levels, still relies heavily on rote memorization, and neglects proof of understanding or critical thinking, both of which are central to research training.

- A common concern among the research community has been the continuing difficulty in conducting independent research, mainly because of the government's aversion to criticism.

- The five-year 'Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar' project by International Development Research Centre and Global Affairs Canada (IDRC), initiated in 2017, is the first donor-led project to focus entirely on funding and promoting social science research.

- The current DRA study, also funded by IDRC, is the first attempt to map and analyse the research landscape in Myanmar, with a focus on social sciences.

- Myanmar's high-level research capacity is not developing rapidly enough and relies heavily on capacity-building components being built into donor-funded projects.

Myanmar's Development in Context

Myanmar is the westernmost country of Southeast Asia, strategically located between the two economic giants of China and India. The multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages in Myanmar presents both opportunities and challenges, as evidenced in its turbulent political history. According to the latest Population Census of 2014 (MOLIP 2015), Myanmar has a total population of 51.5 million, comprised of the majority Bamar ethnic group and a myriad of over 130 other ethnic groups. According to the latest available official statistics on ethnicity recorded in the 1983 Population Census, Bamars accounted for 68 percent of the total population, and the rest is divided between seven major ethnic nationalities – Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Chin, Mon and Rakhine – together with over 100 smaller nationality groups (MOLIP n.d.). The administrative divisions are divided along these major ethnic lines, with 'regions' referring to Bamar-majority divisions and 'states' referring to areas with large ethnic minority populations.

Buddhism, the country's main religion, defined the ethical framework, sense of values and cultural context of the education system throughout the ancient Burmese kingdoms. Educational services were delivered mainly through monastic schools, which took root during the classical Burmese kingdom of Pagan in the 11th Century. Historically, Myanmar was under the rule of various monarchs until it came under British colonial control in 1886. Originally administered as part of British India, Myanmar (then known as Burma) experienced some return to semi-autonomous rule late in the colonial era. Myanmar gained independence from Britain in 1948, on condition that the Burmese leaders demonstrated that the country was unified and that control

could therefore be handed over to a single authority. When the outcomes of the Panglong Agreement, negotiated by General Aung San and other leaders of the major ethnic groups failed to materialize, tensions grew between the Bamar population and the minority groups over self-administration, resulting in conflicts across the ethnic states throughout the 1950s – with many of these tensions still ongoing today.

The central government lost control of many of the ethnic states in 1962 when the leaders of Shan State organized a summit on federalism and demanded more autonomy for the ethnic regions. The military intervened and staged a successful military coup d'état. The military rule that followed would isolate Myanmar from Western economies for the next five decades. Macro and microeconomic mismanagement impeded development, and poverty levels rapidly rose. 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' was introduced by the military to implement central planning and isolationist economic policies. One of the first casualties was the University of Rangoon, whose independent authority was brought directly under the control of the Directorate of Higher Education. The whole higher education system was then reorganized in line with the socialist model. The socialist government broke up the integrated university system into separate units and established professional institutes, arts and sciences universities, and technical colleges under the aegis of different line ministries.[6] Under this system, students were asked to

choose their specialization during their first year of higher education. The number of places for technical subjects were based on centrally planned manpower projections and admissions were determined by the nationwide matriculation exam organized by the Ministry of Education (MOE). As a result, social science subjects were downgraded, while multidisciplinary approaches diminished as many universities became thoroughly compartmentalized during the socialist era (Kyi et al. 2000).

Following two and a half decades of state repression and macroeconomic mismanagement during the socialist regime, 1988 marked a key turning point in the history of modern Myanmar, bringing Aung San Suu Kyi, now State Counsellor, to the forefront of the democracy movement. In the late 1980s, after three consecutive years of negative real GDP growth, high rates of inflation and misguided demonetization policies, the economy was on the brink of collapse (Kubo 2012). In 1987, Myanmar was included in the UN's list of Least Developed Countries for the first time. Pro-democracy movements gained considerable momentum throughout the first half of 1988 as university students organized mass protests, culminating in nationwide uprisings that brought down the socialist government. The uprising was quickly suppressed by the military in September 1988, and military rule was re-established under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the general elections in 1990, but the military refused to hand over power to the NLD and continued cracking down on the pro-democracy movement. As a result of the military repression, Western governments suspended economic assistance and investment in the country, including educational exchange programs and

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6   Under this arrangement, for instance, the Institute of Agriculture was under the Ministry of Agriculture while the Institute of Forestry was supervised by the Ministry of Forestry. At one point, as many as nine-line ministries supervised a wide range of professional institutes, while only the arts and science universities, and colleges of education remained under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

technical assistance. However, in response to the economic and political reforms initiated in 2011, the European Union lifted the last of its sanctions against Myanmar in 2013, and the United States followed suit in 2016, after Myanmar held its first democratic general elections – won by the NLD.

Throughout the 1990s, university students – the driving force behind the pro-democracy movement – organized nonviolent civic campaigns across the country. The SLORC closed down all HEIs for a few years, during which major universities such as Rangoon University (now Yangon) and Mandalay Arts and Science Universities were further divided into smaller campuses in the suburbs, effectively dispersing the student population and moving them outside the cities. Academic freedom was suppressed in an attempt to stamp out anti-government dissidence on campuses and, as a result, the quality of education declined rapidly due to lack of educational resources and infrastructure on the newly relocated campuses. The students took to the streets again in late 1996, resulting in the closure of HEIs for another year in 1998 (Seekins 1999). Between 1988 and 2000, all universities in Myanmar were closed for a total of 10 years (Lall 2008).

Following the student protests, the military government changed its title from SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, and announced a seven-point roadmap for a transition to civilian rule. Further confrontations between the military government and the NLD led to the violent crackdown of the pro-democracy movement and the house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2003. Western governments reacted by imposing tougher economic sanctions, including comprehensive sanctions under the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of the United States. Myanmar's economy declined rapidly throughout the 2000s as a

direct result. From a research perspective, the Western sanctions also prevented any donor-funded assistance to support scholarship and research programs at public universities – which were seen as government institutions.

Under these conditions, the performance of both the economic and education sector deteriorated rapidly, and the SPDC began to implement its seven-point roadmap in an effort to ease international pressure. A new constitution was enacted in 2008 and the first open elections were held in 2010. Boycotted by the NLD, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, formed by the military regime, won the elections and a quasi-civilian government came to power. Under the 2008 constitution, 25 percent of the seats in the national parliaments were set aside for the military. In November 2015, the first free and fair election since independence was held in Myanmar, which saw the NLD win a landslide victory and form the new government under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the newly-created role of State Counsellor.

The protracted armed conflicts in the ethnic states since the 1950s have resulted in displacement and huge disruptions in education service delivery in these regions. Education in non-government-controlled areas, where the MOE had limited access, has been severely affected (Jolliffe & Mears 2016). Gaps in basic education in these areas have often been filled by a network of local NGOs, local political organizations or religious institutions, putting many of the youths at a disadvantage compared to their peers in regional towns and cities. With little prospect of improving their economic opportunities, families have often been disinclined to invest in the education of their children, which is perceived to have poor rates of return (South & Lall 2016).

More recently, in 2019, the government started to collaborate with various NGOs

to set up accreditation systems for schools run by non-state actors. Chapter 6 of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement states that the governing authority of ethnic armed groups should be respected in matters such as health, security, resource management and education in the areas that they control; and Article 43 of the 2015 Amendment to the National Education Law allows the use of ethnic languages in the classroom. In 2018, the MOE launched a pilot program in Mon State to implement these provisions (Hirschi 2019). Despite these developments, high school diplomas awarded in non-government-controlled areas are yet to be recognized by public universities, hampering students' access to higher education (UNFPA Myanmar 2019).

Peacebuilding efforts have unfortunately stalled with the eruption of conflicts in Rakhine State and the subsequent humanitarian crisis in northern Rakhine. Since 2017, the Rakhine crisis has refocused international attention on Myanmar, with foreign academic researchers and international NGOs conducting a considerable amount of research on human rights violations and complex political emergencies. Renewed conflicts have also broken out in a few other ethnic states such as Kachin and Shan States, destabilizing and displacing many rural communities already devastated by seven decades of armed conflict and a high prevalence of illicit economic activities. These developments have contributed to the further polarization of views on the various crises, with huge resistance from within Myanmar to external observations of what is largely regarded as a domestic issue. Given the heightened sensitivity, very little systematic research or evidence-based analysis was conducted locally on the internal conflicts, despite the international attention. Furthermore, any outcomes from local research were unlikely to be taken seriously by

international actors, given the absence of any evidence that the research was founded on sound methodology.

While the Rakhine crisis has had a significant adverse impact on international relations recently, there has been an influx of investments and donor funds over the last eight years (Robinson & Nitta 2017). There is now an even more pressing need for evidence-based research to inform policymakers, particularly to address the socioeconomic challenges facing the country. In the absence of a thriving academic research scene – once an integral part of Myanmar society – applied research driven by international organizations and donors has become the dominant form of social research. This was first prompted by the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Alongside the government's move toward a democratic transition, there was an influx of international aid organizations conducting applied research on the impact of the cyclone on livelihoods and regional economies, to determine international aid requirements. As the country continues its political transition, what has emerged is a fragmented social research landscape where private or non-governmental agencies compete for funding and research projects commissioned by international actors.

During the reformist period (2010 to 2015), Thein Sein's Government initiated reforms in the higher education sector, doubling the country's education budget in 2012 in an attempt to rejuvenate the academic research environment. That same year, he also visited the United States to promote US–Myanmar cooperation as a vehicle for much-needed human capacity development. This prompted the re-opening of international collaboration within the higher education sector. Several education institutions in the US, led by the Institute of International Education, initiated an academic exchange program

and broader activities aimed at developing capacity in HEIs in Myanmar. The University of Yangon was designated as a 'Centre of Excellence' and, in close collaboration with the Johns Hopkins University and a few other participating universities, it conducted a guided strategic planning exercise on upgrading research systems. The exercise benefited from expert mentorship from the faculty members involved the partnership.[7]

Despite the optimism surrounding the economic and political reforms, and the encouraging signs of increased spending on education, research conducted with academic staff and students at the University of Yangon following the democratic reforms initiated in 2010 found a lack of academic rigor and freedom to conduct research, particularly in the social sciences (Esson & Wang 2016). This is largely because research proposals have to be reviewed by the MOE for both funding and general approval, and 'politically sensitive' research topics are often filtered out(ibid).

Nonetheless, international partnership in the higher education sector reached a historic level of cooperation when Thein Sein's government initiated the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) with the support of a number of donor agencies in 2013.[8] The CESR was finalized in 2015,

which led to the subsequent drafting of the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) and its final adoption in 2016 by Aung San Suu Kyi's government. While the need to improve research is highlighted in the NESP, there is currently no blueprint on how efforts will be coordinated among all the HEIs in Myanmar (Howson & Lall 2019).

To help understand the overall structure of the research system in Myanmar, the subsequent sections detail some of the key historical developments within higher education, many of which were driven by the turbulent political history of Myanmar. A significant number of these reforms in the past have continued to affect the higher education and research system, and are highly relevant to any discussions on these matters today.

The General Structure of the Research System

British Rule (1886-1948)

Following successive Anglo-Burmese wars throughout the 19th Century, the British deposed the last Burmese monarch in 1885. In 1886, all of Myanmar came under colonial rule. The Education Bureau was established to set up the first non-monastic education system in Myanmar, which later shaped the evolution of social research systems in the country. The colonial administration expanded Anglo-vernacular education through over 5,000 schools in cities across the country as part of the new secular approach to mass primary education, while allowing monastic education to continue in villages. The main aim of the colonial administration was to form an educated administrative cadre for the colony. As formally declared in parliament in 1903, its purpose was to "convey useful and practical knowledge, suited to every station of life, to the great masses of people" (Fuqua 1992).

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7   IIE (2013) *Investing in the Future: Rebuilding Higher Education in Myanmar,* Washington D.C. The report states that were 807 students from Myanmar studying in the US in 2012 (compared to only 717 students over the entire previous decade). However, this figure pales in comparison to the number of students from neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, which sent 7,626 and 15,572 students to the US in 2012 respectively.

8   Asian Development Bank (2013) *Myanmar Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) – Phase 1: Rapid Assessment.* Support for CESR was co-financed by ADB and the Government of Australia (AusAID) – as well as support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Western-style education was first introduced to Myanmar by the Catholic missionaries as early as the 18th Century, to reach and convert the local population. The expansion of mission schools accelerated under the efforts of the American Baptist Mission during British rule. In this context, Western-style education was largely associated with Christianity. With the successful conversion of a large number of the Chin, Kachin and Kayin populations in the frontier regions, the non-Bamar minority groups were the main beneficiaries of improved access to modern education. The perception that modern education disproportionately benefited the non-Bamar population caused grievance among the Buddhist Bamar majority, who largely avoided attending such schools (Taylor 2005).

A series of measures by the colonial government to improve education led to the establishment of HEIs in Myanmar. Rangoon College was formally established in 1879, as an affiliated college of Calcutta University, with its operations under the administration of India. Given its status as a pre-collegiate preparatory school for university programs taught entirely in English in Calcutta, Rangoon College was modeled on the British system and offered a four-year degree program with an emphasis on liberal arts, law and English (Steinberg 1950). Its students came from elite families, although the number of indigenous students (Burmese or other ethnic groups within Myanmar) was limited to no more than two-thirds of the student body; the remaining third were students from Southeast Asia seeking high-quality education overseas (Taylor 2009).

The sea change in academia in Myanmar came with the establishment of Rangoon University in 1920, which profoundly reshaped the higher education and research landscape. Under the Rangoon University Act, the status of Rangoon College was elevated to that of a University. For the first time,

students had the opportunity to pursue higher education in Myanmar. The university was comprised of six colleges and offered degrees in arts and science, law, forestry, engineering and medicine. Although many lecturers were recruited from Britain, others were local Burmese scholars who had graduated from British and British colonial universities. Rangoon University introduced social science and research to Myanmar for the first time. In fact, the term 'social science' was never used prior to the establishment of the university; instead, the study of subjects such as economics and political science fell under the umbrella of the humanities. Up until independence, law, history and economics dominated the social science disciplines. Rangoon University attracted some of the most promising academics in the country, who later became prominent scholars in their respective fields. Research findings on the economic and social problems facing Myanmar began to emerge, and significant research was conducted in the field of political economy, building the foundations for the science of economic development (Taylor 2009).

Equally illustrative of the emerging academic research environment was the Burma Research Society, founded in 1910 by four scholars – three foreign and one local. As the first research society in Myanmar, its goal was "the investigation and encouragement of Arts, Science and Literature in relation to Burma and its neighbouring countries" (Selth 2010: 406). In its early years, the majority of contributions were made by Western scholars researching Myanmar. Over time, the balance shifted to include more Burmese scholars, many of whom were recognized as early leaders in their fields. Research papers produced by the Society were overwhelmingly within the social sciences and humanities, representing over 80 percent of the papers published

in the Society's journal between 1948 and 1974 – up until the isolationist policies of the military government came into full effect (Kyi 1977). The founding of the Burma Research Society, then the first of its kind in the region, was indicative of the outstanding educational status and thriving academic research landscape in Myanmar during this period. Faculty members at Rangoon University made up a large proportion of the society's members, earning a great reputation for the university as it leaped ahead of universities in other British colonies in the region, particularly the highly prestigious University of Malaya.

Parliamentary Democracy (1948-1962)

After gaining independence from Great Britain in 1948, the post-independence government enjoyed a vibrant parliamentary democracy, where independent media and academia served as important watchdogs for government policies. This era was the golden era for Myanmar intellectuals, who took pride in their educational achievements and expressed their independent views. Freedom of expression stimulated a wide range of ideological views from Marxist, socialist, Western and traditional Buddhist philosophies (Badgley 1969). In the early 1950s, the government, led by Prime Minister U Nu, launched an ambitious national development plan named the 'Pyidawtha Plan'– which literally meant 'building a happy and prosperous nation'– to support the implementation of far-reaching development projects and wide-ranging investments in the education sector (Maung 1953). These included progressive policies for schools and universities, free primary education, mass literacy projects and the translation, for popular consumption, of informative books on a wide range of modern subjects (ibid). It also established a generous state scholarship

scheme to send hundreds of young scholars to Western campuses, including a number of top universities in the United States.

The boom in demand for admission into Rangoon University following Myanmar's independence led to the addition of new subjects, such as sociology and anthropology, while subjects like statistics and commerce were separated out from economics to become their own disciplines. By the early 1950s, Rangoon University was one of the top universities in Asia, attracting both local elites and foreign scholars. Scholars from Britain and Europe came and worked as lecturers and professors, resulting in a great exchange of academic ideas between Myanmar and the rest of the world. However, anti-colonialist sentiments began to grow among some Burmese intellectuals, who had long been suspicious of external interpretations of national problems. This eventually culminated in the dissolution of the Burma Research Society – a famous research body among international scholars and researchers – by Ne Win's government in 1980 on the grounds of foreign conspiracy.[9]

Professors from Rangoon University also earned sought-after positions in prestigious universities overseas. Academics at the university contributed significantly to the social sciences, particularly history, geography and economics – a testament to the superior teaching quality and close contact with other academics globally (Kyi 1977). In 1957, the Faculty of Social Sciences was established at Rangoon University with the aim of fostering interdepartmental

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9 Wei Yan Aung. 'Revered Burma Research Society Founded 109 years ago', Irrawaddy, 29 March 2019. Accessed at https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/on-this-day/revered-burma-research-society-founded-109-years-ago.html in December 2019.

cooperation in teaching and research. The departments of history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics and statistics fell under the purview of the faculty (ibid).

Universities enjoyed a high level of autonomy during the early post-independence years, with their own boards for academic governance. For example, Rangoon University had its own endowments, and governed itself fairly independently through a council consisting of professors, government officials and public interest groups, and a Senate predominantly made up of academic staff. Aid and training were provided by the British Council,[10] the Ford Foundation, the Asia Foundation, the Fulbright Program and the Johns Hopkins University (Kyi et al. 2000). State scholars and military officers were sent abroad, mainly to the United States and the United Kingdom – an indication of the close collaboration between Myanmar and other countries during this period (Steinberg 2013).

Socialist Revolution (1962-1988)

The rise to power of General Ne Win in 1962 prompted many changes to the education and research systems of the time. Firstly, the medium of instruction changed from English to the obligatory use of Burmese in textbooks and schools across all levels of education. All policies implemented during his rule were meant to limit and discourage dissent and alternative views or knowledge of the outside world. The regime expected graduates to become civil servants or enlist in the military (Callahan 2005). The leading administrative body for the civil service, the

General Administration Department (GAD), was tasked with collecting information and community-level intelligence to serve the government's operations (Saw & Arnold 2014). Equipped with detailed statistics about livelihoods and activities at the grassroots level, the government intended to mobilize the civilian population in support of its socialist agenda. While it was easy to implement a mass countrywide basic literacy campaign under such a system of governance, this mission-led approach severely hampered development in higher education and academic research. Rote learning or memorization was used to teach students from primary through to tertiary level – a means of gaining knowledge without encouraging critical thinking or alternative views that questioned the official ideology. Teachers were goal-oriented and were seen as information transmitters, and issues were not problematized.

During this socialist period, social sciences became a tool of government, training the next generation of public administrators to play the role of subservient functionaries for the socialist regime. Social science teaching was overhauled to suit the needs of the revolutionary government. Economics, statistics and commerce were grouped into their own institutions, focusing on economic planning and management. Political science was removed as a discipline from universities and absorbed into a new Central Academy of Political Science, established as a wing of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the official party of the ruling government (Kyi 1977).

During this period, Myanmar had three primary research actors: the academic departments of universities, specialized research organizations, and data gathering and professional agencies. Present-day government agencies like the Central Statistical Organization can trace their origins to this era. All three actors fell under the

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10 The British Council set up offices in Yangon in 1946 and went on to establish a library, reading room and classrooms (British Council n.d.)

oversight of the Research Policy Direction Board, which was a sub-committee of the Council of Ministers. Deliberate organization of research actors under an overarching mandate did not improve national research policy capacity. Indeed, this direct command from the top inhibited the independence of researchers and data scientists; they were under pressure to deliver data that suited the central planning political agenda (Raynaud 2014). While detailed statistics were collected (for example, data on every product line firms sold or produced, or household consumption patterns) they were used not for critical policy analysis but for indicative planning – a hallmark of centrally planned systems. Clear and measurable results – such as per capita income growth, the implementation of new industries, the utilization of natural resources or the development of agriculture – could be used by the government to assert the effectiveness of their policies. It is evident, in hindsight, that data not supporting government policy was not made public or ignored.

Universities also became focal points for political unrest. Demonstrations at the University of Yangon in July 1962 resulted in the violent crackdown of the student union. The incident – better known as the '7th July events' – led to continued student unrest in other campuses. Motivated by fear of further activism, the government adopted the University Education Act of 1964, which separated professional faculties from universities into their own institutions. Under the law, Rangoon University and Mandalay University were significantly scaled down and renamed the Rangoon Arts and Science University and the Mandalay Arts and Science University. A multitude of universities were established from the previous 'professional' faculties, based on their respective area of specialization – for example, the Institute of Medicine, the Institute of Agriculture and the

Institute of Economics (Thein 2004). The act undermined the multidisciplinary approaches in higher education, as well as the vibrant student life that had existed in Myanmar. The mid-1970s saw further measures to physically separate universities as well as impose restrictions on academics, including barring them from overseas travel (Smith 1992). Similarly, it became difficult for foreign academics to visit Myanmar.

The two decades following the socialist revolution (the 1960s and 1970s) had a damaging impact on the research landscape in Myanmar – still evident today. The centrally planned model of education and the ideology of 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' significantly transformed the national curriculum, replacing the once liberal system that saw Myanmar's HEIs develop into regional leaders. The University Education Law of 1973 transferred governance of matters traditionally handled by individual universities to the University Central Council or the Council of University Academic Boards, resulting in universities losing autonomy over their own budgets. Tight restrictions were enforced by the socialist government on research, travel and publishing, resulting in the abolition of PhD programs. Many specialist departments in anthropology and philosophy collapsed as a result of mismanagement (ibid). Technical and Vocational Education and Training was promoted as an essential subject for all higher education students and regional colleges were opened across the country to offer vocational subjects in the first two years of university education. Students were given only two additional years to learn disciplines of their choice, which did little to advance their knowledge of their chosen subject.

Under the isolationist policies adopted by the socialist regime, scholars were not allowed to travel abroad for fear of Western influence. Study exchanges were limited only to other

socialist countries in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Research became a vehicle to support the socialist revolution, as Burmese scholars lost touch with international trends and practices. The Burma Research Society and its journal, which had been running for seven decades as forums of debate and research on Burma, were accused of being Western vehicles for domestic interference, and abolished by the Burma Socialist Programme Party government in 1980.

Military Regime (1988-2011)

Following the student-led 1988 pro-democracy protests and the subsequent violent military crackdown, the military reasserted its authoritarian rule under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (Lwin 2000a). In order to quell the widespread student protests, the SLORC closed all universities for two years – a strategy used on numerous occasions in the 1990s amid fears of another student uprising (Skidmore & Wilson 2008).

An important change in the education system during this period was the deliberate spatial, cognitive, and administrative separation of disciplines and faculties. The intention was clearly signaled with the establishment of the University of Distance Education in Yangon in 1992, largely motivated by the desire to avoid student congregations and diminish their capacity to mobilize (Koon-Hong 2014). Even after universities reopened in 2000, the majority of students were still enrolled in distance-learning programs (ibid). Distance learning relied heavily on textbooks, study guides and assignments so that students did not have to take any classes on campus (Hla Tint 2014). Critics of distance education have argued that the system is not effective, and that students do not receive any qualifications or skills beyond merely receiving a degree certificate (Win 2015). Teaching methods

in distance learning have changed little, despite being the dominant mode of study in higher education (NESP 2015).

Between 1989 and 2004, the number of universities and colleges grew from 32 to 154, as the spatial separation of campuses and students accelerated (Chinlone 2018). This was most evident with the separation of the Yangon School of Economics from the University of Yangon – the former was colloquially called 'Jungle University' as it was relocated to a newly established satellite town 25 kilometers outside of central Yangon in 2001. The University of Yangon campus near the heart of the city hosted only postgraduate students. Faculty members had to commute between the various faculties scattered across the city, wasting hours on the road.

Furthermore, these newly-created HEIs were governed by a multi-ministry system, whereby only half of the institutions were under the MOE, with the remaining scattered across 13 associated line ministries, following specific 'technical disciplines' to support government functions (ibid). It is important to stress that these new faculties were no longer in close proximity to the resources they had previously enjoyed (e.g. extensive and diverse library catalogues) and only offered limited academic resources that were specific to each discipline. The curriculum was shortened, disciplines were compartmentalized and, more specifically, social science disciplines were taught in isolation. As a result, social research suffered immeasurably – few academics were engaged in producing social research beyond generating research papers for their own university journals. Following the restrictions on engagements with international institutions and organizations, social research in academia became even more isolated and was of little relevance to industry or society.

Reform Era (2011-present)

After decades of authoritarian military rule and isolationist policies, wide-ranging reforms were introduced by the transitional government in 2011 in the lead-up to the 2015 democratic elections. The transition, recognized by the international community as the Nay Pyi Taw Accord of Effective Development Cooperation in 2013, ushered in a new era of liberalization and reform initiatives, driving rapid economic growth in the following two years.

Widely regarded as the final frontier for investments and international donors in Southeast Asia, Myanmar witnessed tremendous changes in social policies affecting the higher education sector during this transitional period, with further reforms after the 2015 election of the NLD under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. Prior to 2011, Myanmar was the only country in Southeast Asia where government spending on the defense sector was consistently higher than spending on health and education combined (Turnell 2011). In 2012, under the guidance of international financial institutions, Myanmar undertook one of the most significant reforms in public financial management, with huge investments in education and health. Over the next three years, the government made efforts to increase budget allocations for health, education and social services; the share of social services in the 2015/16 Budget constituted, for the first time, the largest share of the Union Budget Law. Between 2009 and 2013, expenditure on education quadrupled, while expenditure on health increased nine-fold. The newly-elected civilian government further accelerated these cross-sectoral reforms, as government spending on health and education increased significantly.

Since the NLD came to power in 2015, Myanmar has introduced more comprehensive higher education reforms under the NESP 2016-2021, with a focus on upgrading research in higher education. The government set up the National Education Policy Commission to oversee the reform process and the Rectors' Committee to support internal reforms across universities, in line with national policies. Research conferences were also organized to enable both professors from public universities and independent researchers to present their scholarly research work. In addition, for the first time, plans have been adopted to promote a research system. However, Myanmar has inherited the legacy of the past, where historical, sociopolitical, economic and international contexts have shaped the evolution of the social research system. This will be discussed in the following sections. In addition, new contemporary issues emerging in Myanmar will be addressed in the 'Stakeholder Mapping' chapter.

Sociopolitical Context

Political Space: Isolation and Sanctions

From 1962 to 1988, Myanmar experienced an isolationist period during which the government terminated various international contacts, particularly with the West. The socialist government even cut itself off from the Non-Aligned Movement of developing countries in the 1980s. It also refused to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) throughout this period and refrained from any development cooperation, even with neighboring countries. As a result, the education system became far removed from international trends. However, a few selected government civil servants were allowed to study abroad and further their academic training (graduate or PhD) in strategically-aligned countries such as East Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union, mainly for narrowly defined technical subjects such as

statistics, nuclear science, military technology and engineering. The government also maintained some engagement with its Asian counterparts, most notably the Japanese government.

When the socialist era ended following the violent military crackdown in 1988, the international community, led by the United States, imposed severe economic sanctions, which included stopping bilateral academic exchanges with the West. From the beginning of the 1990s up until 2012, nearly all bilateral university exchanges for local and foreign researchers ceased. American universities discontinued their programs with local universities (Martin 2010). This excluded most local researchers from international scholarship opportunities, and isolated them from contemporary trends and research practices. It is important to note that students were still able to apply for scholarships abroad individually, though this was highly dependent on the socioeconomic background of the applicant – it was predominantly urban, well-off applicants who had access to and knowledge of these opportunities. The only avenue for Myanmar academics to engage with international developments was through regional scholarly exchanges, namely in Thailand and Singapore. Fewer students were able to study in Australian or New Zealand universities. While these foreign-educated scholars often remained in their host countries, those with family still at home tended to self-censor their research on Myanmar, for fear of any repercussions for their family members.

For the small number of foreign academics who were able to navigate the bureaucracy in Myanmar, nearly all of the 'approved' research topics related to history and archaeology, which were deemed 'safe' research activities (Skidmore 2005). Even then, research frameworks were tightly controlled and there was limited access to

research materials and the civilian population (Farrelly 2016). For research undertaken in the country, all papers had to pass the official military censorship board, which meant that university professors and academics resorted to self-censorship in their academic enquiries (Selth 2017).

Civic Space: Independent Research NGOs

Domestically, the main types of social inquiry were in the form of information gathering and exchange by various underground activist networks. They collected evidence to document living conditions under military rule. In the early 1990s, UN health and education agencies and various INGOs engaged or resumed engagement with Myanmar within the context of child and family health. During this period, the Millennium Development Goals were contextualized in Myanmar around the Global Fund – an initiative to combat HIV, tuberculosis and malaria. Due to the lack of qualified professionals to work in this newly established sector, the government allowed their staff to study abroad to develop capacity in these areas.

1997 marked a watershed year for the military regime with its decision to join ASEAN. ASEAN membership required extensive engagement, with intense planning for year-round meetings throughout the region. To handle the preparations, the military government established its first think tank, the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The international relations department of the University of Yangon was also instructed to open an ASEAN Study Centre to begin research work on regional integration. The MISIS began to hold several research symposia in the early 2000s, particularly on economic

issues, to solicit independent ideas from retired economists, private businessmen and faculty members of the Yangon Institute of Economics.[11]

Humanitarian Space: Cyclone Nargis

In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the military government was under tremendous pressure from the international community over human rights issues. The military junta started to gradually relax its aversion to international involvement, rebooting their engagement in the form of humanitarian assistance. It formed the Tripartite Core Group, together with ASEAN and the UN, to manage the humanitarian response. This opened up an unprecedented level of engagement with international organizations within the humanitarian space.

The increased engagement with the international community heralded a new era for a country which has been in isolation for over four decades. Foreign governments and development agencies began to partner with newly-formed local civil society organizations (CSOs) to deliver resources to affected communities. This also served as a springboard for the international community to engage with political actors (Stokke et al. 2018). CSOs became the main intermediary for efforts focusing on the promotion of self-reliance in local communities, a strategy that served as a bridge between donors and the government (Mullen 2016). Informed by previous academic studies, development aid helped to introduce a more favorable environment for conducting research. Research funded by development aid initially focused on assessing the social impact of

dispersed disaster relief and monitoring livelihood reconstruction projects. In the end, the tragic event became a turning point for social research activities and paved the way for the further reforms.

Democratic Space: Reforms and Rehabilitation

This new paradigm in Myanmar's history opened the door for limited data collection. Consequently, from 2008 onward, country data could be included in the many international comparative indicators. The Worldwide Governance Indicators assessed the state of governance in the country as extremely low across all its main indicators.[12] However, alongside the incremental reform process, the country's governance ranking began to improve – a process that led up to the democratic transition and the contentious 2010 elections. The quasi-civilian government – led by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – which won the elections, introduced the Framework for Economic and Social Reforms (FESR) and, in 2013, entered into a formal partnership with major donors under the Nay Pyi Taw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation. Close collaborative relationships were forged between the government, researchers, and relevant NGOs and CSOs for the implementation of the two flagship initiatives under the FESR: the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative and the Citizen's Budget. These two initiatives allowed the administration in specific ministries to 'learn-by-doing' and institutionalize some of the practices learned. As an

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11 The Yangon Institute of Economics was renamed the Yangon University of Economics in 2014.

12 The relevant indicators were: voice and accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption. In 2008 Myanmar ranked below the 5th percentile for all these indicators.

interviewee working on the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative reported, "The experience and positive outcome of the EITI Report convinced the government about the importance of good data and methodologies." Nonetheless, the main dilemma for the transitional government was how to allow access to previously undisclosed and sensitive information for the first time, while presenting evidence of the progress under their reformist policies.

As some commentators have argued, with the quasi-civilian government seeking legitimacy for their reform agenda, this was a period characterized by significant relaxation of the restrictions on conducting social research in the country. The growing research interest in Myanmar from various actors allowed for more open discussions and research on areas that were previously off-limits (Farrelly 2016). A range of different stakeholders was able to persuade the government of the importance of social research, resulting in the establishment of the Myanmar Development Resource Institute in 2011. The aim of the Institute was to steer the economic and democratic transition plan. With similar goals in mind, the NLD established the Renaissance Institute in 2013. In addition, the Tatmadaw[13] established its own research institute, ThayNinGa, in 2015. That same year, the first university in Naw Pyi Taw was opened by the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development – the Graduate School of Administration and Development – in collaboration with economic universities. It offers evening and weekend classes for senior officials as part of graduate degree courses.

During this period, university campuses in central Yangon were formally reopened for postgraduate studies. Foreign professors were invited on a case-by-case basis and, from 2013, visiting scholars were allowed in a few universities including the Yangon University of Economics. Since then, foreign students have been allowed to undertake a semester or year-long exchange at universities in Myanmar, again on a case-by-case basis. After decades of absence from universities, political science courses were reintroduced in 2013: the Department of International Relations at the University of Yangon began offering a Bachelor's degree in political studies for the first time in many decades – although, as yet, there is no department of political science in the country.

The decisive NLD victory in the 2015 elections was a much-anticipated turning point in Myanmar's democratic transition. However, despite these changes in the political sphere, a common concern among the research community has been the continuing difficulty of conducting independent research. The bureaucratic hurdles today are higher than during the earlier period of liberalization, mainly because of the government's aversion to criticism. A recent report revealed that, increasingly, access to information and its diffusion is being obstructed or even banned via the various articles of the Telecommunications Law. This particularly affects journalists, activists and researchers engaged in areas or subjects that are deemed controversial (Athan 312 2019). As an interviewee for the DRA pointed out, 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.

It is important to note that the political climate is framed by the 2008 Constitution, which spells out three national objectives:

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13 Tatmadaw is the official Burmese name for the armed forces of Myanmar.

the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity, and the perpetuation of sovereignty (Constitute n.d.). There is therefore an expectation among politicians that journalistic ethics must not jeopardize these national objectives (Khin Maung Myint 2016). Similarly, as a research manager pointed out, the same ethical conduct is expected of researchers: research findings should not violate these national goals.

Economic Context

Growing Demand for Domestic Research

While the country continues to be categorized as a least development country, it has made notable progress over the last two decades. Prior to the comprehensive economic and political reforms, Myanmar's GNI per capita in 2000 and 2005 stood at USD 1,289 and USD 2,252 respectively[14] (see Table 1). However, in terms of human development progress, as measured by the Human Development Index (UNDP 2018), Myanmar has fared poorly in all measures relative to other countries.

The lifting of the economic sanctions by the US and EU countries following the comprehensive reforms undertaken during the 2010-2015 period generated greater economic interest in the country, leading to a large influx of foreign direct investment. This, in turn, created a domestic economic stimulus. Between 2005 and 2015, the poverty rate dropped by a third, from 48 to 32.1 percent; in 2017, it was estimated at 25 percent, according to the Poverty Report (CSO et al. 2019). Over the 2015-2018 period, as shown in Table 1, the per capita income increased dramatically alongside life expectancy at birth. Nonetheless, Myanmar's 2018 HDI of 0.584 is below the average (0.741) for countries in East Asia and the Pacific.

These economic reforms not only had a positive impact on the population but also on the business environment. The most noticeable reform was the liberalization of the telecommunications sector, which not only allowed people to connect with the outside world, but, more importantly, allowed the country to make great technological advances (GNLM 2015). It played a pivotal role in improving public access to government information, while also reducing

Table 1. Myanmar HDI trends based on time series data.

Years	Life expectancy at birth	Mean years of schooling	GNI per capita (2011 PPP$)	HDI value
2000	60.1	3.1	1,289	0.424
2005	61.6	3.6	2,252	0.470
2010	65.8	4.9	4,863	0.565
2018	66.9	5.0	5,764	0.584

Source: UNDP 2018

14 As previously mentioned, comprehensive comparative data collection was only really possible from 2008 onward. For certain economic indicators, international comparisons have to rely on self-reported figures provided by the national government.

the spatial and time constraints on the production and dissemination of research (UNDP 2016). As the country attained a higher economic growth rate, surpassing other high performing economies in the region, the demand for structural reforms

grew, requiring more systematic research and evidence to guide the reforms.

However, given the years of isolation and academic suppression, the pedagogy of the public education system, including higher institutions at all levels, still relies heavily on rote memorization and neglects proof of understanding or critical thinking, which are central to research training (Lwin 2010b). Universities and colleges remain underfunded despite the redesigned and updated curricula across various disciplines (Hayden & Martin 2013; Institute of International Education 2013). Although the quasi-civilian and the NLD governments were both aware of these shortcomings, a maximum of only 8 percent of the Union budget was allocated for education, of which 85.25 percent was channeled toward basic education (Primary and Secondary) and 10.35 percent allocated to higher education; only 2 percent was allocated to TVET (technical and vocational education training). More importantly, research and innovation were included in the 'other' category, which was allocated 2.4 percent of the education budget (UNICEF 2018). Critically, although the government appears to view the development of a research system as a budgetary priority, there is no explicit mention of social research as a priority within that.

The government has relied on foreign aid contributions to finance the gaps in the education budget – most notably, 241 million euros in assistance from a multi-donor education fund (UNICEF n.d.). In 2018, the education sector was liberalized with the aim of addressing the current quality gap across all levels of education, while allowing for a greater selection of curriculum (PWC 2018). At the same time, several private education providers have been set up, most of which prioritize the development of research and analytical skills, offering courses that are not available in public universities. At the time of

writing, a law governing private HEIs is still pending, and several parliamentarians have demanded the strengthening of oversight over the quality of higher education offered by the private sector.[15]

With investment restrictions being eased and more sectors expected to be liberalized, foreign investors are increasingly seeing Myanmar as a high potential economy (Park et al. 2012). Driven by the economic opportunities, the private sector is generating demand for research on the domestic market and its consumers, as well as the country's economic and political system. The private sector actors that are conducting social research are primarily market research firms, small development consulting companies and large international consulting companies. According to a researcher working at a foreign embassy, these actors "mainly focus on conducting market assessments, business feasibility studies, and monitoring and evaluations for other private entities or outsourced tasks of large development aid programs." This has important ramifications for the quality of research. As another interviewee pointed out, "An implication of being a strong force when conducting social research in Myanmar is that because knowledge is not publicly available, the quality of their research cannot be assessed, only inferred by the organization's reputation."

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15 See New Light of Myanmar, 'Hluttaw Proceedings', 15th February 2020. Presently, these institutions run their programs as business enterprises and, unfortunately, many companies of questionable repute have set up schools and programs with non-accredited certificates and degrees, in response to the high demand from students looking for alternatives to public universities. Several scandals relating to fake degrees and credentials have recently come to light. These have even affected the government's top civil service training university, which provided Masters degrees in partnership with a fake university, prompting lawmakers to question the arrangement. More detailed discussions on private sector institutions can be found in Chapter III.

Exacerbating these dynamics is the fact that wages in independent or academic research are far less competitive than those in the private and development sectors. Recent graduates from local universities and abroad are often financially discouraged from pursuing a research career in the public sector – a trend that is prevalent across many developing countries (Gindling et al. 2019).

That said, Myanmar is in an advantageous position with regards to its skilled diaspora and foreign-trained students. Since the transition, many Myanmar nationals, including social researchers, are increasingly seeing Myanmar as a viable place to further their careers. This has encouraged many highly skilled Myanmar nationals to return back home (Chinlone 2018). In the short-term, 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." This needs to be combined with a massive effort to strengthen research training and improve research career prospects in public universities and other local research organizations.

International Context

Foreign Academic Researchers and Institutes

Prior to the 1990s and early 2000s, research on Myanmar was predominantly academic and, by and large, conducted by foreign researchers. This is illustrated by a study that found that the number of articles on Myanmar during the period 1970-2000, regardless of the researcher's nationality, was similar to three other neighboring ASEAN countries, despite that fact that Myanmar was ranked at the bottom in terms of research produced by local researchers (Gerke & Evers 2018).

Because of restricted access to the country and strict control over research and publishing, scholars from abroad had to rely on insights from a variety of disciplines and fields of study to fill in the knowledge gaps. Thus, academic social research on Myanmar was characterized as being multidisciplinary, an approach that reflects the inter-related nature of many of the problems facing the country (Selth 2010). Moreover, this type of research on Myanmar was mainly done through literature reviews because of the strict restrictions (up until 2010) barring data collection by foreign researchers. With the relaxation of censorship since 2011, the translation of important scholarly works has been paramount to the dissemination of research, and increasingly, foreign academic papers on Myanmar have been translated to assist the growing local demand for knowledge (Dolinska 2017). However, these efforts are still very limited and, more importantly, need to be better harmonized with activities in local HEIs in order to allow for local researchers to access existing knowledge in the research system.

Contemporary scholarly interest in Myanmar was initially sparked by the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations and subsequent crackdown. It was not until the late 1990s that research interest became more formalized – namely, the Burma Economic Watch (Macquarie University, Australia); the SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research published by SOAS, University of London; and the Center for Burma Studies, which published its own journal (Northern Illinois University). While the first two have ceased publication, the latter remains active. In 1999, the first Myanmar Update Conference organized by the Australian National University was initiated and continues to be organized as

a biannual event, where scholars present current research findings on the country, with a particular focus on economic and political affairs. In more recent years, the number of international institutions that solely focus on Myanmar has increased. The bordering Chinese province of Yunnan has an Institute of Myanmar Studies at the Yunnan National University. There are also four more centers in other countries: one in India (Manipur University), one in Thailand (Naresuan University) and two in Australia (Australian National University and the independent Australia-Myanmar Institute based in Melbourne). While the growing academic interest in Myanmar is promising, there is still little representation from local researchers in the expanding platforms for research. Recently, there have been more efforts to inform and include these researchers in these events and journals, but these remain marginal (Myanmar Research Centre 2019).

Alongside the establishment of these centers, various NGOs (e.g. Prospect Burma, Open Society Foundations), foreign governments and multilateral organizations have been offering scholarships predominantly for Myanmar students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities and for selected disciplines. It is important to emphasize that prior to 2011, funding was granted only for studies in public administration, public policy, economics, agriculture and political sciences. From 2011, the subjects that were funded broadened to include technical and engineering subjects such as computer science and architecture.

While previously, engagements with foreign academics and institutions had been contained within academia, during the period of the quasi-civilian government they became more involved in informing the reforms, serving as non-partisan experts for specific government reviews and conducting impact assessments for various ministries,

as well as collaborating with HEIs and civil society organizations to enhance research capacity-building (Nyein 2017). While such interactions are still ongoing with the current government, there is increasingly a shift toward providing technical expertise for the development aid programs in the country.

Development Aid

There was a proliferation of donors and development actors in Myanmar following the reforms of 2011. Much of their efforts were directed at supporting the democratization process and peacebuilding initiatives (Frewer 2017). During this period, much of the research driven by donors centered on the rights of ethnic minorities, human rights and humanitarian relief, and more recently, on the crisis in northern Rakhine. Aid programs and the research they fund are intimately intertwined with the economic and geopolitical concerns of the donors (Frewer 2017).

Despite the growth in donor-funded research, the five-year 'Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar' project, initiated in 2017 by IDRC, was the first donor-led project that focused entirely on funding and promoting social science research. Over CAD 10.7 million was pledged to strengthen research and analytical capacity among university academics and students, civil society leaders, think tank researchers, and government officials in support of the democratic transition (IDRC n.d.-b). With the emergence of a small group of specialized research institutes since the democratic transition, IDRC's engagement has played a crucial role in encouraging and sustaining a nascent independent research space in Myanmar. Three local think tanks were selected during the first phase of the initiative – with more likely to be included in the future – to promote active engagement and enhance dialog between policymakers

and the various research actors. This report, also funded by IDRC, is the first attempt to map and analyse the social science research landscape in Myanmar.

With regards to funding research institutions, development aid funding remains project-based and targeted within a specific framework. 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 et al. 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." The lack of national governance capacity, the isolation and limited research capacity of HEIs, and prevailing donor dynamics exacerbate the lack of local ownership over the research agenda. Consequently, donor-commissioned research has disproportionally defined the research agenda and the research system. Nonetheless, the fact that current social research is donor-dependent is not necessarily problematic, as long as the funding for scholarships or training translates into a sustained increase in the supply of indigenous local knowledge and research skills.

As a result of limited local research capacity, most local researchers find themselves working as assistants to foreign researchers engaged by overseas agencies. This is mainly because of a lack of knowledge of analytical methodologies and data interpretation. However, 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 international donors (Alatas 2000). In order to address these gaps in research capabilities, research engagements are increasingly focusing on providing research methodology training as part their project plans. From the government's perspective, budgeted spending on education (to cover this knowledge and capabilities gap) has increased, though there is still a shortage of people in the education sector with the skills and training to train others in research skills. Moreover, while the international community has increasingly focused on funding educational reform, so far these funds have mainly been allocated to reform basic education rather than developing research capabilities in the tertiary sector. Meanwhile, donor-commissioned research carried out by foreign experts has become very influential in policy circles, while local research institutions are mired in a vicious cycle of limited inputs and low uptake. As such, Myanmar's high-level research capacity has not developing at a rapid enough pace and relies heavily on capacity-building components built into donor-funded projects.

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

Highlights

- English remains the official language of instruction for universities, though in reality, lectures and lessons are predominantly delivered in Burmese given the poor proficiency in English of the majority of students, tutors and professors.

- Distance education offers greater access to university education for the poor and those from remote regions where there are no HEIs. However, its graduates often face discrimination from employers because of their lack of proper knowledge and skills.

- Academic staff at universities are employed by the government to first and foremost teach, with few incentives to undertake research typical of professors in many other countries.

- Given the limited experience of civilian policymakers, decisions are often based on personal or political interests rather than on evidence.

- There is a total of 174 public higher education institutions in Myanmar; 134 HEIs are administered by the MOE, while the remaining institutions are overseen by seven different ministries.

- Most private HEIs do not conduct any academic research, but merely operate as businesses offering degrees in collaboration with overseas universities.

- Private HEIs have not been included in the study given the lack of a formal accreditation system and regulatory framework for governing institutions in the private education sector.

- The largest sample for this study comprises academic researchers, selected through a two-stage cluster sampling method.

Introduction

This chapter identifies the types of research actors (research organizations and individual researchers) in terms of their contribution to the different functions of the research system (production, diffusion and uptake) and the nature of relationships between them. In accordance with the definitions used in the DRA methodology, four categories of researchers are included — HEIs, government and funding agencies, industry, and civil society. In order to characterize the types of research work each category of researcher may be contributing to, we follow Enrique Mendizabal's research work typology (2010):

a) Independent research: Researchers have the freedom to choose their research questions and methods, and can focus on long-term issues or 'big ideas' with no direct policy relevance or on policy problems that require a thorough investigation and experimental components.

b) Consultancy: Researchers attempt to address one or two key questions requested by specific clients through commissions, often in response to an existing agenda or problem.

c) Influencing/Advocacy: Researchers may use evidence emerging from independent or contracted research work to influence policymakers through communications, capacity development, networking, campaigns and lobbying, etc.

To map the research actors, this study used the matrix above to locate each research actor in terms of where they are contributing to the research system functions, as well as the type of research they are producing.

In Myanmar, HEIs, individual researchers and local CSOs are producing a wide range of independent research work with very little or

no direct policy relevance. Researchers in HEIs rarely publish their work given that there are no financial, reputational or career incentives to do so, and policy actors do not actively or systematically demand comprehensive, in-depth research to address their policy challenges or problems.

In contrast, many INGOs, think tanks, development consultancies, private research companies and marketing research firms contracted to donor institutions work in areas that extend across all functions of the research cycle. In fact, donors have been very successful at controlling the 'value chain' by supporting these actors to accomplish positive results at all three levels. By sponsoring the entirety of the research cycle,[16] donors have taken on a research leadership role, guiding research actors and moderating the substance of many research projects in recent years.

Last but not least, government research organizations and government-affiliated think tanks such as the Myanmar Development Institute create research products that tend to advocate government policies or influence legislative bodies in support of executive initiatives. At the same time, INGOs, non-

Figure 1: Position of research actors to research system functions and types of research work in Myanmar

Research System Functions / Types of Research Work	Production	Diffusion	Uptake
Independent Research	Higher education institutions; Individuals; Local CSOs		
Consultancy/ Contract	INGOs, thinktanks and development consultancies, marketing firms – all contracted by donors	Private sector firms, consultancies	
Influence/Advocacy	INGOs, thinktanks and consultancies		+ Gov Research

Source: authors' own elaboration

partisan think tanks and consultancies often seek partnerships with government think tanks to advocate and influence government policies. Through these partnerships, there is often a high level of uptake of their research products by government ministries. The following matrix shows the positions and relationships of researchers to research system functions and the types of research work they engage in.

With the exception of the government's own research bodies or organizations, very few actors can effectively facilitate the uptake of their research by policymakers, despite the credible evidence and methodological rigor of their research. For public HEIs, independent researchers and local CSOs, dissemination remains an important challenge – research output rarely reaches beyond circles of like-minded researchers. In this regard, production, although critically low, seems to be more developed than diffusion and uptake, despite the lack of independent and quality research. In other words, the system has become supply-driven, disproportionately driven by donors in the face of a lack of research activity in HEIs. In fact, there is an oversupply of research products that do not connect with local demands. A few of these government-affiliated research organizations have become quite comfortable in their role as 'gate-keepers' of research uptake, while ignoring their original mission of producing independent or long-term research or shaping 'big ideas' independently of donor influence. As part of this evolution, many research studies that are taken up by policymakers have become solution-driven instead of problem-driven, often sacrificing methodological transparency, rigor and holistic understanding of the issues at hand.

In Myanmar, the functioning of the research cycle depends heavily on gaining the trust of and building a rapport with policymakers

– relationships that have been developed informally. Given the limited space and heavy reliance of these policy actors, it is imperative for researchers to be cautious in maintaining credibility and access to such political space. Moreover, many researchers depend on these established relationships to provide them with a competitive advantage when interacting with donors and accessing funding opportunities. Therefore, there is a worrying trend toward self-censorship among researchers amid the fear of upsetting and losing access to policymakers.

This is further exacerbated by the increasing restrictions against freedom of expression, which also discourage many researchers from disseminating their work through their networks.[17] The lack of research groups and associations also weakens the independent position of research actors against undue pressure from the government.

Key Stakeholders in Social Research in Myanmar

Higher Education Institutions

Production: Higher Education Governance

HEIs are typically at the forefront of the advancement and dissemination of research in countries with strong research culture. However, in Myanmar, the nascent academic

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17 Section 66(d) of 2013 Telecommunications Law, amended in 2017, provides for up to three years in prison for "defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening any person using a telecommunication network." The vague wording has allowed for an abusive application of the law, and at least 71 people were charged in the same year that the law was amended (HRW 2017). In addition, some well-intended initiatives such as the establishment of the Ethical Review Board in 2017 have inadvertently held up research production and approval processes, resulting in the cutting back of important research studies on critical issues.

research landscape remains severely underdeveloped and under-resourced. At present, the higher education environment in Myanmar is characterized by a highly centralized governance structure spread across various ministries, with complex and lengthy decision-making processes. Based on data provided by the Department of Higher Education in 2018, there are a total of 174 public HEIs in Myanmar (Chinlone 2018). While 134 HEIs are administered by the MOE, the remaining institutions are overseen by seven different ministries. Under the NLD government, there have been ongoing efforts to transfer more of these institutions under the purview of the MOE, to allow for better coordination of higher education reform.

Private HEIs have not been included in the study given the lack of a formal accreditation system and regulatory framework for governing institutions in the private education sector. At present, private education providers in Myanmar that do not teach the national curriculum are only required to be registered with the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration as companies, operating with little or no oversight and regulation from the MOE. Most private HEIs do not conduct any academic research, but merely operate as businesses offering degrees in collaboration with other overseas universities, often targeted at students who have not received the necessary grades to enroll in public universities (Xinhua 2019).

As discussed in the contextual analysis, the current system governing HEIs is a legacy of the structure designed by the socialist government under the University Education Act in 1964. Following this classification,

Table 2: Governance structure of public HEIs in Myanmar

Ministry of Reference	Subcategory	Number of institutions
Ministry of Education	Arts and Sciences Universities	42
	Universities of Economics	3
	Universities of Distance Education	2
	Universities of Foreign Languages	2
	Universities and Colleges for Teacher Education	25
	Technological Universities	33
	Universities of Computer studies	27
	Subtotal	**134**
Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation		7
Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry		1
Ministry of Defence		6
Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture		5
Ministry of Border Affairs		3
Ministry of Transport		2
Ministry of Health and Sports		16
Total		**174**

Source: Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, November 2018 (as cited in Chinlone 2018: 12)

public HEIs can be further divided into subcategories: professional universities, arts and science universities and degree colleges. Professional universities include institutions specializing in medicine, public health, nursing and other technical fields such as computer science, economics, agriculture and aerospace engineering. Arts and science universities specialize in arts, social sciences and humanities, and therefore contain the largest population of HEIs directly relevant to our analysis. Instances of 'specialist' professional universities engaged in social research are not uncommon – in fact, the University of Computer Studies produces the highest number of studies among all HEIs, and is an important stakeholder for research production. The final subcategory of degree colleges are lower-tier HEIs that offer only undergraduate programs. These HEIs are often attended by students who have not earned the necessary grades in their matriculation exams to enter a full-fledged university and cannot afford the tuition fees of the private education providers.

Production: Modes of Teaching in Higher Education Institutions

Like other countries in the region grappling with their colonial past, Myanmar has undergone numerous policy changes regarding the language of instruction at universities, an issue that remains contentious and debated today. General Ne Win made Burmese the language of instruction at universities in 1964, before reverting to English in the late 1980s. The changes in language policy have caused significant issues in higher education, given the poor grasp of English among the majority of students and university professors. Officially, as stipulated by law, English remains the language of instruction for universities, though in reality, lectures and lessons are predominantly delivered in Burmese given the poor proficiency in English of tutors

and professors (Dinmore 2015). Based on the English Proficiency Index by Education First, Myanmar is ranked 86th (out of 100 countries), denoting a 'very low proficiency' of English skills (Education First 2019). Teaching materials including textbooks, study guides and presentation slides are in English, so professors and students with poor English skills merely regurgitate information — a major hindrance to the development of critical thinking skills fundamental to academic research.

Another peculiar phenomenon in Myanmar's higher education sector is the dominance of distance education, and the resulting impact it has on the lack of a vibrant 'campus life' in Myanmar. First established with the aim of making higher education more accessible to students across Myanmar, it was vastly expanded following the mass protests of 1988. With the closure of university campuses, distance education was the only way to earn a Bachelor's degree in Myanmar at that time. Distance education has continued to grow in popularity, owing to the fact that students do not have to leave their homes or jobs to earn a degree. For students who cannot afford to study full-time or move to another city for the majority of the academic year, distance education remains the most preferred mode of accessing higher education (Chinlone 2018; Win 2015). According to the NESP, as of 2015, there were 411,164 students enrolled in distance education universities, nearly twice the number of full-time students (225,178) in HEIs under the MOE (NESP 2016). Although distance education offers greater access to university education for the poor and those from remote regions where there are no HEIs, graduates often face discrimination from employers because of their lack of proper knowledge and skills.

A major concern with distance education in Myanmar is the lack of quality and, in

particular, the very limited number of contact hours with university professors — distance education students are required to only attend classes for ten consecutive days[18] in order to sit for the annual examinations (Ko 2019). The classes scheduled during this period focus on preparing for the examinations, supplemented by textbooks and study guides which students use in their self-study throughout the rest of the year. Compared to the eight months of face-to-face contact hours full-time students receive, the limited number of contact hours in distance education programs has implications for the broader research landscape in Myanmar's HEIs. First, distance education students attend their weekend or final preparation classes at universities affiliated with the Yangon University of Distance Education or Mandalay University of Distance Education, placing an additional burden on the teaching staff at these affiliated universities (ibid). Overstretched faculty members therefore have less time to engage in research. Second, the passive 'teaching and learning' approach embedded in the distance education programs merely helps students earn a degree, a prerequisite for many of the better-paying jobs. Students are therefore less concerned about what they study, or the knowledge they stand to gain (Su 2019). Distance education remains the preferred mode of study for university students despite these shortcomings, as it is perceived to be the easiest and cheapest method of earning a locally-recognized degree.

The poor quality of distance education is further compounded by issues relating to the weak ICT infrastructure, and the

relative lack of ICT skills in the country. The ICT Development Index developed by the United Nations International Telecommunication Union ranked Myanmar 135th in 2017 – although there have been encouraging advancements in mobile technologies following the liberalization of the telecommunications sector triggered by the reforms in 2013. Myanmar continues to trail far behind the region and globally – just 13.6 per cent of households own a computer (compared to 37.8 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and 46.6 per cent globally), and only about 25 per cent of the population use the Internet (International Telecommunication Union 2017). Over the two decades since distance education was introduced in Myanmar, the teaching methodology has hardly changed, despite the increasing demand for distance education or the demands of the modernizing economy. As an indicator of the outdated methodology, assignments, often made up of lengthy essays, continue to be handwritten and mailed to the universities.

Production: Further Challenges in the Research System

Academic research is heavily concentrated in the HEIs of major cities: Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay. This is unsurprising given that universities based in these cities typically have the best access to resources, helping to promote a more research-active environment. These universities have relatively well-stocked libraries for both students and academics, allowing access to published academic work and archives of Master's and PhD theses. In addition, universities such as the University of Yangon and Yangon University of Economics now house Open-Access Repository platforms on their websites to store and provide access to research papers produced by their faculty members and students. Similarly, Dagon University and the Yangon University of

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18 This differs across different distance learning programs, but the lowest number of days required for any program is currently ten days.

Education have started publishing their research journals on their websites since 2018.

This does not, however, imply that universities outside of the largest urban centers do not undertake or produce social research. In fact, universities located outside the three major cities often conduct research related to their specific regional context.[19] The main challenges for these regional HEIs are the lack of funding and channels to communicate and disseminate their research studies – although there is a growing interest among regional authorities to tap into the research potential of these HEIs.[20]

At present, there is no institutionalized structure for academic research in Myanmar, and many academic researchers interviewed during this project remarked on the lack of interest in research from policymakers. Academic staff at universities are employed by the government to, first and foremost, teach, with few incentives to undertake research typical of professors in many other countries. The interviews with stakeholders in HEIs found that the majority of research studies were self-funded, with a small number funded from external sources. This supports the findings reported by the Asian Development Bank that "research students are expected to pay for their research projects 'out of their own pocket'" (ADB 2013). The lack of funding, and lack of time for professors, are major constraints for research production in HEIs, and are likely factors for the low

percentage of academic staff that engage in research.

The NESP 2016-21 enshrines the current blueprint and strategic direction for the overhaul of the education system in Myanmar, from basic education through to tertiary education (NESP 2016). The establishment of research and development centers has been highlighted as one of the key pillars for boosting the quality of higher education and fostering research-active environments in HEIs. A Higher Education Research and Innovation Fund will be established to provide grants to these research and development centers. In 2019, the University of Yangon announced a call for proposal for a feasibility study to establish a 'Centre for Research and Innovation', signaling the first steps in setting these plans in motion (MOE 2019). As outlined in the proposal, the key objectives of the center are to promote continuous and applied learning, and incorporate skills-based learning into its degrees to better match the needs of industries. It is anticipated that the center will form linkages between the private sector, government, civil society organizations and development actors. While still in its infancy, the plan to establish a 'Centre for Research and Innovation' indicates a strong motivation to rejuvenate academic research in Myanmar, where research is promoted as a vehicle to inform more practical, skills-based learning, and form partnerships with different actors. However, it is important to note that the focus of the research and development centers is currently on science and technology, and it remains to be seen if similar policies would be adopted for social sciences.

Diffusion: Poor Linkages Within and Beyond Universities

The interaction and linkages between universities and the private sector or

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19 Sittwe University, for example, developed a 'Seasonal Assessment of Physicochemical Properties of Sea Water from Point Beach in Rakhine Coastal Area' in 2015 to identify pollution hot spots in coastal sea waters and highlight the alarming rate of marine depletion (Howson & Hall 2019).

20 Interviews with research administrators from two regional HEIs. November 2019.

government institutions remain rather weak. At Yangon School of Economics, which is popular among entrepreneurs and business leaders for its management courses, there are few opportunities for students to gain first-hand experience through industrial placements or internships. In recognition of the importance of aligning higher education programs with market trends and the demands of the private sector, the MOE is redeveloping its programs to incorporate a more practical, real-world curriculum. In February 2019, it launched a pilot initiative, the School Industry Partnership with the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, to promote research and development activities with the private sector. Furthermore, the government has also initiated internship–research exchange programs for a select group of final year students at certain universities, to forge closer relationships with industry. For instance, the University of Computer Studies, Yangon (UCSY) has increasingly been involved in social research through its active engagement with the private sector and government. This tripartite engagement has been driven primarily by the need to address social issues through data collection and application development for the general public – for example, students of UCSY helped the Yangon Regional Government in a project to optimize bus routes (Sein, Hlaing, Thuza 2017).

The emergence of new academic conferences in Myanmar is another encouraging sign of the increase in platforms for promoting and disseminating research. In May 2019, the Myanmar Universities Research Conference was held for the first time, allowing academic researchers from different HEIs and academic fields to present research papers. Jointly organized by the National Education Policy Commission and the Rectors' Committee, the event was indicative of closer collaboration between policymakers and universities

in actively promoting research as a driver of nation-building. The papers presented featured a diverse range of topics, such as the 'Impact and Effect of Cyberbullying among the Co-operative College Students, Mandalay' and 'Nation Building Through Lends a Hand of ICT Innovation: Preliminary Approach to the Multilingual Dictionary for the Prosperity of Shan State' (Myanmar Universities' Research Conference 2019). This adds to the mix of conferences, including the longstanding research conference hosted by the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science (first initiated in 2000), and the international conferences jointly organized by local HEIs and foreign universities (such as the Australian National University). In 2019, the conference was held for the 19th year and continues to serve as an important platform for the exchange of ideas and social science research. Again, with the unique structure of HEIs, these academic conferences tend to be a mix of papers from the arts and science disciplines. A research conference focused solely on social sciences has yet to emerge.

Another key development in the higher education sector was the official revision of the promotion policy for HEI professors in July 2019. In the past, teacher deployment and their promotion were based on the number of years of experience rather than performance. The revised promotion policy adds new criteria for academic career advancement, based on the number of authored or co-authored publications, the level of degree obtained and international exposure – all conditional on not having been imprisoned (Tun 2019). The main challenge, however, lies in the ambiguity surrounding the policy. Based on information gathered from interviews with representatives in the higher education sector, the details have yet to be finalized. No written policy has been drawn up for the amendment, and therefore there is little

scope for analyzing how quality of research output feeds into the promotion process. The criteria for career advancement, which is centered on quantity, has resulted in a recent controversy in which many academics in Myanmar paid for their research papers to be published in illegitimate journals in a bid to gain promotion. The incident was reported in the news and widely discussed on social media, helping to undermine public regard for academic research output. The incident further highlights the urgent need for a framework to assess the quality of research output as part of the promotion criteria.

The issues that followed the new promotion policy highlight an important challenge: even with good intentions, policies that are ambiguous or poorly-executed could have unintended consequences, undermining any attempt to promote an active research culture within HEIs. For example, the promotion policy did not indicate where professors should publish, or set standards for what constitutes a quality and reputable journal. Furthermore, in the absence of a strong peer review system and with the lack of international recognition for PhDs awarded in Myanmar, there are few options for professors to have their work published outside of their own university journals – which is why many professors paid to have their research papers published in journals of questionable repute. Such a policy would have been more effective if it had taken into consideration the development of new academic journals – for example, for specializations in different thematic areas or disciplines.

Moreover, this example exposes the absence of a functioning national or subnational mechanism tasked with reviewing research proposals on the basis of ethically responsible scientific conduct and academic integrity, let alone technical quality. Amid the irregularities surrounding research outputs, the Rectors' Committee has been considering the

restructuring of the national research ethics committee and its approach to research ethics. Research proposals, particularly in the social research field, have to be reviewed by the MOE for both funding and general approval, with 'politically sensitive' research topics often getting rejected (Esson & Wang 2016). Following a series of training workshops held in 2017 and 2018 led by the National Institute for Higher Education Development (NIHED), participating universities highlighted the lack of a defined ethics review committee as one of the main challenges in research management. Subsequently, the MOE issued a directive to universities that they should establish their own ethics review committees by no later than 2020 (GNLM 2018). However, while some universities have experience with these types of mechanisms, specifically in the medical sciences, most professors and rectors – especially in the arts and science universities – have a limited understanding of what ethical review guidelines should look like. It was pointed out by a participant in a closed-door national consultation meeting21 that universities end up merely sending 'representatives' to these meetings, without any real understanding of the functions of an ethical review committee. Moreover, university guidelines do not appear to be benchmarked against international best practices or standards.

Over the last few years, there have been movements from within the academia to push for more autonomy, though reforms to accord greater autonomy to HEIs have been slow.[22] The National Education Policy Commission is currently leading the reform,

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21 Throughout the DRA Project, two closed-door national advisory meetings were held in Yangon, co-organized by GDN, IDRC and CESD. Relevant actors within the national research system were invited to attend.

collaborating with the British Council on a pilot project that will grant greater autonomy to a select group of universities in Yangon and Mandalay. In reality, the push for greater autonomy may be much harder to realize, especially given the lack of capacity among university administrations for governing financial and staffing matters.[23] With regards to academic freedom, interviews conducted with academics in the arts and social sciences faculties noted a high level of bureaucracy, with prior approval required from the MOE for matters ranging from student admissions, research topics, fieldwork, seminars and international collaboration (Esson & Wang 2016). Strengthening research capacity is not a central part of this initiative as yet.

It is worth pointing out that the international donor community has played a notable role in the higher education reform process. The main actors, the British Council, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the US Embassy, have each provided capacity-building training sessions for technical HEI professors.[24] When it comes

to scholarship opportunities for young Myanmar students, various embassies, as well as the EU,[25] offer exchange programs to universities in their countries. In 2017, the National Institute for Higher Education Development was established with the support of the British Council. This national-level institute is tasked with the long-term capacity development of individuals and institutions in higher education, as well as with improving the governance structure of the Department of Higher Education, the National Education Policy Commission and the Rectors' Committee. The first capacity-building training sessions were launched in January 2020, with a long-term focus on three core areas: training and capacity development, research on issues related to management and governance in the higher education sector, and external relations with private, non-profit and development partner agencies.

These affirmative steps need to be juxtaposed against the newly introduced red tape within the system, which continues to bind researchers. Amid the ongoing demands for freedom of speech by several student unions in Myanmar, the MOE issued a new directive at the end of 2019 that HEIs are not permitted to source and receive funding from external parties. At present, any funding goes through the MOE before being re-allocated among universities. With the new directive, the capacity and autonomy of HEIs to conduct research will be severely hampered, just as it was starting to develop. More importantly, such policies contradict the efforts to grant greater financial autonomy to universities. It also signals the contradictory nature of policymaking

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22 A recently released draft of the higher education law came under criticism from student and teachers' unions, who argued it would lead to too much centralization, that it failed to include relevant stakeholders in the draft phase and contradicted the existing national education law and its amendment (Phyu 2018a).

23 According to the Executive Director of a private education institution who has worked with the relevant government bodies on university autonomy, academic staff at universities are considered civil servants and governed by the Union Civil Service Board. While they will have the option of choosing to remain on or leave the Board, many academics may choose to remain because of concerns over matters such as pensions. In this context, staffing autonomy at universities may never be truly achieved.

24 While these initiatives are important, it highlights the emphasis on technical studies. Similarly, the Indian Embassy has focused on providing IT skills training programs. None of these organizations, as far as the authors of this report are aware of, offer specific training programs for social science HEI professors.

25 The EU's 'Erasmus Mundus' program offers higher education scholarship opportunities for talented young Myanmar students.

in Myanmar, which often stems from poor coordination among government bodies and ministries, and the lack of clear action plans and strategic direction.

The speed at which the reforms in the higher education sector are undertaken has increased significantly over the last few years. New policies and initiatives appear to promote a stronger research system. The establishment of Open-Access Repositories at some of the largest universities in the country, and new conferences for the promotion and diffusion of research are strong indicators of the government's desire to promote a research-active higher education sector. The new promotion policy also signals this new commitment to foster a research culture and build stronger linkages with the private sector and policymakers. However, the lack of clarity and transparency in many of the new reform measures result in rather arbitrary interpretations and applications of these policies. As the controversy around the new promotion policy has highlighted, there is a need for clear, well-defined steps within these policies in order for these reforms to truly achieve their intended objectives.[26]

Research is certainly gaining policy relevance and traction, but as one PhD supervisor puts it, "The Union Government does not have any real research priorities, no research agenda." This is evident in the absence of a nationwide strategic research policy (at the time of finalizing this report).

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26 Although there is an overall framework of reforms set forth in the National Education Sector Plan, there is little detail on priorities, approaches and objectives of the reform measures, particularly in terms of doing research. While the higher education authorities did organize several rounds of research paper readings for papers concerning the higher education reforms, issues related to doing research were not discussed.

Moreover, the ethics review committees should function independently and comprise of reviewers with sufficient academic research experience and relevant credentials. They should be able to rely on ethical review guidelines common to all HEIs in the same areas, rather than the current format where decision-making depends solely on the administrative authority of relevant line ministries.

Government and Public-funding Agencies

Government agencies are key stakeholders for both the production and uptake/consumption of research, with important roles in the process of strengthening research capacity in HEIs. In a typical research system, HEIs would perform research autonomously and the findings would then be used to inform policymakers. However, in Myanmar, there is currently very little engagement between government agencies and HEIs in this regard. Instead, what tends to happen is that research is primarily informed by the needs of the government, often in collaboration with multilateral/bilateral donor organizations or international NGOs, with agencies contracting HEIs for specific studies. This is illustrated, for instance, by a major agriculture research project sponsored by USAID and the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT). The project collaborated with Yezin Agriculture University (YAU) and funded a few research studies undertaken by the University, but YAU was not necessarily involved in conceptualizing the research questions and design during consultations with the focal agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation.

In contrast to the previous administration, the NLD government has not appointed presidential advisors or an advisory council through which distinguished scholars and renowned experts could offer candid policy

advice. This has probably undermined some of the progress made on research-to-policy linkages. Many donors and foreign investors now complain about the limited access to policymakers, compared to the access they enjoyed under the previous government. A well-known advisor on think tanks, Enrique Mendizabal (2010), notes that "research uptake is not always up, but it can well be 'sidetake.'" When researchers have links with fellow researchers working in policymaking bodies, they can form effective collaborations to make evidence available to policymakers at the right time. The plurality of research-to-policy linkages through multiple channels could enhance better uptake; having intermediary institutions such as advisory councils or research bodies may help in this regard.

For the purposes of this study – and the focus on research uptake – the target stakeholders from the policy community include the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other line ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MOALI), the Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry (MOPFI), the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population (MOLIP) and the Ministry of Commerce (MOC). They play a pivotal role in mobilizing international partnerships on research production as well as serving as entry points for policy uptake.

For all types of education- and research-related activities across the entire government sector, only a small fraction of public funds is allocated specifically to research. For instance, over 75 percent of the budget allocated to the MOE is spent on salaries, with little or no funds allocated for funding research in HEIs. Likewise, the MOALI Department of Research received less than 2 percent of the total budget allocated to the entire ministry.

As discussed earlier in the previous section, the majority of research projects undertaken by academics or students in HEIs are not funded by government agencies. The Department of Higher Education was allocated 17 per cent of the education budget in 2017/18 (compared to 77 percent for the Department of Basic Education), or 0.32 percent of GDP in 2017/18. The Department of Higher Education controls the budget for research in HEIs, though there is no official data on the actual allocation of funding for research activities. During one of the in-depth interviews, a faculty member highlighted the greater flexibility in the use of funds allocated to higher education in the past; the current approval process is coordinated across three governing bodies (the MOE, the National Education Policy Commission, and the Rectors' Committee). It is still not clear how the establishment of the National Institute for Higher Education Development will impact the approval process. Similarly, while there are guidelines for civil servants on the public disclosure of sensitive information,[27] there are no standardized protocols for information sharing across ministries and government agencies. According to an interviewee, civil servants are often reluctant to disclose any information without a firm directive from higher-level officials, in fear of jeopardizing their position, or worse, their safety. This is a legacy of previous government regimes – whether or not this fear is justified, it is still an impediment and has a tangible impact on decision-making.

While funding allocated for academic research remains scarce in Myanmar, formal collaborations between researchers and policymakers are happening both at the Union level and regional levels (state and regional governments). Researchers can

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27 Note that public university academics are civil servants.

participate in government-sponsored research projects to shape official policies, hired on a project-by-project basis. Since 2016, the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation (Research) under the MOE has tendered a dozen consulting services, of which at least half of them involve comprehensive survey research. One such project was aimed at undertaking a research study on expanding TVET to boost human resource development in the agriculture sector. The project enabled researchers and experts from a regional consultancy agency, Mekong Economics, to work with local researchers from regional HEIs to conduct a detailed assessment of the demand and supply of agriculture skills in major rice-producing regions such as Ayeyarwady and Sagaing.

In terms of the production, there have been a number of research departments established within government agencies in Myanmar specifically tasked with producing research. Each of the three *Hluttaws*[28] (the three houses of the legislature) of the Myanmar Parliament houses an International Relations and Research Department. Since 2013, the UNDP-IPU (United Nations Development Programme and the Inter-Parliamentary Union) program has been providing parliamentary support, in addition to ICT equipment, and research and library management training. By mid-2015, the program had successfully developed the research departments within all three *Hluttaws*, producing research briefings and addressing research enquiries from

members of parliament (Fraser & Myat Kaw 2015). The research department of the *Pyithu Hluttaw* has been publishing journals on current affairs (Egreteau 2017). Similarly, the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* has undertaken a considerable amount of research, publishing their findings on their website, with a primary focus on international relations and macroeconomic policies (Amoyotha Hluttaw n.d.).

During the initial scoping interviews, academic researchers interviewed by the team noted the lack of interest in social research among the policy community, undermining the potential contributions that could be made by social research in addressing economic and social challenges in Myanmar. This is in sharp contrast to the longstanding relationships that exist between HEIs specializing in science and technology and the relevant government departments or ministries. For example, a significant amount of the research activities at Yezin Agricultural University is undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Agricultural Research, which comes under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (Than 2006). Similar consultations are happening in other ministries, including the Ministry of Commerce, concerning the thorny issue of cross-border trade between China and Myanmar. The Ministry of Commerce has sought technical assistance from researchers at the Yezin Agricultural University to address knowledge gaps in overcoming quality assurance for agriculture export to China. Myanmar researchers collaborated with their research counterparts from Kunming University of Science and Technology, and later organized a consultation with private sector representatives and traders who had hands-on experience in dealing with the issues on the ground, as part of efforts to develop trade facilitation measures at the Ministry.

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28 Myanmar's current bicameral legislature was convened on 31 January 2011. The three Hluttaws are: Amyotha Hluttaw, or the House of Nationalities (the upper house); Pyithu Hluttaw, or the House of Representatives (the lower house); and Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, or the Assembly of the Union.

At present, a major challenge is the gulf between social research funded by international donors (and implemented by NGOs) – which focuses heavily on gender and humanitarian issues – and the research undertaken by HEIs and government agencies. There is no overlap in the research space occupied by these stakeholders. These gaps need to be filled in order to create a truly dynamic evidence-based policymaking system necessary for the development of Myanmar.

Finally, there has been an emerging trend of government agencies contracting private sector partners, and more recently, big international consultancy firms, to undertake research on a project-by-project basis. This will be discussed in the later sections of this chapter.

The growing number of research actors following the emergence of new development consultancies, research organizations and big international consultancies have increased the complexity of detailing the relationships between different stakeholders, especially given the prevalence of informality in Myanmar. All of the relationships between HEIs, government agencies, donor agencies and the various types of research organizations are undocumented and difficult to track, which adds to the difficulty of compiling a systematic account of the different actors involved in this study.

International Donors

International development donor organizations and agencies have been supporting and engaging with NGOs and CSOs in developing countries since the 1990s, often to support democratic processes and/or to promote non-profit research to inform or advise policy (Parks 2008). In Myanmar, development donor partners

like the EU, USAID, DFID, Australian Aid, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have ongoing development projects that operate with INGOs, local CSOs or NGOs as implementing partners. Along with the changes in the country, the top donor priorities have shifted from agriculture, health, and 'government and civil society' in 2011, to conflict prevention and resolution, and developmental food aid and food security in 2016 (Equality Myanmar 2018).

At present, the Development Assistance Coordination Unit (DACU) plays a critical role in screening and approving not only donor projects but also public investment and public-private partnership projects, in line with the policy priorities set by the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan. In fact, the need for evidence is one of the requirements of funding approval. This created an opportunity for the government to promote the value of research – as an integral part of policymaking – among the wider civil service. The institutionalization of evidence-based policymaking through the establishment of the DACU mechanisms encouraged close collaboration with development partners, to use their evidence-based technical assistance programs to support government initiatives. As the DACU increased the level of development cooperation, there was intense pressure on donor agencies to come up with their own evidence-based evaluative assessments to inform continuing relationships with the government. This led to a hiring spree: technical consultants were contracted by various donors to write up research reports showing evidence of results, impacts and feedback, to help speed up the project pipeline.[29] Many non-academic

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29 DACU. 'Myanmar Development Assistance Policy', January 2018.

research studies were written by international consultants with few co-authorships with local assistants.

The main way in which donors influence social research is through the funding of programmatic social research via project tenders, whereby NGOs, CSOs and other actors compete for funding in the 'marketplace of ideas' (McCombs & Shaw 1993). This influence is heightened by the fact that funding is concentrated on specific areas in line with the priorities that donors deem important for the country's development. Thus, by deciding which topics are deemed fundable, donors play a critical role in determining which topics are researched in the first place. The process by which funding is allocated and dispersed often entails a call for research proposals within a specific thematic area. These are open to INGOs, NGOs or private entities, or aimed at finding implementing partners for donor projects. Given the size of donor projects, actors divide up the project phases and activities by forming consortiums or developing subcontracting arrangements to tap into the different sets of capabilities and expertise of organizations and independent consultants. As various interviews with researchers and research administrators have pointed out, funding for social research, in this context, is often a contextual knowledge-gathering exercise to ensure that projects are successfully implemented.[30] Research is often used to inform projects or assess their effectiveness.

There are two main sector-specific donor funds that include research as one of the main program pillars: the LIFT Fund and the Joint Peace Fund, both managed by the United

Nations Office for Project Services. Founded in 2009, the LIFT Fund is a multi-donor vehicle that serves as both a mechanism for streamlining finance to agricultural projects, and a platform for research and technical assistance to the government (Carr 2018). The Joint Peace Fund, was established in 2015, and funds research production for all of its main programs.

In essence, according to interviewees, there is a vast amount of research being funded by donor agencies and INGOs, but the main challenge appears to be in coordinating their thematic research in order to better capture the broader dynamics of selected priority themes. An interviewee researching natural resources argued that calls for research proposals from donors set the parameters and seek evidence for their agenda, effectively taking significant control over research production in Myanmar.

International NGOs and Global Think Tanks

As in many developing countries, the Myanmar government has an overstretched bureaucracy and limited capacity for in-house governmental policy analysis. This capacity and knowledge vacuum provides an opportunity for think tanks to fill the gaps within the policy community. In Myanmar, global think tanks and INGOs have been propelled by grants and other funding sources from the government and international organizations that seek to expand the policymaking capacities of the country and its civil society (Saha 2011). Because of their non-profit nature, they are often viewed as non-partisan and of greater integrity than vested interest groups or for-profit research organizations. However, global think tanks and INGOs can also be involved in cross-national processes of policy transfer, where they go beyond detached policy analysis to advocate and spread

certain policy ideas and practices (Ladi 2005). For instance, these types of organizations have been vehicles for the spread of policies as diverse as privatization, anti-corruption strategies, drug elimination policies and constitutional reform.

In Myanmar, the research commissioned by INGOs or international think tanks is often used as a device to draw out policy lessons and global best practices that can be adapted to the local context, or to generate knowledge about a subject to influence government policy preferences. In Myanmar, The Asia Foundation, an influential global think tank, opened a country office (1958-1962) and invited international economists to formulate and advise on the Pyidawtha Plan in the 1950s. After decades of closure following the coup d'état by Ne Win, The Asia Foundation re-established an office in Myanmar in 2013. Recognized for conducting quality research and policy analysis, The Asia Foundation has established itself as a critical player in various fields: democratic governance, women's empowerment and political participation. Moreover, it enjoys strong informal links with members of parliament and the government, helping to facilitate uptake of its research products. The Asia Foundation also provides research for ideological argumentation for federalism and decentralization, areas of particular interest for the NLD-led government today.

Other international NGOs conducting research in Myanmar include the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and the Transnational Institute. All of these organizations advocate for legislative reform by conducting investigative research and gathering first-hand evidence in the various sectors they work in – namely, conflict management and monitoring, ethnic rights and human rights abuses, and informal and illicit political economies in Myanmar.

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations: Advocacy for Policy Positioning

NGOs and civil society organizations have long been an integral part of Myanmar. The country has a very active civil society, particularly compared to its regional counterparts. Myanmar topped the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index in 2017 for four consecutive years, although it is important to note that the majority of individual donations went to religious institutions and religiously-affiliated CSOs. During the socialist and subsequent military dictatorship, CSOs and NGOs were the voice of many marginalized communities and were critical in maintaining relationships with international counterparts. Given the lack of social research undertaken by HEIs, civil society organizations and non-government organizations in Myanmar have also played an important role in conducting research directly or indirectly, as part of advocacy efforts or programmatic research.

The involvement of political parties in the demand for and production of research is a new phenomenon; it was only formally initiated by the quasi-civilian government in 2011. Furthermore, independent, non-partisan research institutes, often referred to as 'think tanks', are also a contemporary phenomenon in Myanmar. It is only with growing interest from the international community during the democratic transition that local NGOs and CSOs began playing an important role in funding and demanding research – mostly for advocacy purposes. Some local NGOs conducting research stated in their interviews that the challenge in Myanmar is not the lack of research being done, but an oversupply of research output. The major challenges all actors commonly experienced are access to information. In cases where information is available, there is also the additional

challenge of verifying its accuracy. Moreover, the research that is commissioned is often problem-driven, rather than part of a longer-term attempt to shape 'big ideas'.

In the Myanmar context, the term 'civil society organization' encompasses all Myanmar-led organizations, including community-based organizations, local advocacy NGOs, border-based organizations, faith-based organizations, government-backed NGOs, and CSOs linked to ethnic armed organizations (LRC & Amatae 2016). These actors are important stakeholders who have the unique social capital to build the state and foster social development in Myanmar (Thura 2018). The number and variety of organizations reflects the historical role that civil society has played in taking up the roles that were not fulfilled by the state, largely through the support of international donors. While some CSOs have remained as service suppliers (in health and education, for example), there has been an increase in the number of CSOs providing knowledge – in the form of advocacy research – to the government and the general public. This was first prompted by the move by donors to centralize resources and thematic networks following their experience of providing assistance during Cyclone Nargis, whereby particular organizations began serving as a platform for local and international NGOs to support and coordinate emergency relief and humanitarian assistance (Christian Aid 2016).

After Nargis, some of the most successful networks were formalized as independent CSOs, focusing on research for high-profile development projects and key issues relating to land, conflict and development, and rural livelihoods. They have increasingly reoriented their activities to more sustainable grant-based projects. Their research focus during the quasi-civilian government was on evidence-based social and economic

analysis. Since the 2015 democratic elections, however, the emphasis has moved toward advocacy research on the peace process, human rights, gender and federalism.

Many of interviewed researchers argued that the space for broad-based advocacy has become more limited since 2016. Authorities are increasingly prosecuting individuals for online and offline speech, and reporting and advocacy on sensitive issues has become more tightly restricted. Journalists and activists have had defamation cases brought against them under the Penal Code, particularly if their research implicates the military (Athan 312 2019) or some regional governments (Win 2017; Myint 2018; Wai 2019).

While most CSOs specialize in a thematic or regional research area, they are increasingly diversifying their scope of research, and have become more engaged in policymaking – a shift largely supported by international donors (Paung Sie Facility 2018). As such, CSOs are now need to strengthen their capacity for policy research and advocacy, which often entails engaging with international consultants to assist in technical policy formulation. A recent report on the dynamics between CSOs in Myanmar found that their operations and activities are 100 percent reliant on donor funding (Equality Myanmar 2018), and are often competing among each other for funding.

When it comes consortium and subcontracting arrangements for donor project proposals, CSOs are often seen as the 'boots on the ground' for INGOs or larger entities. Their 'local knowledge' is often used for providing language interpretation, liaising with government officials, and working as data collectors or enumerators (Krembzow 2016). While the main purpose of CSOs is to conduct research for policy advocacy purposes, their output is often of low quality and based on questionable methodology.

Research Institutes: Informing Debates and Decisions

Prominent research institutes or think tanks[31] are scarce in Myanmar, but slowly growing in number (the first institutes were only founded in 2011). Contrary to the American model and experience of think tanks, many early Southeast Asian research institutes had strong links with the state or enjoyed official patronage (Nachiappan et al. 2010). Many of them were established by their respective governments to contribute toward research on national economic development and security.

In April 2016, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stated that "The country's peace process will be the first priority" of her new government even before she was officially sworn in as the State Counsellor. She was adamant in stressing that "we can do nothing without peace in our country," and pledged that an all-inclusive peace process would be the first priority of the new government. In response to this important policy statement, several independent think tanks have undertaken research studies to support the government's peace efforts. One prominent think tank, the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, worked closely with the principal stakeholders in the peace process to provide timely conflict monitoring analyses, while conducting research on security sector development as part of a long-term initiative. Another think tank, the Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies, focused on assessing the different ideas on federalism in the context of Myanmar. Both think tanks were generously supported by the Joint Peace Fund, which also funded

several smaller NGOs and ethnic groups to carry out action research on the peace process. The Joint Peace Fund is by far the largest multi-donor fund in Myanmar. It has also provided over USD 1 million in research funding to independent think tanks such as ALARM (Advancing Life and Regenerating Motherland), which has identified local and national mechanisms for resolving resource conflicts as part of a broader goal to improve people's participation in identifying solutions and advocating for change in ceasefire areas.

The Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) and the CESD were established under the previous quasi-civilian government. These research institutes have become venues for informal diplomacy – platforms for international organizations and other entities to engage with the government. Their establishment also served a symbolic function – namely, to illustrate the government's commitment to reform, evidence-based policymaking, and greater engagement with the international community (Stone & Denham 2005).

Due to the turbulent history of Myanmar, and contrary to the American model of think-tanking, political parties do not have a long tradition of establishing their own research institutes (Nachiappan et al. 2010). When the NLD established the Renaissance Institute in 2012 to conduct research on macroeconomic management and public policy, it was the first of its kind. After the 2015 elections, MISIS and CESD were considered political actors and had to adapt to the new political landscape. They became fully independent think tanks that relied on external sources of funding. Simultaneously, the new government established the Myanmar Development Institute in Nay Pyi Taw to conduct economic research and assist with the policy objectives of the new government. Unlike purely academic research, policy research primarily targets the interests of

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31 The terms 'think tank' and 'research institute' are often used interchangeably.

policymakers. Given the limited experience of civilian policymakers, decisions are often based on personal or political interests rather than on evidence. A worrying emerging trend is that, while the research produced by Myanmar's independent research institutes is considered to be of relatively good quality, policymakers more often than not turn to INGOs, global think tanks or private sector actors for information to inform policymaking (Initiative Think Tank 2018).

In addition to the research institutes established in 2011, some CSOs established in early 2012 have shifted into the policy-research space. For example, Enlightened Myanmar Research initially started as a survey research firm, but later rebranded itself as the Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF). EMReF now focuses on delivering policy research and capacity training for various international partners, CSOs, regional governments and the donor community. Within this space, the Inya Institute is the only independent organization in Myanmar that focuses solely on assisting and contributing to the creation of academic research in the social sciences and humanities. The organization is funded by the Open Society Foundations and LIFT,[32] and was the first institution to develop a bilingual social research methodology book in Burmese and English for undergraduate students. The book, 'Introduction to Social Research Methods,' is easily accessible both as a hard copy and online. This institution also conducts research methodology training programs for young graduate students but does not confer official certification. The Inya Institute also connects international researchers with local researchers for academic inquires and co-authorships.

There are also a variety of regional research institutes that focus on building and delivering social research capabilities for specific ethnic groups, with activities often run in parallel with their research activities and technical support. Noteworthy organizations include the Kachin-based Kachinland Research Centre and Chin-based Chinbridge Institute. These types of organizations stated during their interview that their main research themes involved issues relevant to their respective regions. Their research was often used to advocate regional government reforms and campaign through their international network; hence, they rarely engage with the Union Government.

In conclusion, while there are a variety of CSOs producing research-informed reports and policy papers, most of them are not full-fledged research institutes, and are still fully dependent on external funding, predominantly from donors. The research topics are often heavily steered by donor funding, and competition for funding has become a harsh reality. Moreover, because of the low wages in the research institute sector, these organizations have a high turnover of employees, hampering the effectiveness and depth of research training offered and discouraging organizations from investing in up-skilling their staff. As previously mentioned, the reliance on political connections for access to data has meant that many of these organizations depend on their political positioning or their leadership's personal ties and networks. Lastly, there appears to be formal conversations among think tanks and a push from funders to improve the quality of research output, particularly in terms of rigor and greater transparency of methodologies.

32 LIFT, Livelihoods and Food Security Fund, is a multi-donor fund set up in 2009 to fund projects related to strengthening the resilience and livelihoods of poor households throughout Myanmar (LIFT n.d).

Private Sector Organizations: Market Research, Consultancies and Private Education

With the rapid economic liberalization Myanmar has experienced over the past decade, there is a growing commercialization and privatization of socioeconomic research. The expansion of the private sector, which offers more competitive salaries, has attracted talent from the highly skilled Myanmar diaspora (including graduates of foreign universities), which increasingly see Myanmar as a safe and economically viable destination. The private sector has also tapped into the existing CSO sector, drawing in locally trained social researchers.

While this is not necessarily problematic, this shift has implications for transparency, particularly in terms of the methodologies used to conduct research, and raises concerns over the accountability of researchers and their output. The restricted access to the research produced by these actors is controversial, given that a large number of them have been commissioned by governmental/non-profit organizations. Another problematic issue, pointed out by various interviewees, is the use of commissioned research produced by the private sector to lobby for legal reforms – the evidence is often dependent on the methodology employed, and the quality of the reports are not closely scrutinized by the relevant legislative bodies.

Market Research Firms

Much of the social research conducted by the private sector in contemporary Myanmar is carried out by market research firms. Amid the move toward greater liberalization, companies and external actors are looking to gather knowledge on the national economy – its main characteristics and dynamics – in order to determine the market potential and consumer base for their products and services. The research and communication produced by market research firms is largely geared toward promoting Myanmar as an attractive destination for investment – often hailed as the 'final frontier' in Asia (BBC 2013).

Myanmar Marketing Research & Development (MMRD) and Myanmar Survey Research (MSR), established in 1992 and 1995 respectively, were the first market research firms in Myanmar, initially conducting surveys for private companies. Despite the initial limited analytical capacities of these firms, they have recently broadened the scope of their services, creating the MMRD Social Insight and MSR Social Research Department. These new departments focus on livelihoods, migration and opinion poll research projects. Since its establishment, the Social Research Department has undertaken projects commissioned by numerous international organizations such as the World Bank and UNOPS, as well as bilateral and multilateral development funds such as JICA, the Korea International Cooperation Agency and DFID (MMRDS n.d.; MSR n.d.).

Large Business Consultancies

With the burgeoning interest among both local and foreign private firms in establishing a foothold in Myanmar, various types of consulting companies have become key focal points for assisting new companies to enter the market, or advising established firms on the reformulation of their business strategies amid growing competition.

Large international consulting companies started operating in Myanmar by conducting countrywide macroeconomic research on the telecommunications and banking sectors with the aim of developing their local knowledge. Roland Berger, a second-tier

consulting company, was the first consulting company to conduct a large project in Myanmar and has continued to leverage its well-established trust and rapport with the Myanmar government. It was in charge of the tender for the telecommunication liberalization process, a position that helped it gain legitimacy among foreign companies, which later contracted Roland Berger to inform their Myanmar operations (Trautwein & Hammon 2015). More recently, Roland Berger won the tender to provide consultancy services to the Central Bank of Myanmar for the selection of foreign banks, as part of the measures to further liberalize the financial sector (Mizzima 2019). Soon after, larger international consulting and auditing firms followed suit – namely, McKinsey, PWC, Deloitte and Boston Consulting Group. PWC's research on electricity in Yangon is a recent example of this dynamic, and it has since won the tender for the Yangon Regional Government's privatization of electricity and water project (PWC 2019).

Development Consultancies

Established international development consultancies such as Adam Smith International and Oxford Policy Management have also established teams in Myanmar to conduct research, adding to the mix of private sector actors, and increasing competition in the space created by development actors. While these companies often collaborate with local development consultancies, they are also direct competitors. Since the election of the NLD government in 2015, the clients of Adam Smith International have increasingly shifted from foreign government agencies to ministries within Myanmar, including the Department of Rural Development Myanmar, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Ministry of Planning and Finance (Adam Smith International n.d.).

Working in the country since the onset of the democratic transition, Oxford Policy Management has established its presence in Myanmar, setting up a local office in 2016. The development consulting firm continues to work with and conduct research for the Myanmar government and other international NGOs. It conducts research analysis and monitoring and evaluation activities for development projects, in the areas of public financial management, social protection and education.

Local development consultancies not only cater to the same research demands as other development consultancies but also those of non-profit research institutes, CSOs and NGOs. An example of this subtype of development consultancy is SPPRG-Lodestar, a private research firm established in 2012. It conducts for-profit policy research on a broad range of issues from poverty, to peace and the rule of law, and provides capacity-building training programs. They carry out research consultancy projects for government bodies and are funded by LIFT and DFID. Another category of development consultancies that has emerged in this research landscape are environmental and social impact assessment firms, which cater to private companies and NGOS that need or want to demonstrate their compliance with international standards and best practices for social responsibility.

Generally, development consultancies rely on foreign researchers for analytical and project drafting expertise. Despite being assisted by local colleagues (as described in the previous chapters) they are often unfamiliar with (or not embedded in) the Myanmar research system. Within the Myanmar context, the main difference between development consultancies, and think tanks and research institutes is that the former are for-profit and offer slightly higher wages. The latter, on the other hand, focus more on public

advocacy and outreach. Their research endeavors overlap – as with the various other actors previously described – leading to an increasingly crowded research space.

Independent Consultants

There are a multitude of independent consultants involved in the production of social research in Myanmar. The government often relies on international experts because it acknowledges its limitations. Foreign experts (or more general consultants) often provide technical expertise for projects. Information gathered from interviews with key actors suggests that international specialists are preferred, and often hired to take on the role of team leaders. They are also considered to be more experienced, relegating many local consultants to more minor roles in the research project cycle. Meanwhile, local consultants are seen as local facilitators, providing local contextual knowledge.

Private Education Providers

The private sector's involvement in higher education is to cater to the growing demand for private sector jobs, which are among the highest paying for many graduates. Consequently, social research methodology is not offered as a course because, currently, there is a lack of demand from students and working professionals.

The boom in private education providers in Myanmar has been driven by the deficiencies in the public education system. First, the archaic university selection system, which is based on the results of the matriculation exam, often leaves students who performed poorly with little or no alternative but to seek expensive tertiary education offered by private education providers (Phyu 2018a). Second, these private education providers seek to address the need to offer a more academic structure that fosters critical

thinking and research methodology skills not taught in public universities (American University of Yangon n.d.; Myanmar Imperial College n.d.). Many of these private education providers, such as Strategy First University and Myanmar Imperial College, partner with foreign universities to offer internationally recognized degrees. With no legal framework to provide accreditation to these institutions or govern the private education sector, there is no regulation to manage the growth in private education providers, and ensure quality and a minimum set of standards for the services they offer to their students (Phyu 2018a).

Other private initiatives have been established that focus on up-skilling potential graduate students to international standards. The Pre-Collegiate Program of Yangon, a liberal arts education program, prepares a few selected students to study in the USA, familiarizing them with social research and analytical skills as well as critical thinking. Similarly, Parami Institute in Yangon has established itself as an organization that provides capacity development and teaches critical thinking, offering scholarships to less well-off students for a one-year liberal arts preparatory course.

The boom in the private education sector in recent years has led to calls for greater scrutiny in assessing the standards and quality of education provided by these institutions. A new Private Education Registration Law, currently being drafted, will replace the existing 2011 Private School Registration Act. It requires all private schools teaching the state or international curriculum to apply for a five-year license from the national private education administration board. The board will assess the private schools in terms of facilities, teaching ratios, curriculum, and safety and security (Kean & Soe 2019). Further developments in the policies surrounding the governance of

private education providers could potentially contribute to a greater production of research from these actors.

Sampling Strategy

The third component of the DRA is to quantifiably assess the state of the research system and the functioning of the research cycle in Myanmar. To this end, the study developed a sampling strategy that was then used to survey the population of research actors identified during our scoping interviews and secondary research (see previous chapters). The target population for this study is categorized into three main groups according to the distinct role they play in the research cycle. As defined by the DRA guidelines, these are: researchers, research administrators, and members of the policy community (GDN 2017).

Because of the isolation and poor state of HEIs, a distinction between academic and non-academic researchers[33] was made in order to gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges experienced by each of these groups. For this study, the largest sample is made up of academic researchers, selected through a two-stage cluster sampling method. Using this method, HEIs are divided into two clusters: research-oriented HEIs and non-research HEIs. These groups are made up of the same types of universities – professional, arts and science, and computer studies universities – all related to social science research. Clustering in the first stage reduces the size of the sample to a manageable level. In the second stage, a weighted representative sample of respondents from the cluster of research-oriented HEIs was chosen for the survey.

Table 3 shows the full list of public HEIs that conduct social research in Myanmar.[34]

Target Population and Selection Criteria

There are more than 60 universities in Myanmar relevant to the study, spread across all 14 states and regions of the country. According to recent statistics from the Department of Higher Education, less than 10 percent of teaching staff have written a research paper. Given this context, the research team deemed it appropriate to depart from the DRA selection guidelines. The team set eligibility criteria to specify a target population with particular characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study. The first criterion was to choose the regions where all three dimensions of the research process exist: production, dissemination and uptake. This is because the aim of the study is to collect information on all aspects of the challenges and opportunities experienced by researchers, not just in terms of producing research. In many parts of the country, researchers may be able to produce research without further dissemination and uptake. As discussed in the section on stakeholder mapping, much of the research production conducted in regional HEIs is merely an academic or promotional exercise, with no intention of furthering the work along the research cycle. As such, their experiences would not provide any useful information about the research process as a whole.

The second criterion is the availability of sufficient research infrastructure and facilities that allow for research to occur, such as functioning libraries, Internet access and

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33 Definitions of these two categorical groups can be found in the Introduction.

34 Please see the Introduction for the discussion on what constitutes 'social science research'.

Table 3: Total number of Public Higher Education Institutions in Myanmar

10 Professional Universities	34 Arts and Science Universities	23 Universities of Computer Studies (CS)
University of Economics	1. University of Yangon	1. University of CS, Yangon
1. Yangon	2. Mawlamyine University	2. University of CS, Pathein
2. Monywa	3. Pathein University	3. University of CS, Sittwe
3. Meiktila	4. Sittwe University	4. University of CS, Mandalay
University of Education	5. Mandalay University	5. University of CS, Magway
4. Yangon	6. Magway University	6. University of CS, Myitkyina
5. Sagaing	7. Myitkyina University	7. University of CS, Taunggyi
6. University of Agriculture	8. Taunggyi University	8. University of CS, Monywa
7. University of Forestry	9. Monywa University	9. University of CS, Pyay
8. University of Veterinary Science	10. University of Distance Education	10. University of CS, Meiktila
9. University of Public Health	11. University of Foreign Languages	11. University of CS, Taungoo
10. National Management College	12. Dagon University	12. University of CS, Dawei
	13. Pyay University	13. University of CS, Pakokku
	14. Meiktila University	14. University of CS, Hpa-an
	15. Taungoo University	15. University of CS, Lashio
	16. Dawei University	16. University of CS, Kalay
	17. Yadanabon University	17. University of CS, Hinthada
	18. University of East Yangon	18. University of CS, Banmaw
	19. Pakokku University	19. University of CS, Kyaing Tong
	20. Hpa-an University	20. University of CS, Myeik
	21. Lashio University	21. University of CS, Pinlon
	22. Kalay University	22. University of CS, Thaton
	23. University of West Yangon	23. University of Information and Communication Technology
	24. Kyaukse University	
	25. Hinthada University	
	26. Banmaw University	
	27. Kyaing Tong University	
	28. Myeik University	
	29. Panglong University	
	30. Maubin University	
	31. Loikaw University	
	32. Bago University	
	33. Shwebo University	
	34. Sagaing University	

Source: Central Statistical Organization, Statistical Yearbook 2019, Nay Pyi Taw.

Table 4: Public Higher Education Institutions Engaged in Social Science Research

Professional Universities	Arts and Science Universities	Computer Studies (CS) Universities
University of Economics Yangon	University of Yangon	University of CS, Yangon
University of Education Yangon	Mandalay University	University of CS, Mandalay
University of Agriculture	Dagon university	
University of Forestry	Yadanabon University	
University of Veterinary Science	University of East Yangon	
University of Public Health	University of West Yangon	
National Management College		
University of Economics, Meikhtila		

Source: Authors' observations based on key informant interviews.

access to computers. While many HEIs in Myanmar may have researchers who are committed and willing to generate research products, they lack the basic infrastructure and key resources to do so. Such issues were considered exogenous to the research system – for example, the inability of researchers located in remote HEIs to produce research has little bearing on the research cycle as a whole.

Following the eligibility criteria, the target population for this study was taken from the two major cities of Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay Taw, because nearly all the major research functions – production, dissemination and uptake – take place in these areas. Additionally, the universities have sufficient infrastructure, such as libraries and access to databases, to conduct research. Table 4 presents the 16 universities from the first stage of stratifying the sample population.

In the second stage, the research team used a weighting criteria to group the HEIs into three sub-groups: professional universities, arts and science universities and computer studies universities. The term 'professional'

is used to denote universities that take only the highest-scoring cohort of students based on the higher education matriculation examination; the majority of lower-grade students can only go to the arts and science universities. The threshold for admission for computer studies universities is also higher than that of the arts and science universities – on par with professional universities. Recent statistics from the Department of Higher Education were used to allocate a sample ratio to each group, particularly data regarding research performance among faculties across the campuses.

According to the official data, the arts and science universities host nearly 50 percent of higher education teaching staff or 11,767 faculty members. However, only 2 percent of faculty members have ever produced social science research papers during their tenure.[35] Professional universities have smaller faculty sizes, but 10 percent of

35 Taken from an internal government report on research production among HEIs (in the authors' possession).

their members produce research papers, representing the highest proportion of social research production among the universities. Universities of Computer Science are present in nearly all states, with a total of 23 universities across the country. They are also relatively prolific in terms of generating research – more than 16 percent of their teaching staff have written research papers. It must be noted that CESD did not have access to the full database of research papers written by the faculty members of computer studies universities and therefore could not verify whether their papers were purely scientific or related to social sciences. However, The University of Computer Science, Yangon (UCSY) was asked to estimate the percentage of social science-related or non-technical papers that the faculty has produced. With this insight, the team estimated that only 25 percent of their papers could be recognized as relevant to social science. UCSY was included in this study for two reasons: first, it has been involved in conducting social research,[36] and second, it has the highest rate of research output of all the universities and institutions.[37] Furthermore, the growing interest in information technology from both secondary school graduates and the private sector has helped to drive social research[38] production in computer science universities throughout the country. The politically uncontroversial nature of research products from computer

science universities, as well as their immediate applicability, have helped to garner the interest and support of the policy community.

The team then used the weighting criteria to determine the final sample population for the public HEIs (see Table 5):

Table 5: Sampled HEIs Researchers for Surveys

Category	Sample Population
Professional Universities	40
Arts and Science Universities	40
Computer Studies Universities	20

Source: Authors' calculations

In addition to the targeted academic researchers, as described in the stakeholder mapping, some non-academic researchers are very active in the research system in Myanmar. Since the majority of these researchers are not formally registered, their population is unknown. Therefore, for this category of researchers, the team relied on the snowballing method to select a sample from among local and foreign researchers who are based in Myanmar or have conducted research on Myanmar. The team surveyed and conducted in-depth interviews with 29 non-academic researchers.

The second target group were the research administrators,[39] of whom 14 were surveyed with a tailored questionnaire – four from each of the three public HEI categories – and then interviewed in depth. Finally, eight policy community[40] members from the third target group were surveyed and interviewed. It must

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36 Please see the Introduction for a definition of 'social science research.

37 It must be noted that because of time constraints and the inability to contact the University of Computer Science, Mandalay, this university was not included in the sample.

38 For instance, Samsung Tech Institute has been training more than 600 computer studies students on mobile application development since 2013, while hosting a competition to support the student's research and design of mobile apps that are useful for both the private and public sector (Samsung Newsroom 2016).

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39 Please see a detailed definition of this category in the Introduction chapter.

40 For a definition of this category, please refer to the Introduction chapter.

be noted that the latter two categories for surveys and in-depth interviews were based on responsiveness and availability; as such, these cohorts of interviewees where chosen using a non-random sampling approach.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the environment in which research is conducted and analyse the factors that hinder or support each segment of the research cycle. By studying groups of stakeholders (made up of individuals with a similar role or of a similar stature), the conditions and factors that enable or hinder research productivity for each of the different departments, universities and organizations can be compared and contrasted. That said, further efforts are required to build a systematic database on the country's research system. It is hoped that the content of this first report will encourage the allocation of further resources, and change attitudes toward the importance of 'research on research' in Myanmar.

Implementing the Surveys

Data Collection Strategy and Tools

The main tool used to collect the data was the KoBo Toolbox, which was used to digitalize all three DRA surveys. Enumerators with tablets containing the digital version of the survey were deployed to interview Burmese-speaking academic researchers and research administrators, while for the non-academic researchers, the digital version was sent out via a link. In order to ensure approval for data collection from the various heads of universities (predominantly rectors), the data collection and sampling strategy had to be adjusted – namely the number of students surveyed.

Researchers

A strategy to circumvent the difficulties of identifying and surveying academic

researchers on campuses was to use the 19th Research Conference of Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science as a microcosm of Myanmar's academic researcher population. The main justification for this was because it is the most established and renowned research conference for national academic researchers. This conference is seen as an opportunity for academic researchers and professors to establish themselves in their fields and improve their prospects of promotion. The relevant academic researchers were interviewed by enumerators using a tablet containing the digital researcher's survey.

A different surveying process was used for the non-academic researchers. This category of actors was contacted via email and other digital channels. As well as relying on word of mouth, and CESD and their networks, there were two public calls for participation: one was posted in a Myanmar-focused public blog41 and the other posted in the Burmese Studies Google Forum, which caters to foreign academics with an interest in Myanmar.42 The eligibility criteria for these calls for participation included experience of conducting research on and in Myanmar.43 Twenty-nine in-depth interviews were

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41 The Blog site was called Tea Circle. It is commonly used by foreign academics researching Myanmar and is also open to non-academic writers. For the full "Call for Participation" please see Tea Circle 2019.

42 The Burma Studies Google Forum aims to facilitate scholarly communication among the full members and associate members of the Burma Studies Group and the international community of scholars interested in Burma/Myanmar. (Burma Studies Group n.d.).

43 It must be noted that there was one non-academic researcher that was surveyed and interviewed that did not have first-hand experience of conducting research in Myanmar; however, the individual was a PhD supervisor for students conducting research on and in Myanmar.

conducted with the non-academic researchers who expressed an interest in discussing their perspectives and views on the research system and who were willing to participate in semi-structured interviews, either in-person or via Skype.

Research Administrators and Policy Community Members

Implementing the sampling strategy for research administrators was challenging. As civil servants, they are required to comply with institutional rules and hierarchies, which made arranging a formal survey and interview very difficult. Because the higher education system is so fragmented, and there are rules in place to manage students and professors, the team was only able to interview and survey those administrators from the target universities who were responsive and available.

For this reason, interviews with both research administrators and policy community members were done only after the initial feedback and insights on research system governance from the survey of researchers had been collected. For these two categories of actors a snowballing approach was employed to select the relevant respondents. This allowed us to refine the questions that we posed to the administrators and policymakers. Senior CESD researchers conducted the surveys, helping to encourage the administrators, particularly from HEIs, to provide further contextual details to explain specific responses during face-to-face interviews. Fourteen research administrators from the following institutions were interviewed:

1. Yangon University
2. Mandalay University
3. Yangon University of Economics
4. Meikhtila University of Economics

5. Dagon University
6. Yezin Agriculture University
7. Yangon University of Computer Studies
8. Mandalay University of Computer Studies
9. Parami Liberal Arts University
10. The British Council
11. The Asia Foundation
12. The Institute of Strategy and Policy
13. The Centre for Democracy and Ethnic Studies
14. Advancing Life and Regenerating Motherland (ALARM)

For the interviews with members of the policy community, senior researchers made several trips to Nay Pyi Taw, the administrative center of the country, to participate in meetings with policymakers and pose specific survey questions as well as explore their perspectives on broader process of research uptake and the importance of research-based policymaking. Policymakers were asked to identify cases of formal and informal collaboration with researchers in terms of their participation or consultation during policy processes. The study also made general observations about the level of use of research within government systems – both the instrumental and symbolic use of research products. A total of eight policymakers from the following institutions were interviewed:

• Ministry of Education
• Ministry of Labour, Immigration, and Population
• Ministry of Construction
• Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation
• Ministry of Planning, Finance, and Industry

Exclusions and Limitations

Exclusions

Only public HEIs are included in this study. Although the number of private HEIs has been growing rapidly, they operate in a legal gray area and are not officially accredited by the MOE, despite the fact they issue degrees.[44] Although some of these institutions are conducting research, they are not administered or regulated by any academic or government body. Myanmar recently drafted the National Higher Education Law, which relates to private HEIs, but this has yet to be billed by parliament.

Despite the inclusion of the private sector in the sampling strategy recommended by the DRA methodology, targeting this group was very difficult; we only had one survey respondent and interviewee from this category. Moreover, although large business consultancy firms produce social research, only a small proportion of their research output is publicly available. This makes it difficult to collect information on their research production and its impact; researchers from large business consultancies have therefore been excluded from the sampling strategy.

Limitations

One of the main challenges was the representativeness of the sample. While the stakeholder mapping was intended to guide the sampling strategy – determining who were the main players in the Myanmar research system – because of the strict approval processes of the Department

of Higher Education, limited funding and time, the limited access to relevant data, and the difficulties in accessing project-relevant information, the most suitable sampling method was the snowball method. Moreover, while there is research being conducted in regional universities, because of these constraints, the actors surveyed and interviewed were mainly located in Mandalay and Yangon, with the exception of three non-academic researchers that were interviewed via Skype because they were based outside of these two locations.

The research team also experienced difficulties in arranging appointments with research administrators and policymakers. Moreover, across all actors, most notably Myanmar researchers, gaining a comprehensive insight into their perspectives on the research system was a laborious process. This was largely because of individuals' hesitancy to disclose the challenges of the system or their lack of understanding of what the research system comprised of. The former was more common among the HEI researchers. Given their position as civil servants, they were reluctant to be critical of government policies for fear of repercussions for their career prospects, a dynamic also discussed in the contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping. This is in spite of the clear 'evidence' that there is little infrastructure or policy to support their research.

The limitations therefore relate, not so much to the study's quantification of the research systems, but to the discrepancies between the survey data collected and the findings from the in-depth discussions carried out with the very same groups.

A broader challenge, as revealed in the stakeholder mapping and the in-depth interviews, was capturing the reliance of social researchers on informal networks in the surveys. In order to address this issue,

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44 The National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee, a body in charge of updating the certification system, does not yet take into consideration private education providers (Phyu 2018c).

the research team included a question for researchers on the frequency and means of interaction with policymakers. Another shortcoming of the research design and subsequent surveys was the underlying assumption that the research system is being driven by academic institutions, which as the contextual analysis, stakeholder mapping and in-depth interviews reveal, is not the case in Myanmar.

Although the DRA Framework provides flexibility in adapting the investigation to the context (in this case, Myanmar), the benchmarking of the country's social science research system against internationally accepted indicators and practices did not work particularly well in this analysis. Myanmar is a very late comer to the field of social science, and many indicators for Myanmar are missing in most international reporting. The lack of reliable data and any internationally comparable indicators for Myanmar runs the risk of providing a poor estimation of the current state of the social science research system in Myanmar. On top of this, early feedback, particularly from the researchers, tended to skew the results toward a more positive appreciation of the current performance of the system. Their views painted a much more favorable view of the system than the more negative observations of many of the education

experts and consultants who were hired by the international organizations to analyse the system – presumably as a result of a lack of exposure to other research systems.

Given the limitations of perception surveys, this study relied more on 'in-depth', face-to-face meetings to conduct more meaningful discussions of the survey by adding non-structured questions to follow up on the structured interview questions. For the surveys intended for research administrators and policymakers, face-to-face interviews were organized to avoid oversimplification of responses and to compile a more meaningful interpretation of the state of the research system in Myanmar. Senior team members also had to conduct these interviews to gain the trust of the respondents and elicit a more accurate picture. Confidentiality was maintained in order to maximize the likelihood of a more candid response.

These limitations emerged and became more obvious during the data collection phase. This first attempt to systematically describe the social science research landscape should be used to inform the next iteration of this study, allowing researchers to adjust the concepts, indicators and tools. This remains the first systematic study of Myanmar's social science landscape (across production, diffusion and use) and represents the seeds of 'research on research' in the country.

DRA FRAMEWORK

Highlights

- Women make up 75 percent of researchers in Myanmar.

- Academic researchers spend less time on research, as they are often burdened with administrative duties, the supervision of students, or heavy teaching loads in their university departments.

- While Internet access has now become more widespread since the liberalization of the telecommunications sector in 2011, there is still limited legal and formal access to academic journals and libraries for academic papers and resources.

- At present, there is no social research body or national research policy in Myanmar.

- There is no formal peer review system in Myanmar, reflecting the lack of conversation about research quality.

- Most local researchers find themselves working as assistants to foreign researchers engaged by overseas agencies because of their limited knowledge of analytical methodologies and data interpretation.

- There is little or no alignment between research studies conducted by individual research institutions and national and regional priorities set forth in national planning documents such as the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan.

- Researchers are discouraged from discussing their findings through social media, limiting the potential diffusion of research evidence through Facebook.

This chapter examines the overall research system in Myanmar – the three stages of the research cycle –using the DRA Framework. The DRA Framework is built on well-established indicators, enabling a systematic analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and bottlenecks related to doing quality and policy-relevant research in developing countries. The analysis draws extensively on the results from the surveys and in-depth interviews, as well as other data or information available at the national level. Given the lack of access to comprehensive and accurate data in Myanmar, the analysis uses information from other sources, such as from international organizations or donor agencies.

The following sections follow the three stages of the research cycle and are divided as such: Production, Diffusion and Uptake.
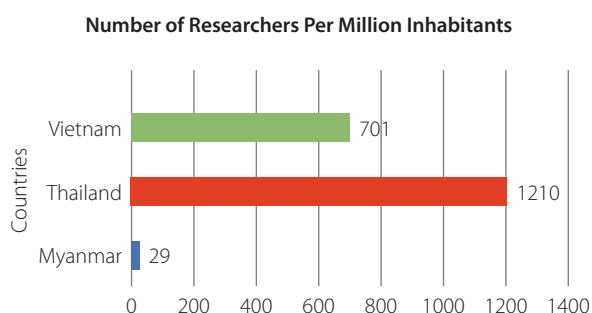
Production

Research Inputs

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) data, there were 29 full-time equivalent (FTE) researchers per million inhabitants in 2017 (UIS n.d). In comparison, Thailand had 1,210 FTE researchers per million inhabitants in 2016, nearly 40 times the number in Myanmar. Similarly, the ratio in Vietnam is about 24 times that of Myanmar, at 701 in 2017 (see Figure 2). At the national level, there is currently no estimate of the number of researchers in social sciences. As mentioned in previous sections, the Department of Higher Education reported that less than 10 per cent of faculty members engaged in writing any form of research paper.

In Myanmar, 75 percent of researchers are women – unusually high among developing countries – while Thailand and Vietnam have a ratio of 55 percent and 45 percent, respectively. This is in line with the results from our study, where about 70 percent of researchers were female. It is not surprising to find an unusually high ratio of female researchers in Myanmar because women dominate all levels of HEIs. This stems from the higher ratio of female students among university entrants –61 percent of first-year

Figure 2. Number of Researchers Per Million Inhabitants (regional comparison)

Number of Researchers Per Million Inhabitants

Source: UIS n.d.

students are female across all HEIs. This is despite the measures introduced by the government to increase the number of male students entering universities. Myanmar is one of the few countries in the world to enforce positive discrimination in favor of male applicants. There are different grade requirements for male and female students for entering university courses, particularly for highly competitive courses like medicine and economics. In essence, for the most sought-after courses, female students are required to score higher marks than male students in order to enter the same course. Although sex-disaggregated university graduation rates are not available, government statistics suggest that 82 percent of all graduate students and 80 percent of faculty members in HEIs are female (CESR 2012).

Over 30 percent of Myanmar researchers in all disciplines held a doctoral degree in 2017, representing quite a high proportion, particularly compared to regional peers (UIS n.d.). In contrast, 23 percent of researchers in Thailand have a PhD, and just 12 percent in Vietnam (ibid). This data, however, does not provide information about the percentage of PhD holders who have been properly trained, in an environment where the quality of doctoral programs and research are held to international standards. In fact, the Myanmar government has artificially manipulated the number of PhD students a number of times

throughout its history. Under the military government, there was an attempt by the MOE to indiscriminately award doctorates through public universities, as the majority of international educational exchange programs were suspended during these years. Similarly, about 2,000 PhD students were enrolled by the MOE in 2012, in just eight universities. In addition, according to UIS data, Myanmar sent only nine scholars for PhD study abroad in 2011, suggesting that the vast majority of PhDs are awarded by domestic universities (ADB 2013).

Currently, there is no reported data on government expenditure on research and development (GERD) in Myanmar, even at the national level. The only available UIS data showed that, in 2017, 78.75 percent of expenditure on research and development was allocated to the public sector, with the remaining amount channeled into higher education. A further examination of the sources of government spending reveals that about 22.5 percent is financed from abroad (UIS n.d.).

In terms of sectoral allocation, social sciences and humanities remain low down on the list of government priorities at present. This is evident in the allocation of GERD; in 2017, this was entirely allocated to STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects, with 32.8 percent to engineering and technology, 32.6 percent to agricultural sciences, nearly 30 percent to medical sciences, and 4.22 percent to natural sciences (UIS n.d.). The allocation is unsurprising, given the emphasis of promoting research and development in these fields, as stated in the NESP 2016-2021. In recent years, new research centers have been established in universities with a focus on science and technology, which are largely regarded as the key drivers of Myanmar's current ambition for greater economic and social development. This poses an interesting

challenge for Myanmar – one which other countries, including countries with a highly sophisticated research sector, are also dealing with: namely, how to embed the development of social sciences as part of efforts to strengthen non-social science disciplines, based on problem-solving or challenge-driven research. While this happens in practice – for example, in the 25 percent of cases where ICT researchers conduct social research – it is still not part of the country's policies or vision for strengthening research–policy engagement, or donor support to HEI sector reform.

According to the interviews with research administrators and policymakers, not only is research funding for HEIs and other public research institutions very low, it also 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 demand. Since most research projects are likely to be financed by external donors, there is the additional challenge for administrators and
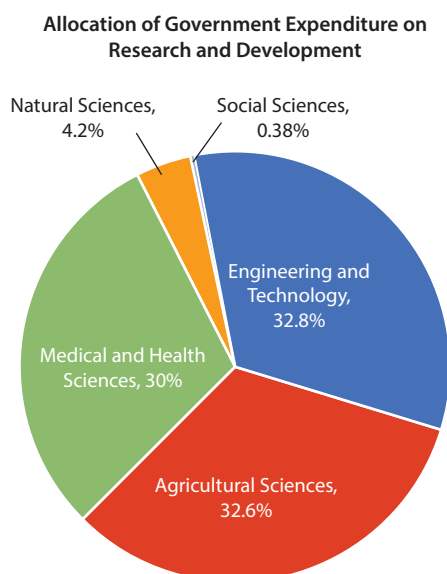
policymakers of adjusting their reporting requirements to suit both the needs of domestic authorities and funding agencies.

As stated in the contextual analysis, the number of individuals using the Internet, either through a computer or mobile phone, has risen dramatically since the liberalization of the telecommunications sector in 2011. As reported by the World Bank, the number of Internet users has increased from 0.25 percent of the population in 2010, to 30.68 percent as of 2017 (World Bank 2017). This corroborates findings from the survey of researchers: an overwhelmingly high number of 'very satisfied' answers with regards to Internet access.

As discussed in the contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping, HEIs are concentrated in the two main urban areas, Mandalay and Yangon, which have the highest number of HEIs in absolute terms (Institute of International Education 2013; see Table 6). The distribution of HEIs in terms of population size in each state and region is shown in Table 6 below.

The distribution of HEIs outside of Yangon and Mandalay does not appear to be based on current income levels or population size; rather, as discussed in the contextual analysis, it was determined by the decisions of past administrations. As the last column of Table 6 illustrates, there is a relatively high concentration of HEIs in certain regions, namely Kayah and Chin states, as well as in the Tanintharyi region. These regions not only have sparse populations, but also low levels of industrial activity; the relatively high number of HEIs in per capita terms is therefore somewhat peculiar. In addition, research production in these regional HEIs is significantly lower, compared to HEIs in Mandalay and Yangon, which dominate HEI research production in Myanmar.

Figure 3. Allocation of Government Expenditure on Research and Development

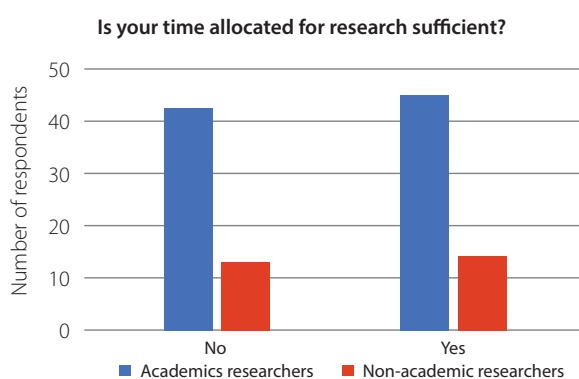**Allocation of Government Expenditure on Research and Development**

Natural Sciences, 4.2%
Social Sciences, 0.38%
Engineering and Technology, 32.8%
Medical and Health Sciences, 30%
Agricultural Sciences, 32.6%

Source: UIS n.d

Table 6: Geographical Distribution of HEIs Relative to Population Size (State and Regional Level)

	HEIs (percent)	Population (percent)	Ratio
Ayeyarwady	7	12	0.58
Kachin	5	3.3	1.52
Kayah	2	0.6	3.33
Chin	2	0.9	2.22
Kayin	3	3.1	0.97
Mon	2	4	0.50
Rakhine	3	6.2	0.48
Shan	9	11.3	0.80
Sagaing	8	10.3	0.78
Tanintharyi	4	2.7	1.48
Bago	5	9.5	0.53
Magway	7	7.6	0.92
Mandalay	22	12	1.83
Yangon	21	14.3	1.47

Sources: MOE 2012 & MOLIP 2015

As stated in the contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping, despite the presence of HEIs in each state, distance-learning higher education remains very popular among the youth, mainly because of the lower entry requirements and higher pass rates, and compatibility with full-time employment. However, as an interview with a project manager working on reform in distance education revealed, the limitations of the distance education sector are likely to remain an issue for the foreseeable future.

Figure 4. Satisfaction with the time allocated for research

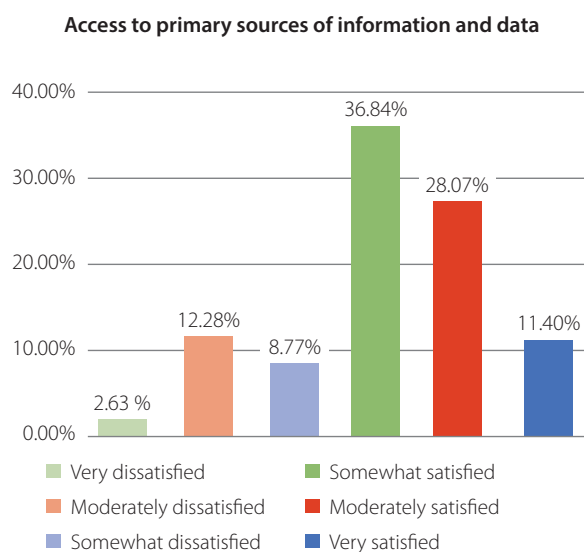**Is your time allocated for research sufficient?**

Source: DRA Researcher's Survey

Overall, about half of the research respondents spend around two to three days a week doing research-related activities. Around 15 percent stated that they are involved in research full-time. When asked if the time currently allocated for research was enough, a small majority gave a positive response. HEI-based academic researchers reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction, stating that they were often burdened with administrative duties, the supervision of students, or teaching loads in their university departments. As noted by a member of one of the governing bodies in higher education, when a professor is promoted, they are often assigned greater administrative responsibilities, which does not allow them to pursue further research projects or continue teaching. This is also partly because academics in public universities are considered 'civil servants'.

Overall, most researchers (both academic and non-academic) were satisfied with the quality of the physical and soft research

Figure 5. Satisfaction with access to primary sources of information and data

Access to primary sources of information and data

- Very dissatisfied — 2.63 %
- Moderately dissatisfied — 12.28%
- Somewhat dissatisfied — 8.77%
- Somewhat satisfied — 36.84%
- Moderately satisfied — 28.07%
- Very satisfied — 11.40%

infrastructure: computers, library resources, licensed research and plagiarism software, and electronic datasets. Moreover, over 76 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the quality of access to primary sources of information and data. However, such findings somewhat contradict the information gathered during in-depth interviews, where some interviewees stressed that the limited infrastructure is not conducive to research, particularly the lack of access to online international journals, scholarly publications and databases; the limited operating hours for university libraries; and the shortage of library books, many of which were outdated. Moreover, as previously stated in the stakeholder mapping, the longstanding issue of student plagiarism in higher education has only recently been thrust into the public spotlight. Finally, electronic library datasets are currently being developed for students, through eLibrary Myanmar, funded by the Open Society Foundations' Higher Education Support Program 2013-2019 (EIFL n.d.). This project involved 13 universities and benefited 205,000 students.

A crucial part of a sound research system is access to scholarly knowledge, to gain

prior insights on research topics or find out about new developments in a discipline. In Myanmar, while Internet access is now widespread, interviewees highlighted the limited legal and formal access to academic journals and libraries. Nonetheless, there has been an increase in the number of open-access research publications in Myanmar since 1996, when only 2 of the 16 articles published on the country were open-access publications (SIR Methodology 2019). By 2017, 36.7 percent of the 566 reports produced were open-access (SCImago n.d.).

When it comes to donor-funded research, final reports are often made available to the general public. An interview with a donor representative revealed that public disclosure of research is the norm, with the notable exception of certain commissioned research to inform development programs or the programmatic agenda, or research that deals with 'politically sensitive' subjects.

Finally, academic books can easily be re-printed in Myanmar at a fraction of the original price. Although this practice is an infringement of copyright, it allows students and researchers to expand their reading list beyond what is available in their libraries. Moreover, the high level of Internet penetration and use today, has greatly increased access to a wider selection of books for students, both legally and illegally.

Research Culture and Services

At present, there is no social research body in Myanmar. However, when asked if there is a national research body mandated to oversee social research, nearly a quarter of researchers responded 'yes'. When asked to give the name of the research body, researchers gave a variety of answers, ranging from the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science to research organizations such as the Myanmar Survey Research, Inya Institute or Myanmar

Development Institute. While the Myanmar Association of Arts and Science is indeed a national academy for the arts and science and oversees efforts to promote research, it is not mandated with the authority and financial resources to manage the entire research system (as in other countries). The responses reflect a limited understanding among researchers of what constitutes a research body, or indeed, an overall lack of an active research culture. They also indicate the lack of debate on the way research is organized in Myanmar, and the limited exposure to the governance of research in other systems.

Similarly, there is currently no national research policy in Myanmar. The revitalization of the research culture in higher education is still in the very early stages of reform, and the focus, at present, remains on reforming the curriculum and strengthening the capacity of professors in HEIs. In addition, resources from the government and international actors are diverted toward helping HEIs achieve autonomy in the near future, currently being piloted with a selected number of universities in Mandalay and Yangon. In the absence of a national research policy, the current emphasis on decentralizing HEIs may further weaken the institutionalization of the research system and any capacity development initiatives, particularly with regard to social sciences. In addition, a number of responses to the open-ended question on national research policy highlighted the lack of emphasis on social research in broader higher education policy, reflecting its peripheral role and the national emphasis on science and technology.

Responses from the research administrators revealed that there is no close alignment between research studies conducted by individual research institutions and national and regional priorities set forth in national planning documents such as the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan. On the other hand, it is also difficult for researchers

and research administrators to gain access to policymakers to present reliable evidence. According to lessons learned from international case studies, the limited use of research evidence to guide government policy actions and programs is due to poor dissemination of research findings. This, however, is not the case in Myanmar, where research findings are disseminated widely and made available for use by policymakers. This is particularly true for internationally sponsored research projects that always involve some form of dissemination and uptake strategy. It is, therefore, not the dearth of policy inputs that limits evidence-based policymaking, but the top-down nature of policymaking processes, which mean that research studies are often neglected.

However, there are some research findings that the government pays attention to and makes use of. These research findings not only lead to policy uptake, but also produce some policy changes. According to the interviews of research administrators and policymakers, there are at least three reasons for these positive outcomes. First, strong partnerships between research organizations and government departments means that the views of all partners are incorporated, from the outset, in the design of research studies. Second, the demand for research on topics that are important for policymaking comes from the government. Third, arrangements with development cooperation partners for collaborative research projects provide for technical and financial resources that enable local researchers to work together with international consultants. As such, external consultants help to ensure that the quality of research inputs is on a par with international standards, while local participation makes diffusion and uptake more efficient and effective.

This underscores the need for the establishment of a national research body

that will oversee, facilitate, coordinate, support and document research activities conducted in Myanmar, as well as a structure that ensures that sufficient attention is paid to social sciences as part of the national research system. The Burma Research Society, established in the post-independence period in the 1950s, used to play an important role in bridging between research and policy as many of its prominent scholars, experts and researchers had the ear of national leaders and their top policymakers. Having such a body can also facilitate and develop good working relationships between and among different research organizations and government research institutions, and help promote crosscutting conversations about research quality and ethics. Moreover, a research body could also provide systematic research training, build research infrastructures, and provide a link between national plans and research data needed for evidence-based policymaking. At the same time, researchers also need to be responsive to national research needs and priorities.

Nearly 80 percent of researchers reported having access to research mentors, and for over 45 percent mentoring support was provided by a professor at their institution on an ad hoc basis. In terms of the quality of mentorship, the responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 80 percent of respondents reporting being satisfied with the frequency of consultations with their mentors. However, according to the in-depth interviews, there is no formal mentorship system in place at the moment. This positive response therefore has to be interpreted with caution, as the understanding of mentorship may not be the same as in other contexts – both developed and developing.

Similarly, there is no formal peer review system in Myanmar. Several responses to the open-ended question on peer review remarked on the lack of peer review system

at their place of work, which reflects the lack of a conversation about research quality. Despite this, 75 percent of respondents rated being satisfied with the quality of feedback from their colleagues, suggesting somewhat conflicting accounts of the peer review culture in Myanmar. It is important to note that journals in Myanmar are not peer-reviewed. Across Myanmar, universities in both the major cities, where research is heavily concentrated, as well as in the many regional universities, produce their own university research journals. These journals are not peer-reviewed, but rather operate as repositories of locally produced research, and papers are selected by senior professors for publication. Further interviews and responses indicate a poor understanding of what a peer review system is – more informal forms of feedback may be misconstrued as peer review.

The implications of the lack of a peer review culture in Myanmar are clear, as was brought to light by the controversy surrounding the publication of papers in so-called 'fake journals' in a bid by HEI faculty members to further their careers. In the absence of such an evaluation process by experts, there are no standards to ensure the quality of research papers, or to ascertain that papers are methodologically sound. Based on our own review of university journals in Myanmar, a large proportion of papers lean toward descriptive analyses, which offer little of value to policymakers or society. The establishment of a peer review system would greatly benefit the nascent research system, and potentially expand its impact and reach beyond the libraries of university campuses. Improving the quality of research papers would also increase the rate of uptake and use of research outputs by policymakers and the general public.

In addition, almost all research publications produced by non-governmental research

organizations are not peer-reviewed. Research outputs take the form of reports, books, conference papers or articles, and are targeted at policymakers and the general public. They are not intended for academic or peer-reviewed publications. Given the amount of time it takes to publish an article in a peer-reviewed journal (often well beyond the timeframe of funding cycles), many donors do not see this as a requirement for their research funding. One area that needs to be explored, in terms of the quality control of research, is the frequent use of commercial survey firms by international organizations and consultancy firms. Under outsourcing arrangements, international organizations focus only on interpreting the data collected by these outsourced local firms, many of which do not have a reputation for academic work or research, either internationally or domestically. There is very little verification to assure the quality of data collection.

"[The research environment] is very fragmented and patchy. Research tends to be focused on describing what is there rather than trying to understand why it is?"

SPRG Interview

There have been some initiatives in this regard led by international development agencies. According to Mohinga, a database portal tracking development aid projects in Myanmar, there is currently a major project working specifically on building capacity in research: Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar, supported by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC (Mohinga n.d.). Other forms of capacity-building initiatives include scholarships for outstanding Myanmar candidates to pursue a Master's or doctoral degree at an overseas university – for example, the 'Capacity Building for Institutions in Myanmar Initiative' funded by the Government of Norway (ibid). At a national level, there is currently no allocation

in the government budget for research capacity-building.

The average rating, on a scale of 1 to 6, for access to support for proposal development and writing was 4.29, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction. A further examination of the results shows that there is a significant difference in the reported level of satisfaction between academic and non-academic researchers. On average, academic researchers rated the level of support at 4.08, compared to 4.45 for NGO/CSO researchers. The results suggest that the quality of research support at Myanmar universities is perceived to be poorer. According to the interviews, most professors at universities in Myanmar are often overstretched with administrative and teaching duties, with little time left for doing research or training.

When asked about the duration of research support training in the last three years, the responses were overwhelmingly poor. Over 56 percent of researchers indicated that they had only received up to two weeks of training over the past three years, and 21 percent received between three to five weeks. Surprisingly, researchers in NGOs, CSOs and the private sector received less research support training than academic researchers. On average, non-academic researchers had received 3.48 weeks of training over the last three years, compared to 4.40 for academic researchers. This result is somewhat puzzling given the fact that many donor-funded projects provide training by experts at the onset of a research project to ensure that the research process adheres to the standards set out by the funding organization. However, such training tends to be more short-term, while academic researchers have more opportunities for training on research methodologies, often via in-house sessions led by other faculty members – though the quality of the training is hard to ascertain in these cases. For smaller local NGOs in
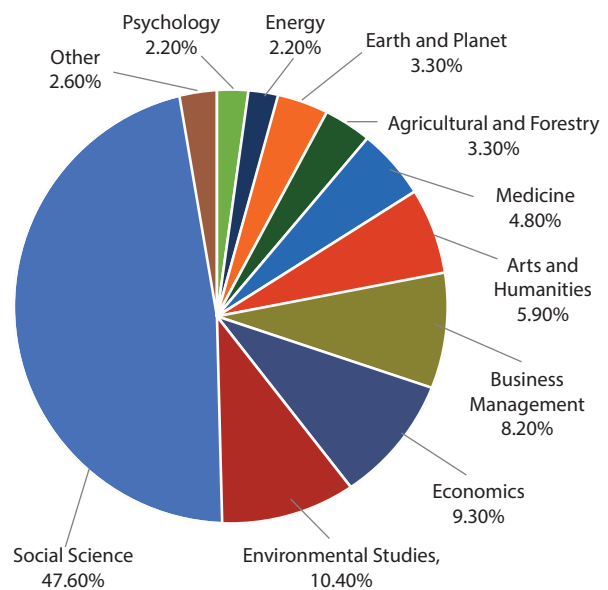
Myanmar, funding is often a huge constraint and likely contributed to the lower average for research support training.

Research Output and Training

The most visible and formal outputs of the research process are papers published in peer-reviewed international journals, a measurement captured by Scopus and Web of Science. For this analysis, the study used the Scopus methodology to list the number of published research papers in peer-reviewed journals and books in social sciences from 2016 onwards. There were 119 publications in the database with affiliations linked to Myanmar institutions. The University of Yangon was the highest contributor of research publications, producing 18 publications in the last five years, while the Myanmar Centre for Economic and Social Development was the top contributor among non-HEI and non-governmental institutions. Most of the contributions (68 percent) are published as journal articles, while book chapters account for 23 percent. Research related to social science subjects dominates the publications, at 48 percent, while publications in economics account for 9.30 percent, and business and management for 8.2 percent of total publications.

For the same period, the search results for

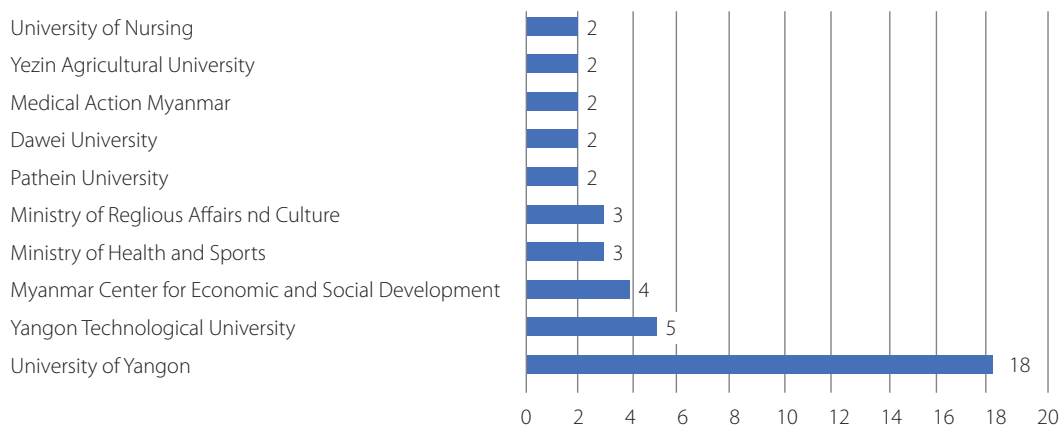Figure 7. Publications written by Myanmar affiliated institutions by subject area (2016-20)

Source: UIS n.d

the keyword 'Myanmar' yielded a total of 460 documents produced by both Myanmar and non-Myanmar affiliations. It clearly shows that the majority of research on Myanmar was written by foreigners or international organizations.

It should be noted that despite the limited number of domestic academic publications, the wider research environment has benefited from the dramatic surge of non-academic development-focused publications on socioeconomic, sociopolitical and

Figure 6. Top Institutions Contributing to International Peer-reviewed Journals and Books (2016-20)

Source: Scopus 2019

environmental issues. While this is a positive development, considering the scarcity of research in the past, the dramatic increase in literature raises questions about the quality of the research, particularly when benchmarked against international research standards.

According to the Central Statistical Organization, the University of Yangon and University of Mandalay have produced most of the PhD holders in the country. Between 2013-2017, these two universities produced as many as 618 PhD holders, while Yangon University of Economics, Yezin Agricultural University, and Yangon University of Education produced 47, 15, and 30 PhD holders, respectively. Most PhD holders are thought to be existing faculty members of these respective universities, as there is no other formal channel for external students to enroll into PhD programs. The proportion of teaching staff in HEIs that hold a PhD ranges from 7 percent to 20 percent, and most of them hold a PhD from a university within Myanmar. Among the surveyed research administrators, half stated that between 1 and 20 percent of their staff had a PhD, while only 28.57 percent had between 20 and 40 percent. The survey findings appear to be in line with the official administrative figures. However, it must be noted that, as extensively covered in the section on research inputs (page 68), the figures on PhD titles for Myanmar must be interpreted with caution – particularly in light of the fact that they are part of the civil service criteria for promotion.

Research Opportunities and Sustainability

When asked about career opportunities, 74 percent of surveyed researchers felt there were attractive research career opportunities for them, and that gaining research skills improved their job prospects and employability. Some stated that research is often confused with dissertations for degrees or that the main purpose of producing research papers is to gain promotion. Conversely, some also stated that this question was not relevant to them because they were government employees and, as such, research knowledge and skills were not taken into account as part of their career progression. Half of the respondents reported that they are moderately or somewhat satisfied with the financial rewards, social recognition, job security and career opportunities that come with pursuing a career in research. There appears to be no difference between perceptions of career opportunities for academic and non-academic researchers. This can be partly explained by self-selection bias and the interpretation of *attractive* – many academic researchers value the stability of a job in the public sector (they are essentially considered as civil servants), despite the lower wages.

When asked about the quality of incentive systems, academic researchers consistently report much lower averages in terms of the financial benefits and career incentives compared to their non-academic counterparts. However, academics responded more positively to the incentives for producing research, particularly in terms of professional competitiveness.

As stated in the section on research culture and services (page 72). there is no national research body. Consequently, the responses given in relation to the evaluation capacity of the (non-existent) national research body are not representative, findings also corroborated during the in-depth interviews with researchers (both academic and non-academic) and research administrators. Nonetheless, 15 percent of the surveyed researchers (18 respondents) gave an opinion about the supposed national body's research evaluation process: 11 stated it was, to a

varying degree, effective, while 6 stated the organization was largely ineffective. Similarly, 4 out of the 14 surveyed research administrators responded to this question: two stated the body was effective (one very effective and the other moderately effective) in its capacity to evaluate, while another research administrator stated it was moderately ineffective. Once again, such findings illustrate the lack of understanding of the question or the terms used, or the over-eagerness of researchers to showcase their knowledge – a cultural dynamic described in the contextual analysis. The recent controversy surrounding PhD thesis plagiarism and paid-for publications in fake journals has highlighted the need to set up a robust and functioning research evaluation mechanism in HEIs. This must also address the criteria for promotion, which currently emphasize the quantity of research output rather than the quality.

However, a note of caution is important here. As described in the contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping, research ethics have become increasingly aligned with the current political climate and benchmarked to the national goals outlined in the 2008 Constitution – a reality that could lead to the institutionalization of censorship in the research evaluation process.

Most HEIs do not have an annual target for research publications, although universities do produce university journals – often a compilation of research papers produced by professors from across different faculties – on a quarterly, biannual or annual basis. This is subject to the availability of funding, and determined entirely by individual universities, often with no set timelines. Non-academic think tanks, such as the Institute of Strategy and Policy, and some independent research organizations, such as Inya Economics, have annual targets for publications. Similarly, this is entirely dependent on the availability

of funding, which is usually financed separately from their donor-funded projects. Although the UIS data does not provide any information on the number of researchers working outside the higher education sector, the stakeholder mapping indicates that there are a large number working outside public HEIs.

Research Diffusion

Actors and Networks

In terms of the diversity of research actors, researchers in Myanmar reported moderately high levels of discussion with a broad range of actors – university affiliates at all academic levels, non-university researchers, women, minority groups, policymakers, community groups and associations, and individual community members. The average rating ranged between 4 and 5[45] across all the different groups of actors, with the exception of minority groups, where the rating fell below four.

As discussed in the chapter on stakeholder mapping, academic research is fairly isolated within the respective subject domains. In addition, there is little collaboration between universities and industry in Myanmar. The results from the survey of researchers appear to reflect this: just 60 percent of academic researchers reported that their organizations had collaborated with an outside organization, compared to 79 percent for non-academic researchers.

Academic researchers collaborated predominantly with international actors (84 percent); over 56 percent of academic researchers have collaborated with international universities. This illustrates the

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45 1 is very dissatisfied and 6 is very satisfied.

lack of local linkages between academia, the government and industry in Myanmar. Surprisingly, only one academic researcher reported that their organization had collaborated with another national university in Myanmar.

In contrast, non-academic researchers reported more frequent cross-sectoral collaboration, with the types of organizations fairly equally distributed among government, international agencies, and international and national NGOs. The cross-sectoral collaboration is largely driven by the proliferation of donor-funded projects following the liberalization of the aid landscape in Myanmar, providing well-established linkages between international agencies/NGOs, national NGOs, and the Government of Myanmar.

Findings from the survey of research administrators also highlight the serious lack of collaboration or partnership among government research institutions, public HEIs and other relevant government departments. One of the often-cited problems is the difficulty of accessing reliable or up-to-date data. 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 that "Generally, it is difficult to get data from government departments. Although we are allowed and entitled to access them, it is a lengthy process …". Another research administrator also mentioned that "Government departments assume that data they have collected is their department's property and therefore they are not willing to share them with other departments, researchers or research organizations." Data sharing is very rare among government institutions, and many of them keep their data for internal use only. As a result, there are a lot of overlapping and duplicated research studies being conducted by various research organizations.

Moreover, according to some respondents, there are polarities within Myanmar's research systems: government and the higher education sector on one side, and non-governmental and independent research institutions such as NGOs and think tanks on the other. The respondents even reported some animosity between locally graduated researchers, mostly from HEIs, and researchers with overseas degrees who often work in foreign NGOs and international organizations. Government regulations and civil service rules also make it very difficult for HEIs to employ or appoint senior researchers and foreign-trained scholars for senior positions in HEIs. In the past, Western donor agencies explicitly barred government officials from their scholarship programs. This meant that only employees of local NGOs and international organizations were awarded scholarships, which has led to the current animosity between researchers in the public and private sectors.

"The Physics department in Yangon University consists of mainly female professors, a paradoxical and opposite trend to western countries. The reason is that the husband works in the private sector (more lucrative) and the wives have the 'luxury' to teach."

Charlotte Galloway

According to UIS data, women make up 75 percent of researchers in Myanmar. In universities, women make up the overwhelming majority of teaching staff. This is also supported by the survey results, in which 75 percent of academic researchers were female. Social and cultural norms, among other factors, contribute significantly to the dominance of women in the higher education sector, particularly the status of women as secondary household earners.

University staff in Myanmar are civil servants hired by the government. Given the low salaries of university staff, men, as the primary earners, are less likely to work in the higher education sector, and tend to look for better-paying opportunities elsewhere.

On average, researchers surveyed during the project attended 1.41 communications training sessions over the last three years, less than 0.5 sessions a year. Capacity-building training conducted in Myanmar by specialists focuses mainly on research production – building up skills in research methodology, rather than the diffusion of research products. These training sessions are predominantly conducted by international actors, such as foreign universities and international donor agencies, but are often short-term programs. Universities have resident trainers who work for at least half a year on teaching methodology and curriculum design.

There are only eight HEIs offering doctoral studies in social sciences, and most of these are located in Yangon and Mandalay; the exceptions are the Universities of Economics in Monywa, Sagaing Region and in Meiktila, Mandalay region. Most of the non-academic research organizations are headquartered in Yangon although they conduct research in various parts of the country. The concentration of research centers in metropolitan areas is largely because of the availability of inputs – researchers, research infrastructure and communication outlets – rather than research interests or demands.

Research Communication Practices

Based on the SCImago Journal and Country Rank, there are a total of 198 social science journals in the Asiatic region, with the highest-ranking journals dominated by the developed economies of Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, China and Singapore. No journal from Myanmar is listed in the ranking (SCImago n.d.).

While Burmese is the official language in Myanmar, it is important to note that English is the official language of instruction in higher education. Textbooks and course materials are all in English, and university students write their examinations and theses in English. As a result, journal papers produced in Myanmar are usually published in English, with a small number in Burmese.

Currently, the majority of national journals in the country are produced by universities, with funding provided by the Department of Higher Education under the MOE. An analysis of the literature in one of the libraries of Yangon University of Economics found that at least 40 universities with a focus on social science have produced their own research journals. The vast majority of papers in these journals are written in English, though there are also a number of Burmese papers. These findings are supported by the results from the survey of research administrators: the majority of responses indicated that 80 to 100 percent of academic papers are written in English.

Outside of academia, journals produced by think tanks and other research organizations are largely self-funded. These initiatives are motivated by the desire to promote and revitalize academic scholarship. For example, the bilingual Inya Economic Journal (produced by Inya Economics, an independent think tank founded in 2017) is funded largely by independent sources. The Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship, which focuses on the humanities and social sciences, raised funds from Yale University, the Open Society Foundation and the Henry Luce Foundation to support its publication (Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship n.d.).

According to Webometrics, which ranks universities based on their website presence and impact, the top five universities in Myanmar (represented in their overall world ranking) are the University of Yangon (ranked 7,221st), the University of Mandalay (ranked 11,257th), the University of Computer Studies Yangon (ranked 12,233rd), Yezin Agricultural University (ranked 15,216th) and the Yangon University of Economics (ranked 19,972nd) (Webometrics n.d.).

The ranking mirrors the relative prestige of these universities in Myanmar, especially in social sciences, where they are fairly well-regarded at the national level for their expertise in their respective disciplines. As stated in the context analysis and stakeholder mapping, the websites of all five universities boast well-developed Open-Access Repository platforms that provide access for both students and academics to published academic work and archives of Master's and PhD theses – with the overall aim of promoting opportunities for collaboration.

The mean score for the number of international projects that surveyed researchers were involved in or collaborated with in the past three years was just 0.93. Currently, the general capacity of researchers in Myanmar is fairly low, which significantly hinders opportunities for them to engage in international research projects. While opportunities for collaboration with international researchers have increased in recent years following Myanmar's democratic and economic reforms – with researchers reporting new collaborative projects with foreign universities or agencies – these are predominantly as part of commissioned projects (with a focus on Myanmar). Given the poor level of research skills in Myanmar, researchers tend to be engaged as research assistants.

Another noteworthy finding was that academic researchers holding a national Master's degree or PhD are less likely to be involved in international research projects, compared to those who have received their Master's degrees or PhD from a foreign institution. Over 76 percent of academic researchers holding a national Master's degrees or PhD have not collaborated in international research projects in the past three years, compared to just 30 percent for those with foreign qualifications. This reflects the current state of higher education in Myanmar, with its outdated research methodologies and curriculum – a major constraint on international engagement with other researchers.

In terms of membership in thematic research networks and international professional affiliations, only 18 percent of all respondents answered "yes" when asked if they were a member of a professional research network. In the subsequent sub-questions, 11 researchers identified themselves as members of a national network, four as members of a regional network, and eight as members of an international network.

Research Communication Products

None of the surveyed researchers have produced peer-reviewed research for conference proceedings. There is also a stark divide between academic and non-academic researchers, with the latter experiencing more exposure to knowledge exchange opportunities, both in country and abroad. Among the research administrators surveyed, 12 of the 14 reported that their universities had organized at least one research conference within the last three years. However, as various interviews stressed, opportunities and platforms for public

debate are rare in Myanmar, with few conducted fully in the local language. Public debate or a culture of dialog would allow for more inclusive development and greater social cohesion.

However, as mentioned in the contextual analysis, freedom of speech and criticism of the establishment is increasingly censored or repressed. Nonetheless, it must be noted that a number of NGO-based researchers stated that research conferences allowed them to build professional networks, update their existing knowledge, and learn about potential project opportunities and partnerships – particularly important for the interviewed researchers from ethnic nationality areas such as Chin and Kachin States.

In terms of communicating and presenting research outputs, in-country research conferences were by far the most common means of showcasing the respondents' research. Recently, there has been an increasing level of engagement between public universities and other foreign universities – for example, the recent conference organized on 5-6 July 2019, 'Managing Challenges During Myanmar's Transition', which was co-presented by the University of Yangon, The Myanmar Research Centre at the Australian National University, and Yunnan University's Institute of Myanmar Studies. It is important to note that 11.4 percent and 39.47 percent of the surveyed researchers were conducting advocacy and policy research, respectively. For these groups of researchers, research findings were communicated to the wider public predominantly via newspaper articles or presentations at in-country conferences, while radio and books were the least common channels of dissemination.[46]

Researchers from non-academic sectors

had far greater incentives to disseminate and publicize their research products among stakeholders and the wider public, either because this was part of the conditions of the research proposal or because of the nature of the research organization and the research topic.

Popularization of Science

While Myanmar society holds its scholars in high regard, this is mainly for their role as teachers, not because of their research achievements. As previously stated, while many perceive a career in research as an attractive proposition, this is largely driven by the fact that most academic researchers work as teaching staff in HEIs and enjoy the perks that come with being a civil servant. With regards to the popularization of research, the findings from the survey of non-academic researchers differ significantly from those of their academic counterparts: 71 percent have published their work (compared to only 11 percent of HEI researchers). For this group, the most popular medium of communication is through social media, namely Facebook. In addition, it appears that non-academic researchers are encouraged to publish their research outcomes on their organizations' websites (on an individual basis), despite receiving less communication training than their counterparts.

Finally, most of the respondents, both academics and non-academics, stated they were moderately satisfied with the quality

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46 The question asked respondents to provide numerical values and answers to open-ended questions. The number of newspapers articles and in-country conferences attended and published in the past three years averaged 1.08 and 1.64, respectively. The lowest averages were for radio (0.05) and books (ranging from 0.20-0.65). The latter includes chapters in a book, chapters written by an editor, and books written by one author or co-authors.

of non-academic media coverage of their research findings – in newspapers, and on television, websites and social media. It appears that respondents are not familiar with radio as medium for communicating their findings: 27 percent of academics and 31 percent of non-academics chose "no answer/I don't know" for the question on radio coverage.

In contrast to the findings from the researcher surveys – which reported high levels of satisfaction in terms of the financial rewards and social status that come with a research career – the interviews with researchers stressed the lack of monetary or societal incentives for young graduates to pursue a career in social research. For them, research per se is seen as a requirement for undergraduate degree programs at public universities. However, social research, including market and business intelligence research, is seen as a lucrative technical skill that increases their employability. As stated by a national research consultant, "At present [academic] research is only understood and appreciated among medical students, but not in other disciplines."

Despite the barriers and limited incentives, social research is still being commissioned, produced and diffused. Although there is a lack of a formal research culture within wider society, there are informal dynamics and established relationships between various actors that are worth examining. As extensively discussed in the contextual analysis, during the socialist regime and the SLORC period, most research studies were conducted through informal networks, which hinged on a high degree of trust between the researchers and the communities being researched. The interviews with leading researchers in the country, suggest that these dynamics are still largely at play across the research system – from bidding for research projects, access to data and facilitating

surveys, to stakeholder engagement and diffusion of research products. Moreover, because of limited institutional research capacity, these informal relationships are also used to commission research outside of formal structures. The downside of such a system is that it strongly favors previously established relationships rather than institutionalizing good practice among researchers.

Research Uptake

Policy-friendly Research

Since Myanmar started liberalizing its research system in 2012, there has been a growing recognition among researchers that it is not enough to just produce good research, but that it also needs to be applied for the benefit of society. The donors who funded nascent research initiatives, to improve the quality and integrity of research production during earlier phases of liberalization, are now trying to improve research communication and engagement with users. As the reforms have deepened, the donors have begun to focus on policy-friendly research, to support and inform decision-making and to influence policies and the actions of government. In this regard, policy research uptake involves a wide range of activities including: (a) the production of quality research (ensuring that research topics are relevant through continued engagement with policymakers); (b) the effective communication of research findings to all relevant stakeholders (that incorporates broader inputs and support for translating evidence into policy); and (c) the facilitation of access to policymakers in order to provide evidence-based research for their decision-making.

To achieve effective research uptake, it is important to first set the right research agenda, which, in turn, will frame the process

for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data. In the past, Myanmar research organizations set their research agenda to fit the needs of particular individuals or groups. However, democratic reforms in recent years have encouraged them to produce research studies that deal with wider societal problems and that collect the best available evidence to support the popularly elected government in addressing these issues. A number of researchers and research administrators reported in their interviews that they wanted to be more aware of which research topics were relevant to policymakers to allow them to initiate the production of policy-friendly research. One administrator responded that the government was rather slow in communicating its policy positions; even development partners and the donor community were not sure how to support the government in terms of their needs for external evidence from systematic research.

The isolation of HEIs within the social research landscape in Myanmar was discussed in great detail in the stakeholder mapping. Unfortunately, because of the absence of a formalized structure to peer review academic journals, there is no accurate measure to estimate the share of academic and non-academic publications that are relevant to policymaking. However, as previous chapters revealed, the majority of policy-relevant research is produced by non-academic researchers. Given that the distinction between academic and non-academic research is still poorly understood (and often conflated) in Myanmar, academic researchers have to compete with other non-academic researchers for government-commissioned projects. According to the in-depth interviews, they are often awarded to non-academic researchers because of their greater capacity for research and their longstanding reputation and professional networks.

In contrast, the majority of HEI researchers publish their research in journals that are specific to individual universities, which are not organized thematically or by discipline. These publications contain papers authored by professors from across all faculties and disciplines, and are only circulated within the libraries of universities, significantly diminishing broader outreach. These HEI journals largely serve as a platform for career advancement for aspiring professors – policy relevance is not the main objective of authoring and publishing a paper. It is hoped that with the new promotion policy in HEIs, and the renewed interest in promoting academic research, plans to restructure these university journals will materialize, strengthening their research-to-policy linkages.

In 2012, as Myanmar stepped out of isolation and re-engaged with international development partners and multilateral institutions, the U Thein Sein government established the National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC). The council, comprised of distinguished scholars and renowned experts, was set up to advise government ministries and their development partners on reform priorities. The NESAC later set up a research wing to develop on-demand research products – such as comparative lessons learned on aid coordination for the white paper on agriculture diversification strategy. Subsequently, many members of the NESAC supported the development of policymaking processes in various parts of the transition government, establishing a strong research-to-policy nexus. As a consultant with experience of providing research skills training to the General Administration Department (GAD) stated, investments in longer-term, institutionalized capacity-building efforts are needed, rather than the current structure of providing short training

courses. The consultant also acknowledged that there has been a tangible increase in the demand for research skills among GAD staff members since the establishment of a new research department within GAD. Similarly, Panna Institute – a local NGO that focuses on building capacity within civil society and regional government – reported during an interview that while interest in developing research skills exists at the ministerial level, research departments within regional governments still require essential institutional capacity to strengthen the research-to-policy nexus.

Moreover, results from the survey of researchers indicate a very low level of engagement with policymakers in research projects: out of a total of 114 researchers, only 18 percent have worked on at least one research project commissioned by policymakers in the past three years. There is also a significant disparity between academic and non-academic researchers. For academic researchers, only 11 percent have been engaged in research commissioned by policymakers in the past three years, while this figure is three times higher (34 percent) for non-academic researchers. When asked about the frequency of such engagements, three-quarters of academic researchers responded "I don't know", once again highlighting the poor linkages between HEIs and policymakers. More surprisingly, of the small percentage of researchers who have engaged in research commissioned by policymakers, only 38 percent had received any funding for the research. This can be attributed to the informality prevalent in the linkages between researchers and policymakers. Often, work commissioned by the government is conducted in a relatively informal manner, and is undertaken by researchers or organizations as a means of developing or maintaining the trust of or a strong rapport with policymakers. As

such, the notion of grants, or a more formal manner of commissioning work, is less prevalent in Myanmar – which is still largely characterized by high levels of informality.

Research-based Policymaking

The link between research and policy is stronger when the government uses the best available research and information to guide decisions at all stages of the policy process and in each of the government ministries. Research-based policymaking can identify solutions for use with scarce resources, and highlight gaps where interventions should focus. This is particularly relevant for Myanmar as such an approach can help reduce wasteful spending on projects in country with limited resources and, more importantly, it can prioritize reform initiatives to change the country's course of development away from the legacy of its past.

Formal researcher participation in policymaking is measured by the share of membership in advisory bodies for policymakers. The findings on this continue to illustrate the poor linkages between HEIs and policymakers: just 3.5 percent of academic researchers are members of a policy advisory body, compared to 17 percent for non-academic researchers. Furthermore, the majority of non-academic researchers represented in policy advisory bodies were from NGOs and CSOs. Due to the well-established relationships with and support from international donors, these types of organizations enjoy stronger formal collaborations with policymakers.

Although the formal participation of researchers in policymaking processes is still an emerging trend in Myanmar, informal consultations with researchers on key national decisions are already well underway. An example of this is illustrated by the setting of the national minimum wage in Myanmar

since 2015, when the country began, for the first time, enforcing international labor standards across the country. When the government set up the new tripartite minimum wage committee in 2017 – made up of government representatives, employers and workers – it also invited five economists, of whom three were active researchers, to join the committee. Although the committee has not undertaken any research work related to the setting of the minimum wage, the researchers are able to access labor force survey data owned by the Ministry of Labour and provide valuable inputs to relevant stakeholders when the minimum wage is adjusted every two years.

There is no quantifiable information on the share of academic and non-academic publications on Myanmar. As discussed in the previous section, the academic output published in HEI journals does not leave the confines of academia. The research for policy-relevant journals is predominantly produced and published by non-academic researchers. Moreover, the vast majority of journals produced by these actors are largely self-funded. Plagued by a lack of interest and low readership, many of these journals are typically intermittently produced or short-lived. For example, the Quarterly Journal of the Institute for Strategy and Policy Myanmar was first launched in 2017, focusing on the key thematic areas of politics, federalism, civil society and social justice. While three issues were published in 2017, the fourth and most current issue was only published in June 2019. Similarly, the Inya Economic Journal, an open-access journal to encourage and promote interest in the field of economics as well as inform policymakers on macroeconomic management, is independently produced and fully self-funded by Inya Economics. Speaking to a researcher at Inya Economics, securing funding for the production of their journal is a major challenge, and funds are often pooled from private donors. As the nascent interest in scholarly work and journals is largely unprofitable and self-funded, the sustained production of these journals is at risk.

Another way of measuring informal collaboration is the frequency of interaction with policymakers. 'No contact with policymakers' was the most reported answer among the surveyed researchers (accounting for 42 percent of total responses); for those researchers who have interacted with policymakers, most of these interactions appear to be occasional. This is directly associated with the limited amount of time researchers spend on research – based on the survey results, the majority spend 2 to 3 days a week on research. Despite the informal nature of the working relationships between researchers and policymakers, the channels through which they communicate remain largely formal. Most respondents who have interacted with policymakers noted that these interactions were established through scheduled meetings, or through formal written requests or emails.

Research-based Policy Products

Although the number of research citations in policy documents is not readily available, there are examples of recent policy documents that refer to a number of research studies undertaken by HEIs and other independent research organizations whose findings are used to inform policy decisions. For instance, the Agriculture Development Strategy and Investment Plan of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (the Ministry's flagship policy document), cites 15 other research studies undertaken by various international organizations and individual researchers. The National Aquaculture Development Plan of the Department of Fisheries also contains several citations of research studies conducted by international and local researchers.

However, there is no symbolic use of research evidence by policymakers in their policy speeches or ministerial press releases. From 2014 onward, every ministry is required to report the progress and achievements of their policy implementations to senior officials and the public, often led by the ministers themselves. While they provide information and statistics on policy outcomes, they have never cited a third party or independent research evidence to validate these outcomes. The Office of the Auditor General undertakes formal monitoring and evaluation of the performance and progress of project implementations for all government ministries but, to date, there has never been an independent third-party review of these results.

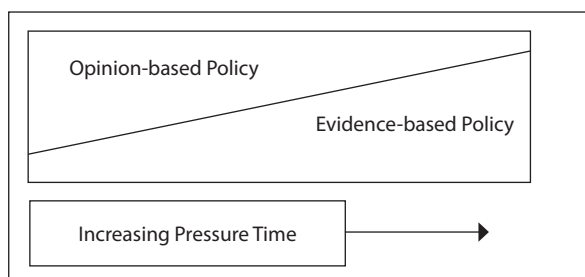## Research Utilization for Informed Policymaking

Several research administrators shared their perception that the level of research use has been improving in recent years. According to responses from the survey, half of the research administrators believe that their institutions' products are used to inform policy decisions. They are particularly encouraged by the convening of a research conference by the MOE. Senior and junior researchers will be able to submit their papers and compete for an invitation to the national conference in Yangon. However, those who do not get selected, will be still be able to present their papers to peers and students at conferences in their own universities. In many ways, research administrators and policymakers alike, see these new opportunities to write research papers and share them among their peers as a positive development. Several policymakers also expressed their appreciation for the State Counsellor's advocacy on promoting research in HEIs. However, one administrator noted that while most of the policy guidelines from

policymakers emphasize the importance of research in HEIs, this does not mean that research would necessarily shape policymaking.

Perceptions of the level of research independence vary from high to satisfactory, particularly – as most administrators and policymakers pointed out – in comparison to practices in the past. Survey results from research administrators were overwhelmingly positive for all indicators, from independent production of research to open discussions of research results without undue influence. However, a researcher in an in-depth interview pointed out that the value of research evidence in recent years may have been undermined by the opinions of popular political leaders whom the public tend to believe without checking the facts and evidence. In fact, Myanmar has been swinging between opinion-based policymaking and evidence-based policymaking. Ironically, under the previous government, which was less popular with the public and barely legitimate in the eyes of some foreign governments, policymakers were anxious to consult researchers and use research evidence to convince the public that they were undertaking serious reforms. The new government came to power following a landslide election victory, despite the economic concerns raised by the private sector. As such, the government seems to care more about public opinion than the evidence of growing issues within the economy.

As several scholars (Sutcliffe & Court 2005; Du Toit 2012; Mendizabal 2014) have pointed out, because of the fluid dynamics of policymaking in the real world, one should not be surprised that the political value of research may also vary with political regimes that are in charge of policymaking in a given period. This means that even if research is of high quality, is relevant to policymakers

Figure 8. Dynamics of policymaking

Source: Sutcliffe & Court 2005

and has been disseminated widely for public consultation, policy uptake cannot be guaranteed. This fluid state of evidence-based policymaking can also be seen in developed countries where, despite the rapid increase in the availability of statistics and information, evidence is often not factored into policymaking. The use of evidence may become political, even though using evidence to inform policymaking is not a partisan matter – it is a basic requirement for good government.

A particularly troubling observation shared by a respondent is the emergence of social media, where 'alternative interpretations' of outright fake evidence have become amplified in unprecedented ways through the popular use of social networks. The resulting bombardment of unverifiable facts and information feeding into poorly informed public opinion poses the greatest challenge to the nascent research culture in Myanmar. Increasingly, public figures and policymakers are using Facebook and reacting to what is 'hot' on social media rather than looking at evidence and information that could provide a more realistic picture of the situation. Worse still, researchers who have put up credible evidence, produced through a rigorous process of systematic research, are open to widespread denunciation if their findings go against popular opinion or the prevailing political narrative of the time. Many researchers are now discouraged to discuss their findings through social media, limiting the potential diffusion of research evidence through Facebook. Under these circumstances, an effective research system – which encourages the uptake of quality research by politicians and policymakers – is still a long way off.

CONCLUSIONS

Highlights

- Myanmar needs to overhaul its national research system to enable the production and dissemination of evidence that can be used to inform policymakers, who, in turn, can then promote actions that are truly viable and attainable.

- Local ownership of research projects needs to be encouraged in order to leverage the expertise of Myanmar scholars for better-informed policymaking, along with stronger partnerships between researchers and policymakers.

- The government should acknowledge the importance of research in building a knowledge-based society that values researchers as important links between citizens and the government.

- Myanmar should invest in boosting research capacity, infrastructure and funding for HEIs as a priority goal of the HEI reform agenda so that HEIs can meet the growing demand for evidence-based policy research.

In August 2018, Myanmar adopted the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) 2018-30, an ambitious program to implement 251 action plans under 28 strategies for achieving a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Myanmar – in line with the global sustainable development agenda. To implement these proposed action plans and achieve the ambitions of the MSDP, Myanmar needs to address the persistent knowledge deficit. It needs to invest in and overhaul its national research system to enable the production and dissemination of evidence that can be used to inform policymaking.

To foster an enabling environment for research, Myanmar can start with empowering its higher education institutions with the adequate provision of resources, enhanced quality control, broader collaborative partnerships and effective policy uptake. Research capacity needs to be strengthened, with regular collaboration with other international scholars and the adoption of universally recognized benchmarks to measure the progress of the research system within the broader framework of higher education reforms (Chinlone 2018). Local ownership of research projects needs to be encouraged in order to leverage the expertise of Myanmar scholars for better-informed policymaking, along with stronger partnerships between researchers and policymakers. The key messages of this report can be summarized as follows:

Higher education institutions can meet the growing demand for evidence-based policy research. Demand for evidence-based research is increasing and changing from more narrowly defined scientific research to broader social science research that assesses the fundamental mechanisms of policymaking, outcomes and impacts. Demands are made not just by central government planners but also a myriad of other policy actors: regional governments, parliamentarians, political parties, private sector associations and international organizations. The government needs to invest in boosting research capacity, infrastructure and funding for higher education institutions as a priority goal of the HEI reform agenda.

Local researchers can be empowered to provide relevant and timely technical assistance to policymakers. The choice of policy options are context-specific, and local researchers are best placed to choose the most appropriate course of action from among the different policy options provided by outside experts. Whenever possible, local researchers can be seconded

to commissioned research undertaken by international organizations or foreign experts on behalf of the Government of Myanmar. Interaction with local research will not only stimulate joint policy learning but also build local capacity to effectively develop public policies in the future.

It is not only important to increase the budget for doing research but also improve the flexibility of research funding. The Ministry of Education budget almost tripled between 2012/13 and 2019/20, of which the Department of Higher Education received 15-16 percent. Although there are some allocations for undertaking research, projects need to follow annual budgetary rules, as well as provide evidence for auditing purposes, which makes it difficult to undertake multi-year research projects. In addition, doing research involves a great deal of trial and error, particularly when applied to complex policy processes. The current allocations for doing research should be increased and exempt from rules that limit the carry-over of research funds.

Governance for doing research needs to be developed and institutionalized. There is an urgent need to develop a system of governance to ensure an enabling environment for doing research in Myanmar. The government must acknowledge the importance of research in building a knowledge-based society that values researchers as important links between citizens and the government. It should develop appropriate policies, long-term endowments and functional institutions to oversee research activities and organizations.

International funds for doing research in Myanmar need to be effectively coordinated. Technical assistance is a key component of international aid for national development. A large chunk of donor assistance is commissioned to international

experts to research, assess and advise on policy inputs for the government. Thus, local knowledge and research is often overlooked by international organizations and, consequently, in many instances research is not properly contextualized and produces inappropriate operational recommendations. Collaboration between local researchers and international consultants should be encouraged. The government could also request that donors consider investing in local research systems, and involving local organizations and service providers in their projects.

International support can boost quality, ethics and equity in the research system. While many important initiatives are being undertaken at the ministerial level by key bodies such as the National Education Policy Commission, the Rectors' Committee and the Department of Higher Education, international funding remains the main source of research funding. Beyond commissioning research and increasing the share of research commissioned to local researchers, these funds can support debates and processes that strengthen quality, ethics and equity in Myanmar's research landscape. This will entail routing funding to and through universities with the aim of strengthening the operational capacity of research support services and research ethics review boards; increasing exposure to how research is managed at an institutional level in neighboring countries and globally; and strengthening linkages between research and other aspects of academic life, including teaching and career advancement. This will require coordination with national bodies that are engaged in debates on how to strengthen the research system in Myanmar, and with those setting the financial management rules for the use of research. Given the current level of funding to research-related activities, this is well within the reach of Myanmar and its development partners.

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Notes

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