

Higher Education reform in Myanmar: Neoliberalism versus an inclusive developmental agenda

Camille Kandiko Howson^{a*} and Marie Lall^b

^aCentre for Higher Education Research & Scholarship, Imperial College London, London, UK; ^bInstitute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Dr Camille Kandiko Howson
5th Floor Sherfield Building
South Kensington Campus
London UK SW7 2AY
+44 (0)20 7594 1151
c.howson@imperial.ac.uk
[@cbkandiko](https://twitter.com/cbkandiko)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1045-3655>

Professor Marie Lall
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2868-4534>

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Abstract

Myanmar has been transitioning to a parliamentary democracy following a long period of authoritarian military rule, with higher education positioned as a catalyst of and for change. This paper explores the policy reform texts through discourse analysis and the process of their enactment by senior university leaders. Two discourses emerge, one of neoliberalism and the role of globalisation, competition and marketisation. Another adopts traditional Myanmar values and argues for an inclusive, developmental agenda based on local needs using culturally sensitive approaches. The article explores the complimentary and contradictory nature of these approaches and the consequences for reform efforts.

Keywords: post-conflict reform; neoliberalism; globalisation; Southeast Asia, Myanmar Buddhist values

Introduction

Decades of underinvestment and civil strife over 70 years resulted in the slow and steady decay of the Myanmar's state education system. In 1964 under the socialist regime, all private schools and universities were closed. After the students' protest of 1988, all universities were closed for two years. Another series of student strikes in 1996 and 1998 resulted in further closures. In Yangon, the University was closed for 10 out of 12 years. After the re-opening of universities and colleges in 1999, the government relocated universities to different regions and the undergraduate programmes were moved to campuses far away from urban centres to avoid further student protests. This extreme version of domestic and international isolation means that the quality of higher education has slipped to dramatically low levels and reforming universities has become a government priority since the country started to

open up again after the 2010 elections.

This article explores the principles behind the policies and reforms of the higher education system since 2012 and how these are interpreted and enacted (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012) by senior staff of universities¹. The article juxtaposes two dominant views on how Myanmar's higher education system should progress – one based on neoliberal principles drawn from the global elite and the other focused on the inclusive development of the country based on Buddhist principles, both born out of a feeling of national pride.

Higher education systems, neoliberalism and international organisations

Higher education systems have evolved from self-standing universities to systems regulated, governed and funded by national governments (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000). Jungblut and Maassen (2017) sketch out the history of different European systems, from the integrated German system to French higher education with elite training colleges outside the university, compared with the heterogeneity of British system. These have all variously inspired the development of higher education in other national systems, including those developed under periods of colonial rule. However, following Clark's (1983) comprehensive systems-based approach incorporating the institutional types, distribution of authority and modes of governance, research more recently has concentrated either on wider global forces, such as the Bologna Process and the impact of neoliberalism, or taken institutional approaches. For example, in exploring the role of universities in European integration, Gornitzka et al (2007), see universities as institutions with unique rationale, identity

¹ Senior Staff that were part of a British Council-funded year-long training programme in 2018

and foundations, its own ethos, codes of behaviour and primary allegiances and loyalties that engender concepts such as university autonomy and individual academic freedom. However, such institutionalisation is not universal, particularly where universities are closely aligned with the state and lack autonomy. Olsen (2007) describes the competition between political actors on how to govern higher education depending on the relationship between higher education and society. In developing countries, this struggle plays out with the university system positioned to maintain the status quo or as a catalyst for change.

In addition to institutional and political features of higher education systems impacting their role in society, there are also profound economic and cultural factors. Most dominant has been the rise of market fundamentalism, a key tenet of neoliberalism which positions the state as a facilitator of market forces (Friedman 1962). Neoliberalism is a new form of governmentality representing a form of political reason (Foucault 1991). “Neoliberalism is a politically imposed discourse, which is to say that it constitutes the hegemonic discourse of western nation states” (Olssen and Peters 2005). It is argued that the marketisation of society has influenced all spheres of life, including education, and this has led to profound changes in the nature of social relations, in particular the narrowing of the notion of student into that of consumer and a concomitant commodification of the learning experience (Giroux 2004). For Giroux neoliberalism has colonised higher education, placing the successful reproduction and legitimisation of ‘market driven identities and values’ (494) at its core. The emphasis on competition and increased performance calls for increased surveillance and evaluation and this has led to the development of national curricula, national testing regimes and managerialist systems of performance evaluation which have eroded teacher’s professional autonomy (Apple 2004).

However, in reviewing neoliberalism in Latin American higher education, Torres and Schugurensky (2002) noted the need to contextualise impacts within the political context of the region.

Policy borrowing is a feature of this approach as foreign institutions are viewed as models of best practice (Steiner-Khamsi 2016). This follows from an erosion of the social contract between higher education and the State (Marginson and Considine 2000). Stepping into this gap, international organisations such as the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are positioning higher education as a global commodity. International education policy bodies draw on their capacity to assemble knowledge and bureaucratic resources to legitimise their power and set the agenda for ‘what counts’ in education (Morgan and Shahjahan 2004). However, despite the global dominance of international organisations as ‘central nodes of diffusion’ (Jakobi 2012), the policies they promote are never directly ‘borrowed’, rather they go through a ‘translation’ process (Mukhopadhyay and Sriprakash (2011).

International organisations are having a growing influence on policymaking in post-conflict development (Baćević, 2014), as a cause and consequence of globalisation. The spread of neoliberal policies through globalisation has led to isomorphic institutional systems (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) which ignore the local context and diversity of paths to development across countries (Kempner and Jurema 2002). For example, differentiated academic systems based on Western models with research universities and universities with research capacity (Altbach 2013) are deemed a ‘necessity’ for developing countries (Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000).

Literature on higher education reform

Most higher education reform literature is written from a dominant Western economic perspective (Brown 2013; Pinheiro and Pillay 2016; Wolf, 2002), focusing on its role in producing future benefits, largely drawing on human capital theory (Hanushek 2013; Sweetland 1996). Research on rates of return of education has shifted focus in developing countries from an focus on primary education to include the role of higher education (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018). Higher education plays a key role as countries move on from crisis and conflict, with the concept of ‘transition’ capturing the change, reforms, innovation and development that occurs (Mitter 2002).

Much literature on higher education reform in developing contexts focuses on the impact on Western systems, including the movement of international students (Altbach and Knight 2007; Bennell and Pearce 2003) and transnational education (Huang 2007; Verbik and Jokivirta 2005). However, the latter while potentially economically beneficial may pose a threat to national systems and students (King 2003). For higher education functions as an ideological apparatus within society (Althusser 2008), and questions about education’s dominant ideological base need to be considered when exploring the role of higher education in post-conflict countries (Tierney 2011). Research has begun to highlight the limitations of the human capital theory approach (Brown, 2001; Marginson 2019). However, many fundamental questions about the role, and alternatives to human capital theory, remain unanswered (Kapur and Crowley 2008).

In higher education reform there is a delicate balance between engaging with international organisations to link with global systems of science and scholarship (Altbach 2009) whilst accounting for local contexts and conditions (Naidoo 2007). This requires shifting from adopting targets to ‘adaptation’ of relevant tangible

benefits of higher education for society (McCowan 2016; Fernández Polcuch 2008). This process does not only occur with international partners, similar activities happen with in-country groupings, at the national and increasingly at regional levels, where unique models for adaptation are developing (Chou and Ravinet 2017).

Higher education can have a catalytic role in recovery and development of conflict-affected societies (Milton and Barakat 2016), as seen in Post-Soviet countries (Fullan, 2001; Gounko and Smale 2007) and in periods following regime change (Couch 2019; Esson and Wang 2018). However, evidence demonstrates that functional education strategies need to account for economic growth, human rights and national identity to support national development (Couch 2019; Gvaramadze 2010). Drawing on Arnhold et al.'s (1998) educational reconstruction conceptual framework, Esson and Wang (2018) analysed the reformation process of Yangon University in 2013 and argue that efforts have failed to consider the ideological and psychological reconstruction of the university in the reform process.

Myanmar political and policy background

After decades of isolation from the west and limited interaction with its eastern neighbours, Myanmar embarked on a series of socioeconomic reforms across all sectors in 2012. Until that time, apart from UNICEF and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), international aid and development agencies had virtually no role to play in the country. Myanmar's education system was government-run according to Buddhist principles, with Buddhist monasteries offering education provision for the very poor. **Buddhism has served as social glue² and as a means to keep civil society alive under military rule (Lorch 2007). The traditional Buddhist**

² Similar to how this is described in Cambodia in Tan 2008)

principles for education are social harmony, conformity and passivity (Tan 2008) are very much reflected across the Myanmar education system. Teachers are (still) badly paid but serve society very much on the Buddhist principles of *seva* (selfless service) and *dana* (the virtue of generosity/ charity). Buddhism as a philosophy and Buddhist values of service to society very much permeated the whole education system from primary to university levels. Teachers at universities (and schools) are revered by their students and their families for their role in offering ‘enlightenment’ and knowledge. This is particularly visible at the annual Sayar Gadaw Pwe (Homage Paying Ceremony) held very year, during the month of Thadingyut where students reaffirm their respect for their teachers.³

As part of the reforms, the government started a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) that was spearheaded by the Ministry of Education and supported by a range of international development partners including the Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNICEF, and national aid agencies such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID, now Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT]). These education reforms, initiated by President Thein Sein’s government in 2011/2012 changed things quite dramatically, resulting in the National Education Sector Plan, the guiding document for the whole education sector that was renamed National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), but otherwise broadly accepted by the National League for Democracy (NLD) government that took power after the 2015 elections (Lall 2016). **Buddhist principles are embedded within the language and**

³ See for example the brochure describing the chemical engineering department of Yangon Technological University (p.242): *‘The campus environment is unique, both inside and outside the classroom: [...] students will kneel and bow to faculty with their face touching the ground, in a show of respect...’*

interpretation of the national legal framework. Through the Constitution the government offered a form of ‘disciplined democracy’, focusing on duties and responsibilities over rights and affordances (Metro 2017), while also framing proper moral conduct (Walton 2016).

The drafting of the National Education Law (NEL) in 2014 marked a major legislative landmark. It defined the key issues facing higher education in Myanmar as university autonomy, the right to form unions and the right of universities to formulate their own curriculum (Kamibeppu and Chao 2017). The law was not without controversy and believing that it did not go far enough student protests rocked the streets of Yangon and other cities in Myanmar, eliciting minor concessions from the government and a re-issuing of the NEL in 2015. Education has remained a key priority of the NLD government. Former rector of West Yangon University Dr Myo Thein Gyi, a hardliner during the 2014 student protests,⁴ has become Minister of Education. Since 2016 he has headed the education reform process, focused on delivering the priorities as defined by the NESP.

Higher Education in Myanmar

There are 171 higher education institutions in Myanmar (NESP 2016) under the jurisdiction of eight different ministries. At the time of writing all the higher education institutions are state-financed and accept students after matriculation depending on their grades. Those who cannot afford to live away from home study in the world’s largest but very poor-quality distance education programme. They do so at a comparatively young age as they finish school at the age of 16.⁵ Due to the

⁴ <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/19825-opposition-builds-over-ministers.html>

⁵ This is changing slowly as the basic education system is gradually moving from an 11 year to a 12-year curriculum and all children are expected to do a year of KG before entering grade

declining quality of the state education system, students and parents have been craving better qualifications and study opportunities outside of Myanmar. This is however only an option for the rich and upper classes who can afford to send their children abroad. Ordinary citizens have to rely on local provision and the wider reforms have led to increased public expectation, often evidenced in local Burmese language newspaper articles, that Myanmar's education reforms will mean students can access jobs. Beyond the domestic agenda for meeting families needs for better incomes and labour market needs for better qualified graduates, the drive for reform across education, and in particular higher education, is for Myanmar to catch up with the ASEAN countries in the region. The success of the higher education reforms is seen as a key element in the long term drive to take the country forward and to regain the respect of the international community (Interview with the MoE, August 2019).

Within higher education reform the NLD's focus has been on the historical flagship Universities in Yangon and Mandalay. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's particular priority has been to restore Yangon University (YU) to its former 'glory' as one of Asia's leading universities, asking both Britain and Australia to support YU's development. As part of the broader reforms undergraduates are being reintegrated on the main campuses of urban universities. New higher education coordinating bodies such as the National Education Policy Commission (NEPC) in 2011⁶, the National Institute for Higher Education Development (NIHED) and the Rectors Committee (2018) have been created. The NEPC was designed to have an executive role in advising and coordinating higher education policy and legislation in the form of Myanmar's 30-year Long-term Education Development Plan as well as coordinating with development partners (Channon 2017).

1, meaning that eventually all undergraduates will enter the system at 18.

⁶ Called 'National Education Committee' (NEC) at the time.

To date Myanmar's universities have operated quite differently from most other higher education systems in the world. The curriculum and the assessment are set by the Ministry of Education. The hiring of staff is also coordinated by the government and all staff are rotated every few years to universities around the country, making the setting up of research teams almost impossible. Universities are not autonomous, and although the elite universities have been promised some limited autonomy such as being able to hire local staff and choose their students as part of the reforms⁷, the fact that the government controls the budget means that the reality of university governance is severely limited. There are however large differences between regional universities in remote areas, especially between ethnic states and urban institutions. For example, universities in ethnic states will often have some local staff already who will not be rotated as part of the national system, and setting up universities in ethnic states has been part of politically-motivated integration efforts across conflict-affected regions (Heslop 2019).

The CESR Phase 1 report on higher education quotes that only 11 per cent of Myanmar youth are able to access higher education (Welch and Hayden 2013). The main issues faced by the higher education sector are the quality of what is taught and the teaching methods, as academic teaching staff are not research active in an international sense and courses need updating to meet international standards. The teaching language is theoretically English; however, this is rarely the case because the academic staff (as well as students) do not necessarily speak English well enough. Quality of teaching and learning is poor with rote learning as the norm, out-dated

⁷ The independent hiring of staff is expected to start in a few universities in the new academic year – i.e. June 2020. According to an interview with the Director General of Higher Education at the MoE in August 2019, it is expected that both Yangon and Mandalay Universities as well as 6 others in Yangon and 6 others in Mandalay (probably the top medical and technological universities) will be given limited autonomy at that time.

textbooks, lack of IT infrastructure and high teacher-student ratios as salaries are deemed ‘unattractive’ (p. 4). The system is under resourced and lacking specialised teaching spaces such as laboratories. The report cites the World Bank’s Knowledge Economy Index (KEI), which states that graduate employability is very low – the sign of a ‘poorly aligned higher education system’ (p. 5).

Three strategies for higher education reform are identified in the NESP (2016), based on the NEL and the CESR. These are to strengthen higher education governance and management capacity; to improve the quality and relevance of higher education; and to expand equitable access to higher education. The NESP expects universities to gradually become more autonomous. Whilst devolution offers universities the opportunity to take control, the biggest hurdle remains the centralised budget that does not allow individual institutions to make their own decisions. The first steps in this direction have been Yangon and Mandalay Universities being allowed to select their students and as of 2020 be allowed to hire some of their own staff as well⁸, with this as a test case for granting autonomy.

Methodology

We use a discourse analysis approach on data from three linked sources to explore reform processes and their enactment. The primary sources are the key documents of Myanmar’s reform process (see Table 1) including the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) Phase 1 and Phase 2 reports, and the NESP 2016, which function as socially-constructed ‘policy objects’ (Sin 2014).

Document	Author	Summary
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⁸ This of course is bound to create a difference between locally hired staff attached to individual universities compared to staff hired by the Ministry of Education, who rotate and have a government employee status. Whilst the universities are aware that this will create issues, at the time of writing no solutions have as yet been proposed.

CESR Phase 1 Rapid Assessment Report (2013)	MoE, Government of Myanmar, drafted under Thein Sein Government	Background document with separate reports for the main education sectors that established the relationship between the MoE and the development partners.
CESR Higher Education Background Information report (2013)	MoE, Government of Myanmar, drafted under Thein Sein Government	Sector specific background document.
CESR Phase 2 In depth Analysis Report (2014)	MoE, Government of Myanmar, drafted under Thein Sein Government	Baseline for reforms with in depth separate reports for the main education sectors setting the priorities for the reforms and background for the NESP.
National Education Law (2014) and National Education Amendment Law (2015)	Based on National Education Bill drafted by EPIC under Thein Sein Government. No revisions under NLD government	Legal basis for reforms
National Education Strategic Plan (2016)	MoE, Government of Myanmar (originally drafted by President Thein Sein Government but revised and adopted by NLD led government)	Key policy document that sets out the reform priorities and with key deliverables in each sector across a 5-year timeline. Ministry conducted a mid term review of the achievements achieved under NESP in the summer of 2019.

Table 1. Key documents of Myanmar’s higher education reform process.

Other sources draw on documents from a Higher Education Leadership and Management Programme, set up in partnership with the Ministry of Education in Myanmar, the Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (IPE) and the British Council (BC).⁹ The co-designed programme was based on the NESP Intermediate Outcomes. Participants included senior management teams from 11 Universities¹⁰. The programme also

⁹ The BC funded training focused on managing change and engaging senior staff with issues pertaining to develop their own curriculum and assessment, develop a research strategy as well as developing international partnerships with foreign universities.

¹⁰ Universities included Myanmar’s flagship universities from Yangon and Mandalay as well

included a set of residential workshops and web conferences as well as two national conferences with speakers from the Ministry of Education, leaders from sector bodies, university rectors, academic experts and over 350 delegates from the higher education sector. Data analysed include presentations delivered by senior university staff at the National Higher Education Conferences held in Yangon in 2018 and institutional development exercises captured during the residential programme.

Together these data sources were used for the analysis of policy texts and their initial implementation. This draws on Ball et al.'s (2012) work that enactment is a process 'framed by institutional factors involving a range of actors' (14) comprising 'contextual, historic, and psychosocial dynamics into a relation with texts and imperatives' (71). Rather than focus on the programme and its effectiveness, this paper explores the principles of the reforms and how they were interpreted and enacted by key policy actors, as: 'policy texts and statements may be conceptualized as ideologically constructed products. Representations of policy will therefore embody, in implicit and explicit form, many of the contradictory and contesting social and political forces that were part of its production' (Naidoo 2004, 468).

Discourse analysis of policy documents offers a lens to understand a particular political view, rather than a description of reality and draws out themes which may otherwise be left unseen (Saarinen 2008a). Using discourse analysis opens 'new possibilities for analysing interfaces between international/national/local, as they exceed micro-macro division and thereby bring new possibilities to studying higher education policy change' and these 'may be able to acknowledge a multitude of actors and actors in situations where transnational and international influences play a bigger part' (Saarinen and Ursin 2012, 154). **Discourse analysis allows for understanding**

as regional universities located in ethnic states.

complex layers of ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard 1984; Fairclough 1993) of hegemonic structures in society.

Discourse analysis an underutilised methodology in higher education research (Tight 2003), although its application in policy research is growing (Baldwin 1994; Fairclough and Wodak 2008; Saarinen 2008b; Suspitsyna 2012). Discourse analysis covers the power associated with ways of organising knowledge (Powers 2007; Robertson and Bond 2005). Critical discourse analysis is often used to explore the effects of neoliberalism on higher education policy (Ayers 2005; Saunders 2010; Urciuoli 2010) revealing ideological practices through economic, social and cultural processes. The work of Bourdieu and Foucault draws on critical analyses to explore and explain repressive social structures, for Foucault language as a social practice and consequently a means and exercise of power.

Analysis of texts can be complemented by ‘material’-oriented analysis, including how policies are enacted (Ball et al 2012; Smith 2005). This approach allows for intentions of policies to be drawn out, as ‘the significance of language is what it is thought to be used for, not what it is thought to mean’ (Saarinen, 2008b, 720). In this paper policy texts and development and evaluation data were therefore discursively analysed and contrasted with each other, to capture the principles and underlying assumptions structuring accounts of policy development and enactment.

Critical discourse analysis was conducted on relevant sections to higher education reform policy from each of the three main texts and the public outputs from the national conferences and leadership programme, following the approach of Martínez-Alemán (2015) linking text, structural power and context. Decades of in-country and regional experience, relationships with government policymakers and international organisations, and professional working with institutional leaders and

senior managers facilitated understanding the operation of structural power and the national context.

The discourse analysis approach was used to identify ideologies which promote homogenous and standardised solutions to specific local challenges particularly policies based on conceptions of ‘best practice’ and international standards (Steiner-Khamsi 2013), such as league table positioning and internationalisation. However, the ‘loose coupling’ between global policy and local identified a contrastive approach (Steiner-Khamsi 2013), of how Myanmar Buddhist values were being used to interpret and enact policies, acknowledging the challenges faced by the country on the ground, particularly around in-country regional and ethnic conflicts.

The two dominant views on how Myanmar should reform its higher education system

Both the policy texts as well as the voices of senior academics fall into two completely different visions as to how the higher education sector should reform and to what end. On the one side, the influence of the development partners¹¹ on the CESR has brought a neoliberal vision to Myanmar’s education reform process, on the other, core Myanmar values of Buddhism and development of the nation to sustain Myanmar cultural principles for the common good prevail. Arguably both stem from a tradition in national pride and wanting to see the country successful, especially in comparison with the region, and commanding international respect.

¹¹ This is how the international aid agencies prefer to be referred to in Myanmar. They include the UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO as well as the World Bank and the major donors such as USAID, the European Union, DFID, DFAT and JICA.

The neoliberal vision

Dominating much higher education policy reform literature, institutionalism explains the high degree of homogeneity in institutions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), with more standardisation associated with greater links to global and regional models. However, in Myanmar, the recent lack of external engagement during military rule facilitated the development of a unique higher education system. Current reform efforts aim to integrate with higher education systems in the region but maintain Myanmar Buddhist traditions and values. Critical discourse analysis highlights the neoliberal vision, identifying themes around competition (between institutions and with other countries); internationally-based benchmarks and performance indicators; governance; and human capital development. Examples below indicate how neoliberal policy solutions (e.g. development of an internationally qualified, globally mobile workforce; privatised funding mechanisms) are used to address the current challenges facing Myanmar's higher education system.

National higher education policy texts

Myanmar's education policy texts have been heavily influenced by the donor community and international organisations who stepped up their support to the education and wider reform processes in 2012 when President Thein Sein allowed the development partners to for the first time play a significant role (Lall 2016). Different international organisations took responsibility for different sectors of education; with DFAT (formerly AusAID) taking the overall lead.¹² As a result the dominant neoliberal discourse of the day has found its way into the policy texts, a classical policy borrowing phenomenon described in many other instances of education reform

¹² The British Council led on issue pertaining to English language and higher education.

in developing countries (Steiner-Khamsi 2016).

Under the umbrella of the CESR Phase 1 Rapid Assessment Report, a technical annex on higher education was published in 2013. The section entitled ‘Summary and Recommendations’ (p.vi) contextualises Myanmar higher education reform within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). It cites Myanmar’s desire to adopt ASEAN standards as benchmarks for its own reform goals. The current state of Myanmar’s higher education system compares unfavourably with its neighbours in the region in terms of investment in education, research output, knowledge economy indices and enrolment ratios. Alongside the need for infrastructure development, the authors identify capacity building in teaching, administration and research quality as the most significant priorities for higher education reform.

Several priorities are identified as part of an overall vision for reform of the public and private higher education sectors including the granting of academic and financial autonomy and a clearer definition of the differences between higher education and Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) through the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Another priority area targets the development of quality assurance measures and improving access and equity, underpinned by an index of minimum quality, which would address key issues such as teacher-student ratios, academic staff qualifications, infrastructure facilities and inclusivity. The report proposes further research into a possible system of student loans, noting that the government would not be able to finance the whole cost of higher education in the future.

The Phase 2 CESR report argues that to function effectively in the current global environment, the Myanmar higher education system must develop governance

that has to encompass an overall national vision for education as well as better system coordination and standardisation of approaches. Institutional autonomy is referenced as a key feature of governance (Billany 2014). This requires a ‘sustainable financing strategy’ (28), which, it is claimed, rests on three strategies: government funding, institutional self-funding and cost recovery. The overriding goal is articulated as an improvement in ‘systemic quality’ that includes employability, targeting the skills needs of the workplace, the expansion of the private sector and internationalisation. The latter signals the need to approximate to standards found elsewhere in ASEAN and internationally, the need for broader international collaboration and the development of internationally recognised standards and certification.

The NESP chapter on higher education places the system reform squarely into human capital creation based on the mission statement: ‘to produce graduate human resources who possess the required qualifications for the construction of a new, modern, developed, disciplined, democratic nation.’ (2016, 188) The chapter goes on to state that ‘Myanmar’s HEIs need more investment, autonomy, and coordination according to the World Bank’s 2012 Knowledge Economy Index, which places Myanmar at the 145th position’ (p. 188).

The evidence from the CESR and the NESP suggests that first and foremost Myanmar wishes to align its higher education system with its neighbours in the region and to become a world-class higher education system that can enter the global university rankings.¹³ There is a shared concern that Myanmar needs to catch up with other economies in the region and needs a qualifications system that will promote greater workforce mobility.

¹³ There are indications that Myanmar HEIs are beginning the process of integration into the ASEAN AUN-QA framework, this will also drive the need to develop an NQF. <http://www.aunsec.org/aseanqaadbproject.php>

Policy enactment

Critical discourse analysis was conducted on outputs embodying policy enactment, with academic voices also reflecting the neoliberal vision through internationally benchmarked indicators of quality, impact and human capital development. In a group exercise where participants of the programme described above were asked to develop university vision statements, their definitions of quality and impact were similar to that of western universities. There was a desire to be ‘internationally recognised’, to be ‘prestigious’ and to partner with international universities in order to develop research capabilities.

In addition to the internationally-important research component, two specialist universities saw their vision of international excellence through the training of highly qualified professionals, often emphasising the high-quality human capital that the Myanmar economy needed to develop to catch up with the region. They developed vision statements to:

stand as an international-standard technological university which produces outstanding engineers and architects and implements research and innovations through best practices of international quality-based education.

become a highly prestigious Technological Centre of Excellence in teaching and research to educate and train student of high calibre to become well-rounded, highly qualified engineers and specialists.

The vision for an urban medical university was to ‘be a centre of excellence in medical education, research in health sectors.’ For this, they would have to improve their lab facilities and ethics procedures to improve research and for students to spend more time learning about patient care.

One urban multi-faculty university expressed its vision: ‘To be a leading H.E. institution as a flagship university on par with regional counterparts.’ While another detailed: ‘To strive towards the Emergence of a leading National Research University by:

1. Encouraging/ conducting more research
2. Doing Research to contribute to the Regional and National Development
3. Increasing collaborative engagement with local and Global Communities
4. Joint Collaboration – Research (National) Intra and International
5. Holding Regional and International Conferences
6. To impart our vision to the public by using media, website, social network
7. To share research findings with stakeholders concerned

In these institutional visions, research plays an important role, as does measuring oneself against international and or regional benchmarks, reflecting the themes from the policy texts. The institutional leaders explained evidence for the success of this vision would be based on the number of international publications produced in-line with international trends as well as contributing to the socio-economic development of the country through the development of patents and creating employable young people. The desire to serve the state was also expressed by a regional multi-faculty university who saw their vision as being: ‘The university shall be an international recognized, nurturing scholars and experts in Science, Arts and Law and Serving best interest of the state (society, economy and state).’

Another regional specialist university saw its recognition of excellence based on ‘collaboration research with international institutions’ for which they had to develop a strategic plan. Domestically, they wanted to ‘be a prime mover of agricultural and rural development in Myanmar through human resource development and national supplier of scientific knowledge and technological innovation.’

The role of serving the state and the development of the local economy is arguably different from the more neoliberal visions expressed in the policy documents. However, many universities, not only those considered ‘flagship’ by the government but also those in rural and ethnic areas, seemed to express their visions increasingly in the neoliberal terms of quality and impact and do see this as part of their ‘service’ to the state and nation.

Development and inclusive education – Myanmar Buddhist principles and values

As mentioned above, Myanmar’s education system has historically been closely linked with Buddhism and Myanmar traditional values reflect Buddhist values of service to the community. The respect for hierarchies from students and families vis a vis their teachers is reciprocated by the teachers’ responsibility to teach those in their care well. There is a particular responsibility to serve and include those who come from less privileged backgrounds. Traditionally the main focus of ‘inclusion’ in education has been that of poorer sections of society through donations to monasteries to support monastic schools, rather than the notion of equality and equity that have taken on issues pertaining to the unequal access of different ethnic groups¹⁴ brought to the fore through the (incomplete) peace process that has run in parallel with the wider education and other reforms (South and Lall 2018).

It is generally recognised that ethnic students traditionally have had less access to education as a whole and higher education in particular, largely because of lasting disadvantages due to the language barrier at primary school level. Currently there is

¹⁴ Myanmar has 135 recognised ethnic groups and 7 ethnic states that have a majority of ethnic residents.

no ethnic breakdown of participation of ethnic students in higher education¹⁵. The CESR Phase 1 report had already identified this gap, saying it was unclear how Myanmar's wide ethnic diversity was represented in higher education (Welch and Hayden 2013, 1). Equity in this report is represented in terms of a traditional belief in 'the five pillars of Myanmar society - farmers, workers, students, monks and the military' (p. 22) and the need to unite them (Channon 2017). This is to foster an atmosphere of 'empathy and trust...in the pursuit of a common goal' (Welch and Hayden, p. 22), which is posited as 'the development of the nation' (p. 22). The difficulties involved in achieving this are acknowledged and inequality and poverty is cited as a major obstacle.

Two recommendations in this phase include first, to support modelling exercises designed to determine the relative costs and benefits of widening access to higher education, including the option of raising fees; and second, to develop an index of minimum quality using teacher-student ratios. In comparison with the CESR Phase 1 report, which identified barriers to access on the basis of ethnicity as a key priority (explicitly referencing the Rohingyas), the Phase 2 report shies away from explicitly addressing exclusion resulting from ethnicity, gender, religion, language or disability (Channon 2017).

Emerging out of the CESR reports, one of the NESP strategies for the reform and development of the higher education sector is to expand equitable access to higher education. It is unclear who is included in this definition of 'equity' but one can deduce from the wider text that the prime focus is on the poor as opposed to those from minority backgrounds, especially those whose first language might not be

¹⁵ The Census (published in 2014) shows the break down of people whose highest education attainment is post secondary education by state, but not by ethnic group. In any case the percentage of those having completed tertiary education in ethnic states is lower than the national average of 9%. P.56 Census Education report.

Burmese¹⁶. The recommendations include creating a good learning environment (including good dormitories for those coming from far away) and promoting student support programmes so that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can access and complete their studies. This last component is rather thinner than the others and the language is significantly watered down from the original CESR Phase 1 report.

Policy enactment

Whilst many of the participating universities expressed in their vision statements the desire to be internationally recognised, some were very clear that their pathway to excellence was through serving society and in particular the local community. Two of the regional multi-faculty universities expressed values such as:

To produce resource persons with QA for community development facilities.

To nurture highly qualified human resources to fulfil the local needs for the development of the society.

This second university explained that their research had to specifically provide evidence and knowledge for local needs (e.g. coastal reef, salt water, etc.) and that they also saw their role as developing the majority of teachers in their state.

One of the urban specialist universities qualified the need for human resource creation to include a moral dimension and hoping that their graduates would engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, which very much reflect Buddhist values of charity:

To create the intellectually and morally developed human resources that can be effectively utilized in development of national economy. Evidence: [...] Owners

¹⁶ And who are therefore disadvantaged for life as they will have done less well on the school matriculation examination that to date is the entrance exam for all universities.

or entrepreneurs of successfully running businesses are our alumni [...] Many CSR activities.

Another urban specialist institution focusing on education explained their vision: ‘To train teachers, researchers and educationists capable of producing lifelong learners who can generate able citizens to create a learning society.’ Their motto being ‘All for All’, they explained that their social and cultural values should be visible on the university campus.

This desire to serve the community as a part of traditional Myanmar and Buddhist values was further elaborated by a member of the NEPC at the second National Conference on Higher Education held in October 2018. His presentation on *Equity in Myanmar’s Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges*, emphasised that this was still a major priority of Myanmar’s higher education reform. Explaining the disparities across Myanmar society based on geographic regions, ethnic groups (in this case based on numbers of people living in ethnic states as opposed to an ethnic breakdown)¹⁷, socio-economic status, disability and gender, he held that increased disparity would widen the social divide, gradually leading to social unrest, and conflict and chaos in the society and therefore ‘equity interventions’ were needed to reduce disparities and include marginalised groups to ensure social justice, and facilitate social cohesion, peace and prosperity of the whole society.

Based on data from the 2014 census, examples of inequity presented included the higher urban rates of education completion, much higher numbers of urban female than male students enrolled in higher education institutions, and 68 per cent of young people from the richest quintile attaining education levels beyond secondary education versus only 1.2 per cent from those from the poorest quintile going beyond

¹⁷ The ethnic breakdown figures in and outside the ethnic states collected in the 2014 census remain unpublished.

secondary education. Although not explicitly expressed, it was acknowledged that rural based ethnic young people are therefore least likely to achieve similar education outcomes than their Bamar¹⁸ urban counterparts.

Referring to the relevant policy texts of the 2008 constitution, the 2014 and 2015 National Education Law, the 2015 Law for Protection of the Rights of National Races and the 2015 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disability (PWDs), the senior policy official explained that Myanmar, as part of its reforms, had made commitments to reduce inequity from a legislative perspective, but that programmes were needed to put these into practice. One way forward was to establish more higher education institutions across the country to address the imbalanced distribution, reflected in too many students (60 per cent) enrolling in the low-quality distance education programme. The urban/rural divide is also seen in the allocation of resources, reflected in regional universities having much worse teacher-student ratios than urban institutions, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:5 in Yangon University but 1:29 in Kalay University in the west.

The key challenge that emerged from the conference was that of balancing equity and inclusion on one hand, and quality and excellence on the other, captured through the phrase ‘Inclusive Excellence’. As Myanmar higher education academics look to making their system more ‘like’ the other systems around the world, they wonder how to stay true to their traditional values.

Discussion

The analysis of the representations of the divergent principles underlying the higher education reform policies and their enactment revealed a shared sense of national

¹⁸ Bamar (Burman) are the dominant ethnic group.

pride and wanting to compete regionally and internationally. However, there was an almost complete absence of any recognized relationship of contradiction between the two policy discourses. From the perspective of policy enactment, there seemed to be little difference between ‘serving the state, development of the local economy and serving the most disadvantaged in society’ and neoliberal policies. This raises questions if neoliberal policies can be pursued in tandem with Myanmar Buddhist values, or if it is in the transition from conflict and in the translation of policies borrowed from international bodies and others that divergent pathways and contradictions emerge. As mentioned above, for higher education reforms to be successful there is a need to account for economic growth as well as human rights and national identity to support national development (Couch 2019; Gvaramadze 2010). However, in Myanmar the latter two aspects are not reflected sufficiently in the policy texts and key stakeholders are not aware how the different elements relate to each other.

Although in harmony theoretically, tensions between the two discourses are highlighted through the desire to promote (and to financially support) developing competitive research-intensive universities. This places pressure on flagship urban institutions to work towards international levels of research and publications, especially by policy makers, whereas regional universities are not brought into this discourse. This is likely to increase stratification of the system, exacerbating the urban/rural divide and subsequent consequences for equity across the country. **For example, a neoliberal push for international collaboration with urban flagship universities is at odds with local needs for higher education to promote integration and social justice across ethnic regions and conflict-affected regions within the country (Heslop 2019).** Similarly, the potential of a private higher education system

may help increase access but as seen in other developing countries, often comes at the expense of quality and concern for local values and issues (Baćević 2014; Couch 2019; Dodge 2013).

New higher education coordinating bodies such as the National Education Policy Commission (NEPC), the National Institute for Higher Education Development (NIHED) and the Rectors Committee, as well as National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC), a new quality assurance body, are all positioned at the intersection of these two discourses. These follow the neoliberal approach of putting accountable governance structures in place, designed for highly institutionalised systems, a noted ‘best-practice’ (Steiner-Khamsi 2013). However, this is done in a culture without the necessary autonomy, systems of review and critique to support them.

There is also concern for higher education institutions to be part of national reconstruction, state-building and peace-building (Sansom and Barakat 2016) rather than follow historical patterns as sites of protest and conflict. This requires care when recontextualising neoliberal policies into local contexts (Welch 2011)—especially if this involves fees at any point in time—and when internalising these through existing structures, policies and practices (Steiner-Khamsi 2014) as students might have very different views on the role of higher education from what the government is propagating. There is also the challenge of the neoliberal discourse being adopted but interpreted through the lens of Myanmar Buddhist values, as Metro (2017) described Myanmar government visions of democracy: “‘citizen participation’ means ‘government listening’; democracy should be ‘disciplined,’ meaning that people should follow laws regardless of their content; decentralisation is largely symbolic

rather than structural; and change proceeds gradually, at a pace determined by the authorities” (p. 215).

As Myanmar embraces a globalising world, higher education in Myanmar is poised for a metamorphosis. Developing indigenous higher education systems has been a pathway out of dependence on colonial powers (Castells 1994). However, neoliberal policies can function to recreate dependent relationships, especially if international standards become the domestic benchmarks and links with global universities are the main medium for quality enhancement. As evidenced through the policy enactment discourses by Myanmar senior leaders, the international markers for success may need to be adapted by new criteria and incentives (Naidoo 2007). Heslop (2019) similarly found a disconnect between political rhetoric supporting internationalisation and competition and the lack of engagement at institutional levels. The highly regulated nature of Myanmar’s higher education system also facilitates change at a national level happening much faster and more consistently than in highly institutionalised systems.

There are possibilities for developing countries such as Myanmar to showcase models for excellence that build on traditional values, including inclusion, care for the environment and more sustainable ways of living. It will be a key challenge for the government to balance expansion, inclusion and excellence in a way that the sector can continue to foster social mobility as well as social cohesion all whilst remaining true to Myanmar’s traditional values. The integration of the two seemingly contradictory discourses helps to explain the current political status quo and may also offer insight how to deliver on the policy aims.

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