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MYANMAR HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRANSITION: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN STATE AUTHORITY, STUDENT POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABFSU All Burma Federation of Students Unions

ACDE Action Committee for Democratic Education

BSPP Burma Socialist Program Party

BRS Burma Research Society

CDM Civil Disobedience Movement

CESR Comprehensive Education Sector Review

CEU Central European University

CSO Civil Society Organization

CWC Central Working Committee of the ABFSU

DG Director General

DHE Department of Higher Education

DU Dagon University

EPIC Education Promotion Implementation Committee

JBRS Journal of The Burma Research Society

JICA Japan International Cooperation Agency

MoALI Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation

MoE Ministry of Education

MoU Memorandum of Understanding

NEL National Education Law

NAQAC National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee

NEPC National Education Policy Commission

NESP National Education Strategic Plan

NLD National League for Democracy

NNER National Network for Education Reform

NUG National Unity Government of Myanmar

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

ODA Overseas Development Aid

RC Revolutionary Council

RQ Research sub-question

RUSU Rangoon University Student Union

SLORC State Law and Order Restoration Council

SPDC State Peace and Development Council

UCC University Correspondence Course

UM University of Mandalay

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNIBO University of Bologna

UNICEF United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund

USDP Union Solidarity and Development Party

USU University Student Union

UY University of Yangon

YAU Yezin Agricultural University

YMBA Young Men's Buddhist Association

YUEco Yangon University of Economics

INTRODUCTION

- Research context: the 2011-2021 Myanmar "period of transition"

After gaining independence from British colonial occupation (1948), Myanmar¹ has been routinely ruled by military juntas². For decades, these authoritarian governments have been challenged by ethnic armed organizations and pro-democracy movements without success. Only in August 2003 did the Burmese military (or Tatmadaw) leadership initiate the long-awaited withdrawal from direct rule. They did so by inaugurating a seven-step roadmap to a "disciplined democracy" that started reassembling the National Convention that had been suspended since 1996 and included the drafting of the new 2008 Constitution (Bünte, 2011; Egreteau and Robinne, 2015). Far from being a bottomup revolution, this new course was the direct by-product of a precise political calculus endorsed by the Tatmadaw, as it opted to step back from the forefront of domestic politics in the attempt to fend off internal dissent and partly international pressure calling for "regime change". As a result, Myanmar's armed forces embraced a new role as "guardians" of the country's stability and "veto players" in the institutional arena⁴. After the November 2010 general election, state power was formally handed over to a civilian cabinet led by President Thein Sein (a former army general) in January 2011. Scholarly consensus is that this was the beginning of a transition to a hybrid regime⁵, combining authoritarian and democratic elements and centered on a power-sharing agreement between civilian and military leaders (Egreteau, 2016). As Richard Horsey (2012) put it, the new Myanmar hybrid regime should be understood as only the early stages of what one would expect of a classical transition from authoritarian rule that was never planned. In other words, as Marie Lall

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¹ In 1989, the military regime changed the official Romanized name of Burma to Myanmar. Similarly, the names of states, cities and towns were changed. Since then, Myanmar has been used officially by the United Nations and inside the country today the revised geographical names and spelling are commonly used. The term "Myanmar" is still contested, however, particularly by activist of the diaspora. In this dissertation, I have decided to use the name Myanmar. The people of the country are throughout referred to as Burmese, expect where reference are made to specific ethnic groups.

² As Renaud Egreteau (2016) argues, between 1948 and 2015, Burmese military (or Tatmadaw) exerted absolute control over Myanmar's state institutions for a total of thirty-six years (54 percent) and partial control for eighteen and half years (27.5 percent), and was under very loose civilian control only for twelve and half years (18.5 percent).

³ Georgie Tsebelis (2002) defines "veto players": a certain number of individual or collective actors that have to agree for a change in policies.

⁴ According to the 2008 Constitution, the military holds 25 per cent of seats in parliament and remains in control of the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs, which operate almost independently from the rest of the government.

⁵ The term "hybrid regime" encompasses the general conclusion that Myanmar's transition has institutionalized a hybrid form of rule in which there are new and important democratic spaces, but the substance of democracy is curtailed by constitutional regulations that reinforce military positions of power and limit popular democratic control over public affairs (Stokke and Aung, 2020).

points out: "the reforms were never meant to create a Western-style democracy, but rather develop a discipline-flourished democracy" (Lall, 2016, p. 3).

Since the beginning of his mandate (that eventually lasted until 2015), President Their Sein promised a legislative agenda based on macro-economic and macro-political reforms. These reforms were initiated according to different timeframes: political reforms in the middle of his first year in power, followed by socioeconomic ones and, lastly, administrative reforms. Whereas the political reforms ensured a liberalization of the political system, the socioeconomic and administrative reforms aimed primarily to improve governance, fight corruption and reform the economy (Bünte and Dosch, 2015). Indeed, these reforms encompassed various sectors, including education: a sector that, after decades of underinvestment, once again made its way onto the governmental policy agenda. This reformist agenda was coupled with some key, long-awaited actions such as the release of numerous political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi and several of the most vocal critics of the government (including 88 Generation student leaders, i.e. Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, and the leaders of the 2007 "Saffron Revolution"). Several of those released were able to join the political process and to re-form or establish new civil society organizations, since the limitations on free speech and public assembly imposed during the military juntas were partially amended. For example, a new law on the freedom of assembly (signed in December 2011) guaranteed the possibility of peaceful demonstrations under very restricted conditions: organizers had to request the authorities for permission five days in advance and risked a penalty of one year of imprisonment for protests staged without permission. It could be said that during Thein Sein presidency, civil society⁶ activists and NGOs started to find more room to mobilize "overground" to express their grievances. At the same time, the legislative framework still granted politicians and authorities the right to use the law to stifle public protests⁸.

⁶ In broad terms, civil society refers to "the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power." (Deibert et al., 2011, p.10) Against this backdrop, it is important to clarify what can be considered civil society for purposes of definition in the context of this study. According to David Steinberg (2013), civil society is best more narrowly defined excluding in the case of Myanmar businesses, political parties, and groups that are engaged in insurgent activities.

⁷ Civil society organizations were allowed to exist under Myanmar military rule as well, but under very limiting legislative constraints (see Liddell in Burma Center Netherlands and Transnational Institute, 1999). During multiple interviews, I heard activists stress the difference between former "underground" activities and the newly found freedom to carry them out "over-ground" after 2011.

⁸ During the presidential mandate of Thein Sein, multiple protests were violently suppressed. In Chapter V, I focus with specific episodes involving student movement organizations that developed between 2014 and 2015.

Against the backdrop of these reforms, President Thein Sein began to enjoy widespread support outside the country as well: *Foreign Policy* named him "Thinker of the Year" in 2012, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon praised his "vision, leadership and courage to put Myanmar on the path to change" (UN Secretary-General, 2012). Therefore, the international community was soon convinced that Myanmar was entering a "post-junta" era, leading to the decision by the European Union (EU) and United States to lift some of the decades-long economic sanctions imposed on the country in early 2012. Indeed, as shown by Figure 1 and 2, in one year's time both international aid and foreign investment grew at an exponential rate. Thanks in part to this renewed international support, Myanmar became one of the fastest-growing economies in South-east Asia, with an average economic growth of 7.5 percent during the 2012–2016 period (see Figure 3).

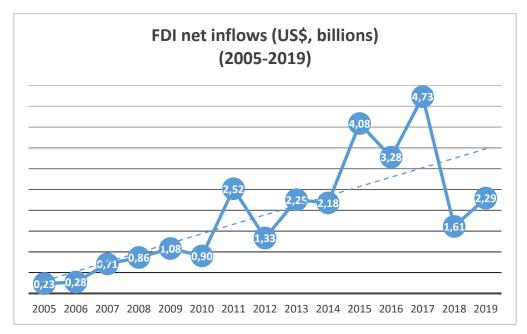


Figure 1. Overview of aid and assistance received by Myanmar from 2005 to 2019. (World Bank Database, 2021a)

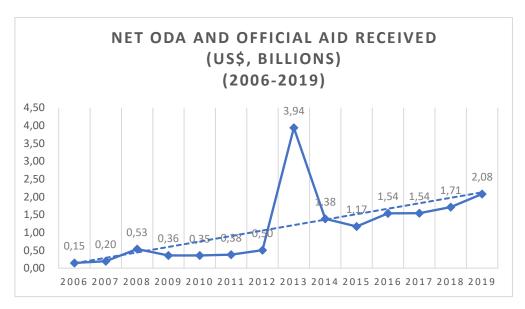


Figure 2. Foreign Investments in Myanmar from 2006 to 2019. (World Bank Database, 2021b)

This new political and economic phase the country was experiencing under the President Thein Sein government was viewed with a high degree of enthusiasm both nationally and internationally. The more optimistic observers called it a "miracle" while realists used the term "transition" (Kipgen, 2015). At the same time, this widespread enthusiasm should be positioned in the broader social and economic context of Myanmar, which was and still is amongst the least developed countries in the world, ranked 147 out of 187 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2020), with significant horizontal and vertical inequalities across ethnic, religious, gender and geographical domains (Burke, 2017; Government of Myanmar and World Bank, 2017). Indeed, Myanmar is one of the most under-developed countries in Asia in terms of infrastructures: only 37 percent of the population has access to electricity (Ibid.); 9.6 million people (almost 1 in 5 of the population) do not have clean water (WaterAid, 2021) and there are only 220 kilometres of road per 1,000 square kilometres of surface area. As Thant Myint-U (2019) points out, on the surface Myanmar resembled a new frontier market ready to bloom but, below the surface, inequalities remained as deep as ever.

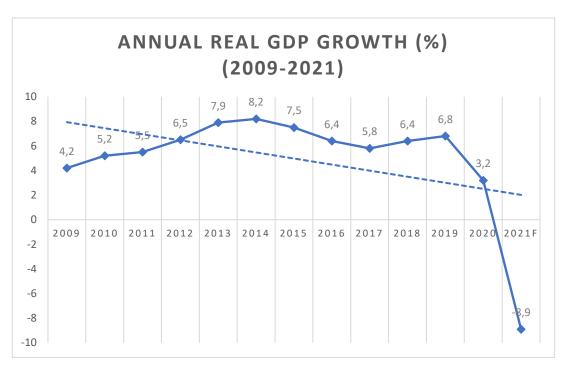


Figure 3. Annual Real GDP Growth in Myanmar from 2009 to 2021. (International Monetary Fund, 2021)

*the data for 2021 are a forecast

In September 2015, against this backdrop of euphoria in relation to the political "transition" and the everyday struggles that ordinary people were still facing, Aung San Suu Kyi's "National League for Democracy" (NLD) started its campaign against President Thein Sein's "Union Solidarity and Development Party" (USDP) for the 2015 national election. The 2015 elections have been considered a cornerstone in the recent political history of Myanmar, praised as the first free election since the '60s⁹. Throughout the two-month campaign period, the NLD's slogan, theme song, and stump speeches all reiterated the theme of *change* for Myanmar. "The country needs change. That is why we say, 'Time for change' – to reflect the will of the people": this was the key message reiterated by Aung San Suu Kyi in all her public rallies (Lwinandwa and Widmer, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2015). NLD electoral promises focused on several cornerstones: internal peace, national reconciliation, the creation of a federal system, amending the constitution, and improving people's conditions. The emblematic NLD election manifesto incipit read: "The NLD, which emerged from the 1988 democratic struggle, has striven for over 27 years to represent people from all parts of society. Our people know that despite facing many difficulties, persecution and dangers, the NLD has always stood firmly for democracy, human rights and the establishment of a federal union" (NLD,

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⁹ See McCarthy, 2016 and The Carter Center, 2015 regarding the limits of this election such as the exclusions from the voter lists (e.g. 400,000 Rohingya people were not included in the list in Rakhine State); the limitations on election campaigns (i.e. short timeframe, limited possibilities for rallies) and free speech rights (i.e. all materials broadcasted during the campaign needed to be approved by the Ministry of Information).

2015). Indeed, the NLD was consciously playing up its national and international iconic status gained thanks to its decade-long struggle for free and fair elections and promise to support key democratic values if elected. At the same time, NLD manifesto targeted ordinary people's grievances, promising more radical reforms in the welfare sector including education, health, energy, and transportation. In contrast, the incumbent USDP ran on a performance platform which seemed to indicate the status quo (Moe Thuzar, 2015). President Thein Sein's pragmatism based on the mantra of systematic, slow, step-by-step change was setting the tone of the modest USDP campaign. More fiery tones were used by the ultra-conservative and national religious group, Mabatha¹⁰, that campaigned for USDP using a vast network of monks (Sithu Aung Myint, 2015).

On Sunday, 8 November 2015, 22 million Burmese (almost 80 percent of eligible voters) went to the polls with 92 parties contending seats for the two houses of parliament as well as the 14 state and regional assemblies. In spite of its positive national and international legacy, President Thein Sein administration was totally annihilated by the NLD. In order to put the government under its control, the NLD needed 67 per cent of seats (or 329 seats), as 25 percent were allocated to unelected appointees of the military; however, the NLD managed far better than this minimum, winning 390 seats (Enlightened Myanmar Research, 2015). These results propelled Aung San Suu Kyi to the helm of the new government with the unprecedented title of "State Counsellor", as the constitution barred her from becoming president of Myanmar. The news of the NLD's landslide victory was celebrated in Myanmar and abroad as a sign of a further step towards the democratization of the South East Asian nation after the President Thein Sein era.

During its years in office, however, the cabinet led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters has visibly struggled to meet the enormous expectations that accompanied its inauguration in early 2016, pushing several voices to see first the risk of a "stalled transition" (Kipgen, 2015), disillusionment (Fumagalli, 2017) and then broken promises. In the words of Richard Roewer (2017), few voters and fewer researchers would have expected the NLD to be able to resolve decades-old issues in a short period of time. The problem, however, is that many issues have not only been slow to improve, they have actually become significantly worse during the NLD government. After ascending to power, Aung San Suu Kyi has come to represent both a disappointment and a puzzle to global observers (Lubina, 2021). To a certain extent, her fall from grace is linked to the authoritarian traits that her

¹⁰ Mabatha is short for "A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shauq Ye a-Pwe", meaning the "Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion", that was founded at a large conference of monks convened in Mandalay in January 2014. The most common perception of the organization among foreign observers (also held by some in Myanmar) is of a discriminatory group that spreads a virulently anti-Muslim message and reinforces notions of an exclusively Buddhist nation. For in a depth analysis see Walton and Hayward, 2014.

government displayed in contrast to promises of democratic progress (and same would argue in contrast to what President Thein Sein's government achieved), coupled with a lack of progress on the reform agenda and peace process (Taylor, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2018). Mainly, however, it stemmed from her reaction, or lack thereof, to the dramatic revamp of the Rohingya crisis in mid-2017. Before September 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi had been able to maintain a very ambiguous position on the Rohingya question. She was capable to balance two opposite drives: international demands for her to use her moral leadership to push forward a human rights agenda, and the national "anti-Muslim" climate in which speaking out in favor of the Rohingya meant jeopardizing her popular support¹¹. On 24 August 2017, the Annan Commission officially submitted the *Final Report of the* Advisory Commission on Rakhine State titled Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine. The report represented a compromise: it offered the Rohingya a path to citizenship (by revisiting the 1982 law¹²) while not explicitly using the word "Rohingya" in the document. The NLD accepted the report but the following day a clash broke out between the "Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army", an insurgent group based in the Rakhine state and military and police forces. The clash quickly escalated, leading approximately Rohingya 700,000 civilians to flee for Bangladesh. Aung San Suu Kyi took a very passive stand on these events, garnering harsh criticism in the West¹³. Ultimately, she was blamed for the tragedy, and the crisis was a game changer in her relations with the West (Lubina, 2021). One piece of evidence attesting to this shift is the significant fall in foreign investment: at the end of 2017, total FDI inside Myanmar had in fact diminished, signaling a vigorous reversal of the positive trends that emerged at the onset of the political transition (See Figure 4).

This is the international narrative, but there is also a Burmese narrative (or at least one espoused by the majority of the society) that Michał Lubina (2021) defines as the "Mother Suu" narrative, or "the mother of the nation" story. Domestically, even in the years of controversial governance when the lack of progress in reforms started to create various currents of dissent¹⁴, the vast majority of the population continued to view Aung San Suu Kyi as the compassionate leader who had sacrificed her

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¹¹ Regarding the historical causes that gave rise to Myanmar's "national races", animating the conflict over who is a Rohingya, see Cheesman, 2017. Regarding the legal denial of Rohingya identity, see Crouch, 2021. For a discussion of Aung Suu Kyi's silence and Buddhist–Muslim political relations in Myanmar, see Lee, 2014.

¹² The Burmese 1982 Citizenship Law institutionalized the Rohingyas statelessness, see Haque, 2017.

¹³ See Keane, 2017; BBC News, 2017 and McPherson, 2017.

¹⁴ Christina Fink and Adam Simpson (in Simpson, Farrelly and Holliday, 2017) argue how civil society organizations and activists looked forward to more inclusive policy-making with the NLD government. According to the authors, NLD leadership tended to make decisions on its own disregarding such expectation. Civil society actors were often muted in their critique of the new government but continued to voice concerns and promote policy reform by linking their agendas to the NLD government's stated commitment to the rule of law, peace and national reconciliation. This study puts forwards some example of this considering the higher education sectors.

family to her political cause, linking her political struggle with symbolic motherhood. There are two illustrative examples of this narrative. The first is the slogan "We stand with Aung San Suu Kyi," that was used in campaigns in the streets of Myanmar's major cities in 2019 when Aung San Suu Kyi decided to take a public stand at The Hague's International Court of Justice in December to defend her nation against charges of genocide (Lintner, 2019). The second one is her front-of-the-stage role in COVID-19 crisis management, a role that involved her opening an official Facebook page to communicate more efficiently, quickly and possibly directly with the population that was looking to her to manage the crisis (Krishnan, 2020). During the 2020 lockdown, Facebook also became a main electoral campaign tool, with both the NLD and the USPD using it to circulate their electoral messages. On 8 November 2020, the Election Day, the Burmese voters confirmed their confidence in the NLD by improving on its 2015 success (Fumagalli, 2021). In 2020, the NLD took 258 seats in the Lower house and 138 seats in the Upper House, thus increasing its parliamentary presence by 3 seats in each chamber. In contrast, the USDP lost 4 seats in each of the lower and upper houses (Taylor, 2020).

Michał Lubina (2021) considers the contradiction of Aung San Suu Kyi governance shortcomings alongside her evidently untouchable national popularity. In doing so, he borrows the postcolonial theory of hybridity from Homi K. Bhabha (1994) to define Aung San Suu Kyi as a "hybrid politician". Bhabha posits hybridity as a form of liminal or in-between space in which identities and cultures are translated and negotiated. At the point of contact between two cultures (in this case, Aung San Suu Kyi's Western upbringing and Burmese identity), a third one comes into existence with its own structures, objects and practices: "a third space". According to Lubina, hybridity offers a way of explaining the apparent inconsistencies of Aung San Suu Kyi's agenda, understanding how she can consider herself a democrat (and be considered so in Myanmar) and yet rule autocratically. As a hybrid politician, Aung San Suu Kyi is a product of colonial heritage or, in other words, "just a local, Burmese example of a wider spectre of Western colonialism's heritage that still haunts Asia" (Lubina, 2021, p. 137). This study builds on Lubina's argument by showing that universities and higher education policies have served as a space in which Aung San Suu Kyi's and her NLD government have displayed and reproduced such hybridity.

On 1 February 2021, in the early morning, just hours before the newly elected parliament was set to convene for the first time, the military moved against the elected government, arresting Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and the NLD vice chair Zaw Myint Maung. The military also arrested or detained other members of the national, state and regional governments, national, state and regional lawmakers, senior NLD officials and prominent individuals linked to the pro-democracy movement.

The military declared a one-year state of emergency and the state power was transferred to the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, General Min Aung Hlaing. In a statement broadcast on Tatmadaw-controlled media shortly after 8 a.m., the military cited article 417 of the constitution that permits a military takeover in the event of an emergency which threatens Myanmar's sovereignty or that could "disintegrate the Union" or "national solidarity". Two days after the coup, a massive civil disobedience movement, referred to as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), was initiated by medical staff followed by workers and trade unionists in a broad range of sectors: firefighters, private bank employees, garment workers, teachers (including university staff), and municipal and Union government staff. At the time of writing, the anti-coup movement is still ongoing led by young people loosely identified as members of "Gen Z", the 88 generation, the NLD affiliated politician and activists (Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Ye Lin Sue, 2021).

Scholars and Burma Watchers have tried to find a persuasive explanation for this coup d'état, which is still ongoing at the time of writing 15. Adam E. Howe (2021) argues that the military, having witnessed a precipitous decline in its popularity over the past two electoral cycles, seized power as a means of recalibrating a new version of "disciplined democracy" that best serves its long-term interests. Though lauded for its decision to allow the NLD to be part of the political life of the country in 2011, the military underestimated the growing popularity of civilian leaders, even among members of the armed forces. As such, the military was forced to reimagine a political system in which the NLD had just enough power to seem relevant to domestic and international observers but not enough to actually undermine the junta's political and economic agenda. The coup d'état was the outcome of a contest between two ideas of state, but at the same time, the elite struggle over personal power played a significant role. General Min Aung Hlaing personal ambitions for the presidency were well known, and it was rumored that after the election, he approached Aung San Suu Kyi asking for the presidency (Aljazeera, 2021). Aung San Suu Kyi is said to have refused his request, leading to General Min Aung Hlaing's humiliation, and escalating a private rivalry into a national crisis. With a 516,000-strong military at his disposal¹⁶, General Min Aung Hlaing undertook what he may have viewed as the only path available for preserving his skin and family resources (Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Ye Lin Sue, 2021). The coup d'état brought about the collapse of the post-2011 hybrid regime and closed the "transition period". Myanmar is re-entering a new political phase of authoritarian currents and the opening of the country through waves of reforms has been put down with force. In the conclusion, I draft few preliminary remarks on the impact of these events.

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¹⁵ See Donald M. Seekins 2021 for a comprehensive list of possible factors leading to the coup.

¹⁶ The figure of 516,000 men and women under arms is from Global Fire Power Index 2021 in Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2021. The Tatmadaw is considered the largest South-East Asian army.

- Why higher education?

The 2011-2021 decade presented here has been described as a "policy window for change" in the recent history of Myanmar (Lall, 2021). To illuminate some of the many issues surrounding Myanmar's political transformation process, I follow in the footsteps of Marie Lall to argue that education was at the heart of Myanmar's transformation 17. A scholarly analysis of the way educational policies have been re-shaped and applied can shed light on the features of the Myanmar political process, especially in terms of political participation and social change. My specific focus is on higher education and universities in particular. Barbara Sporn (2007) argues that higher education institutions cannot be defined as standard bureaucracies. Viewed through the lens of their ambiguous and often contested goals, academic organizations seem fluid and fragmented. "Ambiguous" is a term often used in the scholarly literature to define the role of universities. Indeed, universities serve "both as gatekeepers for established orders of inequality and as transformative institutions that enable social justice through inter-generational changes in circumstances" (Hall, 2012, p. 3). Hall's statement encapsulates the two main opposing concepts that dominate the literature about higher education's influence on societal structure and change: élite reproduction theorists argue that educational systems perpetuate, legitimize and reinforce the position of dominant elites in a society, thereby promoting social injustice, while liberal theorists see education as a force for progressive social change and for creating a more open society by enabling social mobility and change, based on access, inclusion and meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1996; Moore, 2004; Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). Using Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, higher education can be considered a "field," a space in which various actors interact: "constant, permanent relationship of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the relevant power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies" (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 40-41). My study brings to light various actors' struggles to transform or preserve universities in Myanmar's transitional period. My ultimate goal is to underline how higher education policy and university practices were shaped, mediated, localized and "hybridized" through multiple processes and in interactions involving a plethora of local and international actors and to identify the outcomes of these processes.

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¹⁷ Charting how Myanmar came to start the political transition from military dictatorship to a more participatory system (before the President Thein Sein era), Marie Lall points out that education was a catalyst for the movement of new civil society organizations that emerged and pushed for change (Lall, 2016).

It makes sense to apply an analytical lens on higher education in the specific context of Myanmar because of four inter-related factors: 1) the role of universities in the history of the country; 2) the state of disarray that universities were facing during the decades of military rule; 3) the way the education reform process unfolded against the backdrop of national expectations; 4) the expectations of and newly active role played by international actors in the Myanmar higher education sector.

Myanmar has a higher education system shaped by its long and complex relationship with colonialism and student politics. John F. Cady, author of the first *History of Modern Burma*, defines the very foundation of the country's higher education system, the drafting of the 1920 University Act, as "one of the most unfortunate misunderstanding that developed between the British rulers and the hypersensitive Burmese nationalist" (Cady, 1958, p.213). On 5 December 1920, four days after the official establishment of the first national University, the first students' strike was organized at Rangoon University (today known as the University of Yangon). Since then, and during more than fifty years of authoritarian military regimes, university students have represented the country's "vanguard in the vacuum": i.e. one of the few forces opposing the authoritarian regime that ruled the country for decades (Koon-Hong, 2014; Win Min, 2012). In Myanmar, universities have been one of the main centers of contentious politics and opposition to successive authoritarian regimes, leading to multiple attempts by the regimes to completely dismantle university spaces. In my second chapter, I periodize the modern history of the country to identify the relationship between higher education and the state and discourses about the formation of the Burmese state (as understood in various historical periods). This is a story of discontinuities and continuities that link colonial times to present Myanmar in ways that the scholarly literature has not yet fully explored.

In a speech at a Myanmar-UK higher education policy dialogue event convened by the British Council in 2013, Aung San Suu Kyi (leader of the opposition at that time) noted that "the standard of our university education has fallen so low that graduates have nothing except a photograph of their graduation ceremony to show for the years they spent at university" (Aung San Suu Kyi, cited in McKenzie, 2013, p.33). This condition is widely acknowledged in Myanmar. The country's higher education system is poor by global standards (Thein Lwin, 2007; CESR, 2013, 2014). In the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index for 2015-16, Myanmar's higher education and training was ranked 138 out of 140 countries (World Economic Forum, 2015). These shortcomings span multiple areas: physical and digital infrastructures are inadequate; the system's human resource capacity is poor by any standard, and teachers, involving few opportunities and little incentive for professional development; the teaching activities and curricula of most university courses are outdated and not well aligned to the needs of the country (Thein Lwin, 2007; CESR, 2013; Thaung

Win, 2015); and, finally, research activities are limited (CHINLONE, 2018). Moreover, the higher education system reflects the considerable inequalities running across Myanmar society. Youth from poor households are highly under-represented (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016) and the cost of tuition fees, study guides, boarding costs and other auxiliary expenses constitute a significant barrier to higher education (CESR, 2013; Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016). Although only limited data are available, multiple scholars point out that several ethnic groups are underrepresented in the country's universities ¹⁸. This broad list of issues can also be supplemented with specific problems regarding the low overall quality of higher education. One of these problems is the official medium of instruction: English, in fact, had been used since colonial times, but was then replaced by the Myanmar language under the socialist military junta of Ne Win. In 1982, Myanmar was again replaced by English (CESR, 2013). Both staff and students, however, have a generally low level of English language proficiency as a result of low-quality English language instruction in secondary schools ¹⁹.

Today ²⁰, Myanmar has 174 higher education institutions (See Table 1). As defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), higher education institutions are "all universities, colleges of technology and other institutions of post-secondary education," which also includes "all research institutions, experimental stations and clinics operating under the direct control of or administered by or associated with higher education institutions" (OECD, 2015, p.260). Universities make up a large subset of a wide range of higher education institutions where students study for a degree. In Myanmar, all higher education institutions are directly governed by different ministries. Indeed, since the 1960s, Myanmar's higher education sector has been characterized by a high degree of governmental control and intervention in the day-to-day management of higher education institutions. At the beginning of the transition period, higher education institutions were administrated by 13 different ministries, with the Ministry of Education (MoE) directly managing less than half of them. Beginning in 2012, a rationalization process was carried out and the MoE was tasked with administering the vast majority of the country's higher education institutions (134 out of the total of 174). As I discuss in the conclusion, this new configuration was changed back by the government that has been leading the country after the February 2021 military takeover. The Department of Higher Education (DHE) under the MoE is the

¹⁸ The available data shows lower enrollment in the ethnic states, pointing to lower enrollment numbers for ethnic minority students. Marie Lall (2021) cites MoE officials explaining such trends. See Par, 2021 for a discussion on the challenges in equal access to higher educational opportunity in Chin State. I discuss ethnic minority access to higher education in Chapter III.

¹⁹ On the Myanmar languages-in-education policy see Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020.

²⁰ At the time of writing, the 2021 military junta has not yet changed the overall number of Myanmar higher education institutions. The organizational structure has been changed, however, as will be analyzed in the conclusion.

governmental body in charge of organizational regulations (like the selection and dismissal of Rectors), academic affairs (final decisions regarding the introduction of new programs, validation of curricula and their content, setting student intakes, etc.), staffing procedures (allocation of teaching and administrative staff) and the distribution of financial resources among the various institutions (including procurement procedures and the management of infrastructure). In addition, the DHE presides over a supplementary group of 40 academic institutions that is divided up among 7 different ministries (See Table 1). Universities and colleges play different roles in the Burmese educational ecosystem, with the latter more focused on vocational training. Among the country's universities, the University of Yangon (UY) remains a flagship institution even though it has been deliberately placed in competition with the University of Mandalay (UM), see Chapter III.

Ministry of reference	Sub-category	Number
	Arts and Sciences Universities	42
	Universities of Economics	3
	Universities of Distance Education	2
	Universities of Foreign Languages	2
Ministry of Education (MoE)	Universities and Colleges for Teacher Education	25
	Technological Universities	33
	Universities of Computer Studies	27
	Total	134
Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation (MoALI)		7
Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry		1
Ministry of Defense		6

Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture	5
Ministry of Border Affairs	3
Ministry of Transports	2
Ministry of Health and Sports	16
Total	174

Table 1. Higher education Institutions in Myanmar and their Ministry of reference till 2021²¹. (Data provided to the author by the DHE in November 2018)

A particularity of the Burmese educational system is the prominent number of students enrolled in Distance Education universities. According to data provided to the author by the Department of Higher Education in November 2018, in fact, more than two-thirds of the 835,433 students enrolled in the higher education institutions under the Ministry of Education attended distance learning programs. The first distance education institution, called University Correspondence Course (UCC), was established under Ne Win government (see Chapter II). UCC was upgraded to become the University of Distance Education (Yangon) in 1992, and subsequently renamed Yangon University of Distance Education in 1998, at the same time when the Mandalay University of Distance Education was also established. Today, these institutions remain the two distance education universities that operate throughout the country thanks to numerous regional branches. According to governmental discourses, distance education was created with the aim of making higher education accessible to all students at a minimal cost and without having to leave their homes and jobs, especially for students residing in border areas. Nonetheless, and in spite of their virtuous philosophy of "leaving no one behind," there is often a lack of quality in distance education courses due to the very limited amount of targeted, face-to-face training between students and teachers (especially for students choosing Arts Specialization, where classes are only held right before the annual examinations, in contrast to Science students who have to attend classes regularly every weekend). In fact, students are left to conduct the bulk of their preparation by using basic tools such as the textbooks, synopses, CDs, and MP3s developed every year.

²¹ See the Conclusion for insight into the situation at the time of writing, after the 2021 military takeover.

A last important aspect of the domestic higher education landscape is the absence of government legislation regulating private and international higher education provision. This does not mean that there are no "private universities". In fact, due to an increasing demand for international and private tertiary education, several "university colleges" have established a small but growing market in Transnational Education (TNE) foundations and qualifications pathways. These appear to be dominated by UK institutional arrangements, mainly offering Higher National Diplomas and leading to top-up degrees provided in the UK by UK institutions or through UK off-shore campuses in the Asia region, in keeping with the modes and trends observed in other countries (Heslop, 2019). In some ethnic states, there are also non-profit private higher education institutions that similarly to private commercial universities are not registered under the MoE. The majority, if not all, of these institutions, are registered as civil society organizations or private not-for-profit companies limited (Siangpum, 2021). In Chapter III, I argue that one of reform efforts is concentrated on developing a legislative framework for private education, even though concerns have been raised by different stakeholders. Lall notes that TNE in Myanmar, available mainly in Yangon, is increasing the divide between urban elites and the rural poor (Lall, 2008).

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that both President Thein Sein's and the NLD's governments were under enormous local and international pressure to reform the higher education system. In 2012, the Ministry of Education launched the "Comprehensive Education Sector Review" (CESR), with the aim of analyzing the current state of education, formulating new policies, and drafting a comprehensive education plan by 2014. As I argue in Chapter III, CESR quickly became dominated by the various aid agencies that were sending in experts and policy suggestions for influencing the reform process.²² In the same year the CESR was announced an umbrella organization called "National Network for Education Reform" (NNER) was created. Initially, NNER included, among the other actors the student organizations of the country. NNER was intended as a political participation process aimed at making recommendations to the Parliament to potentially inform the CESR. Initially, therefore, NNER was firm in its intent to cooperate with governmental initiatives. In

²² International organizations and aid agencies financially contributed to the reform process. Same references are given by Ian Holliday and Zaw Htet: "In 2012, a Joint Education Sector Working Group was formed to stimulate policy dialogue between the government and development partners. A considerable amount of funding is disbursed through the Multi Donor Education Fund (MDEF), supported by Australia, Denmark, the European Commission, Norway, UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Britain. MDEF Phase I provided \$86 million in 2012–15. Phase II, focused on primary education, contributed \$65 million in 2012–16 and sought to build better coordination across ministries to support early childhood development. In 2013, World Vision (active in Myanmar since 1991), Save the Children (active since 1995) and the Burnet Institute (active since 2003) came together to establish the Myanmar Education Consortium with aid from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Britain's DfID and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). It has provided financial support to some 30 civil society organizations." (Holliday and Zaw Htet, 2017, p. 352)

the span of few months, however, NNER withdrew from this collaboration on the grounds that the government-led reform process was not valuing or incorporating public input (Metro, 2016). As I argue in Chapter IV, student organization's level of disenchantment and dissatisfaction grew with each step of the reform process leading to a national wide mobilization lasted from September 2014 till March 2015. Finding that the CESR process was taking too long to feed into the legislative process, and wanting to secure a set of education laws well in time for the 2015 elections (Lall, 2021), the President's Office constituted a parallel process called "Education Promotion Implementation Committee" EPIC to draft policies for the implementation of educational reform²³. As a result of the work EPIC undertook, the Parliament approved a new "National Education Law" (NEL) in 2014, amended in 2015. The NEL and subsequent Amendment aimed to provide a national framework for the implementation of a range of complementary reforms across the national education system, such as: recognition of the right of all citizens to free, mandatory education at the primary level; establishment of a standards-based education quality assurance system (thanks to the establishment of ad hoc commissions for quality assurance); extension of the basic education system to age 13; support for instruction in nationalities' languages and cultures; and greater decentralization of the education system. In late 2015, a brand new five-year "National Education Strategic Plan -2016/2021" (NESP)²⁴ was launched. With regard to the higher education system, NESP sets three specific strategies: 1) strengthening higher education governance and management capacity; 2) encouraging local teaching staff to undertake quality research and offering effective teaching, to provide students with an effective learning experience; 3) improving access to a high-quality education with no discrimination and regardless of students' social and economic backgrounds. The February 2021 coup d'état put the planned "National Education Strategic Plan – 2021/2026" (the called NESP 2), drafted after the review of the previous plan, on hold. In Chapter III, I discuss these legislative steps in detail to underline the underlying vision for the country's higher education and the implementation of these steps under both the NLD and USPD governments.

This reform plan was coupled with a significant increase in spending on the education sector as a whole (see Figure 4). In 2011-2016, spending on the education sector grew to K283 billion, in 2016-2020, spending on the education sector was raised to K62.67 trillion (Thet Zin Soe, 2021). This increase was supported by the overseas development aid (ODA) commitments for education that grew after the lifting of Western sanctions beginning in 2012. According the data collected by Jolliffe Kim

²³ In Chapter III, I argue that EPIC was also a corrective response to the over-involvement of international actors in the CESR process.

²⁴ I use the acronym NESP to indicate the 2016-2021 plan and not the subsequent plan that was in its drafting stage when the military takeover took place.

and Emily Speers Mears (2016), the total ODA commitments from March 2011 to May 2016 reached USD 6.96 billion. Of this total, USD 437.75 million was committed to education, most of it probably for the Ministry of Education services. While there may still be some discrepancies in these calculations, the World Bank recently offered a more general estimate of around USD 100 million per year in ODA to education, up from 40 million in 2009-10 (World Bank, 2015). This would make ODA about 10 percent of the government's expenditure on education in 2015. Among donors, the largest commitments have come from Australia, Japan, the World Bank, the European Union, the United States, and the UK. In terms of percentage of the GDP, in 2011/2012 education investment was estimated at 0.71 percent of GDP, in 2017/2018 1.85 percent, in 2019/2020 further increased to 2.91 percent (UNICEF, 2018, 2020). These data are positive to a certain extend: the average percentage of GDP invested in education in Asia is almost 5 percent; according to the author's private conversation with MoE officers, higher education was the educational sector that benefited least from this investment²⁵.

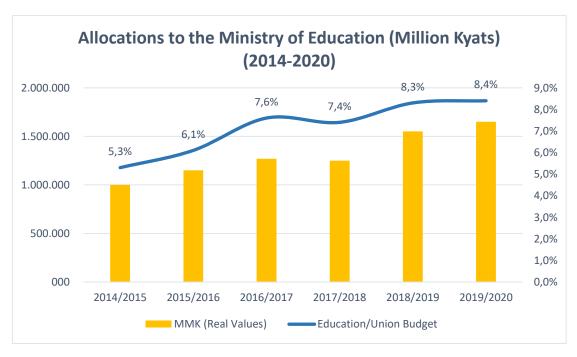


Figure 4. Trends in allocations to the MoE from 2014 to 2020. (UNICEF, 2020)

Together with aid and development agencies, Western higher education institutions intersected and openly worked together within Myanmar higher education institutions to provide training assistance to teaching staff, traditional development projects, human rights education and democratic political

²⁵ The details of international financial aid to the higher education sector in Myanmar are not available even in the main aid transparency portal, Mohinga, set up by international development partners and the Myanmar government to track international aid to Myanmar (https://mohinga.info/en/).

reform. In the words of two professors of the University of Mandalay, Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein:

"a number of universities throughout the world tried to connect with Myanmar's Universities, especially the UY and the UM.. A range of academic collaborations were introduced with academic staff and students at the University of Mandalay after reform of both the economic and political systems. Not only international institutions from the ASEAN Region, but also those from Europe, America, Australia etc., wished to sign Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Mandalay for different academic purposes" (Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein, 2021, p. 98)

University of Mandalay signed its first Memorandum of Understanding in 2013 and by 2020, it had 45 agreements formally signed and a long list of agreements pending the approval of the Ministry of Education to be signed (for the full list of agreements signed, see Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein, 2021; for a comprehensive review of the rationales behind these MoUs, which were for the most part mere declarations of intent with little actual implementation, see Heslop, 2019). Together with aid and development agencies and Western higher education institutions, discourses entered the Myanmar higher education space (see Chapter III and V). Globalization, internationalization, neoliberalism, and the commodification of higher education have played a significant role in redefining the role and identity of higher education institutions across the world, and universities in Myanmar are no exception.

These aspects of Myanmar higher education have significantly influenced elements of the study's research design and methodological approach, to which I now turn.

- Research question and expectations

The Myanmar "period of transition" has been often described as a puzzle. On a theoretical level, despite the wealth of literature on the subject, political scientists often find themselves unable to sufficiently explain, let alone predict, the rise, fall, and evolution of political regimes (Howard and Walters, 2014). Myanmar's unusually long-lasting military authoritarianism has long been characterized as an anomaly in the so-called era of democracy (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2009), and the unforeseen transition has thus provoked the interest of the global policy, advocacy and scholarly communities. A number of scholars have started to engage with the Myanmar context in an effort to

grasp the essence of the transition it underwent during the USPD and NLD governments. Looking at the new socio-political arena, one of the key questions raised has been: what is actually changing and what still maintains the idiocrasies and shadows of authoritarianism? My work focuses on a specific policy sector, higher education, with a view to contributing to this scholarly debate regarding what was actually happening inside this complex country "transition", especially in terms of collective participation in the process of political and social change. I argue that focusing on a specific policy sector can provide a much more nuanced picture of the country political arena and the actions of the main actors while avoiding the various misinterpretations that might stem from using the macro "democratization" category as the main lens of analysis. In fact, most of the scholarly debate on Myanmar has been polarized by two rival scholarly camps. One camp, "the optimists", saw the post-2011 transformations as a rare opportunity for democratic reforms (and democracy as the possible final outcome of the reform process), while scholars in the second camp saw Myanmar's reform era in a much more negative light, emphasizing the lack of real change (Bünte, Köllner, and Roewer, 2019). I argue that a dichotomic approach such as this fails to sufficiently explain processes of political transition and the nature of transformation and resistance in Myanmar. Focusing on university spaces, my work intends to shed light on the contradictions and complexity of the "period of transition" in which tangible pushes for progressive social change coexisted with authoritarian currents and the reinforcement of the position of dominant elites in society. Arguably, understanding the features of the Myanmar "period of transition" from different perspectives is even more pivotal at the time of writing, given that this new era of the country's political life seems to have come to an end in February 2021.

As described in the previous section, President Thein Sein's government inherited a domestic higher education system in complete disarray, unable to perform quality teaching and research activities and isolated from international academia. Historically, every Myanmar regime has changed the structure of the country' higher education system, each time drawing on different visions and ideas about the importance of higher education for the life of the country and creating different conflicts, including the well-known struggles of the student movements. Therefore, while specifically focusing on the 2011-2021 period, my work begins by examining the politics of higher education throughout the long history of modern Myanmar. I argue that an historical perspective is pivotal for shedding light on the discontinuities and continuities between Myanmar's past and the period under consideration; in other words, it is not possible to understand the actions of the USPD and NLD governments in relation to higher education (and probably all the other policy sectors as well) without placing them in historical context.

Reviewing the existing scholarly literature on the politics of higher education, my study employs a triangle of analysis in which higher education reform is framed as the interplay of action on the part of "state authority", "student politics" and "international actors". Therefore, my main research question is: how did state authority, student politics and international actors cooperate and compete to define higher education reform in Myanmar's "period of transition" and with what impacts? This research question can be answered after focusing on the three underlying research sub-questions (RQs):

- (RQ1) What was the role assigned to higher education in the state's vision? Dividing the "transitional" decade into the 5 years of Thein Sein government and 5 years of NLD government, is it possible to identify discontinuities and continuities in their actions around higher education?
- (RQ2) How did student politics frame their discourses and grievances around higher education? Were they able to impact the higher education discourses and reforms as put forward by the state authority?
- (RQ3) Why did international actors engage with the Myanmar higher education reform? What idea(s) of and vision(s) for higher education were introduced by international actors?

The RQs are sequenced in a way that progressively builds towards answering the main research question. Indeed, each of them provides insight into "the logic of the decision" and the perceptions and actions of one of the actors/players in the field I have defined. This leads to uncovering the overall "logic of the situation", bringing to light the conflictual politics of higher education in Myanmar's "period of transition".

- Methodology and methods

My study is based on a qualitative methodology. As Creswell notes, qualitative research is used when "we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p.40). Generally speaking, qualitative research often attempts to interpret phenomena both culturally (taking into account the specificity of each context) and historically. Moreover, it values agency, meaning the participants' perspectives on their world or situation (Blee, 2013). By definition, this methodology encompasses a broad range of approaches and tools seeking to provide an in-depth picture of a phenomena. Considering my research question, I chose a combination of methods spanning ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviewing and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003).

Participant observation and in-depth interviewing was the key data collection method aimed at gathering rich narratives from those involved in the politics of higher education in Myanmar. These data were collected thanks to 9 trips and 2 extensive fieldwork periods carried out in Myanmar from 2016 to 2020. Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct the fieldwork planned for 2020.

In these circumstances, ²⁶ I was able to keep my investigation active by shifting to a format of more rapid, frequent interviews carried out thanks to instant messaging via WhatsApp and various social media. Despite the limits involved in conducting "online fieldwork", I was able to collect information and appraise how the higher education space and actors were facing the COVID-19 health emergency and in the months after the February 2021 coup. As I argue in the next section, the February 2021 coup d'état had a deeper impact on my methodological design, especially in the way I present my data. During my fieldwork periods, I planned the in-depth interviews in a semi-structured or unstructured format with an open-ended list of questions so that I could improvise specific questions and elicit extended answers from interviewees. The semi-structured format was used for research participants from the governmental sector, such as ministerial officials, or those from university governance, such as Rectors, Pro-Rectors, and Head of Departments, while the unstructured format was mainly employed for professors and student leaders I knew I would be able to interview multiple times. This choice was made based on the premise that such interview formats can motivate interviewees to give more authentic answers while encouraging them to freely express their opinions or thoughts in free-flowing conversation, which can lead to some meaningful findings. I used closedended surveys only when needed, such as for example when I interviewed the student voters on the day of the University of Yangon Student Union elections.

My second tool, critical discourse analysis, was applied to multiple kinds of texts (public speeches, key documents, and media statements) produced by the actors at the center of my analysis. I analyzed metaphors, grammar and vocabulary to discern how these actors present the higher education field, what they are doing for/in it, and how they address each other. This method allows for drawing conclusions not about "what is happening," but rather about what people "say is happening" or, better, their meaning-making process (Metro, 2017). Thanks to this focus on the performativity of language, it was possible to analyze dissonances and similarities in rhetoric or discourse(s) on higher education and to consider power dynamics between the actors. Moreover, as Norman Fairclough points out: "discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective,

²⁶ See Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020 and Lupton, 2020 for methodological reflections on possibilities for carrying out social research during the pandemic.

imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions. [...] Discourses constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another –keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another" (Fairclough 2003, p.124). In deploying this method of analysis, my ultimate goal was to underline the different projections regarding higher education and its link with political and social change (if any) that animated the different actors and "logic of the situation" in transitional Myanmar.

As pointed out by Paul Goode (2010), although all qualitative research faces fundamental hurdles in overcoming issues of access and ensuring the credibility of one's observations, these issues are particularly acute and challenging when conducting research in hybrid regimes. In fact, the process of selecting research sites and choosing fieldwork techniques is relatively constrained when regimes are closed, as compared with more open regimes. In choosing my research sites, I considered and carefully balanced two rationales. The first was access and freedom of research, a consideration that lead me to focus on the universities to which I was connected by virtue of educational projects I was carrying out in the country, as I explain in the next section and Chapter V. The second rationale was relevance: a strategic sampling of the institutions that could provide me with insights into the research questions that I formulated by virtue of their being (in different ways) deeply involved in the reform process. These considerations led me to choose the following five universities as research sites: University of Yangon (UY)²⁷, University of Mandalay (UM)²⁸, Dagon University (DU)²⁹, Yezin Agricultural University (YAU)³⁰, and Yangon University of Economics (YUEco)³¹. An important

²⁷ As emerges in Chapter II, UY is the oldest and most prestigious university in the country. At the same time, for the issues discussed in this work, it is important to point out that it is not currently among the largest universities in the country. Even if we do not consider the students enrolled in distance education (who make up the bulk of Myanmar's student population), the largest university in Lower Myanmar is Dagon University with 28,041 enrollees (plus additional 28,290 affiliated distance education students) for the 2018/2019 academic year. In the same year, UY enrolled 15,593 students. UY offers degrees in all the three cycles of education and a variety of Arts and Science subjects. The full institutional profile and data can be found at: https://www.uy.edu.mm/yangon-university

²⁸ As emerges in Chapter II, UM is the second oldest university in Myanmar, founded under British colonial rule. Like UY, UM is an arts and science university offering degrees in all the three cycles of education. In the 2018/2919 academic year, UM enrolled 6857 students in 22 BA, 21 MA, and 12 PhD programs. Tin Naing Win, Thu Zar Thant and Hlaing Hlaing Swe 2021 offer an overview of the history of the university and its institutional profile.

²⁹ UD was created in November 1993 to relocate 3,000 UY undergraduates after the 1988 uprising. A further 12,000 students followed by 1996. From that time till today, this reallocation of students made Dagon University the biggest university in Yangon. A striking fact, considering that still nowadays the shanty-like buildings of Dagon University are located in a middle-of-nowhere lot with limited transportation to the city. UD offers only BA and MA courses. The full institutional profile and data are available at: https://www.dagonuniversity.edu.mm/welcome-and-history/

³⁰ YAU is the only university in Myanmar with a focus on agricultural science. The university was established in 1924 as Burma Agricultural College and Research Institute in Mandalay and moved to Nay Pyi Taw in 1998. Currently, it is one of the most highly ranked universities in the country. In the 2019-2020 Academic Year, YAU had enrolled 2004 undergraduate, 125 master, 46 doctoral students. Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein 2021 provide an overview of the history of the university and its institutional profile.

³¹ YUEco was established in 1964 in Yangon to offer courses in the fields of economics, accounting, commerce, statistics, and management. It offers degrees in all the three cycles of education.

additional research site was the Naypyidaw office of the DHE at the MoE, where I had access to personnel to discuss the reform plans via formal and informal interviews from the beginning of my research onwards. The DHE was informed about my research and its progress, and no restrictions were imposed on the topics I might address or the participants at each institution I could interview. Starting from 2017, I had established a relationship of trust with the "National Education Policy Commission" (NEPC) and Rectors' Committee that supported my analysis of the state authority approach to the reform process.

For the purposes of this study, in-depth interviews were carried out with twenty Rectors, Prorectors and Department heads of the five universities mentioned above and three key governmental players in the reform process associated with the DHE, NEPC and Rectors' Committee. Considering the complex political situation of the country at the time of writing and due to the risk of rendering research participants identifiable, I have used only generic titles to refer to the governmental players and professors (Table 2). More information is provided in the analytical chapter in case it is needed to make sense of the interviews presented here.

Institution	Participant code	Position	Gender
DHE	P1	High Rank Official	Male
NEPC	P2	High Rank Official	Male
Rectors' Committee	Р3	High Rank Official	Male
University of Yangon	P4	Pro-Rector	Female
University of Yangon	P5	Head of Department	Female
University of Yangon	P6	Head of Department	Female
University of Yangon	P7	Senior Professor involved in the management of International Relation	Male
Mandalay University	P8	Rector	Female

Mandalay University	Р9	Pro-Rector	Female
Mandalay University	P10	Head of Department	Female
Mandalay University	P11	Professor involved in the management of International Relation	Female
Dagon University	P12	Pro-Rector	Female
Dagon University	P13	Pro-Rector	Female
Dagon University	P14	Pro-Rector	Female
Dagon University	P15	Professor	Female
Yezin Agricultural University	P16	Rector	Female
Yezin Agricultural University	P17	Pro-Rector	Female
Yezin Agricultural University	P18	Pro-Rector	Female
Yezin Agricultural University	P19	Professor involved in the management of International Relation	Female
Yezin Agricultural University	P20	Senior Professor	Male
Yangon University of Economics	P21	Pro-Rector	Female
Yangon University of Economics	P22	Pro-Rector	Female
Yangon University of Economics	P23	Professor	Female

Table 2: Participants of the study: governmental officials and professors. (By: L. Proserpio)

My analysis of "student politics" is based on sets of data I gathered thanks to in-depth interviews with 10 student leaders and activists: three leaders of the "Action Committee for Democratic Education" (ACDE) who organized the nation-wide mobilization against the NEL during the "period of transition" (ACDE had 12 leaders in total), three student leaders involved in student activism activities during the Saffron Revolution period who provided me a full picture of points of continuity and discontinuity with the past, two students linked to "Central Working Committee" (CWC) of the "All Burma Federation of Students Unions" (ABFSU) and two students linked to the Yangon University Union. Generic information on the participants is provided in Table 3, and more information is provided in Chapter IV when needed to clarify the interviews and positionality of student leaders. To better understand the trajectory and impact of student politics in the decade under consideration, I organized three focus groups with the CWC of the ABFSU, the "Yangon University Student Union," and the "Student Union of Myeik University". During the elections of the University of Yangon Student Union held on 6 August 2019, I participated in the debates organized by the various candidates and, on election day, I distributed surveys that were answered by 56 students.

Participant	Position	Gender
code		
S1	ACDE leader involved in ABFSU	Female
	Bamar ethnic background, daughter of	
	an 88 Generation activist, lives in	
	Yangon. Student activist from the time	
	of the Saffron Revolution until the NEL	
	protests. She was arrested the first time	
	for taking part in the Saffron Revolution	
	and the second time for the NEL	
	protest.	
S2	ACDE leader involved in USU	Male
	From Central Myanmar, Muslim	
	background. Student at a University in a	
	rural area. He was briefly part of	
	ABFSU before joining USU.	
S3	ACDE leader involved in USU.	Male

	Bamar ethnic background, linked to the	
	Dagon University Student Union.	
S4	Student activist active during the	Female
	Saffron Revolution period linked to	
	ABFSU.	
	Bamar ethnic background, she was	
	imprisoned between 2008 and 2012 for	
	staging protests against military rule	
	and a second time after the NEL protest.	
	and a second time after the NEE protest.	
S5	Student activist active during the	Male
	Saffron Revolution period involved in	
	ABFSU.	
	He supported the re-organization of	
	student union activities in 2011 but soon	
	left student activism to join a workers'	
	union.	
S6	Student activist active during the	Male
	Saffron Revolution period involved in	
	ABFSU.	
	He supported the re-organization of	
	student union activities in 2011 but soon	
	left student activism to be join a	
	workers' union.	
07	Member of the CWC of the ABFSU.	Male
S7	whember of the CWC of the ABFSU.	wiaie
	From South Myanmar, Christian,	
	enrolled in distance education.	
S8	Member of the CWC of the ABFSU	Male
	Karen ethnic background, enrolled in	
	distance education.	
	<u>l</u>	

S9	Yangon Student Union member	Male
S10	Yangon Student Union member	Male

Table 3: Study participants: student leaders and activists. (By: L. Proserpio)

Lastly, documentary primary sources to flesh out the historical background of my dissertation were collected thanks to archival research in London and Amsterdam. In London, I found primary sources at the British Library and National Archives concerning the period from 1886 (when Myanmar was part of British India) to 1960 (the so-called first democratic period and caretaker regime). The International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam holds a collection of documents on student movements and Burmese civil society focusing especially on the periods of protest against the military juntas (the wider collection of documents regards the events of 1988).

- My positionality and ethics issues

When I designed my Ph.D. project in 2018, I stated that I did not foresee any particular issue in terms of access to Myanmar. Back then, I was already part of ongoing EU-funded projects involving several Myanmar Universities as well as the MoE (see Chapter V). I had thus already built the necessary trust with the local institution to collect the data I needed without undergoing a lengthy process of scrutiny. In Myanmar, my affiliation with local universities not only granted me invaluable access, it also gave me legitimacy and an alternative "cover" if I ever were to need one. The months I spent in the country prior to my Ph.D., working as project manager alongside various professors and higher education officials and doing the spadework for my research, proved to be crucial for developing solid expertise in conducting fieldwork in a hybrid regime ³². At the same time, I was always aware that my positionality as a non-Burmese researcher looking at *and* actively working on "sensitive issues" such as the politics of higher education and student activism required deep reflection. Especially, it required a considerable degree of awareness and reflexivity about how to carefully build a fieldwork

³² As Yojana Sharma (2018) argues doctoral students and researchers in the social and political sciences are often illprepared by their universities in deal with the perils of fieldwork in authoritarian states. Definitely, most of my preparation was linked to my work on the ground with my supervisor carried out before the beginning of my PhD that provided the necessary confidence and preparation in understanding the cultural and social complexity of my research context. I agree with the Sharma and the other authors that argue that methodological trainings at institutional level should be enhanced considering also the rise of the perils that a researcher can face globally. For example, the methodological discussions that have raised in the world of the Middle East studies in the last years have proven a useful guide and a provider of practical toolboxes for my work (see in particular the edited volume Clark and Cavatorta, 2018).

plan pondering ethical principles as well as the areas of cultural sensitivity or risks at stake in relation to my research questions.

The first aspect I considered is the power asymmetries stemming from my positionality that could arise in each interview. In post-conflict countries where many people have lived through violence, injustice and hardship, when interviewing not only ordinary people but also those considered authorities by virtue of their political or social status, a researcher is often seen as someone "important, official, or having power over them" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 102). In my case, this was accentuated by the fact that I was part of an "international donor community", meaning someone who most people saw as potentially regulating access to certain benefits to their lives (concrete examples being scholarships for mobility abroad in EU universities, grants for educational activities, and so on). It was not possible to completely break down this imbalance³³, but I was able to reduce it by maintaining an awareness of the need to: 1) carefully choose my interviewees. This took some time, which I dedicated to building the necessary trust with key informants who could support me in this process; 2) self-disclose, by providing interviewees with a clear explanation of the purpose of my research; 3) ensure confidentiality, by giving each interviewee the chance to opt out of the process and to maintain anonymity; 4) consider this imbalance in interpreting my data and analyzing my findings³⁴.

Secondly, as Lee Morgenbesser and Meredith Weiss (2018) point out, most South-East Asian countries are semi- or fully authoritarian regimes, and field research merits specific attention since these regimes themselves do not tend towards transparency; nor are their inhabitants likely to enjoy the civil liberties that incline one to speak freely. Indeed, one of my goals was to interview activists and political opponents who, as I argue in my thesis, are often forced to operate outside of legal frameworks, especially when it comes to the freedoms of assembly and expression. The challenge, therefore, was for me to gather enough empirical data so as to be credible and present original data to back up my arguments while not endangering anyone, following the principle of "do-not-harm" (Brounéus, 2011). The necessary steps I have taken were: anonymous notes, password protected files, back-ups, never taking notes from other interviews along with me, and making sure when I needed support from a translator³⁵ that the interviewee was well aware of the focus of my research³⁶. One of

³³ Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005) argue that actually in any interviewer/interviewee situation there is an asymmetry that is not possible to completely balance.

³⁴ Karen Brounéus (2011) offers a complete overview of the many aspects of in-depth interviewing in relation to power, vulnerability and ethics. She focuses especially on the cases when these need special attention given being the research context a post conflict country.

³⁵ Each interviews in Burmese was reviewed by at least two translators to make sure that the meaning of the discourse was not lost in translation or different meanings were attached by a specific translator.

³⁶ For further discussion of how to choose and work with a translator in complex research settings see Dolnik, 2011.

my main strategies was also to remain vague about these aspects of my work (without ever lying) and my whereabouts at all times, so as to protect the people around me. In the end, I was able to build solid relationships with a number of activist and was able to interview them multiple time over the span of months in a way that allowed me to use their names in my research stating that they would not need to remain anonymous in exchange for the benefit of having their "original voice" appear in my work.

In 2018, both the global pandemic (March 2020) and the military coup (February 2021) were unforeseeable and navigating that thin line between ethics and safety has not been easy. First of all, it was clear to me that, after February 2021, it was not feasible to even contact interviewees by email or social media networks such as Facebook or WhatsApp without potentially jeopardizing their safety, since in the meantime domestic intelligence services have significantly expanded their surveillance capabilities in the cyber domain. Therefore, I deliberately interrupted communication with most of my contacts, especially the ones that were (and still are) members of the CDM or National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG). As a result, interview-based data collection with Myanmar informants had to cease in February 2021. Secondly, I have decided to anonymize all the interviews presented in this dissertation even if I had the participants' consent to use their names (or even if informants explicitly asked me to use their names). In fact, given the deteriorating situation in the country, respecting the interviewees' wishes might potentially jeopardize their material, psychological and physical well-being³⁷.

One last consideration regards the relevance of my work after the coup d'état and my responsibility as a foreign researcher and privileged outsider. At the time of writing, Myanmar universities and schools in general are struggling to run any sort of activities (see Conclusion and Frontier, 2021) and higher education reform is on hold, without any clear idea how it might be carried forwards in the new political climate. Like most researchers working on Myanmar (particularly important for my own reflections were Dussud, 2021 and Jefferson et. al, 2021), I have therefore questioned how a researcher can respond acutely, using grounded knowledge and critical reflection, to the current situation when times are changing, and it seems impossible to continue. How can the authority and expertise of research be put to work in this moment, or might research projects even need to be redesigned to align them with the current situation? Using my position as a privileged outsider and drawing together the main conclusions of the study, in the conclusion I address these questions by

³⁷ Similar considerations have guided also Arne F. Wackenhut (2017) in dealing with the similar Egyptian case that have seen a rise of authoritarianism after the "Arab Spring" that the author was studying.

offering informed policy recommendations to the international community that is still engaged in the Myanmar higher education sector.

- The structure of the dissertation

This thesis is divided into five chapters.

Following this introduction, Chapter I presents the conceptual frameworks and a literature review of the theoretical and empirical studies that have contributed to the substantive areas of my research topic, encompassing the discourses and politics of higher education. At the end of the chapter, I present the theoretical model that supports my analyses.

Chapter II is devoted to historical background. The periodization I have decided to use is the following: 1) pre-colonial times, 2) the early debate on higher education³⁸ to the year 1920, when the country's first university, Rangoon University, was founded, 3) from 1920 until the end of the colonial occupation, 4) the so-called first democratic period (1948-1958) and the caretaker regime (1958-1960), 5) the Ne Win era (1962-1988, including the Revolutionary Council and Burma Socialist Program Party periods), 6) from the "1988 Uprising" until the beginning of the political transition around which this research revolves. For each period along this timeline, I critically analyze the underlying debate around the laws/acts/bills/reforms through which higher education in Myanmar was molded and legislated. As part of this view, I underline when and how higher education was used by different governments as a tool for social and political legitimacy and when and how higher education was considered (mostly) a threat to social and political legitimacy and actively dismantled. In doing, so I focus on the interplay between governmental and student movement actions (including references to the role played by other international actors as well) in the higher education arena, thereby shedding light on the country's various historical social and political transformation.

Chapter III examines how state authority shaped higher education in the 5 years of Thein Sein's government and 5 years of NLD government, tracing discontinuities and continuities in their political action (in terms of policy, discourses and practices) around higher education. Data driven by my interviews and the critical analysis of text and key documents is used to bring to light the role these governments assigned to universities. My argument leads to portray the higher education reform in

³⁸ As a cursory reference, 1876 can be considered the first year when higher education was accessible in Myanmar territory.

the Myanmar period of transition as the "quest for autonomy" and to shed a light on how this was acknowledged, discussed and possibly contested by university governance.

Chapter IV explores how student movements and organizations framed their discourses and grievances in the period considered. In contrast to most of the scholarly literature on the topic, I argue that student politics *did* matter in transitional Myanmar. It mattered even amidst the challenges that students were trying to overcome in shaping their relationship with the new party system in an evershrinking space for impacting the higher education discourses and reforms being put forward by governmental authorities and international donors.

Chapter V paints the full picture of the international actors that very quickly began to re-intervene in Myanmar higher education during the "transitional period", bringing with them global trends that were not yet part of the domestic discussion on education. Moreover, I address the following questions: why did international actors engage with Myanmar higher education reform? What idea(s) of and vision(s) for higher education were introduced by international actors? In so doing, I also self-reflexively consider my own experience as an international actor in the reform arena addressed in the previous sections.

Finally, I draw together the main findings of the study. I stress how my discussion of the politics of higher education has underlined certain aspects and enriched the wider debate around Myanmar "period of transition". Furthermore, I draw some preliminary remarks on how the 2021 coup d'état is affecting the higher education sector and few policy implications of the study.

CHAPTER I

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

In his *History of Universities*, Harold Perkin notes that no institution has been so flexible, productive, and adaptable as the university, surviving nine centuries, migrating to every country and continent in the world, and adapting to almost any political situation and form of society (Perkin, 2007). Serving the needs of enormously different societies, universities generally have gained a sort of "universal acceptance" as institutions essential for the wellbeing of any nation. Against this general widespread perception of higher education as a site of "neutral and positive education," multiple scholars have underlined the "missionary" role of these institutions, that is, their mission as formal political institutions to perpetuate and justify the status quo through science, the so-called "neutral knowledge," while simultaneously instilling in the student population a sense of respect for authority. Historically, universities have been places of conflict. On one front, the corporate autonomy and academic freedom of the university as an "intellectual estate" are constantly negotiated and shaped through interaction with surrounding political authorities. Assessing the complex state-higher education institutions nexus leads to acknowledging the disenfranchised, excluded individuals and groups that arise as social movements to influence the power structure, institution, or both. As sites of critical inquiry and symbols of national purposes, universities have often been central in the mobilization of various social movements (student movements taking center stage place) aimed at drawing attention to demands for change, influencing the state, or pressuring civil society to take action (Pusser, 2018).

Higher education institutions have distinct identities within their own societies. Their contextual nature and the way this relates to the society in which they are embedded is particularly important in contexts characterized by societal divisions and ethnic conflict (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2009). At the same time, higher education has always had an international dimension: "universities are soaked in transmitting, studying, and creating knowledge and are part of a larger network of institutions that do this, a network that has always been international" (Marginson, 2011, pp. 413-414). It has been argued that, with the exception of Al-Ashar University in Cairo³⁹, all universities in the world have the same historical roots in that they derive from the medieval European universities imposed on colonized countries and adopted by the rest of the world (Selvaratnam, 1988; Altbach, 2004, 2007).

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³⁹ Al-Azhar was the oldest and most prestigious institution in the Islamic world. It was established to foster a strong tradition of knowledge and revitalized classical ideas of Islamic heritage; therefore, some scholars consider it to be different than European Universities.

These origins have important repercussions in the hegemonic structures of knowledge and power relations at global and institutional levels, as I discuss in depth by looking at the Myanmar case. While higher education has always been characterized by an international dimension (both in terms of its mission and in the actual network of contacts of the institutions), globalization ⁴⁰ caused a considerable acceleration of forces in the transformation of higher education (OECD, 2014). The relevance of this phenomenon cannot be underestimated as the extensive internationalization of higher education functions can be considered one of the most significant changes in higher education over the last few decades (Altbach, 2008; Maringe, Foskett and Woodfield, 2013). Together with internationalization, eoliberalism emerged as a set of ideas based upon the principles of deregulation, privatization and competitiveness (Kelsey, 2004). These global processes have undoubtedly put universities around the world under pressure to play an expanding number of roles, functions and purposes that are multi-faceted, evolving and contested (Altbach, 2008; Robertson, 2010a; de Sousa Santos, 2012).

From this bird-eye view, it is clear that universities find themselves at the nexus of powerful national and international tensions. In this chapter, I review a few conceptual frameworks that can support the analysis of these national and international political tensions that play out in spaces of higher education and which actors play their part when comes to higher education policies development and implementation. My main aim is to adapt these analytical tools to the specific context of Myanmar to answer my research questions. In the first section, I clarify the key functions and discourses around higher education. Although universities and their practices definitely have a set of identifiable key functions to play (contribute to knowledge, teach, and carry out service activities), there are different discourses around higher education, meaning different why these functions need to be performed. I identify the three main discourses in the scholarly literature to discuss them in the Myanmar context in the next chapters. In the second section, I review the academic literature relating to higher education's influence on societal structure: my research moves in the direction of acknowledging the idea that higher education systems can have simultaneously transformative and reproductive effects on the societies of which they are a part. This leads to focusing on the state-higher education nexus in the third section. In most national contexts, including Myanmar, the purposes of a public political institution such as a university can be ascertained by paying attention to the state and the role of higher education in the state project. The state is the first actor to consider when the politics of higher education is discussed. Given the specific context of Myanmar, I argue that the second actor is student

⁴⁰ Globalization has been defined as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of world-wide interconnectedness" (Held et al., 1999, p.2) and is related to world scale transformations in the ideological, political, cultural, social, technological and economic realms (Altbach, 2013; Maringe, Foskett and Woodfield, 2013).

politics. In the fourth and fifth sections, bridging scholarly analyses of higher education with social movement studies, I discuss what constitutes student politics, why it matters and how it influences higher education systems and wider society. The sixth and seventh sections focus on the third actor: the international trends related to higher education and their influence on a specific national system; as part of this discussion, I also argue why international influence is particularly relevant in post-conflict countries as Myanmar. The last section summarizes the different aspects of the theoretical framework that supports my specific analysis of the interplay between state, student politics and international actors' vision(s) of higher education in the 2011-2021 Myanmar hybrid regimes and how they play out in the reform process.

1.1 Higher education: its functions and discourses

What do higher education institutions do? In the simplest terms, they serve three main functions: contribute to knowledge, teach, and carry out service activities (the so-called "third mission"). These functions are often interrelated (Bourner, 2008), but not all have equal priority in every institution or society, and in some cases one or more may be missing completely (Altbach, 2009). Many universities have become predominantly focused on the teaching function, particularly in low-income countries but also in advanced economies (Ibid.). Service, the "third mission" concerned with the university's engagement with society, is also undergoing change and is interpreted in various ways, covering a range of functions such as social capital development in the community, cultural engagement, cultivating links with business and commercializing intellectual property, contributing to policy-making and supporting public debate; as such, visions of the third mission are largely context-driven (Laredo, 2007).

In carrying out these functions, higher education institutions play important social, political, economic and cultural roles in societies (Brennan, King and Lebeau, 2004). These roles have been differently portrayed in prevailing educational discourse. There are three main discourses around higher education that have been identified by scholarly literature. Discourses on the economic contribution of higher education have clearly taken center stage over the past two decades with the emergence of the concept of "knowledge economy" (World Bank, 2003; Altbach, Reisberg and

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⁴¹ The most widely known conceptualization of knowledge economy was provided by the World Bank: "A knowledge economy relies on knowledge as the key engine of economic growth. It is an economy in which knowledge is acquired, created, disseminated, and applied to enhance economic development. Intuitively, conditions for a knowledge-based development process would seem to include an educated and skilled labor force, a dense and modern information

Rumbley, 2009; Castells, 2009). Indeed, "education for human capital" has became the ubiquitous theory underpinning educational global policy. According to Theodora Lightfoot-Rueda (2017), this discourse defines young people as "investments" (much like bank accounts or stocks) for the enrichment of national economies. Therefore, states spend money on education with the expectation that young people (like any other investments, such as stocks) will return profit or pay the society back. While this financially based metaphor of education nowadays appears "universal," in reality, it emerged in a specific space and time, i.e., in the US and Britain in the years immediately following WWII, as part of their neo-colonial endeavors. Remarkably, Theodora Lightfoot-Rueda (Ibid.) notes that these discourses spread rapidly, especially in Asian countries. In fact, in the post-WWII years, many Asian countries began investing heavily in education and simultaneously experienced high rates of economic growth; they attributed such growth to good educational systems. The cases of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong support the author's analysis. From a similar perspective, Supriya Chaudhuri (2011) examines India's self-projection as a knowledge economy and she underlines the perils of higher education conceptualized in terms of the "production of knowledge," especially when "knowledge" is interpreted according to Western categories:

"But in India above all, with its rich, complicated and tragic histories of cultural extinctions and survivals, the definition of knowledge is always under pressure, never secure or uncontested. It is because the term is under pressure in this way that the 'knowledge economy' cannot take its assumed privilege on trust. [...] If universities produce knowledge, they do so by fostering knowledge and oblivion at the same time. The modern university in India was founded upon a monstrous denial of traditional knowledges, scholarship, and skills. This forgetting cannot be undone, but it can perhaps be partially compensated if we renew our sense of the university as a place where knowledge is open to remaking and unmaking; a contested territory rather than a stable, unchanging institution" (Chaudhuri, 2011, p. 20).

Authors such as Chaudhuri are challenging the "knowledge economy" discourse of education by pointing out the asymmetry of power between the Global North and South that this discourse brings

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infrastructure, an effective innovation system, and an institutional regime that offers incentives for the efficient creation, dissemination, and use of existing knowledge" (World Bank, 2007, p. 23).

about. In fact, the "knowledge" implied by this discourse is linked to both economic market standards and the type of education and related educational governance structures of the Global North that universities in the Global South are expected to match. This dissertation embraces and builds on this critical scholarly debate challenging the way the "knowledge economy" discourse is normalized in higher education global policy debate by unpacking the impact of such discourse on a specific higher education space in the Global South.

The second imaginary has older roots: higher education as a field of status ranking and competition (Marginson, 2011). Simon Marginson scholarly production has unpacked this second discourse pointing out how:

"Older symbols of status are integral to hierarchical academic affairs, with their medieval forms of public display. Status also positions universities in relation to each other. Unlike commercial markets, university status ladders are conservative, reproducing much the same pecking order from generation to generation. At the same time few in higher education, however meritocratic or modernist in temper, are untouched by the power of status to secure assent, define identity and compel action. Institutions display status conspicuously and continually, in the ancient form of gothic buildings, the modern form of science facilities and research outputs and the corporate form of websites and global partnerships. Status competition over laps with the economic market. Success in one helps success in the other" (Ibid., pp.421-422)

Marginson notes that status and competition are distinctive features of the higher education functions that can sometimes even take precedence over economic market considerations. In his analysis, he invites us to consider these features as part of both the national debate (meaning the socio-political context in which universities are located) and the global one. In every national higher education system, the institutions are ranked in a hierarchical manner: some of them offer better social status and lifetime opportunities to their graduates than others. In every given context, the institutional prestige of the universities is well-known and "wealthy families invest in high value education to maintain their social and professional leadership. Positional markets in higher education are a matching game in which the hierarchy of students/families is synchronised with the hierarchy of universities; and the peak group in each hierarchy is steeped in the habits of sustaining the other"

(Marginson, 2006, p. 6). Universities and their students have a mutual interest in each others' status. A prestigious university can facilitate lifelong opportunities in terms of its students' social and economic mobility and, at the same time, successful graduates perpetuate the prestige of their "alma mater". Status and prestige also have a global dimension that it is distinct from yet linked to the national one. According to Marginson (Ibid.), status in a global perspective is in flux (even more than in a given national context), but over the last few decades the world-wide hierarchy of universities has been structured around three factors: 1) the distribution of research capacity between national higher education systems; 2) the global advantage of English; and 3) the global dominance of the US in higher education. These factors and considerations have a profound impact on the way higher education is approached and shaped in emerging nations, an impact that must be scrutinized together with the national component of status and competition.

There is also a third dominant discourse, one that acknowledges the broader societal benefits of higher education beyond purely economic and status concerns: higher education for a "just society." The World Bank, in its influential report Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise (2000), categorizes the societal benefits of higher education in four key areas: higher education's ability to unlock the potential of people from all backgrounds; build a national resource of highly skilled individuals; contribute to subjects that have benefits beyond the individual; and enable the discussion of ideas and values (World Bank, 2000). Definitions used by UNESCO also emphasize the societal benefits of higher education, linking it to social justice, human rights, democracy and peace (UNESCO, 1998). These conceptions of higher education situate universities firmly within the arena of social transformation and social justice. Universities are also framed as providing important spaces in which academics and students as social critics can freely and independently engage in discussion and debates on societal and political issues (Whitehead, 1967; UNESCO, 1998; Hornblow, 2007; Altbach, 2008). UNESCO underlines the importance of this role in enabling people to "be able to speak out on ethical, cultural and social problems completely independently and in full awareness of their responsibilities, exercising a kind of intellectual authority that society needs to help it to reflect, understand and act" (UNESCO, 1998, p. 2). The discourse of "higher education for a just society" is deeply connected to a vision of higher education as having a positive influence on wider society, thus also including those not directly involved in higher education. John Brennan and Rajani Naidoo (2008) point out that, although policy literature is full of these brave and bold statements about higher education being pivotal for the achievement of equity and social justice, in reality there is little scholarly evidence of this. In other words, even if the discourse of higher education for a "just society" is widely acknowledged and used as policy-making paradigm, there is little scholarly, research-based evidence showing how higher education exerts such an impact across different societies. According to these authors, the complex and often contradictory nature of higher education and its relationship with other parts of society is a research agenda requiring further scrutiny in a range of different contexts. In the effort to move in this direction, I begin by clarifying how higher education relates more broadly to social change, according to the existing literature, and which theoretical approach is embraced in my work.

1.2 Higher Education and social change

It can be argued that there are two divergent theories that dominate the literature about higher education's influence on societal structures. On one side, élite reproduction theorists maintain that education systems perpetuate, legitimize and reinforce the position of dominant élites in a society, thereby promoting social injustice. On the other side, liberal theorists see education as a force for progressive social change and creating a more open society by enabling social mobility based on access, inclusion and meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1996; Moore, 2004; Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). According to Rob Moore (2004), "reproductive" theories see educational processes as:

- reproducing the privileges and dominance of the ruling class (for example, through access to educational advantages leading to elite jobs and social positions);
- a way to secure the legitimacy of capitalist social relations by inculcating students in the dominant ideology;
- a way to block the development of a counter-hegemonic working-class consciousness that could effectively challenge capitalism;
- a way to systematically prepare pupils for their differentiated future positions in the capitalist economy and social structure.

Moore describes liberal approaches as having a vision of education as:

- producing the "human capital" required by an increasingly high-skill, science-based economy;
- promoting the "civic" values and behavior appropriate to advanced liberal democracy;
- developing a "meritocratic" selection system whereby people can achieve social status by virtue of their actual abilities and contributions rather than having it merely "ascribed" by the accident of birth;

• facilitating an "open" society characterized by high levels of social mobility, reflecting the relationship between ability and opportunity.

These two main streams of thought concerning the impact of higher education on social structures can be perceived as highly antipodal at a theoretical level. At an empirical level, several authors have pointed out that higher education can actually play both roles, performing multiple contradictory functions in the same context in a given time-frame. It is possible, for example, for higher education - as whole, as well individual institutions - to bolster and reproduce privilege even at the same time as it generates new knowledge to the benefit of wider society. An empirical example of how these two theories can be bridged is provided by Michael Young's analysis of the British educational system in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). In an enjoyably satirical tone, the author notes that the British education system was doing reasonably well in providing clever working-class students with opportunities for upwards social mobility; at the same time, however, it was failing to ensure downward mobility for the unintelligent, incapable children of upper and middle class families. Young's analysis captures the political dimension of the expansion of higher education in Britain. On one side, there were genuine efforts to provide places in higher education institutions to more students from socially diverse backgrounds; at the same time, the privileged retained their socially privileged positions, at least in part by participating in and engaging with socially privileged educational institutions. Even in the context of a clear political agenda linked to one of the two sides of the theoretical debate, John Brennan (2018) points out that, higher education institutions and their functions can have direct/indirect and intended/unintended repercussions on their targets. Empirically, the social impact of a single higher education system can involve both "winners" and "losers", and the differences may stem from factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity but also geography: "a university may bring greater prosperity and liveliness to a particular geographical area to the benefit of all, but to the local people who live in the streets around the university it can *limit their access to local services and to a peaceful life*" (Ibid. p.84).

Against this backdrop, my research takes the path of recognizing the validity of both liberal and elite reproduction theorists but without taking a theoretical stand in one of the two streams. Rather, I investigate how the contradictions between these two tendencies play a role in a specific context. I embrace the idea that higher education systems can have simultaneously transformative and reproductive effects on the societies of which they are a part, thereby taking a holistic approach to higher education as a political phenomenon governed by ambiguity and contradictions. In keeping with this critical perspective, I argue that it is pivotal to narrow down the actors that shape higher

education so as to bring to light the conflicts that animate universities spaces in a given time and geographical space. I therefore now turn to an analysis of the actors.

1.3 Higher education and state authority

In order to understand how higher education is shaped, it is important to observe the roles played by different actors, their discourses and the relationships among them. In this type of analysis, scholars often employ Burton R. Clark's famous "triangle of coordination". In his model, Clark (1983) proposed that higher education coordination is organized in a triangular space consisting of three forces: "state authority," the "academic oligarchy," and the "market," with a "tight to loose linkage" between these forces, depending on the national system (Figure 5). The interplay of these forces is what influences and shapes higher education: using this model, a national system can be placed inside the triangle in a way that reflects its specific domestic environment.

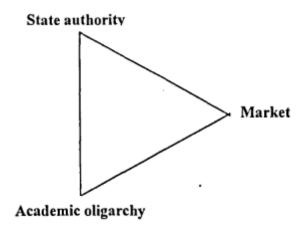


Figure 5. Triangle of coordination of higher education. (Clark, 1983)

According to Clark (1979), "state authority" has two components: bureaucratic authority and political authority, each of which is coordinated in specific ways. Bureaucratic coordination refers to the role of administrative agencies such as national departments of education. Political coordination is found in "the form of regular influence of political officials, external interest groups and internal groups" (Clark, 1979, p. 230). The "academic oligarchy" is composed of prestigious, powerful professors; in other words, "academic barons" who are influential within and outside of their disciplines and institutions. This accord with Clark's contention that we cannot ignore the bottom level of the higher education sector, even in a nation with the strictest of controls, because higher education is a system

in which professors make daily judgments calls at operational levels, their strengths being their specialization and expertise. The "market" is an informal form of institution where the concept of exchange connotes a means of linking people together. In higher education, the market comprises "consumer markets" (students' choice), "labor markets" (faculty and administrative employment), and "institutional markets" (public and private universities' reputations) (Clark, 1983, pp. 161-171). These co-coordination forces (interacting with each other) represent sufficient power and authority to cause higher education systems to hold together in the face of complex and disparate arrays of tasks, beliefs and forms of authority. Hence, each higher education system is seen as the result of a triangle of the three forces.

Although it was published in 1983, this analytical framework remains serviceable in supporting our understanding of contemporary universities and higher education systems. At the same time, it does require some theoretical updating to take into account the changes that have occurred in global academia over the last four decades (Brennan, 2010). In the following sections, I build my model of analysis inspired by Clark's triangle of coordination (see the Figure 6 in the last section for a sketch of my model). Following in Clark's footsteps, I start by acknowledging the role of government as well as other institutions (i.e. the legal and executive branches of the state, regulatory entities, and institutions of national security) in shaping higher education. In most national contexts, the purposes of a public political institution such as a university can be ascertained by paying attention to the state and the role of a particular institution in the state project. Proceeding in this direction, Brian Pusser (2018) notes that the first question to be asked is: "what is the mission of higher education within the state project, and what role do various elements of the state play in meeting that mission?" In answering these questions, several scholars have built on Gramsci (1971) to argue that colleges and universities can be seen as both sites of contestation over state authority and legitimacy and instruments in broader contests for control over the state. Gwilym Croucher and Glyn Davis (2018) summarize the political challenge between the state and universities thusly:

"The ancient monasteries of England, Wales and Ireland were destroyed while still wealthy and influential. They came under political challenge when state ideology changed. Universities in many countries perceive similar risks to their position" (Croucher and Davis, 2018, p. 43).

The authors describe an historical tension between the state and universities. State missions influence educational policies; for governments, seeking and securing a measurable return on public investment represents an urgent priority. At the same time, universities are independent agencies with core missions and characteristics: they are not always easily directed and not always responsive to the will of political authorities. Therefore, state-centered studies brought the concepts of ideology, hegemony, and power to research on the ways states provide and oversee higher education. In the words of Ordorika and Lloyd:

"Framing political contest in education as a confrontation over ideology and resource allocation; enabling the understanding of decision-making structures and processes in education as a historical product of power struggles between dominant and subaltern groups in education and the broader state; explaining the dynamics of educational reform as a consequence of competing demands for the reproduction and production of ideology and skills on the one hand and struggles for social transformation and equality on the other; and establishing the linkages between political contest at the internal and external levels as central to understanding new sites of educational contest and reform" (Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015, p. 145).

This scholarly contribution aims to acknowledge the second actor in my model of analysis, that is, a subaltern group in the educational space that has spearheaded various contentious actions and struggles against the dominant power in the global history of universities. Indeed, as I define in the next chapter, Myanmar provides a striking example of this. The second actor in my analysis is "student politics" and their organizations. Clark's triangle places students under the "market" side of the triangle. At the same time, however, students are not only the "market" or "clients"; they also shape the trajectory of the educational offering proposed to them. In other words, they both react to changes and bring about changes in the higher education sector. Education studies often underestimate the agency of student politics and how it can shape education reforms as well as what happens at the meso-level (i.e. changes in life at the university and higher education policies in general in a specific institution). In the next two sections, I turn to a different branch of studies, social movements' literature, to underline why and how student contest higher education and how this has been studied in recent decades.

1.4 Higher education and student politics

Since the establishment of the university as an educational institution in the Medieval world order, students have appeared as a collective actor organized in associations, councils, guilds or governments. These formal and informal groups have sought to draw attention to certain issues and to pressure the authorities outside and inside the institution to take or refrain from action. Although students were historically a very politically active group, researchers only began to pay serious attention to them after the revolts that shook Western societies in the 1960s and 1970s involving protests for the democratization of university and social life more broadly. Philip G. Altbach is one of the foremost scholars in the field to have sought to define a phenomenon he has described as highly complex and multifaceted (Altbach, 1967, 1989). Listing the types of student organizations (including student newspapers and publications, fraternities and sororities, religious organizations, student unions and governments, cultural organization, and athletic groups), Altbach states that he is mainly concerned with those organizations that "hold a political agenda." In so doing, he moves towards a definition of "student politics" that was not fully conceptualized until more recently, following the global protests in the 2000s opposing neoliberal higher education reforms.

In the wake of these recent waves of protest, Manja Klemenčič and Bo Yun Park (2018) conceptualize student politics as student political activities associated with the organizing of the student body and its influence on the institution of higher education, higher education systems and wider society. Even more recently, Donatella della Porta and her colleagues offer a different take on student politics, defining it as a set of organizational structures, action repertoires, and master frames used by students to promote their claims (Della Porta, Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2020). Both definitions recognize that: students have political agency; student politics are inevitably influenced by the institutions and higher education system in which they are embedded; and student politics matter and have an impact on the educational systems and society in which they are embedded. Student politics is a broad umbrella term that can encompass a wide range of activities from small-scale efforts to lobby against a specific university administrative policy to revolutionary movements that have contributed to regime changes. Considering this wide range of activities, Manja Klemenčič and Bo Yun Park (2018) distinguish between two different forms: activism and representation. While representation refers to the set of activities students carry out within and through institutional bodies (such as lobbying and issue advocacy), activism refers to the set of activities that students enact outside of or against such bodies (such as protest). According to the two scholars:

"representation rests on the notion of participatory democracy. In the context of universities, participatory democracy is manifested through shared governance arrangement that enable all key stakeholders, including students, to have a say in university decision making. [...] Two conditions must be present for representation to emerge in student politics: first students must be able to organize into representative and interest association. [...] Second, representation as a form of student politics presuppose the existence of some formal structure or processes through which student representative funnel student interest into policy processes" (Ibid., pp. 473-474)

When comes to activism, one of the most cited definition was developed by Meredith Weiss, Edward Aspinall and colleagues for their comparative work on Asian student activism: "collective action by university students directed towards (and often against) the ruling regimes" (Weiss and Anspinall, 2012, p. 2). Although it has been praised by other scholars, I argue that this definition has the shortcoming of implying that activism is a phenomenon limited to the claims and actions of specific social actors in relation to the authority in power. This work instead builds on the direction suggested by Jillian Schwedler and Kevan Harris (2016) and others, namely the recognition that activism is not always or exclusively directed at the state. Rather, it includes a number of other activities, such as maintaining alliances, sharing and circulating knowledge about opportunities and tactics, and socializing with potential external allies but also within the same group or movement, elements which are often overlooked in spite of the fundamental role they play in organizing and mobilizing. Activism can consist in a one-off student protest or a long-lasting effort (which can be theorized as a long-term process) in which informal or formal student groups that share a collective identity employ protest or other contentious mechanisms. At the core of such continuous engagement in protest activities lies a sense of collective identity: "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution [...] a perception of a shared status or relation [...] which is distinct from a personal identity, although it may form a personal identity" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 285). In case of sustained collective effort, it is appropriate to use the term student movement that has been defined by Jungyun Gill and James De Fronzo as:

"A relatively organized effort on the part of a large number of students to either to bring about or prevent change in any one of the following: policies, institutional personnel, social structure (institutions), or cultural aspects of society involving either institutionalized or non-institutionalized collective actions or both simultaneously" (Gill and DeFronzo, 2009, p. 208)

Considering these definitions together, it is clear that student politics and its organizations have the potential to impact multiple level and arenas. These include: 1) policies (i.e. the course of actions adopted by governments, not necessarily on educational matters); 2) institutional personnel (i.e. those who hold power in a specific institution: government leaders, military leaders or members of the university governance structure); 3) social structure (i.e. different aspects of the social and political arena of a country, including the type of regime), and 4) cultural aspects (i.e. the dominant values, beliefs and norms in a society). In the next section, I turn to the scholarly literature supporting the analysis of how and why student politics and organizations can impact higher education.

1.5 Why and how students contest higher education

One of the premises adopted in this work is that student politics and their organizations are fundamentally a form of social movement, although one that is distinctive in terms of the way membership is shaped. Social movement studies have been beneficial in creating different frameworks that can be variously applied, according to the type of scholarly investigation into student politics. Broadly speaking, most of this scholarship is focused on answering the question of *why* and *how* student organizations emerge, that is, their origins or, more precisely, how differently configured political and academic institutional contexts shape the possibility or likelihood of student grievances surfacing, the trajectory of this contestation (including possible mobilizations and contentious actions) and outcomes. In this section, I draw on this vast literature for a few conceptual points on the micro, macro and meso dimensions of student politics that are useful in guiding the analysis in relation to my specific research questions and sustaining the analysis of student politics in a historical (Chapter II) and contemporary perspective (Chapter IV).

At the micro-level, student politics has been linked to specific characteristics of youth and to the students' unique social location, often described as liminal, is what enables them to frequently

mobilize in pursuit of collective actions to bring about or prevent change. The concept of "liminality", borrowed by Victor Turner, is defined as the in-between time and place in processes of transformation (Turner, 1969). University life is the period of transformation that students undergo and/or are challenged by before entering adult life, and it is filled with enthusiasm, idealism, and exposure to new ideas (Lipset and Altbach, 1967). Altbach links this transient nature of studentship with students' self-assigned role as the ones to "speak truth to power". Given the short and powerful life cycle of student generations, typically lasting only three to five years, students tend to be both reformist (if not revolutionary) in outlook and unburdened by the possible consequence of their actions. According to Altbach, these two aspects give rise to the possibility of antagonistic action, but at the same time they limit the impact of such contestation: "students tend to be impatient, wanting change quickly, due in part to the brevity of student generations and due in part to a certain impatience normal in young people" (Altbach, 2007, p. 330). Students have also been considered highly emotional rebels, unable to handle ambiguity, devoted to an ethic of absolute ends, irreverent, adventurist, and radical (Lipset, 1976). In general, it has been noted that "the propensity to collective student political engagement lies in the characteristics of studentship as a life stage [...] unburdened by care for family or full-time work, the 'typical' student has the leisure of time and peace of mind to engage in political action if so inclined (Klemencic, 2014, p. 399).

Not only has the psychological characteristics of students and their so-called biographical availability been considered at a micro level of analysis, but sociological generalizations have also been tested to compare the social and economic backgrounds of student activists vs. student non-activists. In a study of sixty politically active parents (both liberal and conservative) and their college-age children, Thomas (1971) found that the children of highly politicized parents tended to be similar to their parents in both their political attitudes and their political behavior. Westby and Braungart (1966) found considerable similarities between "student activists expressing ideological positions of their parents' political orientation" (Westby and Braungart, 1966, p. 692). Also, Altbach points out that:

"Activist students have some common characteristics. Not surprisingly, they are more politically conscious and concerned about ideological issues than the majority of students. They tend to come from families with a higher level of both income and education than the average student population. It must be kept in mind that the students in most countries come from significantly more affluent families than the general population. The educational backgrounds of the parents tend to be much higher than average, and very often the

political attitudes of the families of activists are to the left of the general population. Thus, activist students are very often from highly elite groups in their societies—groups that have benefited from existing societal arrangements. Activists tend to come from urban and cosmopolitan families—this is a key variable in developing countries, where the majority of the population is rural and relatively uneducated" (Altbach 2007, p. 339).

The analysis of the micro-dimension of student politics brings to light the importance of the student activists' personal biographies and status as "liminal heroes" that can be activated to pursue broader grievances. Instead, at the macro level, interpretations of student politics and their organizations have pointed toward transformations in the broad system of interaction between the state and the market in which the university system is embedded. Student politics has strong political outreach inside the educational system and, often, outside of it as well. As Delgado and Ross have noted, "students are often considered to be 'catalysts' of political and social action or 'barometers' of the social unrest and political tension accumulated in society" (Delgado and Ross, 2016, p. 144). On many occasions, students quickly found allies in the political system and contributed to more general mobilizations (Rootes, 2013). Calling for more democracy, students have confronted authoritarian regimes in multiple countries around the world, pushing for more openness on the part of political institutions and creating free spaces. Historically, they have contributed to claims for free education but also national sovereignty. On a theoretical level, political process theory has allowed scholars to analyze various specific instances of student mobilization (for example, for Chile see Bellei et al. 2014; for Chile and England see Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2017; for South Africa see Cini, 2019). More recently, this lens was applied in the volume Contesting Higher Education: Student Movements against Neoliberal Universities by Donatella della Porta, Lorenzo Cini and César Guzmán-Concha to comparatively assess the impact of the recent global waves of student protest against the neoliberal model of education that is rapidly spreading in all higher education systems. The authors note that:

"To understand how student mobilizations evolved and which outcomes they produced, we had therefore to look not only at the pre-existing opportunities and resources of movements but also at the dynamics which were triggered by the protest campaigns themselves. To do this, we built upon a relational perspective as well as a field-oriented approach, which looked at the

interactions of different actors—institutional and not—during what was defined as a neoliberal critical juncture." (della Porta et al. 2020, p. 11)

This work builds on this consideration by focusing on the interplay between the state, student politics and international actors at the precise point in time when neoliberal reforms come into place in Myanmar. Although my focus is on contemporaneity, I build my considerations on the basis of an historical perspective as Vince Boudreau did in his work *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia* (Boudreau, 2004). with the aim of mapping the interactive, reiterative and mutually-reinforcing relationship between student activism and the structure of power, Boudreau raises the question of how excluded social groups such as students can be mobilized against forms of dictatorship that have the power to craft highly repressive and violent systems of social control to deter collective opposition. In answering this question (considering Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia as case studies), Boudreau's contribution is twofold. First, he identifies the three ways in which state repression affects the styles and trajectories of student contention. The first of these is institutional and material:

"Activist forms and organizations [...] do not exist independently of activists. Repression shapes the duration, direction and intensity of activist careers in ways that profoundly influence political contention. Where activists forms and organization survive state attack, generations of experienced dissidents bring their accumulated wisdom and leadership to the struggle, and provide a thicker and more complex network of support for new protest." (Boudreau 2004, p. 10)

The second is interpretive (i.e. movements under authoritarian regimes always anticipate state repression and explicitly incorporate this anticipation into their plans) and the third has to do with the way "historically patterned modes of contention create distinct movement cultures in each setting" (Ibid., p.23).

From a macro-level comparative perspective, over a period of 40 years, Altbach has persistently argued that "the most important distinction is between student activist efforts in the industrialized nations and those in the Third World" (Altbach, 1966, p. 206). The distinction refers to a definition

of "Third World" in terms of socio-economic development or Cold War political alignment, a definition largely obsolete today. Nonetheless, the crucial distinction is one of political development and regime legitimacy: the political systems of developing countries tend to be "young", less democratic and less responsive, and thus lacking in legitimacy. As Altbach carefully notes:

"political systems in the Third World have not always been installed through the ballot box and they lack wide legitimacy; thus they are more easily threatened by dissident movements of various kinds. A weak mass media and frequent limitations on free expression means that Third World regimes are generally out of touch with public opinion. Students often provide articulation for much more widely held views and concerns." (Altbach, 1992, p. 142).

Although these words convey a dated view of the world, the question of how different regimes interact with, create, support or annihilate student movements has been taken up as a fundamental issue by the most recent studies as well. Moreover, this consideration is connected to one of Altbach's most-cited and scholarly acclaimed theories concerning the way a given society responds to student movements on the basis of that country's historical tradition of activism. In countries such as Myanmar where students have an established place in "political mythology" (i.e. as part of or one of the main forces of the anticolonial struggle), they have greater legitimacy as a normal part of the political system; as a result, they play a long-lasting role as significant political actors (Altbach, 1989). According to Altbach, students in post-colonial societies are often viewed as "spokespersons for the broader population" and the "conscience of the society", perceptions which can help their protest emerge and aggregate other excluded groups or even large parts of the local civil society.

While the micro-level of analysis supports the enquiry into student leaders rationales of actions and the macro-level of analysis frames the interplay between different actors, the focus on the meso-level (the institutional one) helps to answer the question: why does it seem to be easier for university students to reach critical mass to act than it is for same-age non-students or older groups? A first set of considerations underline that university students (especially in times and places where higher education was and still is not accessible to the masses) enjoy less responsibility, more resources and the opportunity to create networks (Crossley, 2008 and Van Dyke, 1998). In contrast, other scholars

suggest that students' strong agentic resources are the result of the structural conditions of the campus (Klemencic, 2015) or, as Altbach phrases it, the "agentification of the campus" (Altback, 2006). Although not all activism is directed "on campus" in that it also includes contentious activities "off campus", campus is the physical space that allows interaction among students and the emergence of activism. Lipset (1967) notes that the tradition of university autonomy allowed illegal revolutionary groups to hold meetings in university buildings without interference in Tsarist Russia. The same has been true of other geographical and historical settings where campuses have given student activist organizational advantages by facilitating rapid communication and mobilization. Altbach further scrutinizes the "agentification of the campus" in relation to students' academic background, finding that:

"Student activists come largely from the social sciences and to some extent from the humanities. Fields such as sociology and political science produce a significant proportion of student leaders. The content of the curriculum in these fields may contribute to an interest in activism—the social sciences are concerned with the problems of society. [...] At the other end of the activist spectrum, highly vocational fields such as management and agriculture tend to be much more conservative in terms of the attitudes of both faculty and students, and the curriculum is vocationally focused as well. The culture of such fields does not seem to promote either radical ideologies or a tendency to become involved in activist movements" (Altbach, 2007, p. 339).

In the next chapter, I trace how the "the campus" was one of the most important spaces of contentious politics against the regimes in power during the modern history of Myanmar. In the decades before the "period of transition", the state progressively tried to reduce the space of action of student politics by governing every aspect of campus life. Military regimes intervened on campuses in an effort to counter the influence of student organizations as political actors. There was also a second actor that had been absent from the national education arena for some time: the international actors that did not re-emerge on the scene until the beginning of the "period of transition".

1.6 Internationalization, neoliberalism and the commodification of higher education

Higher education institutions have distinct identities within their own social, political and cultural contexts; at the same time, global trends exert significant influence on a specific context. As mentioned above, the international dimension of higher education is not a recent phenomenon, contrary to the view posited by some literature: universities had elements of global outreach since their foundation. At the same time, it is also true that this dimension has grown exponentially in the last decades. This fundamental consideration leads to the last argument shaping my model of analysis as a variation of Clarks' triangle. In fact, the global dimension of academia was not considered by Clarks, as his triangle was focused more on specific national dimensions. However, since the time Clarks' triangle was published (1983), the "internationalization" of higher education has expanded and differentiated, due to the growth of marketization and consumerism supported by globalization pushes (Brennan, 2010), to the point that it must be taken into account. Here I analyze these international influences as codified in the literature, starting with the very concept of "internationalization" to sustain my argument that the third actors of my triangle of analysis are "international actors".

From the perspective of the every-day life in university spaces, internationalization has come to incorporate a wide range of activities including: research collaboration, curriculum development, transnational education, exchange programs aimed at students and academic staff, conferences and networking, recruitment of overseas talents, and the inclusion of an international dimension in the realms of teaching and learning (see, for instance, Knight, 2004; Henard, Diamond and Roseveare, 2012; Maringe, Foskett and Woodfield, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out how the internationalization of higher education, as a concept, is variously interpreted and, consequently, largely misunderstood (Knight, 2004; Mwangi et al., 2018). Early definitions of the internationalization of higher education showed a tendency to mainly focus on the level of the institution. Arum and van de Water (1992), for instance, defined it as "the multiple activities, programs and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation" (Ibid., p.202). Ellingboe (1998), while also concerned with internationalization at institution-level, evoked the image of a more holistic, ongoing change, a process originated as a response to an increasing globalized world, defining it as "the process of integrating an international perspective into a college or university system. It is an ongoing, futureoriented, multidimensional, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately an increasingly diverse, globally focused, ever-changing external environment" (Ibid., p.199). More recently, the discussion on the meaning of internationalization reflected the continuing evolution and increased interest in the scholarship on, and practice of, internationalization. Bridging

the institutional, national and global dimensions, Jane Knight described the phenomenon as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels" (Knight, 2008, p.21). Among the increasingly wide range of definitions present in the literature, Knight's definition, thanks to its general scope, allows for the possibility to incorporate the breadth of perspectives that can more closely reflect the range of current internationalization issues and activities, including internationalization strategies, programs and policies; institutional values; the impact in both the "home" institution and that of their partner overseas; and spanning institutional and global dimensions (Knight, 2004). It also focuses on internationalization as a dynamic process, enabling the inclusion of different and varying responses to globalization from different contexts. As a consequence, I have used this broader and more inclusive definition in my discussion of internationalization in this study, as it that can better underline the tensions that higher education institutions were facing in Myanmar when they "re-opened to the world" during the transition period.

A further development influencing the degree and forms of the internationalization of higher education came in the late 1970s due to the emergence of neoliberalism as a dominant economic philosophy based on market capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Robertson, 2010a; Naidoo and Williams, 2014; Busch, 2017). Coherently with this credo, higher education was increasingly recognized as having an intrinsic economic value, a development that led to its inclusion in the General Agreement of Trade and Services by the World Trade Organization in 2001, which classified and treated higher education as a marketable commodity. Neoliberalism emerged as a set of ideas based upon the principles of deregulation, privatization and competitiveness (Kelsey, 2004). It diverged from post-war economic liberalization: the latter advocated for the state to apply a laissezfaire approach to the market, while neoliberalism moved in the direction of a more explicit and active role of the state in promoting markets and developing competition, including state intervention in public institutions, even higher education institutions, to ensure that they are transformed into, and are engaged in, competitive markets (Harvey, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Busch, 2017). International aid and development assistance to low-income countries under what came to be known as the Washington Consensus, which was designed by international financial organizations like the World Bank and IMF, was also reviewed within a neoliberal ideology and had a profound and lasting impact on the development of higher education in these more disadvantaged contexts, as governments continuously faced an orchestrated campaign of mass privatization, financial deregulation and reduction in public funding (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Naidoo, 2010; Mwangi et al., 2018). It has been noted that the inclusion of education in the GATS has stimulated much debate among scholars of higher education from both the global North and South (Cossa, 2013). Particular concerns have arisen around the flawed and inequitable structures of the WTO, which disadvantages higher education systems in the global South, leading to counterproductive outcomes like the loss of autonomy (Altbach, 2002) and a growing imbalance of influence and negotiating power within the WTO, with the EU as the most influential and African countries the least (Cossa, 2013).

Globally, the last two decades have seen considerable growth in the commodification, commercialization and marketisation of higher education (Robertson, 2010a; Knight, 2013; Marginson, 2013). With the decrease in state funding and the evolution set in motion by the GATS which paved the way towards the opening up of global markets in higher education, universities and other institutions have been increasingly expected to generate income themselves. The solution has been found in a vast realm of activities, like the collection of student fees, particularly from inflows of international students, and from properly commercial activities like the sale of higher education products and services abroad through transnational education mechanisms and partnerships, through links with industry, the monetization of knowledge through IPR, and the accumulation of research grants through competitive tender (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Luke, 2010; Naidoo and Williams, 2014; Selenica, 2018). A substantial body of literature has been published about the rise in the commercialization of higher education and the impact of global competition on higher education institutions (see Marginson and Considine, 2000; Altbach, 2002; Ehrenberg, 2007; Robertson, 2010a). In particular, it is important to underline that the transfer of the economic costs from the state to the student shifted the conceptualization of higher education as a public good to a private one, which conferred benefit to individuals, who were therefore expected to bear the brunt of the costs (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Carpentier, 2010). Nations supporting the neoliberal regime for economic growth, UK and US being at the forefront (Robertson, 2010b; Naidoo and Williams, 2014), imposed accountability levers and governance structures on higher education institutions under what has become known as New Public Management (NPM) to re-engineer them as market-driven institutions (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Marginson and Wende, 2007; Busch, 2017). In a study on the UK higher education system, Robertson argued that the logics of corporatization, competitiveness and commercialization, actualized through an NPM regime imposed by UK government policies, have been absorbed to such an extent that "structurally predispose UK higher education institutions, over time, towards new regionalising and globalising horizons of action" (Robertson, 2010b, p.191), and significantly increasing the economic imperative for the international activities of UK higher education institutions. In another study, Olssen and Peters (2005), in their examination of the responses of higher education institutions to globalization and the neoliberal regime, found that "the traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with a institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits" (Ibid., 2005, p.313), representing a profound shift in the strategic drivers of higher education institutions.

These global market-driven structural trends and policies have had considerable influence on the shape of higher education system around the world. Firstly, the invasive spread of business-world language and ideas (Brennan, 2010) put considerable pressure on higher education in the Global North to reconsider their mission, structure and governance so as to enhance responsiveness, effectiveness, efficiency and performance. This had also an impact on the rationales behind Northern higher education institutions and aid agencies' engagement with higher education institutions, especially those from low-income and post-conflict countries. This topic will be further discussed in the next section to better focus on how to address the specific context of Myanmar.

1.7 International actors at the rescue of higher education

As mentioned earlier, policy makers argue that the political and social functions of higher education institutions are particularly important in low-income, conflict-affected contexts (Millican, 2017). Altbach suggests that academic communities in universities located in developing countries are unique in their capacity to participate in political, cultural and social dialogue in society by virtue of having not only the motivation, knowledge and commitment, but also access to the necessary technical skills (Altbach, 2013). Davies asserts a crucial role for higher education institutions in countries affected by conflict, arguing that, in order to transition out of conflict, universities are important in their contribution to "new ways of learning and living which is not to reproduce the same causes of conflict" (Davies, 2004, p.182). However, there is very little scholarly, proven empirical evidence showing the wider benefits of higher education for wider society (McMahon, 2004; Brennan, Durazzi and Sene, 2013). While it has been argued that separating the social and economic functions of higher education is misconceived (McArthur, 2011), an examination of the associated research reveals a divided literature. A recent review of academic studies published between 2003 and 2009 on the benefits of higher education found that "research evidence is unevenly distributed across higher education's different functions and contexts" (Brennan, Durazzi and Sene, 2013, p.4), with more literature focusing on benefits to the students (including health and earnings) than benefits to wider society (Ibid.; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). This finding is corroborated by the work of McMahon (2004), who revealed that scholars have paid very little attention to those aspects of societal benefit that cannot be monetized. Nevertheless, in the few studies that do exist, significant

benefits to wider society have been found (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). In one such study, Brennan, Durazzia and Sene (2013) conclude that "higher education attainment favours more racial tolerance, voter participation, trust between citizens" (Brennan, Durazzi and Sene, 2013, p.36).

Against this backdrop, there are two pivotal considerations that need to be put forward when considering the specific case of Myanmar, a country that policy makers and international academia considered in need of "rebuilding" in 2011 using education as one of the tools for action. As Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2016) argues, whenever international actors want to generate reform pressure, they set an agenda based on terms such as "international standards," "twenty-first century skills," and "best practices". They thereby exert pressure on the local state to borrow "lessons learned" from other educational systems (often defined as "international" or "global") and apply them to the local context, sometimes retroactively defining local problems to fit already-existing global solutions or reform packages. This model of "policy borrowing" is linked to the neoliberal drives that are affecting academia and the education sector at a global level. The second consideration is that, during international interventions in post-conflict state-building processes, the relationship between education and peacebuilding/state-building is often centered on the idea of providing education as a key social service capable of addressing past grievances and enhancing (output) legitimacy for national and international actors (McCandless, 2011). Educational policies are thus used as a barometer of a state's commitment to broader society: international donors measure and assess these indicators, using funding to encourage measures for social cohesion that often accompany the provision of education.

In Chapter V and the Conclusion, I point out how these pressures re-shaped Myanmar universities spaces to bring them more in line with models of governance based on power asymmetries between local and international academia.

1.8 Deploying existing frameworks and tools in a new context?

A higher education system is built to teach, conduct research, and carry out service activities for wider society. In carrying out these basic functions, it plays different roles. It can support economic and social development by fostering the production of human capital and the growth of a knowledge society; it can perpetuate, legitimize and reinforce the position of dominant élites in a society; or it can be a force for progressive social change and for creating a more "just society". Ultimately, each higher education system impacts (or not) the society in which it is embedded in different ways according to the mission and vision it pursues. This "ambiguity" makes higher education both an

interesting and a complex field of analysis. Higher education is an interesting field because the unpacking of the political tensions that play out in its spaces can shed light on various features of the political system and society in which it is embedded (as my work ultimately aims to do). At the same time, the fact that each system is different makes this unpacking quite complex. Context does matter: geographically, historically, and culturally.

Considering the specific Myanmar context, I argue that higher education policy development and implementation is the product of the actions of three different actors, and I use these as three categories of analysis. Looking at the actions of these specific actors, it is possible to unpack the shape and form that higher education has taken historically and how this has also affected developments and dynamics in the period under scrutiny here (2011-2021). Though inspired by Clark's "triangle of coordination" (Figure 5), my triangle of analysis has been tailor-made to reflect the socio-political context of Myanmar and contemporary factors (Clarks' model was developed in 1983). Therefore, the actors I consider are: "state authority", "student politics", and "international actors" (Figure 6).

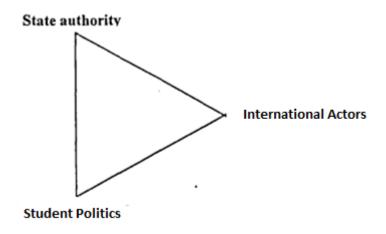


Figure 6. Framework of analysis of this work (By: L. Proserpio)

The first actor is "state authority". As elaborated in the introduction, Myanmar higher education institutions are public bodies managed by governmental authorities. In the next chapter, I underline when and how higher education has been used by different governments as a tool for building social and political legitimacy and when and how higher education has been considered (mostly) a threat to social and political legitimacy and actively dismantled. This provides a background for understanding the actions of the UPSD and NLD governments as described in Chapter III. The "academic oligarchy"

which in Clark' model is a separate category, is in my analysis included under "state authority". As explained in detail in Chapter II, in the Myanmar context, university professors are considered civil servants; for this reason, there is a blurred line between "state authority" and "academic oligarchy." ⁴² I am not arguing that professors do not have their own agency, but state control over their actions is very pervasive. Being "forced to retire" is a common practice and is a euphemism to describe a process in which a person is told to retire voluntarily to allow them to save face and avoid being fired. Melissa Crouch (2019) has reviewed all the written cases published in the official Myanmar Law Reports and a case of an economics professor who was "forced to retire" from her position at the University of Yangon Distance Education by the MoE. She lodged a written application with the Supreme Court to seek a writ of certiorari against the minister's decision⁴³. The professor argued that the minister acted beyond his power under the Civil Servant Law and the two constitutional rights of equal rights before the law and equal opportunity in public employment. For the first time, the Supreme Court declared the decision of a government minister to be unlawful; according to Crouch: "this success, however, was tempered by the fact that the Minister who had made the decision was deceased at the time the court decision was handed down, so the decision did not have any implications for the late Minister. This appears to have been an exceptional case."

I consider "student politics" as the second actors for two main reasons. First, in keeping with social movement scholarship, I acknowledge that students have political agency; student politics are inevitably influenced by the political institutions and higher education system in which they are embedded; at the same time, student politics matter and have an impact on the educational systems and society in which they are embedded. Second, as indicated in the introduction, it is a well-known fact that university student movements have represented Myanmar's nation-wide underground political opposition to the military regimes. By including them in my framework, I am able to frame why students played that role (also asking if they are continuing to play an oppositional role in the new political phase I am analyzing) and what impacts their actions have generated.

I consider "international actors" as the third category. In fact, at both theoretical and empirical levels, any academic system involves both local and global roots. As I argue in the next chapter, Myanmar higher education has been a product of British colonial rule and, until the 1960s, was deeply tied to the international educational arena. Advancing an isolationist policy, General Ne Win intentionally

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 $^{^{42}}$ A similar approach has been taken by Pad Nilphan (2005) in her analysis of the internationalization of Thai higher education.

⁴³ The case is referred as "Professor Daw Kyin Hte v Minister for Education (2013), Union Supreme Court of Myanmar (unreported case No. 290, 5 June 2014)".

cut these ties and Myanmar remained at the periphery of a globalizing and increasingly interconnected international academia for the subsequent decades, thereby creating a unique domestic educational setting. In Chapters III and V, I paint the full picture of the international actors who very quickly began to re-intervene in Myanmar higher education throughout the "transitional period", bringing global trends (which I have labelled internationalization, neoliberalism and the commodification of higher education) that were not yet part of the domestic discussion on education and thereby impacting the reform process significantly.

In the next chapter, this triangle of analysis guides my discussion of the history of the higher education in Myanmar. In relation to the "period of transition", I devote one chapter to each category (Chapter III is "state authority", Chapter IV "student politics", and Chapter V "international actors") and formulate my main findings on the interplay of these actors' actions in the conclusion.

CHAPTER II

MYANMAR'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter, I trace Myanmar's higher education in the period from its very foundation to the beginning of the political transition lying at the core of this work. Following the conceptual framework I have drawn in the previous chapter, my aim is to underline the historical role assigned to higher education, answering the question: what have been the vision(s) and discourse(s) around higher education in the different stages of Myanmar's modern history? In other words, what role has been played by universities as physical and intellectual spaces throughout the history of Myanmar? In doing so, I identify continuities and ruptures in the development of higher education at various historical junctures, bringing to light how higher education and university life have intertwined with conflict causes and processes of state formation and nation-building. For each historical period defined in this overview, I mainly focus on two aspects. On one hand, by cross-referencing multiple primary sources, I critically analyze the underlying debate around the laws/acts/bills/reforms through which higher education in Myanmar was molded and legislated. As part of this view, I underline when and how higher education was used by different governments as a tool for social and political legitimacy and when and how higher education was considered (mostly) a threat to social and political legitimacy and actively dismantled. On the other hand, I focus on people's reactions to governmental actions and, in particular, the mass protests often sparked by student grievances. Analyzing student movements' official documents, I look at the way they have framed their discourses around higher education vis-à-vis governmental plans and reforms. The interplay between governmental and student movement actions (including references to the role played by other international actors as well) in the higher education arena sheds light on the country's various historical social and political transformation: the rise of nationalism, the formation of national elites, the invention of traditions such as political activism in universities, and the transformation of Burmese political thought.

Before plunging into the analysis, I explain the reasons behind the periodization⁴⁴ I have chosen and the sources I have used. I start with an overview of education in pre-colonial times. Higher education was a product of colonial rule; at the same time, however, no discourse around education in Myanmar can be framed without reference to what is still today considered "traditional education". The British

⁴⁴ Selected works that cover the span of modern Burmese history include: Cady, 1958; Taylor, 1987; Thant Myint-U 2008 and 2019; Charney 2009.

Empire absorbed Myanmar in three phases in the period from 1826 to 1886⁴⁵, the year the major institutions of colonial rule were in place. In 1937, Myanmar was separated from India to enter into a short-lived era of "self-government without independence" (Charney, 2009) interrupted by the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. Eventually, Myanmar became independent in 1948. Colonial rule shaped higher education, and the contentious events occurring in the newly established universities had lost-lasting consequences in the history of Myanmar. I have decided to split my analysis of colonial times into two sections: the second and third. The second section encompasses the early debate on higher education (a debate that was linked to the outcomes of colonial education in India) and extends to the 1920, when the country's first university, Rangoon University⁴⁷, was founded under the University Act Bill to immediately become the locus of contentious politics and anticolonial struggle. As described in the third section, after the 1920 strike Rangoon University and Mandalay College (established in 1925) became laboratories for the development of "modern" Burmese nationalism. This politically-oriented, radical and militant cultural nationalism shaped the way Burmese people conceptualize the birth of their nation and perceive students as legitimate political actors in the national arena. The fourth section includes both the so-called first democratic period (1948-1958) and the caretaker regime (1958-1960). I define this timeframe as the period of (unfulfilled) expansion and exploration, when a lack of unity hindered education reforms despite the country's having achieved independence. During the Ne Win era (1962-1988, including the Revolutionary Council and Burma Socialist Program Party periods), higher education was transformed via two waves of reforms. The fifth section sheds light on these reforms that completely re-shaped higher education to provide a ready-to-use workforce for the socialist economy and political control over students. After the "1988 Uprising", the newly established State Law and Order Restoration Council implemented a set of measures to effectively ensure contentious actions could no longer be enacted, proving its strength as a "high capacity undemocratic regime" (Fink, 2001). The sixth section focuses on the long-lasting consequences these actions on higher education through to the beginning of the political transition around which this research revolves.

This chapter fills a gap in the scholarship: it is quite difficult to locate literature on the development of higher education in Myanmar which is not focused specifically on student protest and activism;

⁴⁵ In 1826, the coastal regions of Tavoy and Arakan were annexed after a two-year war. Lower Burma was gained in 1852 and all these territories were consolidated under one administration in 1862. Only at the end of the third war of 1885–6, the heartland and throne of the Burman kingdom, along with the vast plateau to the east and mountains to the north and west populated by other groups, were decreed a province of India.

⁴⁶ As cursory reference, 1876 can be considered as the first year when higher education was accessible in Myanmar territory. In fact, in that year, the Government High School began to offer higher studies courses and its students were able to sit for the entrance examination of Calcutta University for the first time.

⁴⁷ The name of the university was changed in University of Yangon in 1989. Therefore, I use the name Rangoon University in the first five sections and University of Yangon (UY) in the last one.

indeed, the topic of student activism is comparatively better covered than the evolution of the higher education field more generally. Moreover, it offers a new lens (the history of higher education) which can be used to gather new insights into the history of colonial and modern Myanmar. My work brings together an extended body of primary sources and the existing secondary sources that tangentially discuss higher education. Starting from colonial times, I have employed primary sources including governmental reports, political party manifestos, student movement documents and local newspaper articles. Among the secondary sources, it is worth mentioning two important collective sources that had not been extensively researched to date. The first is the Journal of the Burma Research Society (JBRS), which was the periodical of the "Burma Research Society" (BRS) founded in 1910 by civil servants and academic amateurs with an "Orientalist" bent (Ballantyne, 2016) as well as Burmese intellectual elites⁴⁸. Both European and Burmese contributors wrote about and translated Burmese history and philology, inscriptions and chronicles, and a few articles I have selected discuss education policies. Secondly, important information on education issues can be gleaned from several unpublished thesis written by students and scholars of the Burmese Diaspora. These works, mostly written between the '70s and the '90s by young intellects fleeing the crackdown on higher education in their country, can be seen as a collective body of data that deserves more scrutiny.

2.1 Education in pre-colonial times

As Nick Cheesman (2003) notes, the words for "school" and "monastery" in Burmese are identical; only contemporary adjectival prefixes distinguish between the two. The word for "education" is also a product of the monasteries, derived from a Pali word connected to learning, wisdom and knowledge and ultimately the ability to distinguish right from wrong and to see cause and effect (Win Mon, 1967). Pre-colonial states ⁴⁹ did not directly manage schooling. Broadly speaking, pre-colonial Myanmar can be said to have had two educational traditions: a highly literate Buddhist/monastic tradition and a non-Buddhist oral educational tradition. The Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and Burman had strong Buddhist educational and philosophical traditions whereas the Karen, Chin, and Kachin relied largely on oral traditions to educate their youth (Kawl Thang Vuta, 1983; Cung Lian Hup, 1993). As discussed in the next section, the cultural institutions of non-Buddhist communities were more

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⁴⁸ Carol Ann Boshier 2017 offers an interesting analysis of the BRS as a cross-boundary social organization that reflected an inherently local Burmese response to the colonial rule. She reflect on how both the society and the journal mirrored the "cultural nationalist" that was rising in Myanmar in the first two decades of the 20th century.

⁴⁹ During the pre-colonial period, Myanmar was a cluster of kingdoms and smaller political communities. The pre-colonial history of Burma is a history of rulers from various kingdoms vying for political dominance over one another. On the eve of the first Anglo-Burman war (1824) the Burman rulers had consolidated their control over the entire country, having successfully invaded the Mon country in the lower part and along the southern coast of Burma, the Rakhine rulers on the country's western border and the Shan kings known as *Chaofa* on the eastern hills.

influenced by Christian missionaries' early efforts to "educate". In this overview, I focus mainly on the education provided in monasteries governed by the Sangha⁵⁰ that has been built to be the dominant traditional education and has been considered such to date. Monastic schooling may have begun around the 11th century, though archeological and textual evidences suggests that its origins lay with a Mon-dominated kingdom that developed some centuries earlier, and by the 16th century it was well established throughout the country (Kaung, 1963).

Before the founding of the colonial state, in most areas of modern Myanmar families would send their boys⁵¹ to the monasteries to receive adequate schooling, that is, an education perceived to meet their day-to-day spiritual, social, economic and cultural needs. Every community, in the capital city but especially in rural areas, had at least one Buddhist monastery⁵² which also served as a community center. In practice, monastic education was characterized by a blend of both secular and other-worldly types of knowledge. In his *A History of Monastic Education in Burma*, Than Htut states that monastic education had a focus on "character training" and an equally important second focus on producing "self-regulating individuals and equipping them with various branches of knowledge which would assist them in making a living" (Than Htut, 1980, p. 84). Tracing the history of monastic education along the lines of the different Burman dynasties/kingdoms, Than Htut shows that the tension between more secular schooling and Buddhist schooling with a decidedly (Buddhist) Enlightenment-oriented focus created various tensions and fractions that triggered the creation of different sects. On these

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⁵⁰ According to Donald M. Seekins (2017), the Sangha is the Buddhist monastic order whose members live according to strict rules (*vinaya*) and have the solemn responsibility to preserve and promulgate the teaching of Gautama Buddha. They have been the most highly respected group in Burmese society since at least the Pagan Dynasty (9th-13rd centuries) period, and in contemporary Myanmar they still function as an important social institution. The Sangha in Myanmar is divided into nine orders, of which the largest by far, containing almost 90 percent of monks, is the Thudhamma.

⁵¹ Girls had no access to monastic education, but it is not accurate to say that they were denied education altogether. There is historical documentation showing that a parallel system of lay schools was developed to educate girls, but scholarly information is scarce (Kaung, 1963). Various British colonial officers underlined that Burmese society granted women more social and political status than other nations they had encountered, but the role of women in pre-colonial times is a field of inquiry that still needs to be developed through in-depth scholarly literature. It has been found that, as early as the first Burmese dynasty in Pagan (1044-1287), women held various political positions. Women owned property and engaged in business activities, and they also participated in scholarly endeavors. Furthermore, there were female magistrates and women communal chiefs and local administrators (Furnivall, 1957; Nyunt-Han, 1972). The most detailed, historically grounded study of the political role and public status of Burmese women in pre-colonial times is the unpublished PhD dissertation by Nyunt-Han (1972).

⁵² The first statistical data available on monastic education comes from the Annual Report and Census Report of the British Government, currently available at the British Library (British Burma, 1868; Census of India, 1891; Government of Burma, 1940). These data are difficult to reconcile and not always consistent, but some of them can be cited to provide a cursory portrait of the situation. In 1870 (in the parts of Myanmar already conquered by the British), there were 3,438 monasteries schools with 15,980 novice scholars and 27,793 lay scholars. At that time, the overall population of the country was 2,487,000. Instead, the Census of 1891 indicates that in Upper Burma there were 10,440 monasteries for 10,981 villages, as compared to 4,883 monasteries for 10,805 villages in Lower Burma. Since Lower Burma had been absorbed by the British before Upper Burma, these data might also indicate that the number of monasteries decreased following the British conquest, as discussed in the next section.

occasions, the royal administrators in charge of Religious Affairs had to intervene in the various intellectual and political disputes that took place amongst competing currents of Buddhist thought.

Alicia Turner (2017) suggests that monastic education was a system of learning centered around doing, performing and speaking. In fact, much of the learning the boys gained was from their participation in the monks' daily rituals. Beginning at a young age, boys spent most of their time with monks and went on to form a hierarchical bond. The monastic system of education clearly placed a premium on literacy. At the same time, learning to read and write or simply absorb content were not the educational goals of this kind of education; rather, the true goal was to generate due respect for the text thanks to frequent memorization and repetition. Expressing reverence for the texts by reading and copying them out was a means of paying respect to the Buddha and his teachings and of producing merit among students. Ultimately, monastic education was aimed at generating a high rate of literacy⁵³ among the kingdom's young population in order to preserve Buddhism.

Kaung⁵⁴ offers an overview of the value of pre-colonial education in his thesis, which was written in 1920 but not published until 1963 in the JBRS. Kaung was one of the Burmese scholars of the "cultural nationalism" era. Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand that his work was very much concerned with establishing a clear demarcation between the value of education before and after British rule:

"Of "useful knowledge" as conceived by the English officials who later sought to improve their teaching by introducing "the elements of Western knowledge", the pupils learnt nothing more than arithmetic. But on the other hand, a thorough grounding in culture, founded on the study of the religious literature was given to all who stayed on in the monasteries after the elementary course while even those boys who received only the elementary course were benefited by training in character given, first, through the carrying out of the various duties connected with the common life of the monastery, and, secondly, through the actual study of the texts. Moreover, all who went through Monastic education came into contact with certain ideals which the later English schools, by the very fact of the narrow vocational aims of both the schools and pupils alike, could not give. It was education for

⁵³ As discussed in the next section, beginning from its first encounters with European travelers in the 16th century, Myanmar was perceived the most literate nation in the East (and sometimes more literate of some West countries).

⁵⁴ Kaung (1904-1957) was one of the first graduate of Rangoon University. After his BA in Myanmar, he continued his education in London. "History of Education in Burma before and after the conquest" was the thesis for his MA in Education that he completed in 1929.

education's sake, and in accordance with the belief of the people that learning was an end in itself and worth a strenuous pursuit to possess it for its own sake" (Kaung, 1963, p.31).

Even more than other scholars, Kaung stresses the difference between what went on to become English education, instruction focused on "useful knowledge" (what could also be defined as "vocational") and the Burmese tradition of education built on "character training".

It is clear that the pre-colonial monastic education transmitted standardized cultural and intellectual content across all sectors of society. Although such education cannot be said to have been completely free (both students and their parents were asked to contribute to the wellbeing of the monastery), it was accessible to multiple (male) components of the society. In all available accounts, monasteries are described as separated from nearby houses but never far from the villages and never gated. The monks and people of the villages depended on each other and the education of children was one of the aspects that established, enhanced and preserved community participation and support for the well-being of the monasteries and, ultimately, the Sangha. Aimed at building a national Buddhist character, schooling was the link between people and their religion. At the same time, schooling was also an integral part of the relationship between the state and Sangha, a relationship that was both cooperative and competitive (Cheesman, 2003). By providing a sense of discipline and stressing respect for tradition and hierarchy, schooling allowed rulers to maintain control over their subjects in way that was beneficial to both the state and the Sangha.

There is no account or report on Myanmar written by early European travelers⁵⁵, missionaries or even British colonial officers in the first half of the 19th century that does not praise the country's high level of literacy and education. Myanmar was widely perceived by British colonial officers, and by most of the Empire thanks to circulating reports,⁵⁶ as the most literate country in the area British colonizers defined as "the East". At the same time, education in Myanmar started to change radically with the incorporation of the kingdom into the British Empire and Burmese social structure changed along with its educational system.

⁵⁵ European travelers began to visit Burma from the 16th century onwards. The earliest report on Burmese education was written by Ralph Fitch in 1580 (published by John Horton Ryley in 1899). The most well-known/frequently quoted description is probably the one appearing in Father Sangermano's "A Description of the Burmese Empire" published in 1833.

⁵⁶ The Victorian value system considered education (literacy in particular) as a marker of civilization and modernity. Building on descriptions by European travelers, British popular magazines ran articles on Burmese literacy and monastic education. As Turner (2017) notes, even the driest of texts on education, the government's *Report on Public Instruction in Burma* (Government of Burma. 1940) was summarized and reported by British journals.

When the British began conquering Myanmar, they initially relied on religious corporations before eventually setting up their own schooling system. Religious corporations (i.e. Christian missionaries) had been in Myanmar before the British (since the 17th century) and they were the first to create a new form of schooling. The famous American Baptist Adoniram Judson⁵⁷ had been in Myanmar since 1813 and founded a regular educational program in 1830. The cultural institutions of the non-Buddhist communities proved more amenable to the educational efforts of Europeans and American Baptist Missionaries. As a matter of fact, it was the Christian missionaries who were by and large responsible for inventing writing systems for these non-Buddhist communities (Cug Lian Hup, 1993). In 1864, the Secretary of Indian Government assigned Arthur Phayre⁵⁸, Chief Commissioner of Lower Myanmar, the task of submitting a plan for education to be implemented in Lower Myanmar (British Burma, 1868). Phayre's project involved establishing Anglo-Vernacular Schools in collaboration with Buddhist monks. He encouraged the government to gift the monks with government textbooks, hoping to merge their curricula with Western-oriented knowledge. As Turner (2017) notes, this program met with mixed reactions on both sides of the colonial divide. A minority of monks welcomed the books and new curriculum. Monastic resistance to the plan was much more common, however, and fell into two broad types: those who expressed no open resistance to the plan but did not comply with the rules, and those who rejected the plan and justified their opposition by defining the government's efforts as harmful to Buddhism. On the other side, as can clearly be seen from reading the Reports on Public Instruction in Burma at the British Library (Government of Burma, 1940), the mindset of British colonial officers frequently shifted from outbursts of optimism at seeing the monasteries on the verge of becoming great schools immediately followed by despair that the system would never work given the laziness and unapproachability of monks. In 1866, the British government established the Department of Public Instruction and the education plan became an even more a massive effort with an expanding number of Anglo-Vernacular Schools against the backdrop of a rapidly decreasing number of monastic schools. The rationale behind the massive British educational effort was simple: colonial officers needed a class of "native subordinates" who could aid them by acting as middle-men between the colonial administration and local population (Furnivall⁵⁹, 1948). At this stage, colonial authorities deliberately formulated educational policies

⁵⁷ Judson is mostly famous nowadays for having been the first person to translate the bible into Burmese.

⁵⁸ Arthur Purves Phayre (1812 – 1885) was the first Commissioner of British Burma (1862–1867). In 1883, he wrote "History of Burma: from the earliest time to the end of the first war with British India", an important source of information about Burma in pre-colonial times.

⁵⁹ John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) arrived in Myanmar in 1902 as part of the Indian Civil Service. Progressing through the ranks of the ICS, he became the doyen of revenue and land settlements in Myanmar and eventually rose to

according to which a tiny segment of indigenous elite students was to be trained in Western/"modern" schools so they could be employed, albeit as clerks (and later low-level administrators) in the British colonial administration and European firms. Therefore, graduates from Anglo-vernacular schools were soon entering government service at the expense of traditional leaders (Furnivall, 1943), thereby gaining prospects for authority and wealth⁶⁰. As Aye Kyaw puts it:

"To speak English and to belong to a class of persons – Burmese in blood and color, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect – had become the badge of high social status. In short, foreign languages and cultures had pervasively penetrated Burmese society, particularly urban Burmese society" ⁶¹ (Aye Kyaw 1993, p.11).

Burmese desirous of social advantage abandoned the monastic schools in favor of the alternative⁶²: once the bastion of learning and prestige, the monasteries rapidly became a poor man's preserve (Zarni, 1998).

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the rank of commissioner in 1919. In 1910, he was among the founders of the BRS together with his longtime friend U May Oung. When he retired from the ICS, he was serving president of the committee appointed to examine Burma's land revenue system. In 1925, he founded the Burma Book Club and Education Extension Association. Furnivall remained in Myanmar till 1931 before leaving for a period of study and research in various countries. He returned to Burma after independence and served as an advisor in U Nu's government until his death. Furnivall is considered the first historian of colonial Burma, see Trager 1963.

⁶⁰ As Kaung puts it: "The more practical and shrewd parents, who were also often less attached to native culture, sent their son to the English schools knowing that English education was a good investment [...] because they knew that well-paid appointments were going begging for want of Burmans with some knowledge of English and accounts. The demand of subordinates on the part of the government and the trading firms thus created the demand for English education among the parents for their children in the towns, and thus the course of the development of "Anglo-Vernacular" education was set and progress assured" (Kaung, 1963, p. 75).

⁶¹ These words echo the debate around education that unfolded in the first half of the 19th century in British India, a debate that comprised two different streams. One was represented by British scholars and officials dubbed "Orientalists" who pushed for preserving "native customs" and languages in any educational programs set up for local people. In particular, the Orientalist group advocated for the use of "indigenous" languages as the media of instruction in Westernstyle colonial elementary schools. However, a second group of administrators began to argue for the use of English as the language medium of instruction, as part of the liberal program for social change in India based on scientific and utilitarian principles. This group, the so-called "Anglicizers", drew inspiration from Thomas Macaulay's famous 1835 text Minute on Education in which he argued that: "English is better worth knowing than Sanskrit or Arabic; that the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanskrit or Arabic; that neither as the languages of law, nor as the languages of religion have the Sanskrit and Arabic any peculiar claim to our encouragement; that it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars; and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed" (Macaulay, 1871, p. 16). As spokesman for the liberal position, Macaulay argued for the use of the English language in schools on the assumption that those Indians who were Western-educated could then "diffuse" their Western knowledge to the remainder of their countrymen over time. Echoes of this ideological debate reverberated throughout all the British Settlements and many European merchants, supported by the English-language press, argued that English should be promoted as the lingua franca and medium of school instruction.

⁶² According to Than Htut (1980), in 1889-90 there were 2,327 registered Buddhist educational institutions as opposed to 704 registered secular schools. In 1933-34 the number of Buddhist schools had dropped to 928 in contrast to 4,967 secular/modern schools.

Soon enough, this new class of wealthy Burmese wished to purse secondary or college degrees. Until 1874, only elementary schools existed; at that point, the better ones were converted into high schools; this was the case of the Government High School in Rangoon, that, in 1876, started to offer secondary courses. From that point onward, pupils were able to go to the school to sit for the entrance exam for Calcutta University (from 1968 they were able to take the exam at the Department of Education founded in Rangoon in 1868). Beginning in 1878, college-level instruction was offered at the government high school and a college department was opened there in 1880. Rangoon College was officially affiliated with Calcutta University and students could study up to the B.A. level, even if not many of them did. Alongside this secular establishment, the Baptist Cushing High School opened a college department in 1894 called Baptist College (Judson College from 1918 onwards) and this institution was also affiliated with Calcutta University. Why were the colleges of Myanmar affiliated with Calcutta University? Tracing its long history, Prasanta Kumar Bose (1973) explains that, when Calcutta University was founded in 1857, it was responsible for providing higher education for one third of India as well as parts of Asia outside India (see Figure 7). Pramathanath Bandyopadhyay (1957) calculated that the total number of colleges affiliated with Calcutta University from 1857 until 1947 to be 274 (including both religious and governmental institutions). After this period, Calcutta University's responsibility was redefined to cover only Bengal, then West Bengal and finally a specific portion of West Bengal. The affiliation system basically meant that the students attending colleges in British India were graded by Calcutta University teachers by means of exams. It was a higher education system based on the simple fact that the British colonial system needed "embryonic bureaucrats" with a proven knowledge of English and standardized skills to manage administrative affairs (i.e. law, economic principles).



Figure 7. Extent of the areas affiliated with Calcutta University. (Bandyopadhyay, 1957)

In 1881, an Education Syndicate (modelled after the ones in Indian universities) was formed to represent the educational interests of Burma (Burma Educational Syndicate, 1882). On multiple occasions (1892, 1901), the syndicate pushed for the idea of making Myanmar's universities autonomous, but the government of India was not in favor of this idea. In 1910, a formal request was presented to combine the two colleges into a teaching university with a network of dormitories. Reporting on an official meeting of the Syndicate with a number of stakeholders, *The Rangoon Gazette* of 21 February 1910⁶³, offers four pages of discussion about this plan. The account offers interesting insights into the debate. Firstly, the articles present the number of students enrolled in the colleges of Myanmar that year: 210 at Rangoon College and "about 50" at Baptist College. These numbers are a striking indicator of the elite character of higher education at that point in the history

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⁶³ Report of a Meeting at the Crushing Hall, 21 February 1910, *Rangoon Gazette*, British Library, System number: 008627926

of Myanmar. Secondly, in the words of J. G. Covernton, the Director of Public Instruction was clear that the needs of the colonial rulers ("the rapid commercial development of the country [...] which creates the demand for a large number of men with moderate education") were being sufficiently met by the affiliation system with India in place at the time. The main obstacle to making higher education autonomous was indicated as a lack of qualified teachers, pointing to continuing widespread mistrust in the skills and mindset of Burmese teachers. A third point can be drawn from May Oung's remarks. May Oung was member of the BRS, one of the pioneering figures of "cultural nationalism" and a Cambridge-trained barrister. His position was that Burma actually needed its own independent university to as to assert its standing as a Buddhist country wholly different from India. It is no surprise that May Oung's first suggestion was the creation of an Oriental Studies Department in the country's newly established university.

May Oung embodied the growing concern harbored by a segment of the urban Burmese upper class that "modern schooling" was severing students from their cultural and philosophical roots. This faction of the Burmese elite founded an organization called the "Young Men's Buddhist Association" (YMBA) that proved pivotal in the early history of Rangoon University. Before an audience of Western-educated Burmese at YMBA in Rangoon in 1908, May Oung described how the "modern Burman" must retain Buddhism's traditional beliefs and practices, despite pressure on him to fit into the new social structures created by colonial power: "unless they prepared themselves to meet it, to overcome it, and to apply it to their own needs, their national character, their institutions, their very existence as a distinct nationality would be swept away, submerged, irretrievably lost" (a quote from May Oung's speech known as *The Dawn of Nationalism*⁶⁴). May Oung saw the danger of the (dominant) Buddhist national character decaying under the influence of the new British values imposed in part by the education system. In response, he revived the cultural notion that "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist" and this framing gained currency amongst Buddhist communities. In moving forward these concerns about cultural and educational decay and the ability of the Burmese youth to cope with the various economic, cultural, social and political forces acting against Buddhist communities in the country, early nationalists such as May Oung were building solidarity and alliances only among Western-educated elites in urban areas. Many of these were wealthy urbanites, government workers, lawyers, and traders. Their wealthy, educated urban background limited the

⁶⁴ This lecture by May Oung was first reported in the *Rangoon Gazette* on 10 August 1908 (British Library, System number: 008627926) but later published in the JBRS together with a foreword by J.S. Furnivall (see May Oung and Furnivall, 1950).

scope of their nationalist vision. The next section examines the formation of new elites who were responsible for creating more broad visions of a Burmese nation.

With the outbreak of WWI, all plans for an autonomous university were more or less suspended, to be taken up again in 1917 in a different political and ideological environment. Some authors argue that British colonial administrators were more inclined to accept the idea of establishing a university in Myanmar after the upsurge of political and social unrest at Calcutta University. This might be partially the case but, delving into the documents of British offices, it is clear that after WWI the colonial state became more engaged in the project of "governmentality".⁶⁵ The colonial state was more actively and decisively looking to shape orderly and self-regulating subjects who would internalize and embody the values of liberal modernity as envisioned in colonial models. This marked a turning point in British educational policy in the country. Schools and colleges were no longer used only to create the workforce needed for the country's economy, but also to inculcate a sense of loyalty in imperial subjects. For this purpose, between August 1916 and January 1917, the "Imperial Idea⁶⁶ Committee" was formed and chaired by Harcourt Butler⁶⁸ (Government of Burma, 1917). Butler was deeply involved in the construction of Myanmar's first university:

"Owing to the influence and teaching of the monks, Burma is relatively advanced in primary education in the vernacular, but in higher English education it is far behind India. [...] In 1916, I was able to secure a valuable site of over 400 acres in the best part of the suburbs of Rangoon for a university, and during my second term of office I was able, with the help of my Burman colleagues, the big European firms and the generous people of

⁶⁵ See Foucault, 2009.

⁶⁶ The concept of the imperial idea is defined in Chapter I of the Report as "The Imperial idea, as this Committee understands the phrase, denotes a sense of the unity of the Empire, the national and peoples composing which, despite diversities of creed and race, are bound together by common principles of justice and right, and find within the Empire by self-sacrifice and co-operation the best means of national self-development. Of this idea the King-Emperor is the personification and the flag the symbol. Although the aims of the movement which has called this Committee into being would appear to be self-evident and require neither justification nor explanation, yet the fact that no systematic endeavour has previously been made in this province to foster the growth of the Imperial idea in schools and colleges, renders it desirable that we should explain the lines on which we have carried out our investigations and the general principles on which we have based this Report" (Government of Burma 1917, p. 10).

⁶⁷ This is how the "Imperial Idea Committee" describes itself in the report: "This Committee was appointed to ascertain to what extent it would be predictable to encourage by co-ordination and direct methods the growth of the Imperial Idea and of a sense of personal loyalty to the King-Emperor in Schools and Colleges, and to make definite recommendations for rendering such action effective." (Government of Burma 1917, 1)

⁶⁸ Spencer Harcourt Butler (1869 – 1938) was an officer of the Indian Civil Service. The Government of India had appointed Butler as the first Member for Education in 1910 with a seat on the Viceroy's Executive Council. He was lieutenant-governor of Burma from 1915 to 1917 and later Governor of Burma from 1923 to 1927. He is still known for his role in opening of University of Medicine 1 (Yangon) in 1927.

Burma, to collect about half a million pounds sterling for an endowment fund. The buildings of the University are now approaching completion. In advanced English education, however, the Burmans are still some forty or fifty years behind present-day Indian standards. This deficiency in higher education accounts for Burman backwardness in political matters" (Butler, 1932, pp. 654-655).

University life was envisaged along the lines of the committee's vision of education as summarized in these passages:

"The education that is required falls under three heads - Individual, National and Imperial. [...] It follows that the individual must be taught both in his school and in his home that the quality that matters to a man is not obedience or docility but character, that is, self-reliance, self-respect, a high sense of duty towards others, grasps of and fidelity to principle and right.

[...]

In the second place it should be the aim of all schools and colleges to inculcate in their students a sane and enthusiastic national spirit. [...] He should be in fact encouraged to adopt for his motto "Burma for Burmans" within the Empire.

In the third place he should be taught to recognize that both the liberty and the character-building of the individual and also both the preservation of the past and the potentialities for the future of his country depend upon the maintenance of its connection with the Empire, the whole force of which is available for their protection from outside assault.

[...]

In this system of education, the essential basis is the love of country which must be inculcated in all students to the utmost of the teacher's power" (Government of Burma 1917, pp. 15-16).

"Burma for Burmans" was the "cultural nationalism" motto that was used here as a rhetorical middle ground, given that education was clearly a tool to bind the Burmese people to the Empire. The committee envisaged a series of actions 69 in the cultural and educational sphere, including the establishment of "Burma University". Why, then, did the committee believe it was necessary to set up a university in Myanmar? First, it was needed to guarantee a "future supply of professors, schoolmasters, journalists, administrators, lawyers and other moulders of public opinion"; second, it maintained that "the University can become a radiating centre from which feelings of national patriotism and Imperial loyalty can be diffused all over the province" (Ibid., 1917, p. 53). To fulfil these goals in the university, the most important course subjects were imperial or quasi-imperial studies, namely civics, history, geography and economics. These subjects had to be taught by "men of British descent from some British University [...] but, as a school of national and Imperial ideals is developed in the province under their influence, there is no reason why all these posts should not ultimately be filled by Burmans" (Ibid., 1917, p. 42). Creating a university was a means to ensure control over the past, even more important than exercising control over the future. Those who controlled the past, that is, had the power to interpret history, would also hold the power to control the present and, by extension, the future. Acknowledging the recommendation of the committee, the

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⁶⁹ This is the summary list of the actions envisaged by the Committee: "Recent celebrations of Empire Day in towns and schools in Burma have indicated the existence of a considerable Imperial feeling. Hitherto there has been no systematic endeavour to foster and to fix this feeling. Sir Harcourt Butler considers that the time has arrived to encourage by coordination and direct methods the growth of the Imperial idea and of a sense of personal loyalty to the King-Emperor in schools and colleges. In His Honour's opinion every scholar and student should be taught to feel that he is a member of a world-wide Empire comprising members of numerous races and nationalities professing various religions, and all united under His Majesty King-Emperor.

⁽¹⁾ It is possible to utilize all forms of instruction, visual, ceremonial, literary, oral and dramatic, to attain this object. The following scheme gives some outline of the methods which might be adopted:

⁽i) The widest possible distribution of portraits of Their Majesties and the Royal Family;

⁽ii) The provision of Union Jacks for all schools, with instruction concerning the Union Jack, flag drill and action songs with flags; lessons in saluting the flag and the hoisting of the flag on Imperial anniversaries;

⁽iii) The special celebration of Empire Day, commencing with parades and loyal speeches, followed by fêtes, tournaments, visits to museums, zoological gardens, interesting places or monuments, water-falls or objects of natural beauty;

⁽iv) Celebrations of special occasions, such as the King's and Queen's Birthdays, Durbar Day, and other suitable historical anniversaries;

⁽v) The introduction of items of Imperial significance in such functions such as "speech days", "opening days", "prize givings" and other school and colleges events;

⁽vi) Cinema or magic lantern exhibitions of royal processions, incidents in royal public and private life, Imperial events, State ceremonies, the Army and Navy and the leading centres of the Empire;

⁽vii) Visits, when possible, to places of interest, parades or reviews of troops, docks and ships (especially warships);

⁽viii) The teaching of songs and poems inculcating the Imperial spirit, love of country, or other patriotic motives; a competition with suitable rewards to endeavour to obtain a national song suitable for Burma as part of the Empire;

⁽ix) History, geography and reading lessons on the structure, growth, extent importance and meaning of the Empire and the relation of Burma to the Empire;

⁽x) Systematic lectures by teachers and lecturers on various aspects of the Empire and the Imperial Idea;

⁽xi) The preparation of suitable text-books;

The performance of patriotic plays, especially those touching on events in Imperial and Burmese history." (Government of Burma 1917, pp. 5-6).

"University Act of 1920" merged the two existing colleges and created the first full-fledged residential university in Myanmar: Rangoon University. Unsurprisingly, the campus was built in the typical British campus style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: red bricks buildings dispersed over a large area located in a residential area set aside for colonial civil service personnel and wealthy Burmese, a "gated community" that was secluded, isolated and secure.

Looking at the *Rangoon Gazette* of December 1920⁷¹ (the month of the university's inauguration), one might expect a triumphant report of the inaugural events. This was not the case, however: coverage of the university inauguration was drowned out by the first student strike of national proportions erupting just four days after the cutting of the ribbon. The immediate cause of the first strike was the fact that access to the university was so highly restricted. The newly established university was economically ⁷², socially and ideologically alien to the needs of the Burmese population as perceived by the newly enrolled students. Ultimately, the strike reflected general discontent with colonial rule on the part of the dominant Buddhist elite communities. As Aye Kyaw puts it:

"Thus Burma's educational system offered a tiny window to the world for a limited number of Burmese. Having been given the opportunity to view the world from this vantage point, local elites began to see the colonial government as oppressive" (Aye Kyaw 1993, p. 19).

The *Rangoon Gazette* reported that the university strikers were soon joined by high school students throughout Burma. This was the very first organized challenge against British rule since the end of the wars and it touched a nerve in the people. Various letters by the Anglo community in Yangon were sent to the *Rangoon Gazette* expressing concern and disbelief.

One of the most important outcomes of the strike was the establishment of the National Education Committee which in turn launched the National Education Movement. In line with the "cultural nationalism" ideology, the movement had the clearly defined aim of hybridizing the existing

⁷¹ Rangoon Gazette, December, 13, 2020 and December, 27, 2020, British Library, System number: 008627926

 $^{^{70}\} Full\ text\ available\ here:\ https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/burma-act-ix-1920-the-university-of-range on-act-ix-1920-the-university-of-range on-act-ix-1920-the-university-of-ract-ix-1920-the-university-of-range on-act-ix-1920-the-university-$

⁷²People with menial jobs earned between 10-20 rupees a month while the salaries of police inspectors, clerical workers, and doctors were under 100 rupees. For a university student, the living costs and monthly tuition amounted to about 60 rupees a month. A great majority of those who completed high school simply could not go on to the university. Given these expenses, university education was accessible only to the children of high-level colonial administrators, land-owners, and other wealthy urban families (Zarni, 1998).

curriculum that marginalized the dominant Buddhist culture with Buddhist values and knowledge and expanding the educational access. This movement gave rise to a short-lived National University established in Yangon (Aye Kyaw, 1993). The national education movement went on to spread throughout the country and national schools sprang up with support from local Buddhist communities. According to Aye Kyaw, many of the student activists never resumed their studies at the university, giving up their personal advancement in the colonial social ladder to work instead as nationalist teachers. The nationalist leaders, who later occupied the center stage in the Burmese anti-colonial independence struggle, as well as other prominent nationalist writers and thinkers, were products of these national schools (Htin Aung, 1967). Although the movement faded away within a few years, there remained a number of national schools around the country and, more importantly, the movement had stirred up a nationalist sentiment among the public. The 1920 university strike had profound repercussions: it marked the entry of the country's elite students into national politics and the beginning of contentious politics around higher education in Myanmar. The "Imperial Idea" inculcated in the elitist university structure acted as a catalyst for dissent, provoking more militant activity by the students protesting the colonial government's overall management of education. Inspired by early Buddhist Burmese nationalists, students wanted more from their education than being made fit for subaltern jobs; they wanted an education geared towards Burmese requirements, instruction in their own (Buddhist) history and literature, and an affirmation of their own (Buddhist) identity. In the following section, I examine the rise of a different Burmese nationalism and new student contentious politics tactics in the first two decades of the history of the country's higher education system.

2.3 The rise of "radical" nationalism in university spaces

According to Nyi Nyi⁷³ (1964), when Rangoon University was established it hosted 829 students and 6 professors. With the 1920 Students' Strike, the number fell to 331 (as of 31 March 1921). However, by the academic year 1923-24 the number of students had risen again to 1,026, to reach a total of 1,550 students and 21 professors at the end of the first decade of Myanmar higher education. During the second decade, the numbers remained essentially stable: higher education in Myanmar did not

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⁷³ Born in 1930, Nyi Nyi graduated from Rangoon University in 1951 with a B.Sc. Honors Degree in Geology with First Class Honours and from London University, Imperial College of Science & Technology with a Ph.D. from London University and a D.I.C. from Imperial College. He served as Lecturer and later a Professor of Geology at Rangoon University. He also held positions at the Ministry of Education, first Director General of Higher Education and later Deputy Minister of Education as part of the Ne Win government.

expand again until the post-independence period, remaining instead a place for elite youth. After the 1920 strike, a bill to amend the University of Rangoon Act 1920 was introduced in the Burma Legislative Council in November 1923. The University of Rangoon Act as amended in 1924 entailed, among other elements, and system of affiliation for colleges in other Myanmar cities and an enlarged council that also included representatives of the Burmese people's "popular interests" and public bodies. As amended, the act appears to have satisfied the demands of student leaders, and as a concrete result Mandalay College was established in 1925 and the Teachers' Training College and Medical College in 1930. In 1927, University Chancellor Harcourt Butler appealed to the general public for donations and gifts to establish an Endowment Fund for the university so that it could become an autonomous body. This fund supported the construction of the Rangoon University Student Union (RUSU) building. The construction began in 1929 and was completed in 1930, the year considered the date of RUSU establishment.

As one of the outcomes of the 1920 strike, the University Student Union was engaged in organizing debates and activities throughout the 1920s. In an academic world that was not only elitist but also predominantly male, Aye Kyaw reports that female students⁷⁴ rose to the upper ranks of union leadership at the end of the decade. As soon as students and university governance joined hands to officially form RUSU, the Union became a more politically mature organization. In this case as well, however, the political maturity in question was not what the colonial or university authorities had wished for. Modelled after the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, it is clear from Nyi Nyi's account that the governmental vision for the union was embodied in its official constitution:

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⁷⁴ As Aye Kyaw's is one of the very few references to the history of higher education in Myanmar to employ a gender perspective, I cite it here at length: "One interesting feature of the union leadership was the presence of Ma Thein May, a woman student as vice-president. Her election in 1927 marked a departure from traditional Burmese leadership practices and constituted a tribute to the leadership quality of women students. The male students thought their female colleagues should be encouraged to participate as equals in civil and political life. The following year the women students, who number 105, showed more interest in the election. Seven women contested the two seats allotted to women's constituency as against three the previous year. By way of contrast, only 20 male students ran for 14 seats, as against the 45 male students who ran in the elections the previous year. A woman student, Ma Than Kyi, was again elected to the vice-presidential chair. A 1928 editorial in the University College Magazine read as follows: "[This] circumstance proves, very much to our delight, that the lady-students are worthy of being 'man's equal in civil and political life.' This year again we have elected a lady student to the Vice-Presidential chair, in the person of Ma Than Kyi. But we hasten to aver that we are not following a precedent as some may think, but that we are following the policy of having the right persons in the right places. It was a pleasure to hear the ladies speaking in the last ladies' debate when the Vice-President occupied the chair. We hope that the other ladies who turned out then with full force will not be, in the future, merely passive listeners, leaving the floor discussion to the over-assertive male members alone. We were also glad to see the Burmese lady students taking an active part in September Variety Entertainment, which is an unprecedented accomplishment in the social history of the College. Since they have shown their capability on the stage, which we do hope is not for the first and last time, we should very much like to see them take a more prominent part in the affairs of this magazine. No one will deny the desirability of having some more woman contributors to the Magazine. We have proof of their talents, literary and artistic, and we can assure them that these pages hunger for more potential Jane Austens and Brontes." (Aye Kyaw, 1993, pp. 57-58).

"the creation of a healthy corporate social life, inculcating a spirit of independence, and creation of a sense of duty and responsibility among the students of the University" (Nyi Nyi, 1964, p.18).

In pursuit of these aims, the RUSU constitution specified the following key activities: holding debates, arranging for and conducting lectures, and maintaining a library, reading rooms and general entertainment for students. What actually happened inside the walls of that building was, however, much more significant. In 1930, several RUSU members (both Buddhist and Muslims) began reappropriating the prefix *Thakhin*⁷⁵, "master", to establish the *Do-bama Asi-Ayon*⁷⁶. This movement (also known as the *Thakhin Party*) was a laboratory for formulating a new nationalism, definitely more anti-colonial, radical and militant than the previous current of "cultural nationalism." Three important aspects should be mentioned: 1) a new idea of being "Burmese"; 2) the hybridization of Buddhist and Marxist thought; and 3) the progressive link between anti-colonialism and anticapitalism that forged new alliances outside the urban elite and the higher education space. These aspects were pivotal in shaping a new understanding of the birth of the nation and popular perceptions of students as legitimate political actors in the national arena.

The first document laying out the ideological position of Dobama opened with slogans intended to remind all Burmese people that "Burma was for the Burmese" (Khin Yi, 1988). In the preamble to its draft constitution, the confederation's aim was spelled out thusly:

"Do-bama or We, the Burmese Confederation is intended to build solidarity, equality, and unity among all the indigenous nationalities in Burma, those who have indigenous blood (in them), and those who cherish and promote the interests and the well-being of the Burmese nation in accordance with the vision and ideology of the Do-boma" (Ibid., p. 8).

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⁷⁵ *Thakhin* ("master") was the term that the Burmese were required to use when addressing the British. Students leaders re-appropriate the term to use it for themselves.

⁷⁶ This can be translated as "We, the Burmese Confederation" or "We Burmans Association".

Who, then, were the Burmese? Chapter I of the (draft) constitution also demarcated Myanmar as a geo-national entity as follows:

"The boundaries of the Do-bama Asi-ayone are as follows: on the north lies China, on the east Siam, on the south the Bay of Bengal, on the west part of the Indian Ocean and Assam, Manipur, and India" (Ibid., p. 88).

It is evident that *Do-bama Asi-ayone* leaders were thinking of their *Asi-ayone* as a (Burmese) nation with a much broader concept of who had the right to call themselves "Burmese" than conceptualized by early nationalists such as May Aung. In fact, this category could include ethnic groups other than Burmans; it definitely included the non-Buddhist community and even those of other nationalities (other than the one included in the 1935 Government of Burma Act), provided they had the interests of the country at heart and were willing to fight against colonial power⁷⁷. This is Thein Pe Myint⁷⁸'s statement to a student leader:

"While we are criticizing the present educational system, while we are demanding for the better education and while we are insisting on the government laying the foundation for building the industrialized nation, what have we to do? The answer is simple, yes, very simple that we ought to struggle to regain our independence!" (Thein Pe Myint 2018, p. 542).

The ultimate goal of the Dobama was complete independence and, to achieve that goal, the confederation pledged to employ "all just means". This represented a radical break from the cultural

⁷⁷ This argument points to similarity between the Dobama movements and the nationalism of the previous decades. Further scholarly analysis would be needed to underline the limits of this inclusivity and the differences between the historical memory of the Dobama movements' ideology and the intentions of their leaders.

⁷⁸ Thein Pe Myint (1914-1978) was a student at Rangoon University in the 1930s; he obtained his BA in 1935 and carried out further studies at Calcutta University. He was one of the secretaries of Dobama Asiayone and was directly involved in the 1936 and 1938 strikes. He helped to translate classic works by Lenin and Stalin, and then in 1939 published his first novel. He became one of the most well-known writers of the time and the founder of an influential newspaper, *The Botataung*. As a leading Marxist intellectual, he was an important player in the Burmese independence movement and post-war politics.

nationalist politics of the YMBA: in this new position, national visions were no longer concealed within cultural rhetoric.

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the movement included not only Buddhists but also other non-Buddhist individuals such as Myanmar-born Muslims. As such, radical Burmese nationalism needed to be devoid of any overarching religious theme; this called for the secularization of the dominant culture thanks to both modern scientific knowledge and also the new Marxist thought that was spreading in university book clubs. Although not all the movement leaders became communists or socialists and some remained more closely linked to traditional Buddhist thought, Marxism was becoming a dominant theoretical touchstone for student leaders (Tin Htway, 1972). Translating the main works of Marx and other communist minds into Burmese, Thakhin leaders actively worked on generating hybridization between Marxism and the dominant Buddhist philosophy in the direction of what Hans-Bernd Zoellner (2018) has defined as "the great synthesis". This synthesis became the special blend of communism and Buddhism that guided the new generation of Burmese leaders, a cadre including Aung San⁷⁹, Nu⁸⁰ and Ne Win. In the Burmese translations, Karl Marx was portrayed as a poor man who dedicated his life to a higher purpose by devoting himself to this work, sacrificing his personal well-being, family life and everything. The term "sacrifice" was and is used in Myanmar to denote one's readiness to selflessly give up material goods and even one's life: "Marx was

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⁷⁹ Aung San (1915–1947) is one of the modern Myanmar's most important political figure and he played the principal role in winning independence from Britain after World War II. After his years as a student activist, Aung San left Burma in August 1940 to secure foreign backing for the independence struggle. Returning to Myanmar to recruit the Thirty Comrades, he became their leader and was a senior staff officer in the Burma Independence Army. Together with others, he established the Anti-Fascist Organization in August 1944. On March, 27, 1945, a date commemorated as Resistance Day or Armed Forces Day, he ordered the Burma National Army to rise up against the Japanese. Although some British people regarded him as a traitor, Aung San won the trust of Lord Louis Mountbatten and Mountbatten came to see it as essential for Allied forces to cooperate with Aung San's army, renamed the Patriotic Burmese Forces. Leaving the military to pursue a political career, Aung San became president of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League and, between 1945 and 1947, used his immense popularity to bring the British to the negotiating table on the issue of independence. The Aung San-Attlee Agreement was achieved in January 1947 after Aung San journeyed to London to negotiate with British Prime Minister Clement Attlee. Winning the support of ethnic minority leaders, at the Panglong Conference in February Aung San cleared the way for the creation of the Union of Burma's semi federal constitutional order. He would have become the new nation's first prime minister, but he was assassinated along with members of his cabinet by gunmen loyal to a political rival, U Saw, on July, 19, 1947, a day commemorated as Martyrs' Day (Donald M. Seekin, 2017). ⁸⁰ Nu (1907–1995) was Prime Minister during the periods 1948–1956, 1957–1958, and 1960–1962. U Nu's government was overthrown in the March, 2, 1962 coup d'état and he and other political leaders were imprisoned. Nu was able to leave Burma in 1969 after his participation in the Internal Unity Advisory Board, and he headed an anti-Ne Win insurgency, the National United Liberation Front, based in Thailand. This proved ineffective, and he quit as chairman in 1972, returning to Burma in 1980 following Ne Win's announcement of a general amnesty. Though retired from political life and devoting himself to religion, he announced a "parallel government" on September, 9, 1988, establishing his own cabinet with himself as prime minister. Because of his refusal to dissolve the parallel government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council kept him under house arrest from December 1989 to April 1992. His party, the League for Democracy and Peace, failed to win a seat in the General Election of May, 27, 1990. Nu was internationally respected as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement (Donald M. Seekin, 2017).

described as, one could say, a "secular Buddha", serving the poor and oppressed worldwide" (Ibid.p.2).

The political thought of Marx, Stalin and Lenin supported Aung San's articulation of a blueprint for the Burmese nation during his address at the convention held at the Jubilee hall, Rangoon University on 23 May 1947:

"Now, how many national communities are we going to have in Burma. Strictly speaking there can be only one. Of course, there can be distinct races and tribes within the nation. They are called national minorities. [...]

According to Lenin, "The various demands of democracy, including self-determination, are not absolute, but a small part of the general democratic (now general socialist) world movement. Possibly in individual concrete cases, the part may contradict the whole; if so it must be rejected. The question of the right of nations freely to secede must not be confused with the question whether it would be expedient for any given nation to secede at any given movement."

The conclusion to be drawn from these various views is that in a community of nations there must be the right of self-determination. But this right must not be over-indulged in regardless of time and circumstances. These are points we should know concerning the term Nation and Nationality (Aung San quoted in Silverstein 1993, pp.156-7)".

According to Josef Silverstein: "one of the most important parts of Aung San's intellectual legacy is his stand on the question of national unity. He was trusted by the minorities⁸¹ because he was fair and had a clear view of their rights and place in the Union of Burma. His ideas provide an important guidepost for Burmese seeking a permanent answer to the vexing problem of majority-minority relations" (Ibid. p.13). As discussed in Chapter IV, the self-determination of ethnic minorities is still nowadays a cornerstone issue for the student leaders connected with ABFSU and they continue to fight for a more comprehensive idea of what constitutes Myanmar, in the face of exclusive state policies.

⁸¹ Like the argument of the Dobama movement inclusiveness, this statement should likewise be better scrutinized by the scholarly community since it is well known that several ethnic minority groups (such as the Karen) did not express trust in Aung San.

Against this backdrop it is understandable how these fervent exponents of the new nationalism thus rapidly began to weave webs outside of specifically university spaces as well, linking their struggle with other contentious events (i.e. workers strikes) and thereby cementing the marriage between anticolonialism and class struggle based on anti-capitalism. Various features of the 1936 and 1938 university strikes illustrate this trajectory of student leaders' progressively greater involvement in nation-wide political matters. The 1936 strike started on 25 February and was called off on 11 May. According to official estimates reported by Nyi Nyi (1964), approximately 700 students from Rangoon University and Judson Colleges left the campus on the first day of strike (that is, more than half of the student population) and were soon joined by the majority of the students from Mandalay Intermediate College. The contingent cause of the strike was the fact that Nu (elected as president of RUSU in August 1935) and Aung San had been expelled from the university. At that time, Aung San was the editor of the RUSU's magazine, the *Oway*, where he published an article entitled *Hell Hound* at Large, a satirical piece about a member of the university administrative staff making sexual advances to female students. The article was used as grounds for his expulsion. In response, the student leaders drafted a document of 12 demands mainly centered on the reinstatement of expelled students, changes in the University Act to allow the RUSU to place two representatives on the University Council, and an overall greater role for students in managing campus dormitories. The university finally conceded on most of these demands and the strike was officially called off. After the strike, Professor Pe Maung Tin was nominated Rector of the University, the first ever Burmese to head the institution. The other important results of the 1936 strike included the establishment of the ABFSU that it is still today one of the country's main student unions. The student movement entered into a different political stage: the 1938 student strike marked the first time that the student movement had worked together with another group to attain a goal that transcended student interests (Aye Kyaw, 1993). In fact, the student leaders of both RUSU and ABFSU joined the strike staged by the Burma Oil Company workers to create the first national-wide anti-foreign and explicitly anticapitalist struggle. The Burma Oil Company was the single largest employer of labor in the country at that time and the workers were striking to protest unfair treatment, extremely poor living conditions, and chronic lay-offs. According to Frank Trager (1965), the student leaders achieved what no one else had been able to in the nationalist struggle in Myanmar: "a viable anti-British political instrument with its roots in something resembling a unified mass base of trade unions and related peasant organizations." Since negotiating with the students also meant negotiating with workers, this time the strike ended with a violent police crackdown. Ultimately, against the backdrop of the Dobama ideology, both strikes served as a laboratory to forge the main national leaders of the independence period and post-war Myanmar. According to Charney (2009), the student leaders acted

more as comrades than as political competitors. This attitude and willingness to put aside individual rivalries for the national cause went on to contribute significantly to the forging of alliances that carried Myanmar to independence a decade later.

However, the shadow of WWII was looming over Myanmar as well and the political landscape soon changed again: the student leaders began to leave off their university studies to organize the armed struggle for independence and higher education in Myanmar was de facto suspended for a decade. In 1948, independent Myanmar was declared and the former student leaders who had matured in the political climate described in this section found themselves in the position to re-think the country's higher education.

2.4 Higher Education after Independence

From 1948 until the "Ne Win era" in 1962, the student leaders at the forefront of the independence struggle found themselves in the position of civilian leaders in charge of developing the institutions of the independent state. As Charney (2009) notes, although this chapter of Burmese independence still nowadays holds a certain romantic appeal by virtue of being Myanmar's only democratic period (at least until 2011), the "Nu years" were difficult for the country. Nu governments were under constant pressure to build a socialist economy while fighting an ongoing and very serious civil war, on the one hand, and maintaining an equally challenging neutral position in the Cold War, on the other. Political fragmentation, economic slowdown, and a careful international balancing act all played out in the setting of a country divided into republican and rebel areas, ultimately prevented the Nu governments from establishing effective state institutions (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2008; Kipgen 2011). These observations also apply to the educational context at all levels, 82 including higher education. As I elaborate in this section, 1948-1962 was a period of expansion and exploration for the country's higher education. It was a period of immense growth in the size of the university, in terms of number of students, teachers, subjects, building and laboratories, staff and student accommodations. Moreover, Nu advanced a new vision of a higher education system capable of playing an unprecedented role in building a new democratic society. However, due to the unstable political conditions, the policies debated and discussed in this period never became concrete and, when Ne Win took power, he completely reshaped and shifted the focus of the entire sector. Towards the end of this "democratic" period, a letter of resignation penned in 1961 by Hla Myint, a rector of Rangoon University and enthusiastic supporter of higher education, captures the general despair and

⁸² For an analysis of the primary and secondary education policies of this era, see Thein Lwin 2000.

unfulfilled hopes plaguing this arena: "the kind of University the country needs and the one I desire cannot be realized under the circumstances." In this section, I touch on four main points that illuminate the debates and events of this period: the (relative) massification and expansion of higher education; the role of students; the medium of instruction issue; and the web of interconnections between Myanmar and UK and international academia.

During colonial times, university students represented a small élite in a country where only two cities had universities (Rangoon and Mandalay) and these taught subjects mostly related to law, the arts and science, medicine and engineering. Students were definitely a significant collective actor, but small in number and not very diverse in terms of social background since most of the students were from urban Burmese families. It was not until the democratic era that Myanmar higher education achieved a significant number of students and comprehensive array of subjects taught. As shown in Figures 8 and 9, the number of students only began to grow notably in the 1950s. This was mostly due to two factors: the government's move in 1951 to grant free tuition and the perception of new economic and social opportunities in the post-war period. Although there are no official statistics available on this aspect, some sources also note that the student body began to encompass relatively more diverse social and economic backgrounds (Nyi Nyi, 1994).

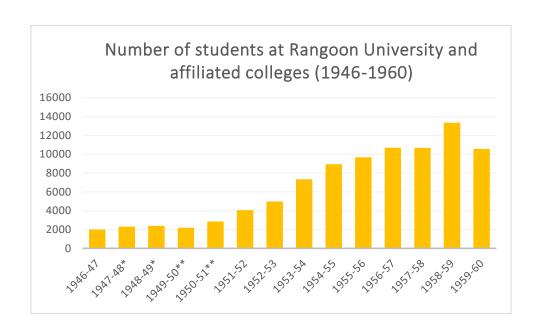


Figure 8. Overall student population of Rangoon University and affiliated colleges for the 1946-1960 period.

(Author elaboration from the data included in Nyi Nyi, 1994, p. 33)

*Excludes Law and Medicine students **Excludes Medicine students

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⁸³ From a letter dated 24 August 1960 from the British Embassy in Rangoon to the South East Asia Department, Foreign Office, DBI74/2, National Archives.

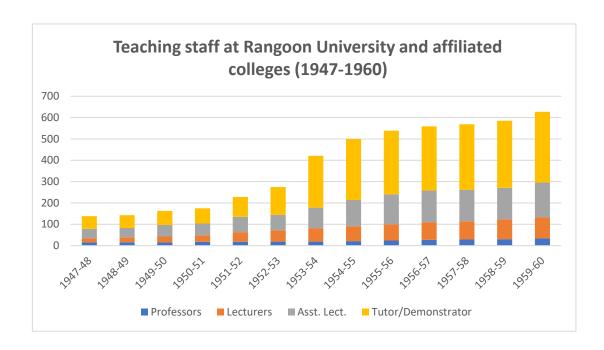


Figure 9. Overall student population of Rangoon University an affiliated colleges in the 1946-1960 period. (Author elaboration from the data included in Nyi Nyi, 1994, p. 36)

According to the data collected for this study from the DHE (fieldwork carried out in 2018-19), during the democratic era several colleges were established in Moulmein, Kyaukpyu, Yankin, Hteedan, Magwe, Bassein and Yezin. Moreover, a faculty of medicine was opened in Mandalay as well and the Defence Services Academy was established in 1954. The array of available courses began to include subjects such as anthropology, psychology, statistics, Burmese history, management, and agriculture.

During the years of the Nu governments, three different committees were established to re-structure higher education laws: the 1951 "University Needs Committee," the 1957 "Education Enquiry Committee," and the 1958 "University Education of the Union Planning Seminar." These committees formulated the 1951 Amendment Act, the 1953 Amendment Act and the 1959 Amendment Act. The role of higher education was re-defined in very broad teams as:

- " (i) Advancement of knowledge and promotion of research;
- (ii) Maintaining for the community a standard of culture which will include the great rules of taste and truth;

(iii) Training scholars and sufficient numbers of specialists and technicians in all fields of human activities, having regard to the socio-economic needs of the country" (Nyi Nyi, 1994, p. 46).

One of the country's new socio-economic needs was to generate a new, skilled political class. While British colonial officers were looking to create "embryonic bureaucrats", leading instead to the creation of "activists" and "freedom fighters", the model higher education student in independent Myanmar needed to be a "modernizer/technocrat with a democratic outlook." On the 22 December 1951, Prime Minister Nu in his address *The Task Before Us* at the Rangoon Universities, declared:

"In this noble task of rebuilding the five pillars, you students with your brains and your background will form the vanguard. . . .

To rebuild the pillar of Education, the country needs skilled technicians both in the mechanical and handicraft spheres, skilled educationists, skilled scientists, learned historians, men of letters and leaders of religions.

To rebuild the pillar of Economics, the country needs men and women skilled in Banking, Foreign Exchange, External trade and technicians who have a thorough knowledge of modern factories, administration, etc.

To rebuild the pillar of Morals, the country needs men and women who have made a life-long study of various methods of moral uplift.

To rebuild the pillar of National Solidarity, the country needs able leaders who are endowed with foresight, forbearance, public esteem and exemplary character.

Who are those architects worthy of being entrusted with the task of rebuilding these pillars? It is certain that ignoramuses cannot be our architects. It is you, educated men and women, who can play the role of the country's architects." (Nu, 1951)

Against this backdrop, as Zarni (1998) notes, Nu urged members of the educational community (university governance and staff, educators, students, and parents) to restore amicable relations

amongst themselves while seeking to resolve an issue that, to judge from most of the documents of that time, was considered extremely pressing: avoiding contentious politics among students. In pushing this goal, in various speeches Nu asserted the idea that respect-based social relations in education constituted the defining characteristic of the Buddhist cultural tradition. Although the initial democratic period did not involve major student unrest, scholars underline that these efforts to supress contestation did not bring about the desired results. Multiple elements, including the legacy of student political activism imbuing the bygone nationalist days, poor economic prospects for university graduates and, last but not least, leftist-inspired idealism, converged to stymy these efforts to reshape "students" as mere "modernizer/technocrats", and the student unions continued with their activities.

One of the most hotly debated issues was the medium of instruction. In the colonial vision, the only conceivable medium of instruction for higher education was English. In the pre-WWII years, basic education in the country's Anglo-Vernacular schools was gradually moving towards using Burmese as the main teaching language: "the general introduction of English as a second language in the vernacular curriculum has become a widespread and persistent demand" (Vernacular and Vocational Education Reorganization Committee 1936, p. 274). The Rangoon University Act Enquiry Committee of 1936 examined this question of instruction venularization at the university in subjects other than English itself, and considered that it would be rash on their part "to hazard any view of what is the proper course for the academic body to adopt" (Ibid.). During the war, the Education Reconstruction Committee reconsidered the question of the medium of instruction and reported that "for the present the main language of instruction in the University should continue to be English, but when the reconstructed education system is functioning, and Burmese as a medium of instruction has been developed in the schools, and when an adequate book production in Burmese in all subjects has been achieved, Burmese may be developed as a medium of instruction parallel to English" (Education Reconstruction Committee, 1947, p. 7). Once Myanmar became independent, as per section 216 of the Union Constitution, Burmese became the official language of the Union and in April 1958, the Minister of Education Htun Tin announced that Burmese could become the medium of instruction at the university in the next decade. In the end, however, it was not until the Ne Win government that this plan was implemented, and in this case with a different approach: Burmese was not used to make higher education more inclusive, but rather as part of efforts to spread the ideological and cultural message of "Bamar national identity"84.

⁸⁴ According to Gustaaf Houtman (1999) the "Burmanization" or "Myanmafication" represented the ultimate illusion of the unification of the country, encompassing all five separate meanings: the language, peoples, nationality, country, and also the ethnic majority as unified through state authority. The military regimes used this rhetoric to crowd out all

Notwithstanding the anti-colonial feelings characterizing the higher education field in the formative years of Nu and this acolyte, the international links between Myanmar universities, UK institutions and the international academia remained particularly vibrant throughout the democratic era. In the documents I have retrieved from the National Archives, there is an extensive collection of letters between the various rectors of Rangoon University and the British Embassy and British Council. The letters indicate concrete steps were taken to plan and carry out academic visits and to support curricula and infrastructural development. One important spill-over effect of these academic webs was the creation an embryonic Southeast Asian network of cooperation around higher education. In October 1955, a conference on Southeast Asia was held at Rangoon and, at this event, the Inter-University Committee on Education discussed cross-national issues around education. These discussions led to the idea of establishing an Association of Institutions of Higher Learning in Southeast Asia, and the first step towards the creation of this network took place the year after when the rectors of eight Universities (including the rector of Rangoon University, Htin Aung) met in Bangkok to draft the preamble to the association statute, stating their motivations as follows:

"Conscious of the urgent need and value of understanding and cooperation among S.E. Asian peoples; and believing that the development of understanding and cooperation among institutions of higher learning is an important contribution to regional and world friendship; the institutions of higher learning in S.E. Asia do hereby decide to organize an association." 85

During the democratic period, not only were British and Myanmar authorities willing to maintain these ties, but they also wove webs with counterparts throughout Southeast Asia. Aid and training were provided not only by the British Council, but also by the Ford Foundation, Asia Foundation, Fulbright Program and Johns Hopkins University (Kyi et al. 2000). Unfortunately, these connections were broken during the Ne Win era⁸⁶.

alternative concepts of unity that various ethnic groups and foreign languages might have expressed throughout history. In the next section, I mentioned how Burmanisation was one of the cornerstone of the General Ne Win education policy.

85 Letter dated 4 February 1956 signed by the Vice-Chancellor Lindsay Ride, National Archives FO 371/123383.

⁸⁶ Tellingly, the BRS and its journal were also accused of being Western vehicles for domestic interference and abolished by the BSPP government in 1980.

On the morning of 2 March 1962, Nu's government was overthrown by a coup d'état led by General Ne Win, who established the Revolutionary Council (RC) to lead the country. On 30 April 1962, the RC proclaimed its general program titled *Towards socialism in our own Burmese way*, wherein the policy on education was outlined as follows:

"17. (a). Education - The Revolutionary Council believes that the existing educational system not equated with livelihood will have to be transformed. An educational system equated with livelihood and based on socialistic moral values will be brought about. Science will be given precedence in education. Our educational target is to bring basic education within the reach of all. As regards only those who have promise and enough potentialities and industriousness to benefit from it will be specially encouraged" (Revolutionary Council, 1962).

On 9 May 1962, the Rangoon University Act was invalidated by the RC after it took over the administration of the university. On 7 July, approximately 2,000 students from Rangoon University participated in a mass meeting in response to the abolition of the act. According to student activist and author Lay Myint (cited in Koon-Hong, 2014), "virtually the whole university" showed up. At midnight of the same day, the Burmese military bombed the RUSU building ⁸⁷, killing several students. Following this violent crackdown, General Ne Win famously stated that "[the military had] no alternatives but to fight sword with sword and spear with spear." ⁸⁸

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⁸⁷ Demolition of buildings that had political meetings was a repression tactic of Ne Win's governments. In his PhD dissertation, Nang Mo Lao Rives offers this testimony: "March 1966, I passed the university entrance exam. I was now eligible to begin my university education with two years of studies at the Taunggyi Intermediate College in my hometown of Taunggyi. This proved to be one of my most remarkable student experiences. I entered Taunggyi College as a Geography major in June 1966, which was the beginning of the 1966-67 school year; school years in Burma ran from June through March. In 1961, the government expropriated some Shan-kingdom relic structures to house our new community college. One building featured a yellow tiger's head monument that symbolized the power and historic glory of the former Shan kingdom. Previously, this building had been used for Shan State government conferences, and perhaps, like the RUSU Building that was dynamited by the Army in 1962, it was considered by the Burmese national government to be a center of animosity, treachery, and plotting against their regime. It had certainly served as a focal point for Shan Separatist ideas. So, the regime ordered its conversion into a hostel for the female students of the college." (Rives, 2014, p. 30).

⁸⁸ See Win Min, 2012 for a detailed analysis of these events from a student movement perspective.

After these events, the 1964 Union of Burma University Act was promulgated to enact the New System Education that reshaped all levels of education, ⁸⁹ including the university system (Nyi Nyi, 1976). After the 1974-75 period of campus unrest known as the "U Thant Crisis," ⁹⁰ the MoE launched the second and last (under the RC and the BSPP governments⁹¹) structural and administrative reform in higher education in 1977. These laws were still in place at the beginning of the "period of transition": until the drafting of the NEL, higher education in Myanmar was regulated by the policies Ne Win had orchestrated. Therefore, for the scope of my work, it is pivotal to outline the structural aspects of these two waves of reform so as to formulate a possible layer of answers to the question, what was the vision(s) around higher education that shaped Ne Win's reforms? In this section, I argue that higher education under the "Burmese way to socialism" policy framework was: 1) placed at the service of the needs of a socialist country; 2) a sphere of state control, leading to the nationalization and centralization of all activities; 3) a space in which to impose one dominant ideology under a very well-worded rhetoric of inclusiveness and social justice.

Several scholars and reports underline that under the Burmese way to socialism policy framework, higher education in the country shifted towards professional and vocational training in order to imbue the population with the skills needed by a socialist workforce (CESR, 2013). I instead argue that this development cannot exactly be called "a shift," since, as shown above, the previous governments also viewed higher education as a tool to serve the economic needs of the country. However, it is true that the RC and BSPP interpreted these needs differently than in the past, stressing in particular the "practical" subjects or hard sciences that were seen as supporting the construction of a socialist and

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⁸⁹ See Thein Lwin, 2000 and Silverstein, 1977 for a discussion on the Ne Win era's impact on primary and secondary education.

⁹⁰ U Thant (1909-1974) was UN Secretary from 1961-1971. In his home country, he had become a symbol of the old pre-1962 period by that time. When he died of cancer in New York on 26 November 1974, the return of his body to Rangoon provided a catalyst among the Burmese people for expressing their frustrations with all the economic problems facing the country. At a public funeral, student activists seized his body. On 8 December, draping the body in the United Nations flag, a procession of students and monks carried it to be entombed in a rough mausoleum they had built close to the demolished RUSU building. After U Thant's body had been seized, the government temporarily closed educational institutions and cut off international communications with the country. On 11 December, 1,000 soldiers and police raided the university campus, forcibly repossessed the body, and carried it to the cantonment gardens where it was re-interred in the mausoleum built by his family. Students, youths, and even Buddhist monks rioted in protest throughout Rangoon, attacking troops and police. Police also opened fire on rioters, killing nine and wounding seventy-four others. Martial law over the Rangoon Division was declared the same day, and special tribunals were established to put rioters on trial. After the U Thant crisis, the government closed Mandalay and Rangoon universities for five months.

⁹¹ For the purposes of this analysis, I will treat the RC period and Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) years that followed as one entity. Partly for reasons of simplicity, but also for a few additional reasons. First, the point at which the RC ended and BSPP Government began is hazy due to the myriad political steps that were involved in the process, including the opening up of the BSPP to mass membership in 1971 and promulgation of a new constitution in 1974 (Charney 2009). Second, the main leaders of the RC remained the ruling cohort of the BSPP government, meaning there was no real change in the political leadership of the country (including education policy-makers). Finally, it is convenient to consider 1962 as the beginning of a single period of military rule as it adds weight to assertions of the overlong tenure of military men at the helm of the state and their responsibility for the country's crackdown on multiple sectors including education.

modern nation. This is how the specific objectives for higher education are worded in an official manifesto of the BSPP:

"1) to implement the educational policy formulated by the Burma Socialist Program Party; 2) to provide for instruction in subjects which are linked to economic production; 3) to produce graduates who are not only versed in theory but also good at practice; 4) to orientate education towards the studies which are linked to economic production; and 5) to push for the development of various (geographic) regions (throughout the country)" (Parti Ye Ya, 1977, p.32).

To reach these objectives, new types of universities needed to be established: less focused on arts and science disciplines, less elitarian, and able to produce graduates in a shorter period of time. Therefore, two-year Regional Colleges were founded, modelled in part on U.S. 2-year junior colleges. The old "combination system" (that is, higher education establishments, either universities or colleges, teaching a wide range of subjects) was replaced by a "majoring system" introduced with the central, ultimate goal of training specialists in selected fields (Tin Ohn, 1977). Regional Colleges were to emphasize the type of knowledge and expertise required by the socialist economy and industry. For instance, medicine, statistics, and education were considered "non-economically linked or nonindustry and non-economy linked studies," whereas technological subjects, agricultural sciences, and veterinary sciences were labeled "economy- or industry-based studies." The latter type of knowledge was to constitute the core of the Regional College curriculum (Parti Ye Ya, 1977). Upon graduation, students had two career options: pursue further studies to receive undergraduate and other professional degrees⁹², or join the workforce. Graduates would be given two-year diplomas and those who wished to begin working would be given an opportunity to intern full-time in their respective vocational fields, for instance, government industries, privately-owned cottage industries, agricultural farms, and related governmental departments (Parti Ye Ya, 1977).

As mentioned in the introduction, the first distance education institution, the UCC, was established under the Ne Win government in the academic year 1975-76. In his work, Maung Zarni (1998) unpacks the official governmental discourses on distance education in terms of their hidden agendas and the reality of the implementation of this system. In governmental discourses, distance education

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⁹² Before the second wave of structural reforms, it was possible for students to enter university-level education directly after matriculation exams. The second wave of structural reforms made the 2 years at a Regional College compulsory before entering any university.

was presented and worded as follows: 1) an expansion of access to higher education; 2) a best practice borrowed from abroad, therefore a sign of prestige and innovation; 3) a means of pursuing equity in university education by making it available to the workforce as well; 4) delivery of university education to students in remote areas of the country at a lower cost and in a shorter amount of time. Nonetheless, and in spite of their virtuous philosophy of "technology supporting the delivery of quality education" and "leaving no one behind," there was (as there still is, nowadays) often a lack of quality in distance education courses. The pedagogical methods included radio (and later TV) broadcasts, monthly assignments and feedback through correspondence, as well as tutoring before the final examination held at major university correspondence centers in Rangoon and Mandalay. Zarni notes that "correspondence programs or distance education per se do not automatically qualify to be labeled as "political control measures". However, the timing of its creation, right after the bloody crackdown of the 1974 U Thant Crisis, the largest campus unrest since the military took over power in 1962, coupled with the establishment of smaller, Regional Colleges, made the second wave of educational changes suspect" (Ibid., pp. 133-134).

According to the data referenced by Zarni (Ibid.), in the closing years (1987-88) of BSPP rule there were 104,687 students enrolled in the UUC as opposed to 255,866 full-time students in universities and colleges. Compared to the numbers cited in the previous sections, these data show that higher education was indeed more accessible in this period of time. I argue that the link between this accessibility and pervasive state control over universities spaces is the cornerstone on which the Ne Win government's vision of higher education can be unpacked. In fact, to ensure this accessibility, the system involved a complex "merit system" applied to students' entire educational career from primary education up to graduation. Students were eligible to receive different incentives for studying: high school students who performed exceptionally well in the hard sciences were awarded scholarships; outstanding students (passing tests at the local, regional and national levels) were given monetary incentives to carry out higher education studies; various governmental, administrative, and mass organizations including the People's Peasants' Council, People's Workers' Council, People's Council, Lanzin Youth Organization⁹³, and community elders helped out-of-town students with their living arrangements (Parti Ye Ya, 1977); and, Regional College students were paid wages to do some hours of work in the various sectors of the socialist economy. This system for rewarding "deserving" individuals was coupled with intense rhetoric emphasizing the importance of young generations

⁹³ For an analysis of each organization, see Zarni, 1998.

having access to the "right" education. An example of this rhetoric can be seen in a Ne Win quote contained in an editorial published in *The Guardian* in May 1965:

"The rising generation is the generation that will make the future of the country. It is those that belong to it who must be guided along the correct path of thinking and living for the striven for just and affluent socialist society to materialize and endure. In this task, the schools are the chief means of transformation. As such, it is imperative that they impart the right kind of education instruction; instill into the young the right sense of discipline and responsibility; mold them into character and habits conducive to the promotion of a socialist society. Thus, they cannot be left in private hands, though highly reputable some may be, no doubt" (The Guardian 1965, May, p. 4-5).

Against this backdrop, it is clear that the "merit system" was a way of keeping students in line with an educational system that wished to shape their sense of patriotic duty and, more broadly, "in line" with governmental policies. Zarni (1998) notes that the "merit system" can also be considered "a form of systematic bribery." Aware that most of the families were facing economic hardships ⁹⁴ students' lives were imbued with a latent sense of disentrancement⁹⁵, the administration set up this system of monetary incentives for students, the majority from economically struggling families, as a new method of pacification and control.

The "merit system" was one of the tools used to exercised control over the educational sphere; other tools were employed to control academic governance and direct the actions of university staff. In place of the autonomous councils at Rangoon and Mandalay universities, the Universities' Central Council and Council of University Academic Bodies were established⁹⁶. These new bodies allowed more direct control over educational affairs by the various RC and BSPP administrative and party organizations in charge of the key decision-making areas in education, such as human resource

⁹⁴ See Silverstein, 1977 for an analysis of the economy in the Ne Win era.

⁹⁵ See Koon-Hong, 2014 and Win Min 2012 for an account of student movement activities during the Ne Win era.

⁹⁶ The Universities' Central Council was made up of Deputy Ministers from several Ministries, Directors, University Rectors, College Principals, Representatives of the Burma Socialist Program Party, the People's Workers' Council, the People's Peasants' Council, and prominent educationists and journalists. This central council was charged with implementing the new educational policy and coordinating work at various colleges and universities. Academic affairs were placed in the hands of the Council of University Academic Bodies, made up of Directors of Departments and Cooperatives from various ministries, University Rectors and College Principals, representatives of various university academic departments, educationists, and journalists.

management (i.e. the hiring and firing of university staff), policy formulation, curriculum and textbooks, teacher education, and scholarships. Student representation was completely absent from these bodies (and generally from all entities deciding over matters related to their schooling). This was a significant departure from the tradition of including student representatives in university governing bodies in the colonial and post-independence periods. Equally important, the heavy governmental interference in academic affairs marked a progressive shrinking of professors' role in academia, shifting towards that of mere civil servant. This is an example of the official teachers' pledges as included in the *New System of Basic Education and Educators' Responsibilities*:

- "1) I pledge to make, out of my students, future experts who will participate in and make contributions to, various economic, social, and administrative projects that are aimed at building a new Burmese Socialist society;
- 2) I pledge to help equip my students with ethical principles and mental attributes in accord with the Burmese Way to Socialism ideology;
- 3) I pledge to help promote the intellectual progress and skill development of the working people who are constructing Burmese socialist society; and
- 4) I pledge to uphold moral and ethical obligations and promote the dignity of educators." (cited in Zarni, 1998, p. 211)

This new rhetoric framed teachers as "agents of the state." It can be said that, during the Ne Win era, the main role of the university teaching staff was to deliver the curricular content dictated by the Council of University Academic Bodies without questioning its content and to monitor and exercise

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⁹⁷ In his PhD dissertation, Nang Mo Lao Rives sketches his experiences in being trained as a teacher in this way: "At the Teacher Training College there were two student buildings; one for the male trainees and one for the female trainees. At 5:30 AM, male and female trainees had separate assemblies at their own buildings, and lined up and repeated "the Beliefs of The Burmese Way to Socialism" by heart together in an orderly manner. We had physical and military training in the early morning then a breakfast break. After that, we had classes the whole day except for a brief lunch break. Our classes were about how to teach the different school subjects, and they were taught by different lecturers. In the evening, we had elective hobby classes, such as singing, dancing, drawing, and gardening. Looking back, it seems like the Burmese Way to Socialism Program Party (BSPP) was a central feature of everything that we did at the Teacher Training College. Most of the instructors and trainees joined the Burmese Way to Socialism Party for their own benefit, but I did not join the party, and later this would hinder my teaching career. [...] In my case, lacking the bonus points awarded for BSPP membership meant that I would later need four tries to pass the Burmese Government oral entrance exams which were used to select candidates for Fulbright Scholarships in the 1985-86 school year. In previous years at the teachers' college, trainees had been required to learn to use rifles and practice target shooting. However, since the recoil of the military rifles had broken the collar bones of some of the girl trainees, the authorities decided that it would be better to change their requirements and substitute formation marching drills for target shooting. Every morning we found ourselves outside, lined up in formation facing the sun for our mandatory military drill training. This was quite a challenge for all of us, and some of the girls even fainted and fell while we were standing at attention. Our military drill instructor ordered us to ignore whatever happened around us and just keep standing at attention. He said that this was Army Regulations, so we must do it. Somehow, we all survived the harsh life of trainees, took our exams, passed them and were awarded our Teaching Certificates; we were ready to begin our teaching careers in rural Burma. I was very happy to leave Taunggyi and go out to a rural school" (Rives 2104, pp.61-62).

political control over students. During my fieldwork in the country, I interviewed multiple professors who were students during the latter part of Ne Win era. One aspect my interviewees frequently mentioned was the feeling of being constantly under surveillance by the governmental personnel existent on campuses and in dormitories. This feeling was exacerbated after the U Thant crisis, when students and parents were required to fill out consent forms at the nearest local offices of the People's Council, BSPP's countrywide administrative network, pledging that they would not be involved in any future unrests in any way, shape, or form once the universities had been re-opened after months of suspensions⁹⁸. Families were liable to suffer hardships if their children were labelled as student activists.

In other reports and speeches, RC and BSPP authorities also capitalized on the "traditional" role of teachers/educators in pre-colonial Myanmar, referring to certain essential qualities defining an ideal teacher in that period, specifically acting as a moral authority, and exercising self-sacrifice. Based on interviews with different teachers and professors from that time, Maung Zarni (Ibid.) noted that the university teaching staff was particularly subject to state control due to a widespread anti-intellectual

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In his PhD dissertation, Nang Mo Lao Rives describes the consequences of a student strike as follows: "During my final year at Mandalay, the Southeast Asia Peninsula (SEAP) Nations sports festival was held in Rangoon on December 6-13,1969 [...] In the Peninsula Games Incident, trouble began when there was a shortage of tickets available for the public, including Rangoon college and university students. Civilians were being told that seats were all sold out. While at the same time army people were being admitted [...]. This news was quickly spread by the radio on the BBC, VOA, and Burma Broadcasting Service, and by the newspapers. Students took this as a rare opportunity for a demonstration, and went on strike asking for democracy and an end to army rule. The result was a protest with perhaps 10,000 demonstrators shouting "give us democracy!" This erupted into a riot in which three cinemas and some motor vehicles were burned, resulting in a government response that ruthlessly quelled the violence with guns. This disturbance quickly spread to Mandalay University. I remember that on one day in the second week of December, we were in the midst of a class with Department Dean U Thein Maung, and that it was the last class session before our lunch break. We heard loud noises and a commotion coming from the street next to our Geography Department building. As the noises became louder and louder, we could tell that the students were demonstrating and shouting slogans even though we could not tell what the slogans were about. It was a stuffy and crowded classroom packed with more than a hundred Geography senior-year students, and the dean just kept on lecturing. He did not dismiss the class even though we were becoming concerned about what was happening outside. In our Burmese culture, students must pay respect to their teachers and higher authorities, and it would have been very rude if we had shown any interest in what was going on outside our classroom while the dean himself was teaching. So we just sat, listened to the lecture, and took notes, but all with increasing anxiety. As soon as the dean's class ended for lunch, we ran out of the classroom as fast as we could and saw a chaotic scene. The campus grounds were filled with students, policemen, soldiers, and army trucks. [...] All the students just wanted to leave as soon as they could get off the campus. [...] When we arrived at Mandalay station, we found our special "students only" train and it had large signs on both sides of the carriages telling non-students to keep out. [...] After we got back home, we found out that many of the other students from Taunggyi had been in such a rush to get out of Mandalay that they had bought rides in the back of a farm truck returning from there to Taunggyi. However, not all of the Mandalay University students were able to find either truck or train rides home. Some were detained by the police and soldiers that were sent to the campus by the government to keep order. The police and soldiers arrested whoever they could grab and did not try to sort out the innocent from the guilty until later. As time passed, many students could not be accounted for, and it was presumed that they were arrested, tried, and jailed, or even worse. The Ne Win government was always prepared to deal very harshly with those who instigated, led or participated in campus political activities or demonstrations and their Military Intelligence Service had agents and spies in many places and a headquarters building east of the old palace in Mandalay. [...] Later in 1970, the universities and colleges reopened again for a brief period of time to let students take their final exams. We submitted our Geography Project Papers, took the exams, and I was awarded my Bachelor of Arts degree in geography and ended my stay in the hot, dusty climate of Mandalay" (Rives, 2014, pp.71-72).

attitude permeating the RC and BSPP governments. A specific episode appears particularly telling: a lecturer in the Department of Geology at Mandalay University jointly published the results of his field research involving the discovery of one of the earliest fossils ever found in Myanmar's soil. When the authorities found out that the lecturer had published the findings of his research in *Science* without their prior approval, they subjected him to a series of interrogations by Military Intelligence and later demoted him to the position of assistant lecturer.

This anti-intellectual attitude was coupled with what was defined as "cultural protectionism" in the words of Ne Win:

"(Colonialism) introduced schoolbooks designed to achieve its purpose unobtrusively, and when it was assisted by missionaries accompanying it in to Burma, the fate of Burmese national culture and traditions was sealed. Our country was still suffering from the lingering ill-effects of the colonial regime" (Ne Win 1963, p. 9).

Links between Burmese and international academia, particularly British institutions, had remained lively and thriving during the post-independence period, but under Ne Win these links were cut. Zarni (1998) mentions an episode that exemplifies the extremism of the Ne Win position. During a scholars' forum attended by General Ne Win, the Head of the Burmese Department at Rangoon University suggested that scholars from her department, too, should be sent abroad to learn how languages and literature in other cultures were studied, improved, and taught. The General reasoned, however, that if Burmese language teachers were to study abroad and bring back foreign ideas about language teaching, this would most likely destroy the Burmese language. In his own words (as reported by Zarni): "if we have to send our scholars abroad to learn how to teach Burmese they would but bring back foreign methods and foreign literature and become "destroyers" of our language. Let me be blunt on this. Do we need our young men and women to go abroad to take lessons in how to make love before they can get married" (Ibid.). Education was just one of the aspects of the profound isolation from the rest of the world characterizing this period of Myanmar history.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this portrait of higher education policy and life during the Ne Win era provided above. It is clear that the newly expanded and more accessible higher education system (structured through two waves of reform, both enacted following major student protests) offered the authorities a number of benefits, the main two being a ready-to-use workforce for the

socialist economy and political control over students, a population that had been one of the country's main contentious actors. It makes sense to ask, were universities also used as a tool to legitimize the ideology of the RC and BSPP? In other words, were universities directly deployed to legitimize military control of the country? It is well known that Burmanisation (the belief that the country needed a unifying national identity based on one culture, one language and one religion) was the hallmark of post-1962 education (Lall, 2021). As noted by Cheesman (2002), the military ended up using this asserted primacy of one ethnicity (Bamar) over the others as a tactic to legitimize itself through primary school textbooks in which the ideal citizen was presented as having distinct ethnic (Bamar), religious (Buddhist) and gender (male) characteristics. Considering higher education, the establishment of multiple Regional Colleges in different parts of the country was unquestionably a way of preventing ethnic minorities and Bamar élites and most importantly, student activists, from encountering each other in the spaces of the university. Keeping students divided (also by ethnic background) in different institutional establishments (or even having them study directly from home, thanks to the UCC) was a way of suppressing the grievances of ethnic minorities. Although these aspects were important, however, they cannot be considered an example of proactively using universities as spaces for legitimacy-building. Rather, the main move used to spread military ideology was setting up military careers as the central, desirable option and rendering the university a secondtier career. During their 26-year rule, the RC and BSPP generals successfully transformed military careers into the most popular professions and started to enhance their military educational institutions that were separated by the others. As Zarni (1998) notes, to many ambitious young men military service was the surest and quickest route to power, prestige, and wealth. A military education was portrayed and enhanced as the best possible education that could provide a secure social and economic status that the other higher education institutions couldn't.

2.6 Higher education after the 1988 protests

Education was one of tools used by the RC and BSPP governments to set the stage for and support the emergence of a privileged class of military officials and associated families who thrived while Myanmar's economy declined rapidly⁹⁹. In 1988, amidst the nation's worst economic crisis ever, the

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⁹⁹ Carolyn Wakeman notes: "Despite its fertile land and abundant natural resources, the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma in 1987 had officially become one of the world's poorest countries, ranked economically alongside Bangladesh and Ethiopia. Designation by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country meant that Burma's [yearly] per capita income was below \$200 and its ratio of manufacturing to gross domestic product below 10 per cent. Shocked by the country's diminished stature in the world, Burmese people felt shamed and angry (Wakeman 2009, p. 115).

sudden demonetization of the national currency and consequent loss of an estimated 80 percent of currency without compensation (Fujita, Mieno and Okamoto, 2009) triggered the country's largest anti-government protests. The peak of the protests occurred on 8 August 1988 (a date that later became known as the 8888 Uprising, and the students who took part in it the "88 Generation"), involving hundreds of thousands of people protesting on the streets of Yangon. The military responded brutally and decisively, killing thousands of people and imprisoning students leaders for decades (Boudreau, 2004)¹⁰⁰. In the midst of these events, the military families acted to prevent any possible path towards political change in the status quo by establishing first the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and later the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Both the SLORS and SPDC launched punitive actions against the student movement organizations that had a profound impact on universities, students and academics. In this section, I underline the main points of what can be described as a total crackdown on higher education¹⁰¹: 1) the systematic shutting down of higher education institutions; 2) the creation of a number of new institutions only to extinguish any spark of student activism and not based on any plan related to the quality or sustainability of the sector; 3) the wild spread of "politics of fear" that also affected relationships between teachers, students and families; and 4) the expansion of low-quality distance education for "regular students" and high-quality military institutions for the students affiliated with the Tatmadaw. In one way or another, all of these lines of action followed the trajectory delineated by Ne Win's governments, but in this case with renewed brutality and without any legislative effort to put the new system under some kind of coherent new framework. Ultimately, under these regimes higher education was spatially and administratively fragmented and cognitively separated from wide society. Higher education was one of the sectors where the SLORC and SPDC were able to implement a set of activities to shrink the space for contentious acts, proving its force as a "high capacity undemocratic regime" (Fink, 2001).

After the 1988 protests, all the universities were closed for three years, until May 1991 (Rives, 2014), and gatherings of more than six people became illegal in Burma (Sheader, 2018). During this three-year closure, the SLORC initiated a systematic purge of civil servants such as teachers and university lecturers. Hundreds of teachers were dismissed, including the rectors of UY, Rangoon Institute of

¹⁰⁰ Apart from those killed and jailed, it is important to remember that 8,000 - 10,000 people fled central Burma for the hill and jungle border areas during the last weeks of September 1998 (Lintner, 1990). By July 1992, 70,000 Burmese refugees, including 2,000 students, had been given official sanctuary in Thailand, but unofficial estimates double that number (Martin, 1993).

¹⁰¹ The crackdown on education involved all levels. From 1988 to 2010, the country's basic education noticeably deteriorated to such an extent that almost 40% of children never attended school and almost three-quarters failed to complete even primary education (Thein Lwin, 2020).

Technology, and the Institute of Education (Smith, 1992). When they did re-open, however, the universities and colleges became by default the only places other than monasteries where larger groups could come together (Ibid.), the regime having shut down all other potential forces of opposition (Koon-Hong, 2014). At any sign of protest (the main protests of the '90s took place in 1992 and 1996), the regime stepped in to interrupt any academic activities: in Yangon, between 1988 and 2000, universities were closed for 10 out of 12 years (Lall, 2008). After 1996, both Rangoon and Mandalay Universities were prohibited from enrolling undergraduate students, a situation that was not reversed until 2015. During the extensive period of closure, university and colleges teaching staff were often asked to attend "retraining camp." Rives describes a four-week "re-education" course at the Phaunggyi Central Institute of Civil Service (about 50 miles north of Rangoon) that UY staff were obliged to attend in early January 1992, about a month after the student demonstration celebrating Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Peace Prize award that lead to the closure of the campus. The camp was run by the military and it included instructions and lectures on national unity, patriotism, and on how to enforce student regulations in practical terms. The ultimate goal was to indoctrinate, reeducate and put under control university staff. The practical advice about how to monitor students included surveillance in halls and bathrooms; on some campuses, a military system of control was implemented in which corridors and staircases were divided into security units under the command of department heads. It is clear that all higher education institutions operated under absolute physical surveillance in this period, in line with the "politics of fear" as defined by Monique Skidmore. Thanks to compelling ethnographic narratives, Skidmore (2003) shows how political violence, fear, and vulnerability became a way of life in Myanmar. Violence and the threat of violence constituted a selfpropagating domain and a temporal marker in the Burmese memory and everyday experience under the SLORC and SPDC regimes:

"Fear is most commonly experienced as a distortion and disorientation of perspective. It gives everyday life a surreal dimension that emphasizes negative aspects to such a large extent that thoughts involving the future are flattened and silenced. These thoughts are replaced by wild, black fantasies that colonize both the waking world and the dreamworld. Fear is intimately associated with time. As a response to a future possibility, it is inherently temporal. In generating fear, the military confuses, distorts, and controls time with the aim of stopping Burmese people from imagining futures other than the one mandating their incorporation into a totalitarian State" (Ibid. p. 20)

The state successfully generated a sense of fear among ordinary people as a constant deterrent to behavior prohibited by the regime. According to both Skidmore (Ibid.) and Koon-Hong (2014), the most common response to this state construction of fear and terror was silence, and this manifested in a lack of support for student movement's anti-governmental activities. Skidmore (2003) reports a student's statement exemplifying how fear was used to destroy students' support base starting with family and teacher support: "the government makes people feel this because of the propaganda it puts out. It causes a lack of sleep, a weakness. When people are arrested the government separates them into separate cells so that they can feel this. So you don't know what the other person is saying and you are always worried about what they are revealing. This is how they work by putting informants around everywhere. They make you feel paranoid. Your family and teachers become paranoid about you because the government makes them responsible for you." (Ibid., p.11)

As this extract shows, "divide et impera" was a key attitude of the SLORC and SPDC regimes. In fact, the military junta progressively split and relocated existing higher education institutions, and established new ones (mostly without student dormitories) in remote locations far from urban centers. Students and staff from the existing higher education institutions (around 32 at the end of Ne Win's era) were transferred to 156 newly-built institutions or campuses outside the main urban centers (Shah and Lopes Cardozo, 2018). These institutions had a smaller number of students, thereby preventing the creation of student groups capable of organizing contentious actions. UY was split into DU¹⁰², the University of East Yangon, the University of West Yangon and other institutions. The other large university in the capitol, Yangon Technological University (formerly the Yangon Institute of Technology) was shut down in 1998 and replaced by the newly built Pyay University in the Bago Region. The different universities were divided among 13-line ministries, placing the medical universities under the Ministry of Health, for instance, and leaving only the non-technical Arts and Science universities under MoE. Not only were the new institutions built in unsuitable locations, they were also built in a hurry with poor materials; teaching spaces were not carefully planned, laboratories remained under-resourced, and libraries stocked materials that were obsolete and out of date. The teaching, learning and research in universities were all profoundly affected. Curricula were reduced to narrow texts, critical thinking was removed from the learning process and rote learning became the main pedagogical approach, a situation that continues to this day (Thaung Win, 2015). Access to the

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¹⁰² In November 1993, 3.000 undergraduates began studying at a half-finished new campus located at Dagon, a new satellite town outside of Yangon. 12.000 more students followed by 1996 (Smith, 1995). From that time till nowadays, this reallocation of students made DU the biggest universities in Yangon. A striking fact, considering that still nowadays, the shanty buildings of the DU are located in a middle-of-nowhere land poorly connected with the city.

country's universities was highly restricted, with admission often given out as a reward for political loyalty and compliance (Lorch, 2007) and large numbers of students were channeled into the vast distance-education system. Distance education was not only more economically accessible (lower fees), it also continued to operate in moments when regular universities and colleges were closed without any clear schedule for re-opening (from an interview with P1 in 2020). On 29 July, 1992, the *Working People's Daily* ¹⁰³ announced that a new University of Distance Learning was to be developed as an expansion of the UCC created under Ne Win. The Distance Education University at Rangoon opened in the same year, and the Distance Education University at Mandalay opened in 1998. The official narrative focused on using information technology and multi-media facilities to offer better education to the masses; most scholars note that, in reality, the Tatmadaw was "determined to prevent any further disruptions caused by uncontrolled gatherings of students" (Smith, 1993). According to Rives (2014), by the year 2010 distance education enrolment had reached 500,000, about two-thirds of Burma's total tertiary education enrolment of approximately 750,000 - 780,000.

Against this backdrop of a higher education system in disarray, the government expanded army higher education institutions for army-affiliated students to "obtain military ascendancy as the dominant force in Burmese society by producing army officers with a better education than it was possible for civilian students to obtain within Burma" (Rives, 2014, p.221). The Tatmadaw selectivity put their economic resources into military institutes, thereby creating a two-tier system in which the best quality education was only available to those themselves connected to the military. These military universities had better infrastructure, connections to the world including visiting foreign scholars, access to teaching aids supplied by international sources, and a calendar that was not subject to closure any time the student body behaved in a "disorderly" manner, that is, against state propaganda (Kanbawza Win, 2010). These institutions trained engineers, technicians, economists, medical doctors, nurses, and pharmacologists to be "hybrid professionals", that is, military officers as well as highly educated professionals in civilian terms. There were three main higher education routes created by the military (Steinberg, 2010). The first was the Defense Services Academy at Pyin Oo Lwin, accessible only to applicants from families in the military or civil service and with a "clear" family background (Fink, 2001). In 2010, this academy offered a four-year college level degree program and had an annual intake of 1,000 cadets. The second route was the Defense Services Officer Training School, which promoted from within the ranks or enrolled cadets out of high school (Steinberg, 2010). At higher levels, there was the Command and General Staff College and, for

¹⁰³ At the British Library, System number: 013913668.

colonels and brigadiers, a National Defense University. The students/officers of these institutions had the opportunity to be sent abroad for further training, a very inviting option seldom available to civilians.

A last aspect to mention is that universities isolated from the rest of the world throughout the "Burmese way to Socialism" years became even more isolated due in part to the severe economic sanctions imposed by the West, sanctions which included ceasing any bilateral academic exchange. From the beginning of the 1990s until 2012, nearly all bilateral university exchanges for local and foreign researchers were suspended 104. European and American universities discontinued their programs with local universities (Martin, 2010), excluding most local researchers from international scholarship opportunities and isolating them from contemporary trends and research practices. It is important to note that students were still able to apply for scholarships abroad individually, but this was highly dependent on the socioeconomic background of the applicant and their connection with the military. 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 out of fear of repercussions on their family members. For the small number of foreign academics who were able to navigate the bureaucracy in Myanmar, nearly all of them pursued "approved" topics related to history and archaeology, areas 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. For research undertaken in the country, all papers had to pass the official military censorship board, meaning that university professors and academics resorted to selfcensorship in their academic inquiries. With the inauguration of the seven-step roadmap to a "disciplined democracy" mentioned in the introduction, connections and paths of mobility between international academia and Myanmar have gradually intensified. However, only the Thein Sein presidency has explicitly re-opened the national universities spaces to global education trends and the international actors (see Chapters III and V).

2.7 Taking stock of the history of higher education

Since its establishment, the higher education system in Myanmar has undergone a series of reforms and policy changes during each of the main regimes (colonial, post-independence democratic

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¹⁰⁴ In the early 2000s, a limited number of agreements (usually between UY and UM and long-standing partners in the UK, EU, and Japan) started to be re-activated.

government, and the long five-decade military era). There reforms introduced throughout its history of more than eight decades were, however, closely tied to changes in the political regime.

The colonial system can be described using Tony Ballantyne's (2012) metaphor of *a web*. In place of older hub-and-spoke models that often privileged the imperial center, Ballantyne imagines a web to emphasize the circulation and exchange of ideas crucial to the formation of empire between, and through, multiple colonial settings. Adopting Ballantyne's model, it is possible to understand the ambivalent role and place of Rangoon University as a public space for intellectual engagement among local, national and colonial elites. Designed as a structural node for inculcating the "Imperial Idea," establishing control over both past and future, instilling loyalty in local elite youth and producing a class of skilled subalterns, the university developed as a contested space. In fact, as Ballantyne notes, webs, threads and nodes are fragile and prone to entanglement: they are places of intra-local connections in which "new identities and social formation were fashioned out of unequal colonial encounters and intellectual transformation" (Ballantyne 2002, p. 15). In this case the "Imperial Idea" inculcated in the elitist university structure acted as a catalyst for dissent, provoking more militant activity by the students protesting the colonial government's overall management of education.

Throughout colonial times, university students represented a small (less than 1,000 individuals) élite in a country where only two cities had universities (Rangoon and Mandalay) and these taught subjects mostly related to law, the arts and science, medicine and engineering. At the same time, university students became one of the most significant collective actors of that time. Interestingly, one of the first student grievances was that access to this university was limited, in contrast to the British belief that "eliteness" would serve as a motivating force as compared to the open-to-all monastery schools. In the 1920s and 1930s, the UY campus was a laboratory for formulating a nationalism that, extending outward past the spaces of elitist higher education, went on to shape the political trajectory of the country as a whole. Student leaders began to weave webs outside specifically university spaces, linking their struggle up with other contentious events (i.e. workers strikes) and thereby cementing the marriage between anti-colonialism and anti-capitalist class struggle. During WWII, the same student leaders began to leave off their university studies to instead organize the armed struggle for independence; in the meantime, higher education in Myanmar was de facto suspended for a decade. In 1948, independent Myanmar was declared and the former student leaders found themselves in the position to re-think the country's higher education. Paradoxically, from that moment forward, the state progressively grew in influence to become the only dominant, decisive force shaping the arrangements and organization of higher education institutions.

The period 1948-1962 was one of expansion and exploration in which higher education became more similar to a modern idea of the sector, with significant growth in terms of the number of students, teachers, subjects, and institutions as well as research infrastructure. Nu advanced a new vision of a higher education system with the capacity to play an unprecedented role in building a new democratic society. While British colonial officers were looking to create "embryonic bureaucrats", a system leading instead to the creation of "activists" and "freedom fighters", in independent Myanmar the model higher education student was to be a "modernizer/technocrat with a democratic outlook." In so doing, Nu tried to tame student politics even while keeping the higher education sector open to the influence of international actors with their continuing part to play in university activities. Due to the unstable political conditions, however, the policies debated and discussed in this period never took on a concrete legislative shape and, when Ne Win took power, he completely reshaped and shifted the focus of the entire sector.

The RC and BSPP educational reforms were carried out in the larger political and economic context and were inextricably tied to the project of building a modern socialist nation in keeping with the Burmese Way to Socialism policy framework. Until the drafting of the NEL, higher education was regulated by the 1970s law draft as orchestrated by General Ne Win. Higher education was placed at the service of the technological needs of a socialist country and maintained under strict state control, thus leading to the nationalization and centralization of all activities. Under a very well-worded rhetoric of inclusiveness and social justice, higher education was made into a field largely closed to the intervention of both student politics and international actors who might potentially lead to contestation and resistance. Meanwhile, military education was portrayed and valorized as the best possible education, one that – unlike the other higher education institutions – could provide secure social and economic status. General Ne Win's policies led to the total crackdown on higher education that occurred during the SLORC and SPDC regimes, a period in which higher education was spatially and administratively fragmented and cognitively separated from wider society. Treated as a space of possible resistance to state propaganda, higher education was dismantled and (poorly) reorganized in terms of structure, pedagogy and access in an attempt to suppress student politics against the regime. The international actors and the regime kept reciprocally at distance. The result was the higher education system in disarray that existed at the moment the 2011 political transaction began to unfold.

Each different state authority in the modern history of Myanmar reshaped higher education. In the colonial period, higher education was a restricted elitist space but one in which students found the power to transform the nation. Under the military regimes, higher education was a more easily

accessible sector, but deprived of any possible transformative impact (especially the impact that could be exerted by both student politics and international actors) not in line with regime policies. Student enrollment, teacher (or better, civil servants) recruitment, the appointment of governing bodies (which started to exclude student politics from the Ne Win era onwards), funding and related issues were decided by the state. All university operating expenses (including even the small amounts needed for any maintenance work) were paid by the state. This led to a higher education system in which governmental involvement in the daily affairs of universities was the norm. The military regimes were not open to marketizations policies and market regulation in the sector because they were not open to the "intrusion" of international academia in any form. Although a merit-based system was in place and universities were linked to the demands of the market, these policies were designed more to guarantee state control over every aspect of life in the country than to guarantee an effectively performing education system of quality. University staff did not hold a share of authority and power; rather, they were reduced to the role of civil servants. University governing bodies were mainly operated by governmental officers who acted to shape educational policies with little input from within the system. Student organization proved remarkably resilient in these periods, but the firm grip of the state prevented their actions from having a positive impact on the education system.

Having highlighted the interplay between state, student politics and international actors in the history of Myanmar, I now turn to a discussion of how these three actors shaped and managed a higher education sector in need of drastic restructuring during the "period of transition", starting with "state authority".

CHAPTER III

STATE AUTHORITY

During the transition period, Myanmar's political system operated according to the framework of the 2008 Constitution. As mentioned in the introduction, the 2008 Constitution was drafted to allow the country to return to constitutional rule. At the same time, the document was also disproportionately influenced by one single institution, the Tatmadaw more than any other; indeed, the Tatmadaw made sure to retain this veto power by means of favorable legislative provisions (Crouch, 2019). In relation to education, in Chapter 1, Article 28, the 2008 Constitution stipulates that: "The Union shall: (a) earnestly strive to improve the education and health of the people; (b) enact the necessary law to enable the Nation's people to participate in matters of their education and health; (c) implement a free compulsory primary education system; and (d) implement a modern education system that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character, contributing towards the building of the Nation". The Constitution includes a mandate for the state to provide certain goods and services, including free primary education and a modern education system. In this arena the state is responsible for providing these services, with a duty to support social justice and improve the lives of its citizens¹⁰⁵. There is, however, also the note that education shall promote "correct thinking" and "a good moral character", as these virtues will lead to citizens contributing to nation-building. In a way, this aim closes the circle of the reciprocal social contract, even while still reflecting some of the themes of nationalism discussed in Chapter II (see also Lall, 2021). At the same time, in Chapter 8, Article 366: "Citizens, Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens", the Constitution describes its obligation to citizens regarding their right to education, stipulating the following: "Every citizen shall, in accordance with the educational policy laid down by the Union: (a) have the right to education; (b) be given basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory; and (c) have the right to conduct scientific research, explore science, work with creativity and write, to develop the arts, and conduct research freely with other branches of culture." This article, in contrast, marks a clear discontinuity with the past by virtue of specifying the right to "conduct research freely", a right that had been severely restricted in the past (see Chapter II). Overall, the new Constitution grants the Union's citizens core civil and political rights such as freedom of expression and association, freedom of press, freedom of religion, citizenship, the right to vote, and the right to equality and nondiscrimination. At the same time, there are still severe restrictions. For example, the freedom of assembly and right to form associations is qualified by the phrase that the gathering must be unarmed,

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¹⁰⁵ When it comes to the 2008 Constitution, it is important to note how the distinction between the "people" of the Union and its citizens. See Crouch 2019 for further elaboration.

an indication of intolerance for ethnic armed organizations, and there are clear examples of the limitations imposed on the right to freedom of association in legislation, such as in relation to trade unions and prohibitions on the formation of student unions (Crouch, 2019). These limitations attest to the fact that student politics was still a concern for state authority.

Despite the clear ideological limitations and restrictions on political rights still present in the legislation, the 2008 Constitution opened a possible, new pathway for transforming the social and political life of the country. In terms of education, meeting the 2008 Constitutional provisions for accessible and modern education after decades of military rule meant that the whole education system needed to be overhauled (Lall, 2021). Applying my conceptual framework, this chapter focuses on how the state authority of the transitional period shaped and managed this process with the aim of interpreting and explaining the visions and rationales behind higher education legislation and practices. State authority is mainly conceived as the political authority of the two governments (President Thein Sein's USPD and the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD government) and bureaucratic authority which, to use Clark's definition, consists of administrative agencies such as national departments of education (Clark, 1979). Employing this approach, I analyze data from multiple sources including participant observation, interviews, official legislative documents, and public speeches by the top key political figures. I consider public speeches not only because politicians "do politics" through their discourse, but more importantly because Myanmar politics, even in the transitional period, has borne certain idiosyncratic traits of a top down political system and society. Considering both the government's prevailing aspiration to maintain control over public resources and administrative functions (including education) and the top-down structure of the two parties considered here, my analysis starts by critically framing President Thein Sein's vision of higher education (the first section) before moving on to an analysis of the main stages of the reform processes under the USPD government (second section). In the third and fourth sections, a data-driven analysis of Aung San Su Kyi's public speeches is used to bring to light her role in and visions for higher education and reform steps carried out under the NLD government. In the fifth section, I discuss how new higher education policies were acknowledged, discussed and possibly contested by university management by gathering data from my interviews with twenty Rectors, Prorectors and Head of Departments (see Introduction). Ultimately, this chapter answers my first research sub-questions (RQ1) as defined in the introduction.

3.1. President Thein Sein's discourses around Higher Education

At the first regular session of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw¹⁰⁶ convened on 30 March 2011, President Thein Sein's delivered his inaugural speech presenting his policies and reform plans (The New Light of Myanmar, 2012). At that time, he was considered by most Burma Watchers and the international community as "a faithful servant" of Senior-General Than Shwe, former head of the SPDC, with very limited agency behind his actions. The actual content of this speech was defined as "surprising" and "impressive" by most of the international commentators (Ebo Analisys Paper, 2011) and, ultimately, marked a dramatic departure from the opaque style of the SPDC government (Callahan, 2012). The President's new reputation as a more receptive and reformist leader was definitely reinforced by the views he expressed on education, and these views were well received national and internationally. I unpack the lines he developed on education, identifying a few main considerations with particular reference to higher education. In so doing, I also consider several public speeches on education he delivered during his mandate in order to pinpoint the themes and topics that appeared most consistently.

The topic of education was introduced as follows:

"Mr. Speaker and representatives, We need more and more human resources of intellectuals and intelligentsia in building a modern, developed democratic nation. In this regard, a fundamental requirement is development of human resources including new generations who will take over State duties. Therefore, we will promote the nation's education standard to meet the international level and encourage human resource development."¹⁰⁷

President Thein Sein immediately signaled that educational politics under his new government would be different from the country's recent repressive past. Intellectuals, considered enemies of state authority since the General Ne Win, are indicated as a necessary ingredient. "Education to build a modern, developed and democratic nation" ¹⁰⁸ rapidly became the mantra for all of his government's

¹⁰⁶ The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is often translated as Assembly of the Union or Union Parliament. According to the 2008 Constitution, it is formed of two houses, the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), a 224-seat upper house, and the Pyithu Hluttaw, a 440-seat lower house (House of Representatives).

¹⁰⁷ The full inaugural speech is available at: https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-03-31.pdf

¹⁰⁸ On February, 14, 2012, in a widely cited and published speech, the Vice President framed the same concept as following: "by developing human resources through promoting education and health sectors, we hope to realize our

education-oriented activities. Tellingly, the higher education chapter of the NESP, the key policy document under the NLD government, defines the mission of higher education as: "to produce graduate human resources who possess the required qualifications for the construction of a new, modern, developed, disciplined, democratic nation" (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016, p.188). This vision is consistent with what has been defined as the "education for human capital" discourse. As discussed in Chapter I, this discourse defines young people as "investments" for the enrichment of national economies: states spend money on education with the expectation that young people will return profit or pay society back. As further articulated in a public speech on 2 May, 2013:

"We acknowledge that technology and human resources also known as the human capital are pivotal for sustainable development, especially the future generations take the main role in creation of competent human resources. As our government is undertaking education reforms, we have placed a special emphasis on production of all-round youths for State-building." 109

Coming from decades of isolation, Myanmar needed to catch up with the other economies in the region and, to do so, it needed a qualifications system that would promote greater workforce mobility. On 14 February, 2012, in a long and articulated speech, the Vice President expressed this vision as follows:

"For the higher education sector, more students are offered for more opportunities for learning, by opening more new universities and degree colleges and other educational programmes are also expanded to promote greater diversity. [...] But, the productively should be in line with the demand in the existing labour market, not only in quantity but also in quality. Therefore, expansion of accessibility as well as quality enhancement are necessary to strengthen, both in basic and higher education." ¹¹⁰

vision, which is "building modern, developed and democratic nation". The concept of development can be conceived of in a multidimensional process. Since the challenge is to improve the quality of life, the needs must be fulfilled. It is necessary to focus on quality growth which can share the fruits of development among the people equitably." The full speech is here: https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs13/NLM2012-02-14.pdf

¹⁰⁹ Full text available at: https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs15/NLM-2013-05-02.pdf

¹¹⁰ Full text available at: https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs13/NLM2012-02-14.pdf

Higher education was to be restructured: to serve the needs of an expanding labor market and, at the same time, to promote "great diversity" as well as "accessibility". This leads to an additional consideration regarding the blueprint of President Thein Sein's vision for education: he constantly signaled that a reform in the education sector required the renegotiation of state-societal relations. These renegotiations were needed to support the process but, at the same time, the reform process itself could be supported by such renegotiation. Considering the national level, he not only spoke positively about the role of non-state actors in educational matters but also openly called for civic participation and assistance from intellectuals, NGOs and ethnic organizations. He promised a significant relaxation of state control over society, leading to the emergence of an expanded, albeit conditional, pluralism. This pluralism included international actors and organizations, as also noted in this speech from 15 July, 2013:

"We need assistance now, especially in training and education during this period of transition, in order that we might stand on our own two feet. But what we need most is responsible trade and investment, to grow our economy, create jobs and lift our people from poverty, investment that will transfer technology and will help us join in the economic success of the region and give our children the same opportunities as the rest of Asia." 111

Not only were these words in clear contrast to the isolation policies of the previous political period, but they also give development partners a specific mandate. These partners were welcomed into the educational arena of the country because they were expected to bring Myanmar to the level of Asian/ASEAN standards.

Overall, President Thein Sein was signaling a new idea of collective participation in education matters that could lead to societal transformation. We can ask: what were the borders of this societal transformation? In other words, what society did President Thein Sein have in mind? In a speech on 15 August, 2013, he argued that:

"First, they want stability and the rule of law. Another is the socioeconomic development. As an elected government, the desires of the people and fulfilling these desires are our objectives. We must ensure political stability

¹¹¹ Full text available at:

to enforce the rule of law and stability. We must end six-decade long conflicts with ethnic armed groups. We must stimulate the country's economy simultaneously to improve education, health and social standards of the people in order to shape their socio-economic development and eradicate the poverty."112

I cannot argue that President Thein Sein fully advocated for education "for a just society", as conceptualized in Chapter I. He envisioned a society the top priority of which would be the political stability provided by military mighty. The more fitting framework might be: the key political mandate of President Their Sein continued to be an education system that could support the military's interests in building a solid and internationally credible "disciplined democracy". As I argue in both the next section and the next chapter, this new collective participations in educational matters was conditional: it had borders and limits and was subordinated to achieving the more pressing political goals of the presidency. This is why the CESR process was sidelined by EPIC when it seemed to be not "pragmatic and timely enough" and the student protest against the NEL was suppressed by USPD hardliners in March 2015 (as discussed in Chapter IV, the protest was not supported by the NLD either).

3.2 The higher education reform unfolding under the USDP government

After his inauguration speech, President Thein Sein's vision for education was consolidated in a 10point education plan¹¹³ that formed the basis of what was to come over his following 4 years in office. The call for international support was promptly received by various international agency and donors. In February 2012, the government organized a conference on "Development Policy Options with

112 Full text available at: https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs15/NLM-2013-08-15red.pdf
113 The 10-Point Education Policy was::

• To implement a free, compulsory primary education system.

Source: http://www.cesrmm.org/ministryofeducation

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[•] To increase the enrolment rate in the basic education sector.

[•] To nurture new generations as intellectuals and intelligentsia in human resource development.

[•] To improve capacities of teachers in both basic and HE sectors

[•] To utilize teaching aids more effectively.

[•] To upgrade the quality and socio-economic status of educational personnel.

[•] To provide scholarships, stipends and awards both locally and internationally.

[•] To promulgate relevant laws for the participation and contribution of private sectors in education services.

[•] To collaborate with international and local organizations including the UN, INGOs and NGOs.

[•] To upgrade education standards to an international level.

Special Reference to the Health and Education Sectors" bringing together more than 600 development partners (The New Light of Myanmar, 2012; UN, 2012). As a result of this conference, the CESR was launched in July 2012. The CESR encompassed all educational sectors, from early childhood education to higher education, and involved a wide range of governmental bodies (ministries and their departments) that had a role in education ¹¹⁴. UNICEF led the education consortium, working with the MDFE. As Marie Lall (2021) argues, the CESR was a complex process dominated by various tensions between the MoE, the development partners of the CESR team, and civil society actors like the NNER¹¹⁵. The keyword and main commitment of the CESR process was to "review": a plan to re-assess and evaluate the state of the national education sector in four stages 116. This very nature of the process as "a review", a passive process rather than an active process of change, was highly criticized by different fronts. I heard the comment that "we already know what is wrong with it" being advanced by different stakeholders (national or international) together with an emphasis on the need for more ready-made policy recommendation to "move change forward". I argue that these comments did not fully consider the disarrayed status of the management structure of higher education in the country, however. During the SLORC/SPDC years, Myanmar's "crippled" bureaucracy had "difficulty accomplishing even basic tasks necessary to maintain the regime, such as collecting revenue and supplying the army" (Englehart 2005, p. 623). The disarray of the bureaucratic system was a legacy that the USDP government had to tackle in every sector, and as seen in Chapter 2 higher education was definitely one of the most significantly affected. A system in disarray is often unable to provide data and insights regarding the current situation, as CESR's development partners often complained when blaming governmental officers for withholding information. The reality of things

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¹¹⁴ A complete list is available on the CESR website: http://www.cesrmm.org/partnerships

¹¹⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, in the same year the CESR was announced, an umbrella organization called NNER was created by 13 grassroot associations. NNER included, among others: the NLD Education Network, the 88 Generation activists, the Thinking Classroom Foundation, student unions, teacher's unions, and religious organizations. NNER was intended as a political participation process aimed at making recommendations to the parliament to potentially inform the CESR. Initially, therefore, NNER was firm in its intent to cooperate with governmental initiatives. In the span of a few months, however, NNER withdrew from this collaboration on the grounds that the government-led reform process was not valuing or incorporating public input (Metro, 2016). As I argue in Chapter IV, focused on student organizations, NNER's degree of disenchantment and dissatisfaction grew with each step of the reform process, as did the degree of governmental control over any political participation initiatives that could be seen as contentious politics. The input that NNER wished to include in the reform process included: mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE); Contextualized Curriculum/Local Curriculum; Education for Social Justice and Peace; Academic Freedom and Decentralized Education; Self-determination in Education; Freedom of Association, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Assembly (including for student unions, teachers' unions, etc.); Equity-based Financing in Education (that the education budget should be 15-20% of the national budget or 5-6 % of the GDP); Universal access to quality early childhood education, basic education, higher education, non-formal education, adult education, and lifelong learning. (https://www.facebook.com/NNER.mmr)

The first phase of the CESR was entitled "Rapid Assessment" and it ended in early 2013. The second of phase of the CESR was entitled "In-Depth Analysis" and lasted until early 2014. The CESR concluded with a Phase 3 focused on costs, covering fiscal years 2016 through 2020, of what would be required to make changes across the sector and Phase 4, the writing of the NESP.

on the ground was that not one single person was able to provide a clear picture of the country's higher education system¹¹⁷ because higher education matters were handled by a large number of ministries and departments that lacked coordination. Higher education was not "under control", although the top-down, authoritarian nature of the bureaucratic structure of the country was preventing governmental officials from declaring this fact publicly. Ultimately, the CESR provided a coherent and publicly accessible picture of the state of the Myanmar higher education that had not been available since the 1960s¹¹⁸ and a complex set of recommendations for revitalizing it.

Concerning these policy recommendations, I argue that the CESR clearly displayed a "sit-on-thefence" approach that ultimately affected the entire higher education reform process in the transition period, specifically by stagnating it and making it a very selective process. On one side of the fence, there was the influence of the neoliberal vocabulary introduced by CESR international partners. The global higher education trends discussed at the end of Chapter I materialized at warp speed in Myanmar thanks to the "best practices" of international partners, mirroring the kind of classical policy-borrowing phenomenon described in many other instances of education reform in developing countries (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). On the other side, there were the core values of national development sustained by Myanmar cultural principles for the common good and the push to create a more just and inclusive society fueled by civil society actors such the NNER. However, as noted by Camille Kandiko Howson and Marie Lall (2019), the CESR process failed to acknowledge the contradiction between different policy discourses. In fact, policy recommendations seemed to recognize little difference between: "serving the state, development of the local economy and serving the most disadvantaged in society" (Ibid., p.11) or the neoliberal trends of creating a higher education system fit for international standards and the needs of higher education institutions in disadvantaged rural or conflict-affected areas. I argue, therefore, that the CESR process brought to the table all manner of international "best practices" but did not translate them so as to adapt them to the local context and did not consider how the different elements might interact without creating evident contradictions. The CESR tried to encompass different approaches, but legislation cannot really "sit on the fence" and so, in the end, only a few of the CESR insights were actually reflected in the NEL (unsurprisingly the more neo-liberal ones). To further unpack this point, I give two examples.

¹¹⁷ In my days of participant observation at the DHE of the MoE, I saw governmental officers struggle to produce coherent basic data like a list of higher education institutions, student enrollment by year, or data on the teaching staff employed at each institution.

¹¹⁸ Not considering documents in Burmese, the CESR reports are the first documents from a state authority perspective available in English that include quantitative and qualitative data on the national higher education sector, after the ones mentioned in Chapter II drafted by Nyi Nyi.

Beginning with CESR Phase 1, development partners pushed the idea that higher education quality depends on more effectively meeting the needs of the economy and labor market so as to build a "knowledge economy society". The underlying paradigm followed two intertwined logics. First, it intended to reposition and facilitate the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. Second, it aimed to ignite a specific kind of transformation that has been successfully carried out in many Asian states, namely the progressive shift from a rural-based model to an industry- and service-driven one. This approach led to some specific subjects (and some specific institutions) being heavily targeted by reform efforts (i.e. Economics, Management and Finance, It Services, Law, Agricultural Science) and others left completely alone (i.e. especially some Arts subjects like Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology...).

This proved problematic on both sides, not only for the institutions/subjects left out of improvement attempts but also for the ones that were heavily targeted, as illustrated by the example of agricultural science at YAU. Agriculture was expected to retain its prominent role as the country's major economic catalyst in the near future, also in light of the fact that it still accounted for more than 30 per cent of the national GDP. A disproportionate number of pages of CESR reports on higher education focus on the agricultural sector, but in Myanmar the YAU is the only institution providing higher education in this sector. This university was put under an immense amount of pressure by the MoE and MoaLI to serve as an engine of reform (to increase student intake and enhance the quality of research) and targeted by an incredibly large number of projects organized by international donors (a full list appears in Nang Hseng Hom et al. 2021). This pressure was not matched by an improvement in the staff-student ratio or a provision allowing the employment of foreign staff¹¹⁹. In the framework of the CHINLONE project, Professor Nang Hseng Hom, Rector of the University, and her colleagues reflected on the negative repercussions of this pressure to boost student intake and change the curricula to better match market needs, noting:

"In 2011-2016, the education program was again reverted to subject-based specialisation due to increased student intake. Consequently, the time for practical courses and course contents were decreased (e.g. a total of fourteen practical courses in one semester reduced to seven)." (Ibid., p.42)

¹¹⁹ One of the peculiarities of the Myanmar context is that, since universities are not financially autonomous, they cannot employ foreign staff to foster the reform process as in other developing countries. The MoE only employs foreign staff for language courses.

In the last section, I delve more deeply into the case of YAU curricula reforms. Ultimately, the idea that higher education was to be reformed to build a "knowledge economy society" was only a part of the Thein Sein vision, but this part in particular appealed to development partners pushing to create universities of excellence in specific sectors.

The second example relates to the issue of access to higher education. More precisely, the trajectory of the conceptualization of "access" from CESR Phase 1 to the NEL represents quite a remarkable shift from a very broad and complex problematization of a problem to a very narrow solution. CESR Phase 1 identified barriers to access on the basis of multiple factors, including ethnicity ¹²⁰ (also explicitly referencing the Rohingyas 121), while recognizing that more diverse access to higher education depends in many ways on the creation of a better and more inclusive society. Over time, policy documents began to shy away from explicitly addressing exclusion based on ethnicity, gender, religion, language or disability and, ultimately, the NEL defined access in quite narrow terms as the procedure for entering higher education, that is, the "matriculation exam" 122, by legislating new "simple and transparent" selection criteria based on "the wishes of the learner". matriculation exam was held in 1946. As argued in Chapter II, the Nu times were an era of higher education expansion and the matriculation exam was a tool for governing this expansion by channeling students towards the various sectors of the state-controlled economy. It was undoubtedly a tool in need of rethinking, but reducing the issue of access to the matriculation exam proved more suited to meeting one agenda, that of aligning new market-economy needs with the academic offering, while completely sidelining the other, namely the local need for higher education to promote integration and social justice across ethnic regions and conflict-affected parts of the country.

As per Myanmar political tradition, state authority expected the CESR process to provide a timely and straightforward roadmap to follow¹²³. Since this roadmap appeared impossible to formulate in time for the 2015 election and relations among all the stakeholders were becoming increasingly

¹²⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, even there are no official data on the breakdown of ethnic minority students' participation in higher education, it is a well-known fact that universities are not always accessible these students.

¹²¹ The explicit mention of the Rohingyas in the early CESR documents shows how comprehensive that phase of the reform process was. In the later stages, even student activists were no longer addressing the Rohingyas explicitly (as I mention in the conclusions, they did so after the February 2021 military takeover).

¹²² Students at formal basic education high schools can choose to study a combination of subjects out of 7 fixed combinations offered at the national level. On the basis of the combination chosen, and on aggregate score achieved on the matriculation examination, the student is eligible to study a specified field of study. During my interviews with students, they expressed very clearly that they are rarely offered a place at the preferred higher education institutions. It is quite common for Myanmar university students to feel very frustrated about the lack of agency the normative process leaves them in choosing their career path. As a student at the DU told me: "I want to be a fashion designer and I'm studying Law, do you know how I feel about this?".

¹²³ On October, 7, 2013, shortly before the establishment of EPIC, President Thein Sein addressed the "Pragmatic Education Reform Seminar" emphasizing that education reforms should be accelerated and "be pragmatic", thus revealing a sense of frustration with the CESR timeframe and how it worked.

complex, authorities ended up reducing the space for participating in educational matters that President Thein Sein had opened. In the middle of Phase 2 of the CESR, a new, parallel body – the "Education Promotion and Implementation Committee" (EPIC) – was set up by the President's Office (Tin Tin Shu, 2013) with the specific aim of drafting the new education law. The establishment of a parallel body came as a surprise and frustrating development to the various national and international stakeholders, including the student organizations as I discuss in the next chapter. In an informal interview, Prof. Marie Lall, who was part of a team supporting the CESR led by the Myanmar MoE, pointed out to me that most of the meetings of EPIC were held in Burmese, thereby effectively excluding the development partners. EPIC was conducted in three phases, from October 2013 until December 2015. On the basis of the National Education Bill drafted by EPIC, the 2014 NEL (amended in 2015)¹²⁴ was drafted as the final legislative landmark of the UPSD government¹²⁵ (the NLD did not modify it). The NESP (2016-2021) was also drafted under President Thein Sein's government but, since it was revised and adopted by the NLD-led government, I review it in the next sections.

In the arena of higher education, the NEL (and its amendment) did not legislate all the aspects discussed in the CESR or EPIC reports. In Chapter 3 – Education Principles, article 4, it is indicated that "(g) Universities and colleges shall have the right to be independent and self-administered; (h) University entrance shall be based on the learner desire and they have the right to choose any school if they meet the institutions' qualification." The concept of institutional autonomy is repeated in Chapter 5- System of National Education, article 26, this time worded as "independent learning and independent administration" and Chapter 12, article 64, refers to financial autonomy. Chapter 7 – Establishment of Curriculum and Curriculum Standards states that curricula should be established in line with laws and the need to improve and develop the nation's socio-economic situation. Chapter 11 – Education Administration defines the policy-making bodies; these bodies were actually reviewed in the amended law and NESP, thereby leading to the creation of the NEPC (as I discus in the next sections). The right to create student and teachers unions was part of the NEL Amendment (which was not part of the Constitutional provisions). I discuss in the next chapter how including this amendment was a controversial achievement by student politics. Ultimately, the NEL established that, to function effectively in the current global environment, Myanmar higher education system

¹²⁴ The full text of the law in English is available at: https://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/laws-myanmar-laws-1988-until-now/union-solidarity-and-development-party-laws-2012-2016/myanmar-laws-2014/pyidaungsu-hluttaw-law-no-41-2014-national-education-law-burmese-and-english.html

¹²⁵ At the legislative level, the 1973 University Education Law (amended in 1989, see Chapter II) was still regulating academic affairs until the drafting of the NEL. In 2012, a Higher Education Bill was presented to the Pyithu Hluttaw but ultimately rejected; therefore, CESR policy documents identify a new law on education as a fundamental milestone for accelerating the process of change that the USDP government pledged to achieve before the end of its mandate.

needed to develop better governance in the sense of both university autonomy and a set of policy bodies tasked with the coordination and enhancement of the national landscape. University autonomy was understood as including different aspects, with the two most pressing being universities' right to formulate their own curriculum and enjoy financial autonomy. Chapter 13 - Provisions for Transitional Period, article 66, mentioned that "all education institutions that existed before the prescription of this Law must have (all provisions) accomplished in line with this Law within five years from its starting date". Up to the outbreak of the coup that disrupted this process as I argue in the conclusion, almost none of the higher education institutions had implemented most of the provisions. The steps remaining to be taken included the process of writing and approving university charters, setting up appropriate quality assurance mechanisms, reorganizing faculty systems, etc. At the same time, however, the state authority never intended for all institutions to achieve these goals. I further elaborate on this point in the last two sections of this chapter.

3.3 Aung San Suu Kyi's discourses around higher education

Before analyzing how higher education reform continued under the NLD government, I unpack Aung San Suu Kyi's vision for the sector. This task is more challenging and complex than unpacking President Thein Sein's vision, as the latter was ultimately more linear and closely aligned with the actual policy and practices implemented by his government. As mentioned in the introduction, Michał Lubina (2021) considers the contradiction of Aung San Suu Kyi's governance by borrowing the postcolonial theory of hybridity from Homi K. Bhabha (1994). Lubina defines Aung San Suu Kyi as a "hybrid politician": the living embodiment of two cultures (one being her Western colonial heritage provided by her upbringing and the other her Burmese identity) that clash and, in so doing, generate a third one with its own structures, objects and practices: "a third space". According to Lubina, hybridity offers a way of explaining the apparent inconsistencies of Aung San Suu Kyi's overarching political agenda and how she can consider herself a democrat (and be considered so by Myanmar public opinion) and yet rule autocratically. This section builds on Lubina's argument by showing that universities and higher education policies have served as a space in which Aung San Suu Kyi's displayed and reproduced such hybridity.

Since the period of her house arrest (1989-1995), education has been one of the cornerstones of Aung San Suu Kyi's public addresses. Her international fame as an icon of democracy has been fueled by her progressive remarks on the link between education and democracy, remarks that have been widely quoted by the international press and scholars, such as:

"A country's international standard cannot be measured in terms of numbers of hotels and bridges: it has to be measured in terms of education." (from a public speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered on 30 September, 1995)

Based on the critical analyses of five of these public addresses, Franziska Blum (2011) argues that Aung San Suu Kyi aimed to employ mass education as a means to lead her country towards democracy. Against this backdrop, her vision of democracy has depended and been centered on the actions of educated and self-responsible citizen rather than the implementation of institutions and the separation of powers. In the wake of what was defined as the "traditional" Burmese concept of education at the beginning of Chapter 2, her vision of "what is education" included the fostering of both spiritual and worldly abilities. A reform of education, both spiritual and secular, has thus been indicated as a prerequisite for democracy by Aung San Suu Kyi since the 1990s.

Advocating for "a great deal of reform in [the] country's education system" (from a public speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered on 7 October, 1995), she has often mentioned the need for free, compulsory basic education but also of high-quality higher education: "without a good higher education system, our country will be not able to rise" (from a 30 May, 2003 public speech by Aung San Suu Kyi). She also signaled the need to re-establish universities' historical political role linked to student politics activities:

"I believe we will have the right to rebuilt the student union some day. The student union played a critical role in Burmese political history. This role cannot be ignored [...] The time will come, I believe, when we can rebuild the union. Students, do not despair. The time will come." (from a public speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered on 23 September, 1995)

Considering her agenda of "educating the nation", at the beginning of the transitional period, many international donors looked to her for both information about the real status of the higher education sector (as already mentioned, very little information was publicly available) and insights into how to frame their support for higher education reform. Especially in the first years of the Thein Sein presidency, she was the one who delivered the most passionate pleas for supporting education reform, as illustrated by this quote from her address to UK representatives delivered on 9 May, 2013:

"Establish Burma on the map of countries with an admirable system of education. Please help us to put Burma back on the map of those countries where education is enjoyed by as many people as possible, and the education that they enjoy is one that will help not just our country but the world to build a happier human society." ¹²⁶

If we compare her position to that of President Thein Sein, she puts more emphasis on the societal benefits of higher education, linking it to social justice, human rights, and democracy and peace while also situating universities firmly within the arena of social transformation and social justice ¹²⁷. Universities are also framed as providing important spaces in which students, as social critics, should freely and independently engage in discussion and debate on societal and political issues, activities that were forbidden in the country's recent history:

"The very first thing we need to do, which perhaps may come to you as a surprise, is to recreate campus life. Our young people have not known campus life for decades. The focus of the military government was on maintaining discipline, not on providing education. Young people gathering at a university campus were considered dangerous. They were looked upon as would-be demonstrators, young troublemakers who would demand the fall of government. Of course, young people like to voice their opinions and also to oppose what governments do if they think that governments are not doing what they should be doing. But to try to destroy campus life in order to keep our young people quiescent is to destroy the future of our country." (from a public speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered May, 9, 2013)

¹²⁶ Full text available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/aung-san-suu-kyi-speech-support-burmas-higher-education

¹²⁷ While this argument is generally true, there is a nuance worth noting. Her position on progressive education is emphasized to a greater extent when approaching the donors community and Western policy makers and academics. Her speeches in Burmese in the Parliament are more cautious and are more centered on the role of University of Yangon, as I will further elaborate below.

Considering these premises, she and her NLD party might well have been expected to make a decisive intervention in reforming higher education. The reality was very different, however: not only did the NLD function less as a genuine opposition party and more as a bystander during NEL drafting, but also during the entire NLD mandate the trajectory of the education reform did not take any significant turn. The NESP drafted during Thein Sein's presidency was only minorly revised, and the main aim in terms of higher education reform was the search for better governance through autonomy. Moreover, in the next chapter, I argue that Aung San Suu Kyi deliberately fragmented the national field of student politics by co-opting student organizations and tried to reduce the impact of student power, not supporting it as promised. It seems that higher education is yet another sector in which she did not deliver what was promised. How can this gap be best explained and framed? A clue can be found in this quote:

"At one time, the education system in Burma was very closely linked to the education system in Britain. In fact, we could say that modern education was introduced to Burma by the British government. Now, we have to learn all over again. We have to learn not only from you, but from other countries in the world who have managed to change their education systems to deal with the demands of modern times". (from a public speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered 9 May, 2013)

Showing her postcolonial hybridity, in this speech she points out how beginning higher education system reform could be conceived as a "return to the golden era" in the sense of reestablishing the prestige of a few centers of excellence, with the UY as the crown jewel. Re-branding the UY as the country's "flagship university" was one of Aung San Suu Kyi endeavors throughout the transitional period. In fact, following the creation of the special parliamentary commission, from November 2012 onward she chaired the "Yangon University Renovation and Upgrading Committee" and pushed international donors to give priority to upgrading its facilities to meet international standards. Her vision for the university is clearly detailed here:

"It will be more effective if we start at UY. In the past, UY was able to compete with other international universities. But now I can honestly say that there is no international-standard university in our country [...] I don't mean to

renovate only the buildings of the university but also its courses and teaching methods. A university should be oriented towards its students. [...] If we can build a single high-quality university with donors' support then they will be more encouraged to help with other projects [...] Some world-leading universities are ready to help with this kind of program." (from a speech Aung San Suu Kyi delivered to Pyithu Hluttaw 9 November, 2012)¹²⁸

In 2017, the "University of Yangon Revitalization Committee" was created to draft and implement a "Master Plan for University of Yangon Revitalization". Acknowledging that real change would take time, the Master Plan laid out a development vision for the period until 2030 but also identified a subset of urgent priorities and improvements to be completed by the UY's centennial in 2020 (called Centennial Milestones). The Master Plan contains two self-standing but integrated components. The first is the program of institutional transformation defined as the Software Master Plan and supported by the Central European University and Irrawaddy Policy Exchange. In line with NESP provisions, the Software Master Plan was based on introducing "autonomy" as the major tool for efficiency and catalyst of change. The second component was the Hardware Master Plan, the infrastructural and physical revitalization of the campus. Quite tellingly, this project was subcontracted to a British firm, the London-based Kilburn Nightingale Architects¹²⁹.

More than a decade and a half ago, Altbach was one of the first to observe that "everyone wants a world-class university. No country feels it can do without one. [But] the problem is that no one knows what [it] is, and ... how to get one" (Altbach 2004, p.5.) Aung San Suu Kyi clearly pointed at UY as the country's "world class university" to invest in, de facto concentrating reform efforts on one specific goal while sidelining the issues of the wider system. Drawing on Nina Arnhold's educational reconstruction conceptual framework (Arnhold et al., 1998), Esson and Wang have analyzed the early effects of the UY reform process and argued that these efforts failed to consider the ideological and psychological reconstruction of the university as part of the reform process (Esson and Wang, 2018). Their conclusion is that the reform of the university was mainly targeted at a few infrastructural improvements and, as such, was more cosmetic than substantial. In the next chapter, I argue that student activists advanced a similar argument in the summer of 2019. Nevertheless, in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a yearlong celebration of the university centenary was planned following

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¹²⁸ Full speech available at: https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/3164-nld-leader-pushes-hluttaw-on-yangon-university-plan.html

¹²⁹ The plans are available at: https://www.uy.edu.mm/master-plan/

Aung San Suu Kyi's explicit personal request to showcase the "success story" of the university for the world to see (from an interview with P4 who was part of the planning committee at UY). Preparations for this event took over most of the duties of the most active members of university governance, and they were in direct contact with the chair of the Rector' Committee that was taking direct instructions from Aung San Suu Kyi for most of 2019 and 2020. All the development partners and international universities with a relationship with the UY were asked to participate in the celebration and perform their appreciation for working to improve the university.

Against this backdrop, two main considerations can be formulated. First, juxtaposing the "education for the nation" agenda and her actions to create one single flagship university, I argue that Aung San Suu Kyi advanced an elitist and top-down idea of higher education in which universities are linked to the production and allocation of social positions, "positional goods" or "status goods" (see Chapter I) and, ultimately, the reproduction of the country's elite. Choosing to focus on a single university as a center of excellence and not the wider issues of the system (as other actors, such as the CESR partners, had done), she gave state authority the mission of working to educate a small elite of "learned men" in the same manner as colonial times (see Chapter II). Second, this approach to higher education can be seen as bound to a conservative idea of state identity-construction. As argued by Kristin Anabel Eggeling (2020), when individual education institutions are imagined as standing for the advancement and progress of an entire sector, there is the danger of creating an empty and rhetorical "knowledge-state" branding project. Flagship universities, regardless of the reality of their academic or research performance, can be used as a rhetorical expedient to showcase ideas of national unity, stability and capability. Simply the existence of a single center of knowledge serves to enhance the idea of a nation that is moving forward, towards a better future. This is a never-fulfilled but always-present idea of a better future or better society that is politically deployed to gain consensus. Aung San Suu Kyi's project for the UY can be seen as an example of how: "rather than questioning the power of the elite [...] state-funded prestigious higher education institutions can also re-affirm the centralization of political power and become a projection surface for the soft and benevolent policies of otherwise authoritarian governments" (Ibid., p.90). In the next chapter, I show how some student activists tried to point out that Aung San Suu Kyi was using the UY brand to showcase the "soft side" of her measures and, in so doing, covering up the more authoritarian side of her government.

According to several scholars, since entering parliamentary politics the NLD abandoned its longstanding rejectionist policy and acquiesced to advocating for political reform as a "loyal opposition" within the parameters of the 2008 Constitution (David and Holliday, 2018). NLD lawmakers were largely passive in parliament and were apparently instructed by party leadership "not to antagonize their counterparts in the USDP or the military" (Kean, 2014, p. 54). Several unpopular and publicly protested laws were passed by parliament, often without any input or participation from NLD parliamentarians (Lee Huang, 2020). I argue that these also included the NEL that the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD effectively backed, since the party was also silent about the state's use of violence to squash the students' mobilization against the NEL as discussed in the next chapter. In fact, after a short tenure by Aung San Suu Kyi herself, the person chosen as Minister of Education was the former Rector of West Yangon University Dr Myo Thein Gyi who had proven himself a hardliner during the student protests. The NEL was the major legislative landmark of the UPSD government, and that administration also concluded with the drafting of the NESP (2016-2021). As Marie Lall (2021) points out, education was still stated as a key priority of the NLD election campaign and government, and the NLD promised education reform based on an agenda of social justice and change. During the entire NLD government, the NESP remained the de facto key document for policy change and implementation. In 2019, towards the end of the NLD mandate, I interviewed P3, one of the key policy makers in the education sector close to the NLD party who admitted: "there is not much difference at the moment between what was done by Thein Sein government and us for the higher education sector". The NESP was reviewed in 2019 leading to the drafting of a new NESP for 2021-2030, a process interrupted by the 2021 February military takeover.

Against this backdrop, the NESP stood out as an overarching reform impacting the Myanmar educational system as a whole but with particular emphasis on the primary education sector. It encompassed nine goals/transformational shifts (see Figure 10).

As mentioned in the introduction, the NESP sets three specific aims with regard to higher education that I discussed with governmental officers to understand the ranking of priorities or implementation strategies. Ultimately, although a number of activities were carried out along all three strategic lines (including with the support of international actors), the first one was at the heart of the NESP-lead

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¹³⁰ These aims were worded as: 1) strengthening higher education governance and management capacity; 2) encouraging local teaching staff to undertake quality research and offering effective teaching in order to provide students with an effective learning experience; and 3) improving access to a high quality education with no discrimination and regardless of students' social and economic backgrounds.

reform process. Tellingly, my interviewees indicated that the third strategy, that is, improving access, the one that could be seen as most closely linked to social inclusion issues (and including a vision for universities and colleges in ethnic areas) was the last in order of priority. This aim was conveyed through vague remarks regarding the creation of a good teaching and learning environment and the promotion of "student support program" in the sense of scholarships and financial support. In terms of the second strategy, I argue that "enhancing the quality and relevance of the academic offer" took precedence over "enhancing the quality and relevance of research". Updating the curricula took precedence over research activities, and this latter manifested in actions that were advanced quite timidly (the research targets were: establishing a National Research and Innovation Fund and Research and Development Centers at specific universities; upgrading facilities, e-learning centers and e-libraries, including in specific "world-class national universities and comprehensive universities"; and carrying out professional development for faculty and laboratory technicians).



Figure 10: Diagram of the NESP GOAL and nine Transformational Shifts (Myanmar Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12)

The first strategy of "enhancing the administrative efficiency of the institutions" was definitely seen as the more pressing issue. In fact, although most scholars argue that the NESP put the issue of quality at the heart of higher education reform, I would instead argue that the NESP put the issue of governance and management at the heart of the reform in the hope that changing the governance system would lead to better quality education. In the last chapter, I argue that international actors

supported this idea by funding programs that moved it forward. In NESP implementation documents, the first strategies identified were that of carrying out overseas study tours to document best practices and establish partnerships; strengthening the governance of higher education institutions through university charters and university councils; increasing the autonomy and, at the same time, the accountability of higher education institutions; and establishing a National Institute for Higher Education Development (NIHED) and Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (HEQAA). Increased institutional autonomy was accompanied by the introduction of new accountability measures, the most important of these being a quality assurance mechanism. In the move to advance a paradigm in which state authority steers the higher education sector "from-a-distance", quality assurance is a fundamental component of the monitoring and evaluation process that the state authority needs to carry out to ensure that the autonomous institutions are playing according to the rules¹³¹. Moreover, it is a mechanism that can pave the way to establishing a framework of action for private higher education institutions. This was definitely a direction that was explored under the NLD government, even if it never ultimately resulted in specific legislation.

Alongside this strategy, the NESP created new policy bodies¹³². As shown in Figure 11, these new bodies were coordinated by the NEPC, a committee independent of the MoE mandated with formulating and implementing education policy reform, while the MoE retained only administrative duties. The NEPC was designed to play 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, a role that was previously assigned to the MoE. The NEPC comprised three committees: the National Curriculum Committee (NCC), the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC), and a Rectors' Committee. The Rectors' Committee was established in April 2018 with representatives from 161 of Myanmar's public universities. It was a coordination, collaboration and negotiation body tasked with supporting universities during reform and meant to guide the process leading to autonomy ¹³³. It was expected to become the collective national higher governance body representing and taking collective responsibility for a system of autonomous universities (further discussed in the next section). As I argue in the next chapter, the Rectors' Committee was also the body in charge of relations between the government and student unions. The NAQAC was responsible for quality policies for the entire

¹³¹ In Chapter V, I argue that the establishment of quality assurance rules was a battleground for "international actors".

¹³² According to the NEL 2015 Amendment, "The Commission can form an independent committee composed of appropriate people to cooperate and negotiate on the matters related to Higher Education without interfering with the autonomy of the universities".

¹³³ The Rectors' Committee list of duties included: Institutional Charter, Teacher Union, Student Union, Research and Publication, International Relations.

education sector. The NAQAC drafted two modes of quality assessment for higher education: one at the program level called Standards and Guideline for Program Level Assessment, and another at the institutional level called Standards and Guidelines for Institutional Assessment. These documents were drafted in line with ASEAN and EU standard guidelines for higher education quality as I discuss in the next chapter.

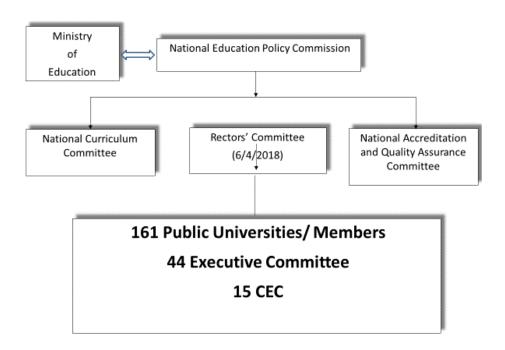


Figure 11. Higher education Governing bodies according to the NESP (Rectors' Committee)

In January 2020, towards the end of the NLD mandate and just few weeks before the COVID-19 outbreak, I interviewed a Rectors' Committee high ranking official (P3) regarding the overall process of change that he had observed or foresaw for the country's higher education. The interviewee's overall attitude towards the reform process can be expressed by the following quote:

"I'm aware that we need to take the time to change our system entirely and methodically. [..] If you want to change the system in one country, that takes time. It was calculated that it takes 20-25 years. That's why we have to be very patient, very careful when we change. And also Myanmar is in a very sensitive location, geographically and politically. We are between India, China and the USA, East and West and also we have some conflicts inside

our country. That's why we need to be very careful and patient. These are some delicate conditions. Currently, what's happening is regulated by the constitution, which also needs to change. Also concerning the Tatmadaw, we have to be very balanced, because there are a lot of different things in different areas of different problems, but we definitely want better conditions." (from an interview with P3)

I have mentioned how the NLD campaigned on the basis of a progressive and fast-paced agenda for social change in opposition to the "too slow and pragmatic" attitude of the USPD governments. These words seem to suggest that the NLD establishment always knew that some sectors, definitely including higher education, would in reality be managed "slowly and pragmatically" by the NLD itself.

Three points were indicated as advancements in higher education reform:

"The first progress is autonomy: UY and other universities forming the cluster of universities that soon became fully autonomous. The main goals are the UY and the UM. Also, the State Councilor, when we had a meeting for the centenary ceremony of the UY, mentioned autonomy. Hopefully in 5-10 years we can fully realize it" (Ibid.)

The second area of progress mentioned was the forthcoming legislation that would allow the full-fledged establishment of a private system of higher education in the country in the near future. The last area of progress was the establishment of bodies, such as the Rectors' Committee itself, capable of operating independently from the logics of the MoE and the other Ministries, bodies that the interviewee indicated as being more conservative and linked to an older way of doing politics.

3.5 Higher education reform as the quest for "autonomy"

When President Thein Sein kickstarted higher education reform, the aim was to abandon the status quo, a system in disarray, in hopes of achieving an education system with the potential to be integrated, compete with the ASEAN region and support national development. He also created an arena in which local and international actors could work together in this direction. Divergent visions of education ended up colliding in this arena, however. A neo-liberal vision, aggregating themes of

internationally-based benchmarks and performance indicators, governance, and human capital development, took up the lion's share of the space. This vision was indirectly supported by the fact that the NLD did not support the NEL opposition led by various actors, including student organizations that were pushing a social change agenda theoretically in line with the NLD campaign platform. Considering the progression of key policy landmarks, it is clear that, over time, the main point of the reform became the idea of granting the universities "autonomy". Arguably, indeed, this quest for autonomy came to constitute the driving force behind reform.

What exactly did university autonomy consist of in the Myanmar context, however? What institutions were supposed to became autonomous, and what actions were taken to achieve this goal? In this section, I answer these questions using the interviews I carried out with twenty Rectors, Prorectors and departments heads of UY, UM, DU, YAU, YUEco. In this process, UY, UM, YUEco were among the first universities sent down the path towards autonomy. Of these, YAU is not under the jurisdiction of the MoE but, as mentioned above, it holds a special place in the reform process. In contrast, DU was never included in the list of possible universities to be granted autonomy. My interviews were carried out on different occasions between 2017 and 2020 (during the COVID-19 pandemic I carried out online interviews as explained in the Introduction). It needs to be acknowledged that the route to increased autonomy is a long process and its effects are not always immediately noticeable at a macro-level. Therefore, this section is also an effort to map the specific stages of the overall reform process as perceived by the authorities at the institutional meso-level. I argue that this perspective is particularly important to focus on the ongoing impacts of a reform that was interrupted by the 2021 military takeover before reaching its final stages.

In the context of Myanmar, the word "autonomy" is generally understood as the transition from a state-controlled system to a state-guided system, thereby allowing universities a degree of freedom to decide their own policies and activities. In this way, the governance of higher education becomes the shared responsibility of public authorities (ministries for administrative matters, other bodies as the NECP for policy matters) and higher education institutions. It is clear from the interviews that there was substantial consensus on the need for this reform and its general objectives and priorities; however, when asked about the actual steps for implementation and their viability, the positions were very divergent. The general consensus about autonomy was based on the idea that these four specific objectives and priorities could eventually be achieved by the end of the process:

- Enhancing the efficiency of higher education institutions by linking decisions more closely to actions;

- Improving the quality and relevance of academic programs by allowing each university to modernize and differentiate its degrees and courses;
- Strengthening the relevance of teaching and research by allowing higher education institutions staff to choose their academic paths more freely;
- Facilitating international relations by allowing each university to stipulate agreements with its international partners that might lead to external financial and capacity-building support for the university's reform process.

The interviewee expressed the hope for a long-term vision of granting increased autonomy to all the higher institutions of the country even if several of them acknowledged that was not the governmental authorities. I argue it was never the plan for all higher education institutions to be granted autonomy; only some were cautiously selected for this fate (in 2020, the final pilot list included 16 universities including the two distance education universities of the country¹³⁴). Beginning with the first meeting I had at the DHE in 2015 with P1, it was clear that some institutions, such as educational colleges and institutions in remote areas were to be excluded. The Ministry of Defense was reported to have declared that the institutions falling under its umbrella would continue to be controlled by the government. In my last meeting with the NEPC chair just few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic began, he reported that he was carrying out exploratory trips in rural-area universities together with the MoE to assess how a few universities and colleges in the same regions could be merged or clustered to reduce the number of institutions in the country and improve their governance without granting autonomy.

Interviewees' positions differed with regards to the kind of institutional autonomy that is needed and feasible for Myanmar, and how different layers of autonomy could be achieved. NESP documents show that various steps were being taken to move towards both substantive autonomy (meaning, the chance to make decisions about the "what") and procedural autonomy (meaning administrative freedom relating to the "how"). The teaching staff I interviewed feared that, at the end of the process, the autonomy gained by higher education would be only procedural and not substantive but that they would be nonetheless held responsible for its implementation. Since university autonomy is a complex concept that potentially covers many different reform measures, I have assembled an analytical table (Table 2) considering the four internationally recognized aspects of institutional

Mandalay.

¹³⁴ The final list included: UY, UM, YUEco, Yangon University of Education, Sagaing University, Yangon University of Foreign Languages, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, Yangon Technological University, Mandalay Technological University, Technological University in Mandalay, the University of Computer Sciences in Yangon, the University of Computer Sciences in Mandalay, University of Information Technology in Yangon, Myanmar Institute of Information Technology in Mandalay, University of Distance Education in Yangon, University of Distance Education in

autonomy. Organizational, Academic, Staffing, and Financial autonomy are fleshed out in indicators as they emerged during the interviews; as such, they are meant to represent not a complete list but rather a list that represented the context of Myanmar's "period of transition". As a result, there are some "autonomy" aspects that are not covered in this table because they relate to European (for example) academia but not the one in Myanmar (for example, in the table financial autonomy does not entail the right to set fees for international students, since this is a topic of discussion in European academia but not in Myanmar). For each aspect of "autonomy", I have included the points that represented MoE and universities goals and were being implemented in incremental steps (in most cases, at the early stages of implementation in selected universities) and the ones that were being discussed but without there being any actualization mechanism in place (in most cases, because there was consensus as to the need to overcome a specific issues or reach a specific goal, but no coherent plan or provisions as to how this would be accomplished). Considering that the military junta has occupied university spaces post-coup, I review the concept of "autonomy" in the post-coup era in the conclusion.

Organizational	Academic
university's capacity to determine its internal	Academic autonomy refers to a university's capacity to manage its internal academic affairs.
 Change in the legal status Election and dismissal of University leadership Election and dismissal of decision-making bodies Increased power of governing bodies Right to make decisions regarding academic structures 	 Issues discussed with a mechanism in place for selected institutions: Right to determine student admissions and their total number, as well as the selection of applicants according to level of preparedness Right to determine the content of programs at various educational levels Right to abolish or cancel academic programs Right to formulate quality evaluation criteria Right to choose the core content of the program Issues discussed without formulating clear policies of actions: Determination of research agenda

Staffing Staffing autonomy refers to a university's ability to recruit and manage its human resources.	Financial Financial autonomy refers to a university's ability to manage its funds and allocate its budget independently.
 Issues discussed without formulating clear policies of actions: Ability to make decisions regarding staff (recruit and dismiss academic and administrative staff) Ability to decide on the level of salary Ability to make decisions regarding the professional development of administrative and academic staff Academic staff become university personnel (and not civil servants) 	 Issues discussed without formulating clear policies of actions: Duration and type of funding Profitability Credit opportunities Right to set fees for local students More autonomy in the management of buildings and premises

Table 4: The different aspects of "autonomy". (By: L. Proserpio)

The accounts collected in the interviews clearly conveyed that organizational autonomy was perceived as the first necessary step, even if there was general skepticism about the degree of decision-making autonomy that the ministries would allow the various universities. In 2020, the universities that were able to display some progress in this area were UY, UM and UYA, and the progress mainly manifested as: a change of legal status thanks to the drafting of university chapters, increased power to governing bodies, and the right to make decisions regarding academic structures. At the same time, some interviewees noted that this process led to a greater centralization of power and authority at the university level, in the office of the Rector or some Prorectors. With the establishment of the Rectors' Committee, the role of rector (even at institutions not included among those slated for autonomy) had been granted greater power, but each individual rector used (or did not use) this new, limited room to maneuver in a different way. For example, some student activists mentioned in interviews that unions were allowed on campus (or not) depending on the politics of each specific Rector. Most of my interviewees did certainly report that the number of meetings and the participation of staff at the departmental and faculty levels had increased. Teaching staff in general felt more involved in universities affairs, although not necessarily in the decision-making process.

Academic autonomy was the aspect of autonomy indicated as having undergone more progress during the transition period, albeit with some limitations. The right to determine institutional access was granted only to UY and UM in 2020, while all the other universities was still subject to the matriculation exam process. However, various curricula reform success stories were mentioned, all of them instances in which the MoE allowed individual universities to set the curricula for a course in a way that did not adhere to the structure imposed by the national Academic Boards. Professors at YUEco launched a student satisfaction survey on the Master of Marketing Management Program at their universities, developed in 2018, and the results were summarized as follows:

"In this study, student perceptions of learning highlighted that students were satisfied with teaching styles as they required the academic knowledge and theory to be constituted of practical issues. These insights suggest that more emphasis needs to be placed for teaching aids and infrastructure to be improved. The educational board and quality team must review results and enhance the quality dimensions of the programme. Student perceptions of learning can judge the impact of teaching innovations or assessment changes on student learning between course offerings. It can assist the marketing of YUE graduates in considering whether changes to a course are likely to improve student learning, thus providing an additional measure to support the market' requirement" (Phu Pwint Nyo Win Aung and Soe Tue, 2021, p.54).

It is important to note that these success stories were not found across the board of all the disciplines or all the institutions. Interestingly, however, institutions outside the "autonomy path" were able to successfully restructure specific curricula, especially if they were supported by international donors in their efforts. For example, the alignment between "market needs" and the support of donors helped sustain the university- wide curricula reform at YAU:

"The project supported the switching of the undergraduate education program curriculum from a conventional year-based system to a credit-based semester system. The reasons for the change were to promote international and domestic credit transfer, student mobility and freedom of course

selection, based on a student-centred approach. However, it was somewhat difficult for YAU to understand and design the whole curriculum scheme for the undergraduate program under the credit system." (Ibidem, p.56)

This quote shows the paradox of the fact that the university staff became acquainted with the complex vocabulary of international academia very rapidly, but was not prepared for its full implementation. Even if they supported the idea of reform curricula according to international standards, teachers in Myanmar found themselves in the paradoxical situation of rebranding themselves and their courses in a package that appeared to better meet the requirements of the knowledge society even while they themselves did not feel capable of making this switch:

"However, at this stage, instead of teaching what can be taught, it is necessary to consider a course structure that provides the knowledge and information required by students living in modern society". (Ibidem, p.55)

In any case, teachers generally felt that they were more independent and empowered in their teaching in my 2020 interviews as compared to the ones in 2017. Moreover, they expressed confidence in the newly established quality system processes and their potential to lead to further improvement. This was not the case for research activities that lacked significant improvement at the national level: "now we are preparing the research proposals but there are limited national resources so we will submit the proposals to JICA for support. So we are planning to start the research for the department level but [there has been] no progress so far" (from a 2020 interview with P17). It appears that international recognition of research activities remains out of the reach for Burmese researchers: "for us international publications are very difficult. [...] So if I want to publish my research I contact my old professor of the PhD in Thailand and ask him for recommendation [...] He said he can publish our research papers to other journals. For me here it's very difficult to get to international journals. Very difficult" (from a 2020 interview with P18).

Perceptions around organizational and academic autonomy can be summarized by the "it is progress, but slow" mantra that I have registered in multiple interviews. They were welcomed steps in what was perceived the right direction, even among numerous constraints. In contrast, staffing and financial autonomy registered no progress and ultimately perceived of more problematic (and possibly unwelcomed) implementation. As already mentioned, the staff of higher education institutions are civil servants with nationally standardized salaries, and staff recruitment and career

development is required to be processed and approved by the MoE. At the end of the transition period, this system still left no room for setting up merit and performance-based remuneration. Moreover, the "rotation system" that forces teaching staff to move frequently among universities around the country was still in place. Permanent assignment to specific universities seemed to be the hoped-for solution, but at the same time this would lead to procedures based on competition that would be new for the country. Lastly, financial autonomy was generally perceived as very risky since it comes with significant duties in terms of accountability and possible risks in terms of underfunding, as one interviewee expressed: "yeah. I am worried about getting autonomy, because when we get it we must find our [own] funding for the university" (from an interview with P22).

The aim of this chapter was to examine the state authority discourses and grievances around higher education in the transitional period. I draw the main findings in the first section of the conclusion.

CHAPTER IV

STUDENT POLITICS

Since colonial times and for more than fifty years of authoritarian military regimes, university student movements have represented Myanmar's "vanguard in the vacuum" or, metaphors aside, a nationwide underground political opposition to the aforementioned regimes ¹³⁵ (see Chapter II). According to scholarly literature, in post-colonial societies such as Myanmar, students are often viewed as "spokespersons for the broader population" and the "conscience of the society", perceptions which can help their protest emerge and aggregate other excluded groups or even large segments of local civil society. As Altbach points out, students in these countries have this established place in the "political mythology" and play a long-lasting role as important political actors (Altbach, 1989). This claim appears to have been disproven by the first studies published at the beginning of Myanmar's political transition, particularly the finding that the student movements that had re-emerged "aboveground" in this period no longer had the same significance in the country's political landscape. In the words of Dan Chan Koon-Hong: "with the end of opposition vacuum and the beginning of gradual reforms, students are exposed to less political opportunities and thus less incentivized to urge for progressive political changes" (Koon-Hong 2014, p. 93). Echoing this idea, in Forgotten' democracy, student activism, and higher education in Myanmar: past, present, and future, Moon Suk Hong and Hani Kim argue that "amidst the rapid political and social changes in Myanmar, perhaps a long history of democratization and the important roles of student activism is in danger of being forgotten" (Hong and Hani 2019, p. 220). The authors identify the cause of this lack of political engagement in the fact that the contemporary history of Myanmar is not taught effectively in formal educational settings: "there had not been a single graduate student in history who wrote their dissertation on Myanmar's hard-won, yet fragile history of democracy. If history is not taught, if intrinsic roles of higher learning such as seeking truths, creating knowledge and ideas, questioning and developing fundamentals of democratic societies, and fostering new generations of leaders and thinkers of the country are not pursued by the reformed higher education institutions, if the new higher education institutions do not confront the issues of democracy within the higher education governance, then how are the ways of the new generation who entered into these historically valued institutions to be re-connected with their histories of democratization?" (Ibid., p. 221).

¹³⁵ I disagree with Win Min 2012's argument that they were the "only" opposition, however, since ethnic organizations definitely played an important oppositional role as well.

This chapter paints a different picture: student politics did matter in the Myanmar transition phase. It mattered in a way that was overlooked by the literature expecting student organizations to carry out historical repertoires of contention. Instead, in the new socio-political landscape, the common target of student movements was no longer that of overthrowing the government, a goal which had been central to Myanmar activists' shared claim-making for decades. Rather, student movements found new opportunities and resources to mobilize against a new contention cause: improving the country's higher education system. In moving forward their actions to create a better campus life and more equitable and accessible higher education system, some student organizations reshaped their modus operandi, shifting from historical patterns of radical contentious politics to new contentious actions focused more on incremental and practical change pursued by working within the system. This shift was also pushed by the actions of state authority. The NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in particular enacted a very carefully crafted policy to deter possible mass collective actions of radical contention through a "divide et impera" policy (creating new student unions to weaken the existing ones, especially historical ones such as ABSFU) and policing the boundaries of "student" identity by excluding graduated students (who had historically been part of the country's student movements). The "international actors", not fully aware of the identities of the country's student organizations and wanting to give their full support to the NEL process grounded in neo-liberal policies, also acted as an unintentional constrain on student actions (see Chapter V). Nevertheless, throughout the entire "period of transition" it continued to be student organizations who embraced a more progressive and less neo-liberal idea of higher education and pushed for more "just" higher education that could support a better society.

In advancing these empirical considerations regarding the Myanmar context, I aim to demonstrate the necessity of bridging theoretical approaches from two different fields of study. As mentioned in Chapter I, social movement studies and higher education (or education in general) scholarship have been developed as separate research fields: the former exploring the mobilizations of student movements, the latter the political or public policy side of education. This distinction seems especially untenable today, given the resurfacing and proliferation of struggles on education issues (especially against the neo liberal academia) in which bottom-up forms of student organization are giving rise to a new array of mobilizations at a global scale (Della Porta, Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2020). Fostering dialogue between these studies has the potential to debunk a few limitations hampering the current scholarship. Education studies often underestimate student politics' agency and how it can shape education reforms as well as what happens at the meso-level (i.e. changes in life at the university and in higher education policies in general in a specific institution). Students are not only the "market" or "clients", sometimes they also shape the trajectory of the educational offering

proposed to them. In other words, they both react to changes and bring about changes in the higher education sector.

In the first section, I focus on the way students have rebuilt their organizations after decades of state repression at the beginning of the Myanmar transition phase. I define the logic of the situation as a "coordinated field of student politics" dominated by two main student organizations. The second section analyzes the largest student mobilization to happen during the Myanmar hybrid regime: the 2014/2015 national-wide protest against the NEL. I highlight the actors (protagonists, antagonists, and bystanders), contentious events and claims. The third section is about the impacts of this mobilization and the way it re-shaped the trajectory of student under the NLD government. I describe the mobilization as an "eventful protest" that resulted in more acute differences among the various student organizations. Student politics grievances under the NLD government are described in the fourth section and in the fifth section that presents the data collected during the 2019 Yangon Student Union Election debates and a survey administered to the voters. The sixth section draws conclusions answering my second research sub-questions (RQ2) as defined in the introduction.

4.1 Student organizations "above-ground"

During the summer of 2020, I interviewed S1¹³⁶ multiple times in the headquarters of her newly established NGO. S1 was a woman in her early-30s, the daughter of an '88 Generation activist, married to a fellow student leader and the mother of a small child. She had been imprisoned twice in her life. The first time was in 2007, for having taken part in the "Saffron Movement" as an ABFSU member ¹³⁷ and for materially helping the people affected by Cyclone Nargis at times when the

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¹³⁶ Considering the sensitive character of the topic, I use codes rather than individuals' names as discussed in the Introduction.

¹³⁷ In Chapter II, I described the rise of ABFSU in colonial times and its importance throughout the modern history of the country. Like all student movements, ABFSU had phases of mobilisation and phases of de-mobilisation. The last phase of mobilisation before the events at the core of this chapter was in 2006-2007, coinciding with the "Saffron Revolution". This movement was led mostly by monks and other civil society organizations. Student leaders were not at the core of the protests, but ABFSU did play a part, especially in spreading information about what was happening in Myanmar to the outside world (thanks to their ties with foreign Embassies and their ability to access facilities such as the British Council's headquarters and libraries). According to the data provided by my interviewees, at the time, ABFSU was led by 15 leaders including S1. As secrecy and discretion were of the upmost importance, ABFSU maintained a very top-down and hierarchical structure during all the decades of military rule. It was quite common for all the key decisions to be made by a very restricted number of people who shared a close bond as comrades and friends (and, in some cases, families ties). Most of the ABFSU leaders were jailed by the military in its attempt to bring down the "Saffron Revolution" and later freed by President Thein Sein. A number of these leaders were responsible for re-organizing ABFSU in late 2011, thereby starting a new phase of mobilisation.

military government was struggling to provide any kind of support¹³⁸. She was held first in Insein and then in Myingyan prison, for a total of almost 4 years. She was set free in November 2011. In December 2011, she helped to reorganize ABFSU "openly, not anymore secretly as in 2007" (from an interview with S1). Her involvement in ABFSU and the NEL protest I describe in the next section cost her a second period of imprisonment lasting almost one year. I asked her to map with me how student organizations, and in particular ABFSU, reformed themselves at the beginning of the Thein Sein presidency. What emerged was the view of a "legacy activist". I use the term "legacy" to underline two main aspects of how S1 perceives her identity as a student activist. Firstly, she is what can be defined as a "bloodline activist" in that she grew up in a family that took part in the prodemocracy movement, with her father being a member of the '88 Generation. Her family history is connected to the national struggle for freedom and this was both a cause of suffering (when she was young, her father was in prison most of the time) and pride. Being an activist is an important aspect of her identity that she shares with her family and close circle of friends. Secondly, "legacy" is how she frames the necessity of re-organizing and leading student unions. In her vision, the student unions and ABFSU in particular embody the country's struggle for freedom, a contentious history that she eloquently narrates in a way that links together the actions of her generation with everything accomplished since the beginning of ABFSU, that is, the 1930s (see Chapter II). The legacy of previous struggles is especially relevant for S1 and the core of the current generations of ABFSU activists who see activism as a gift passed down from one generation to the next to the benefit of wider Myanmar society. When ABFSU was reorganized in 2011, this uniform and continuous story of struggle for freedom was re-performed.

"[In 2011] Even though a lot of political prisoners were released from the prison, people were still afraid. "What is going on in politics?" Everyone was asking, unsure. Nobody dared to openly discuss students' unions, not even pronouncing the name or flying the flag. Every December is the memorial of one of the student activists. Actually, he was killed under the British colony, his name was Aung Kyaw, we call him Bo Aung Kyaw, like the name of the street downtown. [...] We held Bo Aung Kyaw Day in December 2011. At the time, the political situation was still confusing and it was still a tricky time, many were still very tricked by the government, U Thein's government, who

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¹³⁸ For an analysis of the impact of the Cyclone Nargi emergency on Myanmar socio-political transformations, see Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2010.

was watching everyone. Then we celebrated that memorial in a monastery. The monks were really afraid of it but it turned out ok. The military came to document our activities but no one was arrested." (from an interview with \$1, July 2020)

The Bo Aung Kyaw memorial marked the beginning of the new phase of the history of ABFSU that was re-organized maintaining the highly hierarchical structure typical of Marxist-oriented student unions:

"We wanted to organize student unions legally, so we selected 10-11 members for the Central Organizing Committee and then we decided who should be President, Secretary General and those kinds of things. Actually, our main goal was to found student unions everywhere: in universities, township-level student unions, district-level student unions and then maybe, after a student conference, a Central Working Committee (CWC). So our goal was to elect a CWC to hold a students' conference." (from an interview with S1, July 2020).

In this re-organization, ABFSU managed to re-aggregate old generations of student leaders with a different background in activism and with wide geographical coverage and supporters in most of Myanmar's districts. In terms of the vision behind their actions, S1 always returns to the key, founding principles:

"Since the Sixth Conference of the ABFSU in 1960, ABFSU has followed 5 principles: anticolonialism¹³⁹, people's politics¹⁴⁰, democratic education,

¹³⁹ In my interviews with a younger generation of activists, anticolonialism was often framed in terms of the new Chinese colonialism. In the words of the ABFSU General Secretary: "there is a new colonialism that influences small countries like Myanmar, it is the West, but also China" (from an interview, December 2018).

¹⁴⁰ Sometimes mentioned as democracy. Also from an interview with ABFSU General Secretary: "we are fighting for workers and farmers democracy, not elite democracy, some people call our Union Marxist" (from an interview, December 2018).

promoting students' rights, and peace." (from an interview with S1, July 2020).

In 2007, these principles took on a concrete form in three main grievances: the fight against the country's military leadership, the release of all political prisoners, and the legalization of the student unions. In 2012, ABFSU members summarized their three main claims as: fighting to give the 2008 Constitution a more democratic outlook, democratizing education reform, and legalizing the student unions.

However, in its reorganization, ABFSU was not able to aggregate a large number of the so-called "day-students", those not enrolled in distance education. To understand why, I present the story of S2. In 2012, S2 was 17 years old and ready to start his university experience when he encountered ABFSU for the first time:

"In 2012, some students' union, in particular those from ABFSU's sides, started protesting against the Letpadan mining project. At the time I was the reporter for the weekly published journal, News Channels. [...]. I started to take an interest in students' unions and in 2013 I joined ABFSU. Then in 2014, I quit ABFSU and then I founded a students' union based in Monywa University affiliated with the University Students' Union. Then I was no longer part of ABFSU and I have been walking with University Students' Union 141." (from an interview with S2, July 2020).

Between 2013 and 2014, a second player surfaced in the Myanmar student union arena: the "University Student Union" (USU). USU was created as an unstructured umbrella in which different unions created at different universities could aggregate on voluntary basis, even only for a limited time. In fact, USU has a much more flexible structure than ABFSU. Since its formation, ABFSU has had a rigid organizational structure including the above-mentioned CWC, a general congress, a membership process, and defined local branches. On the contrary, the organizational structure of USU does not limit participants from entering into and leaving the organization: it is a fluid aggregate of

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The original sentence in the interview was "*Then I was no longer part of Ba Ka Tha and I have been walking with Ta Ka Tha*". I have chosen to use the English version of unions' names, but in Burmese ABFSU is also known as Ba Ka Tha and USU as Ta Ka Tha.

different groups that no longer responds to the need for rapid political mobilization, but instead focuses specifically on the needs of communication and dialogue between different unions working locally at different universities. As a matter of fact, S2's account suggests that, even though these groups do pay close attention to national political events, the core of these unions' activities is represented by two additional main points. The first one is university student affairs, in particular the task of establishing round tables that also include members of the university governance structure and focused on discussing issues such as living conditions in dormitories, canteens, and students' extracurricular activities. The second point consists in what may be defined as "leadership activities" or "community service", that is, volunteering in the local area.

"We have some ideological differences. The students from the ABFSU side are stronger in politics. From my point of view, the students' unions should only focus on students and education reform. But ABFSU members don't think like this, and their priority is to help the public with politics. That means, for example, intervening in the Letpadan mining project, trying to protect the rights of the farmers living there, and such. From my point of view, especially from the side of students who are attending their classes at universities, I think that the priority of student unions should be the affairs of students and how to make changes in universities and education reform. So that might be the biggest difference between ABFSU and USU". (from an interview with S2, July 2020).

S2 is not a "bloodline activist"; he is not unaware of the history and legacy of ABFSU but, as an activist, he is looking to move forward to a different agenda, one more in line with what he perceives to be the needs of the new generation of students, a population that has different needs and, at the same time, different opportunities as compared to the past¹⁴².

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¹⁴² As mentioned, Moon Suk Hong and Hani Kim 2019 launched the alarmist idea that the important role played by student activism in Myanmar was in danger of disappearing. On the basis of my data, I cannot support this claim. The history of student politics is very well known in Myanmar, even among the new generation of students. Alongside this legacy, some students from the new generation have decided to advance progressive change along new paths. Moreover, I cannot support the idea that formal education is the place where students "should" learn about the democratic legacy of their past. Although it would indeed be valuable to reform curricula so as to teach the history of the country in a different way, students are currently meeting and debating activism and democratic issues in different places, spaces outside the classroom where their oppositional stand towards "formal" and "official" authority can grow and evolve without the risk of being co-opted.

It can be said that, at the beginning of the Myanmar political transition, ABFSU and USU created "coordinated field of student politics". According to the definition by Donatella Della Porta and colleagues, in such a field, student organizations become arenas in which groups of students, organized by ideological, political or other common features, attempt to represent and/or mobilize the entire student body (Della Porta, Cini and Guzmán-Concha, 2020). Here, student federations and unions exert attraction over a significant portion of activists, shaping the whole field of student politics. In the case of Myanmar, ABFSU and USU served as two poles of attraction; where the first was able to aggregate the older generations linked by a common history of struggle and codified repertoires of contention, the latter instead appealed to the new generations. ABFSU and USU offered resources and legitimacy that allowed the student activists to implement their agendas claiming to move forward the interest of the entirety of the student body. Since these institutions were both well established (ABFSU had the name and the legacy, USU the rising number of affiliates), they become the vehicles through which students have attempted to influence the higher education reform as discussed in the next section.

4.2 The 2014/2015 student protest against the NEL

The 2014/2015 student-led protest against the NEL was the only national-wide student mobilization during Myanmar's political transitional period. According to Charles Tilly, movements mobilize as soon as they are able to combine a certain repertoire (contentious performances such as vigils, demonstrations, rallies, meetings and so forth) that displays "WUNCness" within a campaign (a sustained, public and collective claims-making effort that could last in time). "WUNC" is an acronym that stands for Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment. The idea is simple: in order to have the potential to produce a desired outcome (which is already quite rare for social movements), protest events must have a high turnout (numbers), gather an apparently unified (unity) and dignified (worthiness) crowd that really cares about the issue (commitment). Social movement organizations are seldom unitary fronts: internal conflicts are quite common, but they must nonetheless display unity and engage in coherent actions so as to garner the necessary support from public opinion and to rally bystanders. In coordinated fields of student politics, the existence of student government institutions recognized by the student base provides an incentive for these coordinated collective actions among affinity or politico-ideological groups. They tend to facilitate the building of coalitions within the heterogeneous landscapes of campuses. At the beginning of the political transitional period,

ABFSU and USU¹⁴³ were able to coordinate their actions in a nation-wide protest. In this section, I focus on the main actors, events and grievances of this protest; in the next section, focused on its impact, I offer a possible explanation as to why this was the only protest in the political period under consideration here.

The student protest against the NEL arose after the failure of a first phase of negotiations between the government and NNER¹⁴⁴ that lasted until 7 March 2014, at which point the network sent a formal letter to the government entitled *NNER's position regarding its loss of faith in the government and Ministry of Education's education reform process* (NNER, 2014)¹⁴⁵. As already mentioned, this first phase of "tame" confrontation between student unions and the government was regulated by the international organizations working with the government on the CESR, organizations who were trying to keep the plan from failing. On 30 September, 2014, the NEL was passed into law by the parliament without including NNER's recommendations and a second phase of contention began, with students' actions taking different forms and shifting from institutionalized negotiation to disruptive protests held with a certain frequency. To understand the different forms of contention the activists were able to put into action, I have formulated a complete timeline of the protests on the basis of multiple sources (Figure 12).

In September 2015, the student organizations started to differentiate their actions from all the actions taken by their allies inside the NNER as an attempt to emerge as a leading oppositional actor of the protests. The interplay of opportunities and risks, representing the political opportunity structure, included various factors. On one hand, they saw an opening in the input structure ¹⁴⁶: they were persuaded that a nation-wide protest could lead the government to acknowledge their input in the policy cycle since the MoE's outputs were too weak to maintain its policy strategy. From an interview with S3: "we thought that a big national protest could make a difference. It was a way to use our collective power as students, [a power] that we know we have from our history. We thought that using

¹⁴³ There was a third actor in the protest, the "Middle Burma Federation of Students", but it had a more marginal role and quickly disappeared from the national landscape, so I mention it only in passing.

¹⁴⁴ As mentioned in the introduction and Chapter III, student organization were part of the NNER

¹⁴⁵ Although the government at that time was led by President Thein Sein, it is clear that the NLD was not supporting the NNER process either. In fact, as pointed out by Marie Lall (2021), the party expelled Dr. Thein Lwin for heading the NNER. Dr. Thein Lwin was also the charismatic figure who supported the student organizations in shaping their grievances and outlooks on higher education, and this also supports the assertion that the NLD clearly had not supported students' involvement in higher education matters since the time when it was an opposition party.

¹⁴⁶ Herbert Kitschelt has emphasized two elements of POS, that is to say, "political input structures", which may be "open" or "close", and "political output structures", which are "strong" or "weak" (Kitschelt, 1986). Inputs concern the government's "openness" or "closeness" to dialoguing with different political actors during, for example as in our study case, a policy cycle. The output structure refers to a government's capacity to impose itself in the output phase, which, in this study, may be represented by the government's capacity to suppress opposition and, on the other hand, to impose its output in the policy cycle, which activists perceived as "weak".

our full power, in a time when lots of international attention was on Myanmar, could lead to some progress. The MoE was weak and disorganized, so we thought that we could stop the law and have a better one in time". On the other hand, they believed that the government was so politically vulnerable that a violent reaction to their protest would lead to a dramatic loss of consensus and support. Basically, they thought that state authority would not be able to openly enact violent tactics against them. In this, they proved mistaken.

- **30 September 2014.** The NEL is passed into law by the parliament.
- **12-13 November 2014.** A student meeting across the country is held in Yangon. The ABFSU, USU and Middle Burma Federation of Students form the ACDE to organize demonstrations against the NEL.
- **14-17 November 2014.** The ACDE organizes student demonstrations in different places in downtown Yangon, lasting four days. National newspapers indicate an attendance of 350 students. At the end of the demonstrations, students announce a 60-day deadline to amend the NEL after which a nation-wide demonstration would be held. During the 60-day period, ACDE activists continue holding demonstrations in different part of the country.
- 20 January 2015. Students start to gather in Mandalay to begin a 404-Mile Protest March to Yangon.
- **21 January 2015**. President Thein Sein publicly announces that the parliament will consider amending the legislation.
- **28 January 2015**. After preliminary talks with student leaders, Minister Aung Min agrees to hold four-party talks involving the government, the parliament, the NNER, and the students' ACDE.
- **1 February 2015**. Four-party discussions are held at the University of Yangon. Students formulate an 11-point framework for discussion and both sides reach agreement on eight points.
- **3 February 2015**. The four-party talks in Naypyidaw are postponed to 12 February 2015 as agreement on student attendance cannot be reached.
- **4 February 2015**. Many civil society organizations call for a rapid resumption of four-party talks focused on amending the NEL.
- **8 February 2015.** Students from many universities in Yangon organize a demonstration to show their support for their fellow students in other areas of the country marching towards the city and calling for reforms.
- **9 February 2015.** A second preliminary discussion is held in Yangon as part of the four-party talks on the 11-point agenda developed by students.
- 14 February 2015. After extensive talks among the government, lawmakers, student organizations, and NNER independent civil society experts, agreement on a new bill that will replace the NEL appears to be reached. Groups of students agree to suspend demonstrations.
- 16 February 2015. The bill that was agreed on by the four parties is sent to parliament for discussion.
- **17 February 2015.** State-run media publish the Education Ministry's bill alongside the agreed-upon bill with a title suggesting that the latter was proposed only by NNER and student organizations.

- 19 February 2015. Student demonstrators from Mandalay who had halted their march at Letpadan (Pegu Division) when an agreement was reached on 14 February issue a statement that the agreed-upon bill should replace the NEL.
- **22 February 2015.** Student leaders and NNER blame the government for not respecting the conditions of the 14 February four-party agreement about drafting a new education bill and claim that the Education Ministry circulated an alternative draft undermining the agreement.
- 23 February 2015. The nationalist Buddhist movement Ma Ba Ta issues a statement asserting that it supports the ministry's draft and not the students' proposal. The organization says that it does not support granting schools run by ethnic and religious minority organizations the right to teach primary school children in their mother tongue.
- **24 February 2015.** The Upper House announces that it will discuss the amendment of the Education Law on 5 March.
- 27 February 2015. Student leaders from the main group of demonstrators at Letpadan visit the parliament discussing the amendment of the Education Law.
- **1 March 2015.** The Home Affairs Ministry releases a notification calling for demonstrations to cease while the parliament discusses amending the Education Law, otherwise the government will take action.
- **3 March 2015.** Students at Letpadan announce that they will resume their demonstrations and try to march towards Yangon. Authorities respond by increasing police deployment. Students start a sit-in.
- **4 March 2015.** Student demonstrators camped at Letpadan hold talks with the Security and Border Affairs Minister of the Peku Division, but no resolution is found.
- **5 March 2015.** Students and activists gather at Yangon's Sule Pagoda to prevent a crackdown on the Letpadan demonstration. Demonstrators are arrested. On the same day, a meeting between 20 students from ACDE and Upper House lawmakers fails to reach an agreement.
- **8 March 2015.** Students at Letpadan ask for a rapid resolution and unrestricted passage to Yangon by 10 March, at 10 a.m. Authorities refuse.
- 10 March 2015. After a week-long blockade, a confrontation starts as some students at Letpadan demand to be let through to march to Yangon. Confrontation ensues, with police reacting and arresting students to disperse the demonstration. Members of the media are also targeted. Students in Yangon start a demonstration in support of the Letpadan group, but their demonstration is quickly suppressed.

Figure 12. Timeline of student protests from 30 September 2014 to 10 March 2015 (By: L. Proserpio, from multiple sources including newspapers and interviews to activists)

When activists plan a mobilization campaign, decide on the timing of their actions, frame their grievances in the form of common claims, prepare their public discourses and design the modes in which they will attempt to involve public opinion, among other crucial aspects of all protest movements, they show that agency lies at the center of resistance and struggles. This specific protest was considerably shaped by the agency of the 15 leaders who comprised the "Action Committee for

Democratic Education" (ACDE)¹⁴⁷, that is, the committee formed to organize the main event of the student protests. At the same time, protest movements are also situated historically. Activists do not make decisions in a vacuum. History, institutions and cultures leave an imprint on the contemporary character of social movements, not only as structures that condition and limit but also as sources of creativity and agency. The NEL protest was significantly shaped by the modus operandi, repertoires of contentious action, and visual culture of protest characteristic of the ABFSU contentious tradition. This created factions among the leaders:

"We were not in agreement on every issues. For example, what kind of flag we were going to use, and what kind of songs we were going to play... From the USU side, we didn't want to play Communist songs, "To the barricade rolls"... And we had good reasons for that. One of the students from ABFSU played "To the barricade rolls" at the 4-days boycott in Yangon. So, a very famous journal reported that. We didn't want our message to be confused with other issues. We were not trying to get rid of the government and we didn't want that false message to come across. We only demanded a good and fair education reform, but I'm not sure on the ABFSU side [what they wanted]. We had internal problems between ABFSU and USU in the 4-days Yangon boycott. The third day, ABFSU tried to change the boycott from the students' movement to the people's movement, making demands on general political issues, but we didn't have agreement and we just insisted that if you try to set a general strike, then USU will quit the boycott. So they didn't make it happen. [There was] A lot of disagreement between us." (from an interview with S2, July 2020).

Between 14 and 17 November, the ACDE organized student protests in multiple areas of downtown Yangon (national newspapers indicate an attendance of 350 students). After these protests, students called a 60-day ultimatum to amend the NEL, threatening a new nation-wide protest if their requests were not met. The student' demands, summarized in 11 points (see Figure 13), revolved around four issues: the necessity for the government to consult students in all decision-making processes concerning education, the need for universities to enjoy a higher degree of autonomy, the

¹⁴⁷ The ACDE was made up of 6 leaders from ABFSU, 6 leaders from USU and 3 leaders from the "Middle Burma Federation of Students".

allocation of more financial resources to universities, and the need to include national minority languages teaching in the curricula. Following in the footsteps of Rosalie Metro (2017), I argue that a critical analysis of this document shows a use of terminology stemming from different sources and indicating different alignments. Demands 4 and 7 place the ACDE in alignment with ethnic organizations that had been struggling for "self-determination" for decades and show how ACDE grievances link up the democratization of the education system with the decentralization of the country's political authority. Demands 1 and 8 are centered on the concept of "inclusion" and "participation", notions that are not linked to Myanmar's tradition of struggle but rather reflect the work the student leaders have carried out with international donors in the NNER. Demands 2 and 9 have been common grievances and claims in every student protest in Myanmar for decades, while demands 10 and 11 instead address new issues brought to the table in this political phase where students felt they were facing a government capable of addressing the general underfunding of education put in place by the previous military juntas. Reading between the lines of these 11 demands, we see a clear ambivalence in the student organizations' alignment towards the government. On one side, student organizations ask the government to act in a certain way, thereby acknowledging the government as their legitimate interlocutor; one the other side, there is intense mistrust in the government, as shown for example by demand 3 asking the government to carry out an action already indicated in the NEL. This position shows both mistrust but also the student organization's selfassigned role of whistleblower in case the government takes any steps backwards in education reform.

- 1. Inclusion of teachers' and students' representatives in the legislative process of education policies and laws, by-laws and other related laws.
- 2. The right to freely establish and operate student and teacher unions and legal recognition for them.
- 3. Establishment of the National Education Commission and University Coordination Committee mentioned in the approved National Education Law.
- 4. Self-determination and self-management on educational affairs for individual state/regions and schools.
- 5. Modifying the current examination and university matriculation system.
- 6. Modifying teaching methods to ensure freedom of thought and students' autonomous study.
- 7. Inclusion of a provision in the National Education Law that guarantees freedom to use ethnic languages and mother-tongue based multi-lingual education for ethnic populations and tribes.
- 8. Inclusive education for all children, including children with disabilities.
- 9. Resumption of enrollment for students previously expelled from schools due to the student uprisings.
- 10. Allocation of 20 percent of the national budget to education.
- 11. Regulation of free, compulsory education up to the middle school level rather than the primary school level.

Figure 13. ACDE's statement regarding the need to create national education policies and laws to make the education system democratic (24 January, 2015) (ACDE official statement)

Since the ultimatum period passed without significant changes being made to the proposed legislation, on 20 January 2015 students started gathering in Mandalay to launch a 404-Mile Protest March to Yangon. This protest was immediately interrupted the day after, however, when President Their Sein publicly announced that the parliament would consider amending its legislation, proposing four-party talks involving the government, the parliament, the NNER, and the ACDE. On 14 February, after two weeks of talks between the government, lawmakers, student organizations, and NNER independent civil society experts, an apparent breakthrough agreement was reached on a new bill that would amend or even replace the NEL. On the same day, student unions issued a statement announcing the suspension of their demonstrations. On 17 February, state-run media published the agreed-upon bill with a title suggesting that it was being proposed only by NNER and student unions and not by the government. However, this apparent agreement quickly turned into a deadlock that brought the negotiations to a halt and generated a consequent increase in the tension between the government and student groups. In particular, tensions were geographically concentrated in the area of Letpadan, Pegu Division, where the hundred students participating in the 404-Mile Protests March had stopped. On 1 March, the government ordered the end of the demonstration, but on 3 March the students in Letpadan announced that their march towards Yangon would restart. After a week-long blockade by hundreds of police officers, on 10 March a confrontation broke out with police officers (who outnumbered the students by about 5 to 1) wildly beating and arresting students in order to disperse the protest. Dozens were injured and arrested, and members of the media were also targeted. Students in Yangon launched a protest in support of the Letpadan group, but authorities quickly quashed their demonstration.

The violent suppression of the protest was made possible by multiple factors that I present here as they surfaced in my interviews. First, the reformist approach of the Thein Sein government reached its limits in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections. With this important electoral target in sight, the so-called "hard-liners" of the Thein Sein government were pushing the so-called "reformists" to silence the critics who sought to undermine government policies or interfere with the military's sphere of influence. Second, there were many more bystanders than activists had originally expected; as I elaborate further in the following sections, these observers included the NLD which initially encouraged the activists but then gradually withdrew its support to take a more neutral position in view of the coming general elections. This shift caused the students to lose the support of Myanmar's

more liberal public opinion. This more liberal support was needed for the protest to succeed since, as expected, the conservatives harshly criticized the students' protest: for instance, the 23 February, 2015 statement issued by the nationalist Buddhist Ma Ba Ta movement weighed in to say that it backed the Ministry's draft and opposed the students' proposal. In the liberal arena, the national and international press, actively following every step of the 2014/2015 protests, proved to be the only powerful ally for students. And lastly, the final factor to take into account is the fact that many other groups (including members of the national and international civil society organizations) were involved in the negotiations with the government. These organizations advocated for a more open approach towards negotiation and described the students' protest as too radical and a potential hindrance to completing the policy cycle. As a consequence of this lack of support from civil society and public opinion, and because of the politicians' focus on the upcoming general elections, the government decided to act more decisively than activists expected in the outcome phase, violently intervening to quell the protest. In the next section, I turn to the long-term effects of the mobilization.

4.3 The impact of the mobilization

I offer an analysis of the protest's impact on two different levels. The first one is its impact on the higher education reform policy cycle, the second one is its effect on the student organizations themselves. I carried out these assessments by cross-referencing the protesters' and antagonists' opinions with the actual implementation of the higher education reform's policy cycle.

To analyze the first level of impact, it is necessary to verify whether policy makers included the activists' claims in the policy cycle. This impact analysis on policies is particularly complex given the fact that, as also pointed out by Rosalie Metro (2017), if we compare the text of the NEL and ACDE's 11-point chart it is clear that the NEL already included most of the issues brought to the table by ACDE. Specifically, ACDE demanded more autonomy for the university and a higher degree of freedom of association, two points already mentioned in the NEL, albeit only partially. The only visibly different point is the "allocation of 20 percent of the national budget for education", a point that was taken from the UNESCO guidelines but is really not respected by any state, even the more industrialized countries. At the same time, interviewing the activists clearly indicated that their grievances were grounded in a vision of higher education that did not match the NEL vision and neither of the NEL as amended in the 2015 or the NESP. In light of how the reform process ended up being implemented, it must be acknowledged that the students' visions were not accepted. Here below

are some examples of issues related to social justice in education, particularly inclusion, diversity and autonomy, as they were framed by activists and never actually included in the policy cycle.

"We don't stand by the concept of university autonomy, but rather [focus on] academic freedom. If you get academic freedom you don't need autonomy, because it's already included; freedom is much more than autonomy" (from an interview with S1, August 2020).

The concepts of university autonomy and academic freedom are related but distinct. Academic freedom applies to individual academics, while autonomy applies to the university as an institution. Autonomy implies the freedom and authority enjoyed by universities and institutions of higher education to play their role and contribute to societal development *within* the framework provided by state authority. As discussed in Chapter III, academic freedom was not part of the NEL vision and neither was it raised in the debates and discussions I had with academic staff. The same can be said for the decentralization of the curricula:

"Another thing is that in our demands we talked about curriculum decentralization as well. So, there might be a skeletal curriculum at the national level, but it should be locally developed and implemented in different ways according to the different needs. In the law, they mention some principles of decentralization, not at the school/university level, but at the regional level. But there are no guidelines for implementation and it is very vague. We know that regional governments don't have the political strength to implement regional decentralization in any sector, including education, this is why we are pushing for different institutions to be able to set their curricula more freely. In this way, change can happen for all the different Myanmar communities" (from an interview with S3, December 2019).

In the state authority approach, the national higher education system is represented mainly by major urban universities. As discussed in the Chapter III, over time the state-led reform process became a quest to reform a few institutions while setting aside the plan of (potentially) reforming the whole

system to some future moment. The student leaders, in contrast, had a more comprehensive idea of the national education system. In fact, the ethnic and urban/rural divide were often addressed:

"Even in the education policy, languages are centralized by the Education Ministry. The Ministry said that non-qualified teachers should be sent to the rural areas. These are kinds of punishment for unqualified teachers. That means that the rural areas are full of unqualified people. These kinds of things are really bad, this doesn't help reconciliation or peace. Bottom-up reconciliation is important. For the future we are focused on reconciliation, but it depends on our capacity, our management, our funds, our resources." (from an interview with S4, December 2018).

Moving the analysis from the 11-point chart to the activists' frames, it becomes clear that the bone of contention was not the specific points of the reform but rather the lack of concrete governmental actions aimed at forming an education system with the potential to foster "a just society". The activists envisioned universities with adequate funds, governed using principles of inclusiveness and freedom, by focusing on the idea that education should be at the service of the larger societal transformation Myanmar needs (often expressed with the terminology of reconciliation and peace). One last important student grievance was the legal establishment of autonomous unions in the universities:

"My priorities are: first the autonomy of the universities; second, budget allocations for education, and third, the freedom of student's unions, to be in line with the university charter, not the NEL. Every university in Myanmar autonomous and autonomous unions under autonomous university" (from an interview with S2, August 2019)

Although not permitted under the 2018 Constitution, unions were tolerated under the USPD government until the NEL mobilization. As mentioned, USPD hardliners could not accept such mobilization during election times. Interestingly, the only concrete successful outcome of mobilization in the policy cycle was inclusion of a provision in the NEL 2015 Amendment to establish

student unions. I argue in the next sections that this was a controversial success, however, since it was also a way for state authority to co-opt and work with "certain" unions rather than others.

When I discussed these activists' opinions and principles with MoE officials, their responses clearly indicated a strategy focused on bringing the students back to a vision of higher education focused on producing human capital, citing employability and economic growth as the most important contributions they could make.

"I don't know how the protest was stopped, but if students had arrived in Yangon there would have been more problems. That's why they stopped them before arriving. I think most of them had a negative attitude. They wanted to oppose whatever the government was allowing them to do or whatever they didn't like. They just wanted to protest. Maybe since they are only 20-24 years old, they are not politically mature yet. They should learn political science in the university, I think, because they don't have the chance to study real political science. If they were more educated on that, I think we would have fewer protests. In the history of Myanmar, students' movements have always been very important. They want to be heroes. Sometimes it's the wrong way. Now, they don't need to be heroes. What they should do is to study political science, their subject, and think in an unbiased way. In some universities they don't care if students understand their subjects or not, they are just coping, they don't have practical courses, they don't have laboratories, internships, they don't have a relationship with the private sector, etc. These are the things to change" (from an interview with a P1, August 2020).

A standard response to my questions by policy makers and government officials included two key points: a list of things students should be concerned about (i.e. dormitories, canteens and all things related to campus life) and the general idea that student's disruption is unproductive for a process of reform that should be based on "discipline and caution".

"I have to tackle some ideas of the student unions. Sometimes what they are demanding is impossible at the moment. We have to reduce tensions. [...]

Students talk about possible viable ways, not only the negative things. And it is a problem for us to handle. That's why this minister is afraid of the student unions, to shake up politics." (from an interview with P2, August 2019).

Recent research on Myanmar's youth by Higgins and Lopes Cardozo argues that Myanmar authorities continue to regard student activists as threats to security and stability, framing them as "subversive of social and national order, needing containment through monitoring, surveillance and regulation" (Higgins and Lopes Cardozo, 2018, pp.196-197). In the next sections I argue that the main instrument of control was cooptation, not the surveillance or regulation, and that under the NLD government the Rector's Committee became the point of contact between student politics and state authority, in line with a progressive reduction in the role of the MoE (as mentioned in Chapter III).

At a second level of inquiry, the mobilization had an impact on the student organizations themselves. The accounts I collected in my interviews clearly express the specific role played by Aung San Suu Kyi in this process.

"Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to meet the students that were protesting. But she only agreed to meet the students who were studying at the universities at that time, meaning the students who had not graduated. The ABSFU had many graduated students in their student union and she just wanted to meet the students who were studying at the university, they were not included. Aung San Suu Kyi doesn't like them, but this is just her opinion." (from an interview to S3, August 2019).

In the decades of the military junta, political parties were officially banned in Myanmar. In 1988, the NLD was formed and it was the "opposition party" until the period of the NEL protest. ABSFU and NLD share the same flag, the fighting peacock; Aung San is the heroic icon of the ABSFU and his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, of the NLD. However, in the 2015 political climate, NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi were not allies of the students unions in their protest, as proven by the fact described in this section. The events I describe and the data I have collected from interviews indicate that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD's influential party members most probably viewed student organizations as possible obstacles to the framing they were using to campaign and win the elections, that is, the construction of the NLD as the only progressive political force in the nation. In the months of the protest, in her press releases Aung San Suu Kyi invited students "to negotiate", urging the resolution

of the dispute in such a way that the NEL would pass rapidly to the implementation phase (Free Radio Asia 2015; Frontier 2015). Ultimately, as seen in Chapter III, Aung San Suu Kyi's vision of higher education did not match the ideals of a "just society" that were at the basis of the students' 11-point chart. This is also evidenced by the fact that the NLD forced one of his party members who had supported ABFSU in drafting these points to resign (Metro, 2016). At the same time, Aung San Suu Kyi was able to craft a very powerful narrative that shaped the approach to student contention during the NLD government. This narrative was that only "current" or "enrolled" students could represent the interests of students. Considering her personal legacy, Aung San Suu Kyi can herself be defined as a "bloodline activist", but with this move she broke the inter-generational solidarity that characterized student unions in Myanmar in which multiple generations of students had been involved in every student struggle for decades. This deliberate move was intended to manipulate the "agentification of studentship" in a way that would support state control over student organizations, thereby breaking both the micro-level biographic bonds linking activists and the macro-level history of activism in the country. Moreover, at a moment that was crucial for the mobilization, she gave priority to one front, USU, at the expense of the other one, ABSFU, thereby creating a wedge between the two federations of unions that fractured the movement in the last week of mobilization. These were the first intentional steps towards the crafting of a plurality of tools that Aung San Suu Kyi went on to use to govern student political actions throughout the NLD government, as pointed out in the next section.

Protest events tend to fuel mechanisms of social change: during protests, organizational networks develop, frames are bridged, and personal links foster reciprocal trust or the opposite. In his work on the history of the French labor movement in the 18th and 19th centuries, William H. Sewell (1996) proposed the concept of *eventful temporality* to recognize that events have transformative effects in so far as they "*transform structures largely by constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways*" (Ibid., p. 271). With reference to eventful temporality, the concept of *transformative events* has been developed to single out events with a high symbolic (and not only) impact. As McAdam and Sewell (2001, 101) have observed, events "*become turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity when the logic of historical development is reconfigured by human action but by no means abolished"* (Ibid., 102). During eventful protest, collective experiences develop through the interactions of the different individual and collective actors who take part in them with their different roles and aims (della Porta 2008). Mobilization against the NEL (and especially the march that led to its crackdown in March 2015) can be considered an "*eventful protest*". After the events of March 2015, ABSFU underwent a radicalization process: its leaders increasingly distanced themselves from governmental

institutions and their dissatisfaction with the NLD increased (Frontier, 2015). As expressed in the interviews I conducted between 2018 and 2019, the new CWC explicitly started to call for an "armed struggle" to bring the nation to a truly democratic regime. ABSFU's shift led to the loss of much of its consensus among students studying on-campus, but it gradually gained the support of the emerging left-wing parties of the 2020 election. Conversely, USU decided to avoid organizing acts of radical contentious politics against the state authority in favor of expanding its on-campus activities. It pursued these latter activities by following a new operational trajectory focused on debating institutional changes with university leaders, e.g. the aim of achieving a higher degree of involvement in learning processes and more specifically learning activities in the classroom, curriculum relevance, and extra-curricular activity design. USU and ABSFU were unable to find common ground to organize joint actions for the rest of the transitional period, and this period was instead characterized by micro-episodes of contention but not by a new national wave of mobilization, considering that the NEL protest was effectively the only large, nation-wide mobilization organized by student organizations in this political period.

One important aspect worth mentioning is that the ABSFU leadership changed completely after the protest. In part, this overhaul was linked to the fact that most of the ABSFU leaders were jailed for a year after the crackdown on the protest. According to the estimates of the "Assistance Association of Political Prisoners", nearly 100 students were imprisoned in 2015 and released in 2016. At the same time, in an expanding civil society arena, when the ABSFU leaders were freed they found new venues for their activism (mostly labor unions or NGOs) and formally handed ABSFU over to a new generation of leaders. According to an official statement published on social media and made available to the press, this change of leadership was an opportunity to diversify ABSFU upper echelons: "one-third of the country's university students are from ethnic regions and now there are many universities in those regions. We want out friends from universities in ethnic regions to be a part of our new committee" (leadership statement published in Ei Shwe Phyu, 2016). Although ethnic issues had been among the core claims and grievances of ABSFU since its foundation, most of the federation leadership and active members were Bamar "bloodline activists". According to the data collected thanks to my interviews with S7 and S8, the diversity of ABSFU in terms of family and ethnic background changed after 2016. Unfortunately, the arrival of the COVID pandemic prevented by from further scrutinizing this topic by attending ABSFU meetings as planned. As I mention in the conclusion, ethnic alliances in and with student movements have been gaining strength over the course of the long mobilization against the recent military takeover that is ongoing at the time of writing. Therefore, I argue that further investigation into the ethnic identity of ABSFU and other

student organizations from a historical and contemporary perspective are needed to shed light on an important aspect of Myanmar state-building and its contentious politics.

4.4 Student politics under the NLD government

"I became part of the student unions in December 2016, so I'm not sure I can talk about before that time. [...] In 2016, I was a third-year student. Student unions had disagreements about the Letpadan movement. [...] After the NLD was elected, the ideals of lots of activists changed a lot. Some tried to cooperate with the NLD government. Some did not [...] Since that time, the unions at my university have been divided." (from an interview with S9, August 2019).

In my interviews, it was clear that the outcomes of both the mobilization against the NEL and the 2015 NDL election were a changing point in the trajectory of student politics in Myanmar. From 2011 until 2016, a coordinated field of action for student politics existed in Myanmar, with two federations of unions acting as the point of reference for students in the form of collective political actors and making the main decisions about their contentious actions. So far, this chapter has illustrated their mobilization capacity, main demands, and political strategies. In 2016, the Myanmar organizational field of students started to change. From that point until the COVID pandemic and 2021 military takeover ¹⁴⁸, the new field consisted of a multiplicity of highly politically fragmented and organizationally loose informal student groups. Although at times these groups expressed firm and radical views on how Myanmar higher education was to be reformed and other collective grievances, their organizational weakness and competing attitudes prevented them from creating a national system of alliance. Activists report that the NDL played an important part in creating this fragmented field of action:

"In my opinion, the very prominent transition in the life of student unions started after the NLD got elected. After that, the NLD formed a lot of student unions across the country. Last year, they held a conference. We were not invited but I saw the report of the conference. It was a report that was meant

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¹⁴⁸ As I point out in the conclusion, the 2021 military takeover initiated a new trajectory for student organizations and, at the time of writing, these groups are still organizing the pro-democracy front.

only for some student unions that they cooperate with. I read the report and I found out that the NLD government formed about 90 student unions and teachers' unions across the country, which means they tried to dominate the unions. [...] There are a lot of universities that have different student unions in one university. I think the NLD is responsible for that." (from an interview with S10, August 2019).

In May 2016, the "National Student Unions League" (NSUL)¹⁴⁹ was founded as an umbrella for all the unions that wanted to work closely with the NLD. The NSUL was reported to have held meetings with the NLD Central Executive Committee, but this federation was ultimately short lived. In 2019, I was unable to find any student activists who still had links with the NSUL. Most of the student unions under NSUL remained as autonomous entities inside the different universities where they were founded. According to the data provided to me by the MoE, in 2018 there were 90 student unions active in the universities and colleges under their authority (134, see Table 1 in the Introduction). It is most probable that each of the country's universities, but not all the colleges or other higher education institutions, had at least one active union. In the cases of bigger universities, 2-3 unions were active and competing. The total number was definitely greater than the overall number during the Thein Sein government.

In this fragmented field of student politics, I looked at local newspapers ¹⁵⁰ and other sources to observe the reactions to events such as student protests or government announcements. This information was qualitatively analyzed to uncover the new political dynamics between challengers, authorities and the public and to identify and construct an analytical narrative of the main interactions within the policy fields. It appeared clear to me that there were different loci of contention in the country and protests that were able to gain national attention, even if they had not achieved a national-wide scale. In the 2016-2020 timeline (before the COVID outbreak), I was able to identify three main cluster of student-led protests that were extensively covered by the national press, centered around three main grievances.

The first common grievance was the lack of implementation measures for the NEL and, more broadly, the need for a specific reform focused on higher education. Student unions repeatedly pointed out that higher education reform was at a "stand-still" under the NLD government, and that this administration

¹⁴⁹ In Burmese, the acronym was Na Ka Tha.

¹⁵⁰ Mainly "The Irrawady", "Myanmar Times" and "Frontier".

was unwilling to move forward with the implementation of decisions that had been formally made on key matters (Pyae Thet Phyo and Ei Shwe Phyu 2016; Ei Shwe Phyu, 2017; Ei Shwe Phyu, 2018). The key claims often raised were mainly: university autonomy and the drafting of institutional charters to legislate such autonomy, the lack of new regimentation on the hiring and dismissal of university staff (Chan Thar and Kyaw Ko Ko, 2017), an increase of the education governmental budget (Kyaw Ko Ko 2018, Htung Khaing 2018), the formal legalization of student unions that were active without proper legislation (Lun Min Mang 2017), and general freedom of expression and protest for students¹⁵¹. It is clear that these claims are a specific sub-set of the ACDE's 11-point chart. Of these 11 claims, the ones more commonly used after 2016 can be said to be the ones more strictly related to the educational sphere, without any intense reference to education being at the service of society at large. In my interviews with ABFSU's leadership, the activists kept expressing more radical views: "if education is a priority, then you cannot separate political affairs and student affairs. Students can only reach their potential if they have a voice, [and] that is what student unions must do" (from an online interview with S8 in March 2019). At the national scale, this approach was losing consensus as also evidenced by the fact that in 2019 only 5 activists at the UY openly identified themselves as ABFUS members.

The second common grievance was campus security. As seen in Chapter II, most of the higher education institutions in Myanmar were hastily built in the period following the 1988 protests and placed in the outskirt of cities and towns. All of these buildings were poorly constructed (lack of proper planning and adequate funds) and the infrastructure meant to link the campuses to the main arteries of the cities and towns were never fully developed. As a result, still nowadays students find themselves in precarious commuting conditions and studying in buildings that do not meet basic safety or security standards. Although most of the university buildings are gated, episodes of microcriminality are quite widespread on the campuses. In conflict-affected states, this situation is particularly exacerbated. In fact, universities in conflict-affected states are often the sites of intense drug trafficking. These activities are not being addressed by local or national authorities, and some see this as a deliberate policy to undermine ethnic youth, one oft-cited example being the high levels of heroin addiction reported at Myitkyina University in Kachin State (Kachin News Group, 2009; Kachin Women's Association Thailand, 2014). One wave of protests was particularly significant for attracting press coverage to the "campus security" matter. On 25 December, 2018, a student was

¹⁵¹ One step in this direction occurred in 2017 when the MoE cancelled all rules curtailing student participation in political activities from the University Entrance Guide Book. Instead, in 2018, a MoE directive circulated among universities required that information about the speakers, topics, and guest list of every student-led university debate or talk be sent for approval ahead of time. In interviews, some student activists commented on this new directive, calling it "a move backwards".

murdered on his way home from university, on the outskirts of Mandalay, after a robbery attempt. In this specific case, the Student Union of the murdered student's university, Yadanabon University, the largest university in Upper Myanmar, organized a wave of protests that lasted several weeks and led to the arrest of seven students (De Hlaing Winn, 2019). Campus security was an issue discussed in all my interviews with the new generation of activists. Tellingly, it was never discussed in any of the many discussion tables I have found myself involved in as part of an international donor team or a foreign academic discussing education with governmental authorities.

The third waves of protests that reached national attention in the press were the ones staged at the UY, especially when the university centenary was in its planning stages. As seen in Chapter III, during the NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi's guidance, the UY was the center stage of the reform process and the university centenary celebrations (only some of the planned events were carried out, due to the COVID outbreak) were designed to showcase, for the international community, the progress made in the education sector. As of summer 2019, a number of student unions and activists began to stage protests against the centenary preparations. The student leaders publicly framed their grievances around the event as follows:

"The ruling government has formed a centenary celebration committee and sub-committees and taken the lead role in holding celebrations. At first, the YUSU participated in the committee and sub-committees. But after attending meetings, it appeared that we would have to work according to the agenda of the government. And that agenda does not reflect the interests and wishes of students. So, we resigned from the committees and sub-committees. But we have continued to participate as observers." (a student activist in a livestreamed interview on the Irrawaddy website, December 2020¹⁵²)

"I have to talk about the university centenary first. UY is a sacred place not only for students and student unions, but also in Myanmar's history. All the historic turning points in Myanmar started at UY. We are happy the government is paying serious attention to centenary celebrations. But at the same time, schools and universities in Yangon Region and elsewhere in the country have many needs, especially in terms of infrastructure. Funding is

¹⁵² The video interview is available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/dateline/will-centenary-myanmars-yangon-university-lead-re-establishing-university-student-union-building.html

insufficient. Everyone is probably aware that, at some universities outside Yangon, motorbikes have to be parked in muddy fields. And regarding campus security, there are cases of motorbikes being stolen, even at campuses like Dagon University in Yangon. We want those needs to be met first. We are happy that the government will organize the centenary on a grand scale, but if it is to spend a lot of money, we want to stress that there is an urgent need to fulfill infrastructural requirements at universities in Yangon and elsewhere in the country. We want to see the centenary celebrations held on a grand scale, but we want to have a meaningful event, rather than spending a lot of money on it. So, [the placard] was intended to urge the government to fulfill the requirements of universities, if it has funds." (from a livestreamed interview on the Irrawaddy website, December 2020¹⁵³)

Just like repairs to the physical infrastructure of the university (see James Esson and Kevin Wang 2016 as discussed in Chapter III), the centenary is framed by the student leader as a "cosmetic event" or "smokescreen" for the international community to showcase progress that has not really been made. Ultimately, it was also an event destined to inevitably deplete the limited resources allocated to the higher education sector. The UY centenary was the most visible and confrontational cause of direct contention between the NLD government and Aung San Suu Kyi personally, on one side, and the student unions, on the other side. Between July and August 2019, I maintained contact with various activists who were leading these protests, mainly through Facebook. In the early days of August, I noticed that one specific activist was heavily targeted on his personal page with hundreds of derogatory messages. He ultimately closed down his profile, contacted me from a different one and we scheduled a long interview in a tea room on the UY campus. First of all, he explained the cause of contention:

"A couple of weeks ago, we demonstrated about some issues like: the release of the students who marched for the 7 July anniversary, the release of a 9th-grade student from Mandalay who was arrested very unjustly and other issues that we have at the University of Yangon campus, like the episodes of sexual harassment. I held the final sign that was meant to remind the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi to stop using the 100th Memorial event of the university to do

¹⁵³ The video interview is available at: https://www.irrawaddy.com/dateline/will-centenary-myanmars-yangon-university-lead-re-establishing-university-student-union-building.html

their politics. [...] We were protesting and we got the information that Aung San Suu Kyi would meet us for 30 minutes and talk about the problems, but she didn't. [...] We were about 15 students from East, West University of Yangon, Dagon, from 5 different universities. [...] The police tried to stop us by threatening us with guns. They told me that my sign was particularly problematic and they told me to leave it behind. [...] My sign was very sensitive for the government; they know that they are using the centenary for political interests. I'm very sure they are using the Centennial to persuade the people to support the campaign of the 2020 election. [...] They want to show that in the NLD period they made a lot of developments in the University of Yangon, but we know that it's only the infrastructure, nothing very important."

When I asked him about the hate campaign on Facebook, he explained:

"Lots of messages were from NLD supporters. Maybe they were fake accounts, I don't know. They threatened me especially because my sign was very sensitive for the NLD government. I received a lot of hate messages and a lot of NLD supporters reported my account. [...] Even Facebook sent me a message that they were reviewing my account."

Scholarly literature point outs that social movements' protests "are highly likely to succeed if public opinion is both supportive and attentive or fail if the reverse is true" (Luders 2016, p. 189). As mentioned in the introduction, Aung San Suu Kyi personally and her government more broadly enjoyed high levels of public support throughout the political transition phase, even when the international community was aggressively pointing out Aung San Suu Kyi's political shortcomings. As also confirmed by a report prepared by Frontier (2020), various activists felt that the mood of public opinion under the NLD government was against all activists' activities explicitly targeting the NLD as an "antagonist". As pointed out by my interviewee:

"Most people think we should stop criticizing the government, because the NLD government has been democratically elected and is led by Aung San Suu Kyi. In the past, student politics that were against the government had public

support. Now we can have public support only for things that are not a direct attack on the NLD."

Sporadic student demonstrations took place under the NLD government. However, none of them evolved into full-fledged uprisings or extended outside of university campuses. Generally, students refrained from demonstrating on exogenous issues related to the political and socioeconomic conditions in the nation, and focused more on protesting for better conditions in their university lives. When I approached student leaders asking about the reason for this shift, their answers expressed the idea that "we used to be in opposition, but we found out that it was more useful to enter the unions from a reformist perspective", thus implying that adopting such an approach would have more impact on state authority. Student organizations continued to ask for a more democratic reform of higher education and better conditions for students throughout the country (with a continuous focus on the issues of the less privileged students and areas of the country) in order to bring about progressive change. In doing so, they felt that a less oppositional and more reformist approach could serve better their purposes. This did not apply to ABFSU, as indeed this group augmented its oppositional stand but without enjoying the necessary support from the student base.

These logics of action were progressively reinforced by the work carried out by the Rectors' Committee. From April 2018, dialogue with student unions was conducted by the NECP and, more specifically, the Rectors' Committee working under the umbrella of the NEPC. This body, created to enhance the rectors' leadership, was in charge of working on possible forms of student representation inside Myanmar universities¹⁵⁴. In 2019, I had two informal meetings with P3 and he pointed out that: "the country needs students who are young, active and white, meaning no color". Targeting these "students with no color", the chairman was organizing meetings thanks to which student input could be entered into a new cycle policy that would lead to the drafting to the new NESP plan and, potentially, a new higher education law that policy makers had in mind. Under the NLD government, the state eased control over universities and allowed student groups to operate openly on campuses. At the same time, however, the government used a plurality of approaches to ensure that the unions were co-opted in a way that pushed them to abandon their broader claims for national social justice (the color mentioned in the interview is the political color of student actions). State action was successful to a certain extent, but at the same time – as proven by the debate questioning the

¹⁵⁴ The Rectors' Committee list of duties included: Institutional Charter, Teacher Union, Student Union, Research and Publication, International Relations.

ideological use of the UY Centenary – student leaders managed to retain their role as actors capable of "speaking truth to power" and pushing for a more democratic higher education system.

I now turn to a specific event, the election of the UY Student Union, to further explicate the specific common grievances of student politics in the country's most important universities.

4.5 The debate at the University of Yangon

On 6 August 2019, UY students were called to elect the student union representative who would represent them in institutional governance bodies (mainly the University Council and Senate). It was the first official student union election in decades at the most important university in the country, so I decided to follow the event closely. On that occasion, I attended the debates held by the different candidates and, on election day, I distributed surveys with closed-ended questions that were answered by 56 student voters (almost one quarter of the people who voted that day). To carry out this research, I approached the UY governance, in particular the Rector and the most influential Pro-rector, to seek authorization in advance. As I mentioned in the introduction and explain in further depth in the next chapter, I started to carry out extensive research in Myanmar in 2015. Back then, I needed ministerial approval even to officially interview university staff and Rectors. My opportunities to freely carry out interviews on a subject as sensitive as student activism were limited. In 2019, the university governance made no objections or requests that I follow any specific procedures. It is true that I had already built a relationship of solid trust with university authorities, but it is also true that higher education and its issues were much more widely discussed and the MoE was exerting less control over the research done by foreign academics 155.

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¹⁵⁵ My positionality as a foreign researcher was definitely an advantage in this situation. A researcher from Myanmar might have faced much harsher restrictions if he or she were to investigate the same subject.





Figure 14. Photographs of the University of Yangon elections, 6 August 2019 (By: L. Proserpio)

I also disclosed my intentions to the student leaders with whom I was regularly in touch. Activists tend to be very welcoming of research that can shed light on their activities, and this case was no exception. At the same time, on Election Day, I received various questions from students (who I did not personally know) who were in charge of security for the event. No major issues were raised when I explained my connections and what I was doing; the aim of their questions was to understand if I might possibly be "a spy for the MoE" or someone who could create trouble for them (which was another of the reasons I previously asked the university governance structures for permission). At the same time, the questions raised were proof of the way student activists feel that all of their activities are still subject to possible surveillance.



Figure 15. Student debate promotional post on social media. (Facebook page of University of Yangon)

In participating in the pre-election debates, I took note of the issues, claim, and grievances discussed between candidates and possible voters. At the final debate of 5 August 2019, audience members asked the candidate 22 questions. Most of these questions and debate time fell under the umbrella issue of "campus security", an issue that was discussed in different terms including sexual harassment (mostly by strangers on campus, such as taxi drivers harassing female students), street dogs roaming the campus, and the poor conditions of the dormitories and catering facilities. The second largest group of questions and portion of debate time was dedicated to how the candidates were planning to run the unions, especially in terms of guaranteeing full transparency as to the use of funds and how they were planning to establish more "educational clubs" such as sport clubs. There were also some questions about student unions and specific activists not having common visions, and how the split among different organization could harm students' chances of having their voices heard by university governance. The third grievance discussed at these debates was higher education reform, especially the lack of real autonomy for universities and the importance of student input for a truly democratic reform process. Only one question was addressed to a more general political issue, that is, the peace process. Although the debates were held in the same period as the student protest mentioned in the section above, no candidates mentioned the university centenary or the NLD government in front of the wider student audience.

Having conducted this initial screening of the issues debated for the elections, I drafted a closed-ended questionnaire. The first questions were aimed at understanding the degree of students' satisfaction with their quality of education. As seen in Table 5, students generally responded that the quality of education was in need of improvement.

Do you think University-level Myanmar education should be improved?				
Yes, a lot	45	80%		
Yes, a little	8	14%		
No, it is ok	3	5%		
I have no opinion	0	0%		

Table 5. Student Opinion on education quality. (By: L. Proserpio)

In improving the quality of their education, students feel that unions can play a part, as seen in Table 6. In an additional question, 63% of students stated that they were willing to donate part of their free time to student union activities.

Do you believe Student Unions are important?		
Yes, and they can do a lot to improve the university	42	75%
Yes, but they can do only a little to improve the university	6	11%
Maybe	8	14%
No, they are a waste of students' time, better to focus on studying	0	0%
I don't know	0	0%

Table 6. Student Opinion on student union. (By: L. Proserpio)

When it comes to the type of activities student unions should focus on, the voters pointed to better student services, campus security, and tackling cases of sexual harassment. "Myanmar national politics" was indicated by only 3 voters out of the total of 56.

What do you think should be the focus of Student Unions?				
Better student services at the university (dormitories, canteens)	30	52%		
Discussing with teachers how to improve the quality of education in the classroom	25	45%		
Campus security		68%		
Fighting for a better National Education Law	12	21%		
Myanmar national politics	3	5%		

More clubs for students (literature, sports, etc)	13	23%
Fighting to change the classroom schedule	7	13%
Inclusive education	10	18%
Discussing with the university leadership how to improve campus life	16	29%
Sexual harassment	30	54%
I don't know	1	2%

Table 7. Student Opinion on student union activities. (By: L. Proserpio)

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a study arguing that "amidst the rapid political and social changes in Myanmar, perhaps a long history of democratization and the important roles of student activism is in danger of being forgotten" (Hong and Hani 2019, p. 220). On the basis of this survey and the debates in which I took part, I propose a different approach. The important role of student politics has not been forgotten in the "period of transition", I argue, and student organizations have retained their role as important agents of change. The shift that did take place, away from established historical patterns, lay in the question of what needed to be changed. State authority, and the NLD in particular, had an impact in re-shaping this what.

The aim of this chapter was to examine the student politics discourses and grievances around higher education in the transitional period and their impacts. I draw the main findings in the first section of the conclusion.

CHAPTER V

INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

As discussed in Chapter II, Myanmar higher education was a product of British colonial rule and, until the 1960s, deeply tied to the international educational arena. Advancing an isolationist policy, General Ne Win intentionally cut these ties and Myanmar remained at the periphery of a globalizing and increasingly interconnected international academia for the subsequent decades, thereby creating a unique domestic educational setting. The aim of this chapter is to paint a full picture of the international actors that very quickly began to re-intervene in Myanmar higher education during the "transitional period", bringing with them global trends (as discussed in Chapter III) that were not yet part of the domestic discussion on education. Moreover, I address the following questions: why did international actors engage with Myanmar higher education reform? What idea(s) of and vision(s) for higher education were introduced by international actors? In so doing, I also self-reflexively consider my own experience as an international actor in the reform arena briefly addressed below.

I started engaging with Myanmar universities thanks to an ERAMUS MUNDUS Action 2¹⁵⁶ project called PANACEA, funded by the European Commission and designed to set up student and staff mobility schemes between 20 universities in various Asian and EU countries. Drafted in 2012 and carried out between 2013 and 2014, the project was not particularly impactful for Myanmar institutions as they benefitted from only a limited number of student and staff mobility agreements. Nonetheless, EU partners felt that "the country was opening up" and, to support future opportunities for the country's institutions, it was decided that the project's final meeting would be held in Myanmar. In 2015, as an international relations officer for the University of Bologna (UNIBO), I found myself at the DHE discussing a higher education reform of which I had no previous knowledge. Like most of my European colleagues, I perceived that both governmental authorities and university staff were eager to explore possible collaborations that could support their reform process, even if little input was offered as to *how* this might be achieved. It was basically a very broad "call for help": any international partner would be given a seat at the reform table. At that time, thanks in part to new institutional governance on international relations, UNIBO was broadening its outreach in Asia along two strategic lines of action: exploring new collaborations outside the well-established ones in East

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¹⁵⁶ Launched in 2010 under the Erasmus Mundus programme (2009-2013), the Erasmus Mundus Action 2 was set up with the aim to contribute to the sustainable development of partner countries in the field of higher education, in accordance with EU external policy objectives. The action is based on Partnerships between European and partner country higher education institutions and includes a scholarship scheme for mobility of students (undergraduate, master, doctoral and post-doctoral) and staff. More information here: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/836286d2-2d86-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Asia (mainly China, Japan and Korea), and developing universities' "third mission" dimension in a global perspective thanks to capacity-building and international development cooperation. Answering the "call for help" launched by our Burmese colleagues seamed a way to fulfill both goals. Since the bulk of UNIBO international relations activities is carried out under the umbrella of the European Commission programs that offer both strategic guidelines and financial support, we turned to Brussels to actualize this possible new partnership. As I further explain in this chapter, the EU at the time was also advancing new policies for its "external partnerships". The ASEAN region was clearly indicated as a new strategic region, therefore the needed support materialized promptly. Thanks to this quite interesting strategic alignment, beginning in 2016 I was involved in drafting and implementing 3 different EU-funded "Capacity Building in the Field of Higher Education" (CBHE)¹⁵⁷ projects involving the DHE and different universities. I briefly describe the projects here only to underline a few analytical arguments I develop in this chapter.

The first project, CHINLONE, "Connecting Higher Education Institutions for a New Leadership on National Education" ¹⁵⁸, was a three-year-long CBHE project (2017-2020) modelled after and in response to the launch of the NESP. CHINLONE had three broad platforms of actions: academic governance (management platform), degree course designing and monitoring (education platform), and international relations management (international relations platform). The activities of the platforms were designed to target Myanmar academic leaders (Rectors and Heads of Departments) to create an extensive program of trainings on the main principles regulating academic affairs, by bringing to the table the "Bologna process" model. As I argue in this chapter, CBHE projects, and other EU funded projects such as EU-SHARE, are part of a global strategy to externalize European higher education that have started to target ASEAN countries in recent years. During the implementation of the CHINLONE project activities, I had the opportunity to discuss strategies with other international actors, especially colleagues and academics from the British Council, Central European University and JICA. As I outline in more detail below, some of these conversations were aimed at making sure that our activities would not compete or overlap (as they quite inevitably did, in the end).

In 2018, a second project, TOOLKIT, "Designing and managing international relations, educational projects and mobility schemes in Asian Universities" was drafted after few informal conversations

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¹⁵⁷ Under the Erasmus + (2014-2020) umbrella, the CBHE programme was designed to supports the modernisation and development of higher education institutions and educational systems in the Third Countries not associated to the E+ programme. More information here: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/introduction-international-dimension-erasmus-plus_en

¹⁵⁸ More information here: https://site.unibo.it/chinlone/it

with Brussels-based officers who lamented the lack of administrative capacity making it more difficult for Myanmar universities (and other Asian countries and institutions) to draft and manage international funds. In the span of just few years, Myanmar higher education institutions had begun receiving a constant flow of financial support, raising some concerns on the part of donors about the efficiency and effectiveness of funding use. Therefore, TOOLKIT aimed to: support the drafting and realization of international relation strategies, the design and management of educational projects, and the design and management of academic mobility schemes¹⁵⁹. Following consultations with the DHE, the project chose YU, YUEco and YAU as pilot universities for these activities. I had a few conversations with the DHE in the TOOLKIT drafting stages, and it was interesting to note a change of attitude in relation to the idea of local universities setting up dedicated international relations offices. One of the reasons the PANACEA project did not succeed was that the Myanmar MoE did not allow its universities to have fully-fledged international relations offices (a legacy of the isolationist era), leading to these activities being managed by individual academics who had some connections to international academia. In 2017, the International Cooperation Office (ICO) was set up at UY to develop international relations under the guidance of the Pro-Rector for Academic Affairs. In 2020, most of the country universities and colleges had some form of international relations office, usually consisting of senior academic staff tasked with covering these duties on a part-time basis. Some have physical offices with dedicated computers and internet access, while others rely on shared areas and equipment.

In 2020, the third project followed a significantly different approach. It grew out of conversations with the NEPC and Rectors' Committee (at the time, fully in charge of relation with international actors) who shared the idea of improving student engagement by creating effective actions and policies to empower student participation in the planning, management and governance of university life. The ENGAGE – "ASEAN student engagement initiative" – project was launched in three Partner Countries (Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) in January 2021. At the time of writing it is "on hold", as I further discuss in the conclusion.

These experiences led me to reflect, individually and with other international actors, on our collective role in relation to Myanmar higher education reform. In this chapter, I begin my analysis and discussion by presenting the arena of international actors, that is, *who* was engaging in higher education development and cooperation in Myanmar during the transitional period. I then turn to the *why*, that is, the rationales behind the activities carried out. In these first two sections, I move in a

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¹⁵⁹ More information here: https://site.unibo.it/toolkit/en/

similar direction to that of the PhD research carried out by Lynee Heslop (2019). Her study found substantial social injustices in the international interactions revolving around Myanmar higher education institutions, both in relationships with their Northern higher education partners and in relation to wider society in terms of the focus of their activities. Focusing on bilateral relations between the UK and Myanmar institutions, Heslop notes that these partnerships were driven predominantly by the commercial interests of the Northern partners and shaped by external forces associated with the globalization of higher education. In the third section, I add a piece to the puzzle by focusing on the way EU-ASEAN regional cooperation played out in Myanmar. Indeed, even if this kind of cooperation is driven by political more than economical rationales, it nonetheless led to similar asymmetries in power structures. In the last section, I conclude my analysis by focusing on a specific activity: setting up quality assurance mechanisms. As mentioned in Chapter III, state authority made it a priority to establish a quality assurance system for the domestic higher education environment, in order to monitor and evaluate the institutions that were moving towards autonomy. This accountability measure was one of the fields of action launched by different international actors that clearly shows one important aspect: the competition between these actors. Ultimately, this chapter answers my third research sub-questions (RQ3) as defined in the introduction.

5.1 Overview of the international actors in the higher education sector

As already argued by Lynee Heslop (2019) and mentioned in the introduction, it is not altogether easy to obtain a clear picture of the number of international actors, their activities and related financial aid in Myanmar's higher education sector. In many cases, data either are not available, not comprehensively collected in a central register or database, or not disaggregated from general bilateral aid agreements, rendering it problematic to accurately examine them. This situation is in contrast to international education aid programs in the basic education, non-formal and TVET sectors, which are clearly documented and tracked by government and development agencies alike. Higher education has been a very fragmented and un-coordinated field of international cooperation in which different actors have definitely played an impactful role even if this role is difficult to map and assess. In this section, I aim to give a bird's eye view of who was cooperating in the higher education field in the period under examination so as to narrow down the why and interaction with the higher education reform analyzed in the next section.

I start with the forms of institutional cooperation between Myanmar and foreign higher education institutions that are usually formalized in MoUs. As mentioned above, a very limited number of

western higher education institutions were able to carry out activities with Myanmar institutions during the SPDC regime. At the beginning of the transitional period, a significant number of institutions intersected and openly offered to work together with Myanmar universities to provide research opportunities, student and staff mobility, and training assistance. For example, UY signed 54 MoUs between 2013 and 2016. According to the data collected by the TOOLKIT project in a survey administered to 15 institutions in 2020, most of the MoUs involved partner universities based in Japan, China, Thailand, UK, Australia, Germany, Korea, UK and other EU and ASEAN institutions. However, as deduced from the survey replies, the development of stable activities (including the outgoing and incoming mobility schemes that are the basic goals of any MoU) has been hampered by a lack of adequate funds and excess of bureaucratic barriers. Under these circumstances, the wide majority of MoUs signed by Myanmar institutions rest on the condition that foreign partners are required to bear all the costs of both inbound and outbound mobility and any other activity; as a result, most of the MoUs are inactive or have supported only short-term activities. Reviewing the 36 MoUs signed with UM, Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein note: "generally, activities like exchange programs, seminars, workshops, conferences, internships, and special lectures have come to fruition at the UM since 2013 under MoUs. However, agreements on research publication are still lacking for almost all MoUs. Weak points are also found in commitment towards student/teacher exchanges and visiting professors/special lectures in some MoUs" (Nyo Nyo and Zin Maung Maung Thein, 2021). In 2016, the MoE placed a moratorium on signing new MoUs. In 2020, this moratorium was partially lifted and universities were allowed to follow a standard template for new agreements, but these can take up to two years to be completed. Ultimately, institutional cooperation proved to be an administrative burden more than an actual impactful form of cooperation. One notable exemption has been Central European University (CEU), founded by George Soros and linked to the Open Society Foundation. CEU had a longstanding partnership with UY that regularly provides scholarships and European study visits for capacity building, and supports the development of their institution's Master Plan as discussed in Chapter III. Before the 2021 military takeover, CEU was planning to extend further collaboration to upgrade UM's Master Plan (2020-2025).

At a second level of analysis, several countries are known to be active in higher education in Myanmar, including: Japan, China, South Korea, India, Australia, USA and UK and Germany. Not all of them formally or consistently share the details of their programs with the wider development community. For example, little information is available on academic cooperation with China, India 160

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¹⁶⁰ See Nang Hseng Hom et. al. 2021 for a description of the ACARE, "Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education" project at YAU. ACARE was opened in 2014 in cooperation with the Government of India to support

and South Korea¹⁶¹, and what information is available points to support for institution-based research and capacity-building in specific sectors such as engineering, medical, IT and agricultural sciences. Japan (represented by its development agency JICA) is often mentioned as one of most active actors¹⁶², and indeed through a bilateral agreement with the Myanmar government and in cooperation with the ASEAN University Network (AUN) it supports Myanmar's top technical universities in Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw in terms of curriculum development, developing research capabilities, providing grants to procure equipment, and facilitating faculty exchanges (to my knowledge, it is the only donor that funded resident academics living and working in Myanmar universities for a number of years) and scholarships. JICA is the only international actor with a proven track record of supporting research-oriented activities.

The Australian government supported technical higher education consultancies for the CESR process, but over time it scaled back its support in the country; nonetheless, Australian National University (ANU) in mentioned as the second most important international partner for UY (after Central European University) and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), Australia's specialist international agricultural research for development agency, works in close cooperation with YAU. Similarly, the USA played a part in the early stages of higher education reform (also focusing on infrastructural upgrades, which is relatively rare among international actors' activities) after President Obama's visit to Myanmar, but it has been less sizeable in recent years. However, the Fulbright Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, is one of the main scholarship schemes available to Myanmar faculty. According to Lynee Heslop (2019), the UK's aid to higher education has been limited compared to basic education. The UK's main engagement with higher education in Myanmar is through the British Council, the Department for International Development and the Department for International trade. The British Council support has included policy dialogues, UK study tours, capacity-building workshops in teaching and research, leadership and management training, commissioning needs analyses in improving teaching quality and distance education, and providing opportunities for MoE

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agricultural research and human resource development around rice cultivation in Myanmar. ACARE is portrayed as one of the two main projects at YAU, together with the capacity development project financed by JICA.

¹⁶¹ The Korea Animal And Plant Quarantine Agency is funding a project at YAU titled "Analysis of the global pathway and risk of highly pathogenic plant viruses and insect vectors from tropical and subtropical countries". Since, most of the academic cooperation of South Korea is funded by their development cooperation agency Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) that is active in other ASEAN country and not in Myanmar, probably Myanmar is not high in the national priority list for academic cooperation.

¹⁶² See Jürgen Haacke, 2018 on Japan's government enthusiastic support to the reforms undertaken by the President Thein Sein government. Tokyo encouraged these reforms through a combination of high-level diplomacy, economic assistance and other targeted support to develop Myanmar's economic and social capital (including education). After the NLD-led government came to power in March 2016, Japan remained intensely interested in supporting Myanmar, even if Aung San Suu Ky as State Counsellor remained non-committal in particular in relation to regional partnerships.

officials and higher education institutions leaders to participate in international higher education networking and debates. The support of the other two agencies is more oriented towards recruiting international students for UK universities and linking universities with business and development opportunities. As indicated by Sarah-Marleen Dannenberg and Susanne Preuschoff (2021), the fact that the former Ministers of Education Dr. Khin San Yee and Dr. Myo Thein Gyi were DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) alumni was a beneficial starting condition for Myanmar-German cooperation in the university sector. The DAAD works with all German federal ministries and is the main distributor for project funds and individual scholarships in all areas. It supports various mobility and capacity-building projects in the country.

The third level of analysis is regional cooperation, which includes a number of Asia region higher education programs, Asian higher education sector governmental bodies, networks and organizations. The EU funds one of the largest regional higher education development programs involving ASEAN countries, including Myanmar. The EU-SHARE program is funded by the EU in the mount of 20m Euros over five years (2015-2020) and involves 10 ASEAN countries in four areas of development: international student mobility, credit transfer systems, internationalization and quality assurance (more on the specifics of the activation in Myanmar in the next sections). The program's stated objectives are to "strengthen regional cooperation, enhance the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education institutions and students" (SHARE, 2018, p.10) by learning from the European experience. As I note in the third section, Myanmar universities are also deeply involved in various projects under the Erasmus + umbrella. International collaboration at the regional level involving Myanmar institutions is also facilitated through Myanmar's membership in three key Asia region higher education groups: the South-east Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), and the Asian University Alliance (AUA). SEAMEO-RIHED aims "to foster efficiency, effectiveness, and harmonization of higher education in Southeast Asia through system research, empowerment, development of mechanisms to facilitate sharing and collaborations in higher education" (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2018, p.10) by organizing regional workshops and policy dialogues for South-east Asian HEIs. The primary purpose of the AUN is to bring together universities across Asia to enable greater collaboration among leading Asian universities. The AUA is a regional organization established in 2017 with the aim of jointly addressing regional and global challenges, specifically related to higher education and economic, scientific and technological development, by strengthening collaboration among member institutions. The AUA acknowledges and promotes shared identity and values in working towards this mission.

The last level of analysis comprises the international development agencies, NGOs and CSOs. After contributing to two technical consultancies on higher education as part of the CESR, UNESCO has stopped providing support to the higher education sector except where this intersects with teacher education as part of its work on developing teacher competency standard frameworks in the basic education sector. Generally, as pointed out by Lynee Heslop (2019), the higher education sector in Myanmar has been largely neglected by international development agencies, implying that the roles, functions and purposes of higher education in social justice and peacebuilding have gone unrecognized, unacknowledged or ignored. I further elaborate on this argument in the next section.

5.2 Rationales and asymmetries in international actors' actions

In June 2019, an article by Tony Water published in *The Irrawaddy* spread rapidly throughout the expat online groups I followed. The article ironically stated something that every self-aware and conscious expat knew about their work and its outputs: "the general ideas for Yangon consultancy reports typically start in the capitals of the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic countries, known by the currently popular acronym, WEIRD. Such countries come to Myanmar with the hope of assisting a transition from what was there before, which is by implication eastern, ignorant, rural, poor, and autocratic, to the heaven-on-earth which is WEIRD. This is why the word "transition" is so popular in such reports" (Water, 2019). Since the early stages of the Thein Sein presidency, international actors materialized at warp speed in Myanmar, following different but similar rationales of action (Steinberg, 2018). Expressing good will and altruism towards the development of the country, and international actors pledged to support nation-building agendas (framed around the democratization concept) and economic growth. Education was a sector of intervention for most of them¹⁶³; higher education was less heavily explored than other educational sectors, but was nevertheless deeply impacted. In this section, I elaborate on the rationales guiding international actors' actions in this sector and their impact on the reform process to raise three key analytical considerations: 1) economic rationales and policy borrowing practices took precedence

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¹⁶³ As ironically pointed out by Water: "as the Myanmar NGO grant writer emphasized to me, this system of RFPs reflects the foreign policy interests of the donors. Here is how he summarized the donors. Americans want American-style elections complete with dye to make fingers purple, Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar, and the control of extremist violence. The UK likes good governance and dislikes military dictatorship. Canadians and Swiss like federalism. And, of course, China equals dams and infrastructure benefiting Chinese companies. Norwegians like good governance, too, and also the environment and energy. The EU likes democracy and prosperity. And finally everyone likes peace, the empowerment of women, saving the environment and education. All want to give their own businesses access to new markets—doing good while making money." (Water, 2019)

over the higher education for a "just society" discourse that could have acknowledged the broader societal benefits of higher education beyond purely economic and status concerns; 2) there was an asymmetry of power in interactions between Myanmar policy makers and institutions and international actors that kept Myanmar actors in a subaltern position; 3) interactions with international actors led to the rise of internationalization discourses and associated practices in the domestic higher education sector, goals that were hard for the country's institutions and educational staff to implement coherently. These arguments are key to understanding how "international actors" managed to act as one of the driving forces of the reform process.

As discussed in Chapter III, the engagement of most of the Western higher education institutions and aid agencies in higher education was fueled by market-driven structural pressures and neoliberal policies. Beginning with the CESR process, development partners pushed for the idea that higher education quality depends on more effectively meeting the needs of the economy and labor market to build a "knowledge economy society". This idea met the expectations articulated by Myanmar government officials for international collaboration based on a human capital logic. At the policymaker level, internationalization was viewed as supporting increased marketisation, competition and deregulation and these were in turn viewed as positive forces for higher education reform. Moreover, as I argue in the next section, a significant push toward ASEAN regional integration lead policymakers to fast-forward activities with the potential to standardize pedagogical and administrative language, rendering it more uniform.

Especially in the early stages of the reform process, social justice demands were brought to the table but, ultimately, they were not granted enough space in discussion and therefore ended up being sidelined (although they did remain a topic of discussion at a few international conference and workshops). I argue that three interconnected issues hampered social justice policies. First, most of the international actors did not have a deep, historically rooted knowledge of the country's complex landscape. A vast majority of the Western experts that secured a seat at the table in reform processes were newcomers to the country who did not have first-hand experience of university life, especially in the remote areas that were not easily accessible. Second, as mentioned by Sarah-Marleen Dannenberg and Susanne Preuschoff (2021), most of the Myanmar universities and colleges perceived as "peripheral" were overlooked by internationals interested in cooperation, as cooperative projects were focused particularly on the university landscape in Yangon and Mandalay. Institutions in the conflicted-area had fewer opportunities to bring up their specific issues in international contexts not supporting debate around a possible federal system of higher education. Lastly, as mentioned in the final section, the higher education sector in Myanmar has been largely neglected by international

development agencies and NGOs who could have brought different concerns to the conversation. Most of the Western experts involved in higher education consultancy came from an academic or university management background, and this naturally lead to conversations focused on policy borrowing and the exportation of best practices. Experts from a different background might potentially have fostered a different debate focused on human rights issues, equity, and social justice.

My second argument is that the power structure characterizing interactions in the Myanmarinternational actors' arena was asymmetrical. According to the analyses carried out in the TOOLKIT project, "higher education institutions have started to participate as partners in different international projects. However, many of these projects are delivered with little or no involvement of the Myanmar partners in design, management, monitoring or evaluation. This results in a lack of coordination between projects working in related fields, over-commitment of the few senior staff with English-language and project management skills, and in some cases unsatisfactory outcomes with little to show for the investment" (TOOLKIT 2020, p. 21). When President Thein Sein made higher education a sector of intervention for international partners, he and his government expected technical and financial support; little effort was put into coordinating and giving a direction to projects (due in part to the relative inexperience of MoE officers). Therefore, the field of action that ended up being created was marked by a power-setting agenda in the hands of international actors (with some limitations and corrective actions such as EPIC, as described in Chapter III), duplication and, ultimately, inefficiency¹⁶⁴. The NLD government tried to change the power structure of international higher education support by relocating these collaborations under the umbrella of the Rectors' Committee, a body made up of more experienced and skilled officers and policy makers. This move was in line with a general shift that Aung San Suu Kyi had tried to bring about in international engagement in the country overall. In fact, soon after her election, she met with major global agencies to inform them that the agenda for international assistance would be set by the government, not by the agencies. In early 2020, I interviewed a senior UY officer of the International Cooperation Office who, after noting that most of the university's interactions with the external word were asymmetrical, expressed his hope for the future in this tone:

> "Mutual recognition, Mutual Respect and Mutual relationship based on Mutual trust are essential for creating Mutual International Relation

¹⁶⁴ Similar considerations are posed by Holliday and Zaw Htet, 2017 considering the international engagement sector as a whole.

networks among the partners that lead to Fairness and Equity of sharing benefits for partner countries like Myanmar" (from an interview with P7)

My third consideration is a direct outcome of the combination of the first two: new global pressures reached Myanmar, and these pressures were coupled with the idea that national institutions needed to "step up" to embrace these global trends so as to gain international status. In Chapter I, I mentioned that the most comprehensive definition of internationalization is: "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels" (Knight, 2008, p.21). Due to the country's isolationist foreign policies, internationalization developed in Myanmar starting in the Then Sein era. The TOOLKIT project report suggests that Myanmar institutions are currently convinced that enhancing their international outlook is an issue of utmost importance. However, this awareness is not always accompanied by either an internationalization strategy or resources. Most of the universities frame internationalization as the implementation of the following measures: setting up an International Relations Office; enhancing international collaboration by revising existing and signing new MoUs; welcoming the advice of international experts; building capacity for both teachers and staff; and attracting scholarships, stipends and awards both locally and internationally. In my interviews, most of the Burmese academics involved in internationalization matters declared that, in the last few years, they had gained a deeper understanding of the different aspects of making their universities more international, thanks in part to trainings provided by international actors. At the same time, Myanmar academia struggled to implement policies of this kind that put enormous pressure on a number of academics, especially the ones being asked to attend the international trainings or those put in charge of forming the international relations office. In fact, management roles such as international relation offices were performed at an institutional and departmental level by teaching staff who were already severely overextended due to a workload involving extensive teaching hours and management duties (without any additional income for performing different roles). Moreover, despite the increase in financial resources allocated to higher education in Myanmar (see Introduction), these funds are still insufficient and, given the lack of financial autonomy, universities are not able to make use of sources of revenue other than state-provided funds. This lack of financial support prevented Myanmar universities from being able to effectively implement the actions planned at trainings and with international partners, thereby creating a shared sense of frustration stemming from their feeling the pressure to change but not having the structure to implement such change.

Given the scope of my work, one last aspect worth mentioning is that international actors interacted with multiple actors in Myanmar academia, but not with students or their organizations. During my years of participant observation, I witnessed that most dialogues involving international actors had as their interlocutors on the other side of table only governmental officers and academic staff, not students. Considering the points made in the previous chapter, I argue that this situation prevented international actors from perceiving some of the shortcoming of their work and how a different, more inclusive approach could have been taken to re-shape Myanmar's academia.

5.3 The EU export model, between integration and collaboration

In the first two sections I have approached the microcosmos of the who, why and how of international engagement in the higher education sector from a bird's eye view. In this section, I delve more deeply into the analysis by focusing on a specific actor: the EU.

According to Jörn Dosch and Jatswan S. Sidhu (2015), in the period from 1988 until early 2011, the EU's policy towards Myanmar frequently fluctuated between a "carrot" and a "stick" approach. In April 2012, the EU suspended its restrictions, except for the arms embargo, and began high-level contacts. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission marked a new beginning in bilateral relations in April 2012. An EU Office in Yangon was opened, and as of September 2013 the EU had a full-fledged delegation in Yangon. The EU's development assistance portfolio was set at over €200 million in separate programs running from 2016 until 2020. The EU's re-engagement with Myanmar included the education sector as well. In this field, EU support materialized in the implementation of various projects: the above-mentioned EU-SHARE¹⁶⁵ and 56 projects under the Erasmus+ program. The latter included 25 Key Action 1 "International Credit Mobility" projects, 15 Key Action 2 "CBHE" projects, 7 Capacity Building for youth in ACP countries, Latin America and Asia, 1 Strategic Partnerships for

¹⁶⁵ Since 2016, in Myanmar, EU-SHARE carried out the following activities:

^{- 2016:} two workshops on quality assurance matters;

^{- 2017:} SHARE National Workshop on the impact of Qualifications Frameworks and Regional Quality Assurance Standards Higher Education in Myanmar;

^{- 2018: 6}th SHARE Credit Transfer System Capacity-Building Workshop in Yangon. The workshop in Yangon, Myanmar, provided support and training on the use of the SHARE online Platform and the SHARE Mobility Tools, and the implementation of the CTS for the Myanmar's Higher Education institutions participating in the SHARE mobility scheme;

^{- 2020:} National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) Development in Myanmar;

⁻ staff and student mobility flow involving UY, UM, YUEco and Myanmar Maritime University.

youth and 8 Erasmus Mundus¹⁶⁶. Why did the EU engage in the Myanmar higher education sector? And why did it do so through these frameworks of action?

The promising role that education can play in international relations has become increasingly evident to European Union policy-makers, especially in defining priorities and actions to navigate EU external relations. As the manifesto of this new policy path, the Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy states that "the EU will lead by example on global governance. But it cannot deliver alone. It will act as an agenda-shaper, a connector, coordinator, and facilitator within a networked web of players. It will partner with states and organizations, but also with the private sector and civil society." (European External Action Service, 2017). The EU is therefore highly determined to become an attractive partner worldwide and it is pursuing different avenues to achieve this goal. According to this strategic plan, both the EU programs Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 – the EU-funded programs for education, training, youth and sport and the EU framework program for research and innovation, respectively – are defined as key tools of European public diplomacy. To a certain extent, this approach resembles "soft power" as conceptualized by Joseph Nye (2004), that is, the ability to achieve a specific political aim not through coercion but through the use of attraction. Hence, "soft power" can influence international relations and persuade people of the attractiveness of a specific political offer. In this sense, transforming Erasmus+ and Horizon into worldwide brands of excellence in the fields of education and research represents a valuable new source of "soft power" for the EU.

A large part of the EU's soft power in higher education is linked to "the Bologna process". The Bologna process started in 1999 as an internal process involving EU countries in establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)¹⁶⁷. At the Bergen conference in 2005, the Bologna minister agreed to open the EHEA "to other parts of the world" with the support of reforms in neighboring regions. According to Franz Kok (2020), the states in post-war and break-away situations (such as the Western Balkan, Caucasus, and Central Asia) were open to adopting Bologna process instruments in order to enable them to develop independent national strategies in higher education outside the dominance of former big players such as Russia, and China with its infrastructure-based approach. Therefore, the EU's Bologna process became a success stories (in these regions) and has been portrayed as a model for other regional actors on how to "do" regional higher education cooperation (Zmas, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Source: https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2014-2020/erasmus_en

¹⁶⁷ The main goals of EHEA were increased intra-regional mobility (student and faculty), degree recognition, and quality assurance.

The Bologna minister and European Commission have increasingly identified the ASEAN region as the new frontier for exporting the Bologna process to "teach" them how to be a "region". As Myanmar is the new kid on the regional block, supporting the country's higher education system is a way to support the ASEAN project of integration which, in turn, supports the EU's standing as an international actor. If we take a look at the complete list of EU funded project in the country, regardless of their specific focus, we see that they all focus intensely on "integration". Integration is expressed in the following activities (comprising the bulk of the activities financed by the EU in Myanmar): supporting the mobility of students by implementing a credit transfer system to facilitate the comparability and compatibility of study programs; developing qualification frameworks to support graduate employability (not only in the country, but in the region); developing quality assurance systems to monitor and evaluate institutions (and ensure their comparability in international rankings); engaging in policy dialogue to share best practices. In the next section, I focus on the quality assurance case to draw a few conclusions.

5.4 "One decade of attemps" and training

In this section, I discuss what Tin Naing Win, Thu Zar Thant, and Hlaing Hlaing Swe (2021) have described as a "decade of attempts" to set up Quality Assurance Mechanisms at the UM:

"Under the two democratic governments, the UM was able to seize opportunities for the internationalization of the institution between 2011 and 2020 by collaborating with many international development partners and projects. It could craft certain advancements in terms of quality assurance, and identify the problems, challenges and gaps that have hindered all-round developments. [...] Within a decade of transitioning period, there were 58 major activities associated with quality assurance and the UM had been able to move forward a little, even though the progress was slow. It can be said that the UM could execute nearly six QA or QA-related activities per year or one every two months. Nevertheless, it still needs to speed up its attempts to fit the purposes and to meet its objectives and core values. [...] Then, it must strive to become a fully autonomous university. While keeping the existing achievements and performance results, shaping future development's

strategic plans for all aspects with inclusiveness and individual and collective leaderships will allow the UM to fulfil its vision before or after its Centennial. In short, "the focus is not about accredited or not accredited but how the UM implements the quality assurance successfully" (Ibid., p. 70).

Against the backdrop of what can be considered a success story (see also Figure 16 for an overview of the quality assurance structure that was created and implemented), I pose three interrelated arguments regarding the role of international actors. First, international actors and their projects are described as the driving force for developing quality assurance (at both national and institutional levels). This is the full list of the actors who supported this goal and provided trainings: "SHARE, CHINLONE, Erasmus+, Central European University (CEU) Collaboration, and Australian Aids, and having contacts with international development partners like ADB, DAAD, EU, AQAN, ASEAN-QA, AUN, ENQA, APQN, HRK German Rectors' Conference, SEAMEO RTHED, EUA, Nuffic, British Council, Campus France, Potsdam University, UNIBO, Uppasala University, University of Granada, The Coimbra Group, CEU, and other HEIs from Southeast Asia" (Ibid.).

This impressively long list leads to my second argument: international actors' efforts overlapped in specific fields and they competed to present their "best practices". In the 2012-2021 timeframe, Tin Naing Win, Thu Zar Thant, and Hlaing Hlaing Swe show that UM staff had access to an average of 10 intense workshops a year 168 on quality assurance matters alone, organized by the various partners. These workshops inevitably presented different models (since the international partners were from different regions of the world, applying different logics to these actions), a fact that did not foster effective decision making or consolidation in the creation of a single system suited to the UM. Moreover, being accessible only to staff with good English skills, and representing only one sector of intervention among others (a similar number of workshops were also organized on international relations and curricula development, for example), these workshops were a time-consuming commitment for a number of UM staff and professors. Given the lack of coordination characterizing their actions, international partners created a system in which Burmese staff – already fully booked with teaching responsibilities – were saddled with a number of additional duties to carry out to learn ever-new "best practices". Ultimately, UM staff was kept in the position of being "always a student, never a master", thereby perpetuating the uneven power relations between the UM as an institution and international partners.

¹⁶⁸ Considering only the ones held in the country and not the numerous study trips abroad also made available to staff.



Figure 16. Quality Assurance organization at the UM (Source: Tin Naing Win, Thu Zar Thant, and Hlaing Hlaing Swe-2021)

The aim of this chapter was to examine international actors' discourses around higher education in the transitional period and the impact of these discourses. Expressing good will and altruism towards the development of the country, international actors pledged to support nation-building agendas (framed around the democratization concept) and economic growth. Education was a sector of intervention for most of them and, while higher education was a less central focus than other educational sectors, it was nevertheless deeply impacted. International actors were one of the main forces behind the Myanmar reform process. In fact, on one side, they fueled the reform of marketdriven structural pressures and neoliberal policies coupled with a significant push toward ASEAN regional integration. This created the side effect that, even though social justice demands were brought to the table in the early stages of the reform process, ultimately such demands they were not granted sufficient space in discussion and therefore ended up being side-lined (although they did remain a topic of discussion at a few international conference and workshops). On the other side, international actors established and maintained an asymmetry of power that had the side effect of keeping Burmese university staff members in the position of being "always a student, never a master". In the conclusion, I delved more deeply into these considerations while also identifying some policy suggestions for international actors' future engagement in the country.

CONCLUSION

- Main findings

My study was moulded around three RQs sequenced in a way that progressively builds towards answering the main research question: how did state authority, student politics and international actors cooperate and compete to define higher education reform in Myanmar's "period of transition" and with what impacts? In this section, I bring together the main findings of mine that respond to each of the RQs. My starting point was acknowledging and debating the historical roots of this interplay. Since its establishment, the higher education system in Myanmar has undergone a series of reforms and policy changes during each of the main regimes (colonial, post-independence democratic government, and the long five-decade military era). In the colonial period, higher education was a restricted elitist space but one in which students found the power to transform the nation. Until Ne Win's coup d'état, both student politics and international actors played a significant role in shaping higher education policies in Myanmar. Under the military regimes, in contrast, higher education was a more easily accessible sector but one deprived of any possible transformative impact (especially the potential impact exerted by both student politics and international actors) not in line with regime policies. All aspects of university life (organizational, academic, staffing, financial) were decided by the state, and governmental involvement in the daily affairs of universities was the norm. Student organizations proved remarkably resilient in these periods, but the firm grip of the state prevented their actions from having a positive impact on the education system. It is clear that, when the "period of transition" started, the higher education system in Myanmar had been under the dominant influence of a single influential actor: the state. Did higher education transition from this state monopoly in the "period of transition? How so?

(RQ1) What was the role assigned to higher education in the state's vision? Dividing the "transitional" decade into the 5 years of Thein Sein government and 5 years of NLD government, is it possible to identify discontinuities and continuities in their actions around higher education?

My analysis as to how state authority actions shaped higher education in the "period of transition" leads to three main findings. The first is that state authority was not the main driving force behind higher education reform; rather, the international actors were equally influential. From the onset of his presidency, President Their Sein opened up education as a space for reform requiring the intervention of a large number of stakeholders (both local and international). Reversing the state

authority's vision of Myanmar higher education for the first time since the 1960's, he asserted the success of universities as a key element in the long-term drive to move the country forward, regain the respect of the international community, and establish a credible place in the ASEAN region. International actors began playing a role in influencing the organization and coordination of the higher education system and its institutions. The dynamics of the Myanmar higher education context as underlined in my work suggest that the impact of global reform trends in higher education (such as competitiveness, equity, responsiveness, efficiency) were among the key forces that influenced and shaped higher education sector reforms.

My second finding is that the President Their Sein government, through its actions, advanced a vision of higher education that was more transformative for society than the one advanced by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD era. Considering the premises of the NLD 2015 and 2020 election campaigns, Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party might well have been expected to make a decisive intervention in reforming higher education. The reality was very different, however: not only did the NLD function less as a genuine opposition's party and more as a bystander during the drafting of the NEL, but also the trajectory of the education reform did not take any significant turn during the entire NLD term. Aung San Suu Kyi advanced an elitist and top-down idea of higher education in which universities were linked to the production and allocation of social positions and, ultimately, the reproduction of the country's elite. Choosing to focus on a single university as a centre of excellence and not the wider issues of the system, she gave state authority the mission of working to educate small elite of "learned men" in the same manner as colonial times. This approach to higher education can be seen as bound to a conservative idea of state identity-construction. Regardless of its actual academic or research performance, the UY was performed as a "flagship university" and used as a rhetorical expedient to showcase ideas of national unity, stability and capability enhancing the idea of a nation that is moving forward, towards a better future. The UY embodied the never-fulfilled but alwayspresent idea of a better future or better society and this idea was politically deployed to gain consensus. Ultimately, Aung San Suu Kyi's approach to universities is not very dissimilar from Harcourt Butler's "Imperial Idea" that sought to pander to nationalism, permitting the slogan "Burma for the Burmans" while also asserting the paramount importance of the system's connection to the British empire. In a similar fashion, Aung San Suu Kyi showcased an idea of immediate change and progress in higher education but, at the same time, deliberately worked to make sure that actual change was controlled and directed at selected institutions governed by her cabinet.

My third finding has to do with the very nature of the higher reform process, a process that arguably reflects larger processes of social and political change in the "period of transition". The NEL and

NESP put the issue of governance and management at the heart of the reform in the hope that changing the governance system would lead to better-quality education. In other words, higher education reform took the form of a quest to make a few carefully chosen and trusted universities autonomous from day-to-day governmental interference. Institutional (organizational, academic, staffing, financial) autonomy was advanced in the Myanmar context as a politically defined matter and subject to frequent negotiation; or, to phrase it differently, this was a "conditional" autonomy. On one side, institutions and academic staff were asked to act more decisively and strategically in the face of new complexities and the demands of a knowledge economy. At the same time, however, there continued to be maintained a strong relationship between the political system and higher education institutions and the process of change was closely monitored even in the few elite universities selected for reform. As the answer to the next research question also demonstrates, NLD state authority actions were directed in a more top-down and carefully planned manner than the actions of the more reformist UPSD government.

(RQ2) How did student politics frame their discourses and grievances around higher education? Were they able to impact the higher education discourses and reforms as put forward by the state authority?

My analysis as to how student politics actions shaped higher education in the "period of transition" generates two main findings. The first finding points to the nature of student organizations in the "period of transition". From 2011 until 2106, the field of student political action remained quite closely coordinated, with two main actors (ABFSU and USU) succeeding in holding and aggregate student power in a nation-wide mobilization. Student grievances were concentrated around higher education reform and specifically the fact that proposed reforms seemed to lack the right vision for the better, more just society students were hoping for. Self-determination, inclusion, participation and freedom were the main student claims underlying the mobilization, claims that did not end up entering into the policy cycle. The mobilization was not able to deeply influence the NEL policy cycle, but students leaders were nonetheless able to assert their role as actors with agency in relation to educational issues. The outcomes of the mobilization against the NEL and NLD election represented a watershed moment and exacerbated the already marked divergences among Myanmar student movements. After the protest, ABSFU with its more extensive history of political opposition began to undergo a radicalization process. Conversely, USU decided to avoid organizing acts of radical contentious politics against the state authority in favor of expanding its on-campus activities. It pursued these latter activities by following a new operational trajectory focused on debating institutional changes with university leaders, e.g. the aim of achieving a higher degree of involvement in learning processes and more specifically learning activities in the classroom, curriculum relevance, and extra-curricular activity design. At the end of the "period of transition", the students' field of action was no longer coordinated and had instead become fragmented. Student organizations thus had less opportunity for wide mobilization and were more focused on micro-episodes of contention. This shift was also driven by the actions of the NLD government.

My second finding is the argument that the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD government enacted a very carefully crafted policy to deter possible mass, collective actions of radical contention through a "divide et impera" policy (creating new student unions to weaken existing ones, especially historical ones such as ABSFU) and policing the boundaries of "student" identity by excluding graduated students (who had historically been part of the country's student movements). Nevertheless, throughout the entire "period of transition", it continued to be student organizations who embraced a more progressive and less neo-liberal idea of higher education and pushed for more "just" higher education with the potential to improve society. A new generation of activists was heading in multiple different directions, focused on endogenous educational issues and the well-being of students on campus without linking their claims to broader national political demands. Tellingly, students refrained from demonstrating on exogenous issues related to the political and socioeconomic conditions of the country.

Ultimately, it can be argued that the focus of 2011-2016 student politics was the democratic potential of higher education institutions in relation to wider society, whereas the focus of student activism and movements under the NLD government emphasized the democratization of specific higher education institutions and day-to-day practices in education. The 2021 military takeover changed the political opportunity structure once again, leading student organizations to take a different stand in the new national arena as I discuss in the next section.

(RQ3) Why did international actors engage with Myanmar higher education reform? What idea(s) of and vision(s) for higher education were introduced by international actors?

There are three findings that are key to understanding why and how "international actors" managed to act as one of the driving forces of the reform process. The first is that the interests of the state authority and those of international actors converged. One of the most striking examples of such convergence is President Thein Sein's vision of a national higher education that would meet ASEAN standards and Western international actors interest in having "the new kid on the ASEAN block"

consolidate its regional role. This convergence drove economic rationales and policy borrowing practices to take precedence over the 'higher education for a "just society" discourse that could have pointed to the broader societal benefits of higher education beyond purely economic and status concerns.

My second finding is related to the power asymmetry in interactions with international actors. When President Thein Sein made higher education a sector of intervention for international partners, he and his government expected technical and financial support; little effort was put into coordinating and giving direction to projects. Therefore, the field of action that ended up being created was marked by a power-setting agenda in the hands of international actors, duplication and, ultimately, inefficiency. The NLD government tried to change the power structure of international higher education support by relocating these instances of collaboration under the umbrella of the Rectors' Committee, a body composed of more experienced and skilled officers and policy makers. One can wonder how the second NLD government (the one that would have taken office were it not for the military take-over) would have shaped interactions with the international arena

My third finding is a direct outcome of a combination of the first two: new global pressures reached Myanmar in the "period of transition", and these pressures were coupled with the idea that national institutions needed to "step up" and embrace these global trends so as to gain international status. This set of circumstances gave rise to a system in which Burmese staff – already fully engaged with teaching responsibilities – were saddled with a number of additional duties to carry out in order to learn ever-new "best practices". Ultimately, Burmese university staff members were kept in the position of being "always a student, never a master", thereby perpetuating the uneven power relations between Myanmar institutions and international partners. In my interviews, most of the Burmese academics involved in internationalization matters declared that they had gained a deeper understanding in the last few years of the different aspects involved in making their universities more international. This new sense of empowerment, together with more effective coordination of policy activities by the Rector's Committee, was probably leading to a re-assessment of the power asymmetry characterising higher education engagement in the country, but not necessarily the rationales behind actions.

So far I have answered my three research sub-questions focusing on each side of my analytical triangle. Now I turn to uncovering of overall "logic of the situation". As defined in my theoretical analysis, I embrace the idea that higher education systems can have simultaneously transformative and reproductive affects on the societies of which they are a part, thereby taking a holistic approach to higher education as a political phenomenon governed by ambiguity and contradiction. In keeping

with this critical perspective, I have argued that it was pivotal to focus specifically on the actors' actions that shape higher education so as to bring to light the conflicts that animate universities spaces in a given time and geographical space. The past, present and future of Myanmar higher education can be read thought the analytical lens of the interplay between state authority, student politics and international actors.

What does this interplay lens reveal if we consider Myanmar's "period of transition"? I argue that it shows that tangible pushes for progressive social change coexisted with authoritarian currents and the reinforcement of the societal position of dominant elites. The Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD government displayed a higher degree of ambiguity compared to the President Thein Sein administration, thus confirming her nature as a "hybrid politician" capable of showcasing (at the international and national levels) progressive politics even while, in reality, advancing measures characterized by a post-colonial elitist outlook. The ambiguity of state authority actions were repeatedly challenged by student politics; the actor of student politics proved less impactful in this period than the other two I have considered, but it was important nevertheless. Through my analysis, I have demolished the myth of increasing political apathy on the part of the young generation of Burmese students as found in the scholarly literature. I have gathered compelling evidence that, although students in this period have been less engaged in historical, radical models of contentious politics, they are in fact concerned about political issues and their political engagement in higher education is increasing. Their political actions have become more individualized, ad-hoc, institution and issue-specific, however, and less linked to the traditional societal cleavages of contentious politics. Ultimately, it was the convergence of interests between international actors and state authority that served as the force driving higher education reform towards a neo-liberal model of governance and autonomy. Since the road towards higher education autonomy is long and the process was interrupted by the military takeover, it is not possible to fully identify its outcomes. At the same time, however, it is possible to say that the "period of transition" – albeit permeated by numerous conflicts, forms of ambiguity and contradictions – was beginning to shift higher education outside of complete state control and into an arena that, in time (probably a matter of decades), could lead to positive transformative change. As I underline in the next section, this trend has already been inverted by the military takeover.

One last point needs to be raised to underline some limitations of my work. This dissertation has attempted to provide a broader view of higher education sector reforms and the resultant system and institutional changes in the Myanmar context. The discussion of trends and the impacts of the reforms is exclusively focused on the public higher education system and largely centered on system-level

policy analysis rather than the institutional level. Moreover, little discussion is included about the impact of reforms in the country's ethnic minority areas; such areas need to be studied in their specific context to avoid detrimental generalizations. Despite these limitations, the dissertation fulfils the aim of providing a rich foundation of knowledge about higher education reforms and their impacts in the Myanmar socio-political context.

-Higher education after the 2021 coup d'état: preliminary considerations

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar experienced its third coup d'état. As mentioned in the introduction, this coup surprised even the most seasoned Burma Watchers and indeed they are struggling to formulate coherent explanations, assessments of the current situation or even possible scenarios for the future. At the time of writing, it is still difficult to understand how this return to authoritarian forces is putting an end to the country's post-2011 opening towards the outside and associated decade of economic and social reforms (mostly incomplete and still with a long way to go, as is the case for higher education). My aim is to advance just a few considerations about what is happening in the higher education sector, consideration that might be useful for conducting further studies and drafting policy recommendations for the international donor community. As I have done throughout my work, I have organized my data and thoughts into the three categories of state authority, student politics and international actors.

When the coup d'état occurred, Myanmar universities were de facto closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The State Administration Council (SAC) kept higher education institutions closed throughout 2021, only allowing students in their final classes to take examinations (thus ensuring that students do not remain in the system for too long and potentially create problems). The intake of new students has been suspended: students who have passed the matriculation exams in 2020 are still waiting to enrol, and no matriculation exam was held in 2021. In an online interview in December 2021, DHE officials stated that regular classes might possibly be held starting in June 2022, but not for first-year students who would expert to enrol in December 2022. The DHE has declared that there are several pathways still open to new students: some universities focused on medicine and the computer sciences are authorized to carry out autonomous selection processes, and a few universities closely tied to neighbouring countries are helping students to find alternative routes for enrolment (for example, the Mandalay Institute of Information Technology has an agreement with the Indian government and it is encouraging students to apply to go study in India). Meanwhile, higher education

institutions are de facto closed to most of the student population. Moreover, the SAC is changing higher education governance by bringing back old policies that had been transformed in the transitional period. First, higher education institutions have been re-separated into different line-ministries. In June 2021, the new Ministry of Science and Technology was put in charge of technical (33) and computer universities (27) (a total of 60 institutions are under the umbrella of this new ministry), while the MoE is still in charge of the 49 universities of Arts and Science plus an additional 25 institution (a total of 74 institution are under the MoE). Second, the NEPC has been abolished and the NCC (National Curricula Committee) has been established as the sole coordination body, its main duty being that of supervising university curricula. This could be seen as a step back from the progress made in the last decade in terms of academic autonomy. Lastly, the DHE declares that: "the Roadmap of the new NESP 2021-2030 is still there. Nothing has changed for 2021-2030. The education policies are not so much changed at the moment". At the same time, however, no real action is underway to implement any NESP policies; rather, all the efforts of state authority seem to be concentrated once again on fragmenting the higher education system.

Higher education staff has taken a strong stand against the actions of the Tatmadaw and SAC. Multiple sources point out that between the 50% and the 35% of the country's teachers have abandoned their duties and given up their jobs to join the CDM¹⁶⁹. Collecting the narratives of a few professors who have decided to leave their positions, I found similar perceptions. First, "the Tatmadaw cannot be trusted when comes to education, this is a proven fact in the history of our country". A SAC-run education system is not credible in the eyes of most university staff. Second, the higher education reform was opening up welcome spaces for debate and autonomy that academics are not willing to lose: "the progress was slow, but it was there, [and] now it is all lost... the Tatmadaw will recreate the old ways, an outdated system". Losing one's job as a university professor comes at great personal cost, especially if we consider that 80% of this staff is female. Even if the academic position is not well paid, it comes with financial security (and often housing) that is hard for women in Myanmar to acquire in other ways. A former department head in one of the most prestigious universities in Yangon stated in an online interview: "my university was providing me a house in Yangon, now I don't have a salary and I don't have a house. I'm not married. It will be very hard for me in the future to make a living, but I couldn't bear to teach under the military. Not after the last ten years of progress and the activities that we have done, including in international projects". This last consideration brings us to the third common point that surfaced in the narratives

¹⁶⁹ Sources at the DHE stated that they have started to hire student as tutors to replace missing professors.

I collected: the shared fear that the SAC will once again isolate the country from the outside world, starting by cutting all academic ties with international partners. Ultimately, the university staff that joined the CDM believes that losing their jobs was the only way to fight for a functioning higher education system, since the SAC will have no interest in keeping the university running or in providing quality education based on critical thinking, autonomy and international engagement.

In December 2021, I interviewed at length one professor based in Mandalay who has decided to keep her position. She framed her reasoning in the following way:

"I'm a teacher. If I don't go back to university, what can we do? If we do the revolution it might or might not happen. I'm a teacher, if the students come to university I have to teach. I teach only my subjects, not politics.

I have to do research for the new generation. That's why I decided to go back to university and handle my department. At the time, two professors left the department and everything was locked. Then I took control of the department because otherwise other people would come and just try. I work for my students and my subject, not for them. Students will come back one day.

I'm not a politician but I understand what is fair and what is unfair, only that.

I have to work for the university, the students and the subject. I have to work for this community only, for the country, not for the government".

A conflict has arisen between CMDer staff and the ones who have decided to stay in their positions. It is conflict based on different perceptions of what constitutes the most honourable and suitable thing to do for Myanmar's future and the current students. Regardless of the outcomes of the next months' struggles, it is clear that the bond and relationship of trust between and among students, teachers and families has once again been broken.

To turn to student politics, a new phase of mobilization has begun: this is a complex mobilization phase that, against all odds, has already continued for more than a year and is bringing new regional alliances and repertoires of contention into the national debate, thanks in part to the support of other regional social movements, the so-called "Milk Tea Alliance" Without fully analysing the actors,

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¹⁷⁰ The Milk Tea Alliance is an online democratic solidarity movement connected to Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan and Myanmar that pushes back against Chinese domination in the region. It aligns itself with other global anti

grievances and actions of this mobilization (which probably represents the country's first transnational cultural revolution) in these few pages, I offer an insight of what this mobilization is planning in relation to higher education, to support the argument that these "protests have accomplished what has been elusive to prior generations of anti-regime movements and uprisings. They have severed the Bamar Buddhist nationalist narrative that has gripped state society relations and the military's ideological control over the political landscape, substituting for it an inclusive democratic ideology" (Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Sue Ye Lin, 2021). Knowing that "we have nothing to lose but our chains", one of the Marxist expressions popularized by groups such as the University of Yangon Student Union, student organization are boycotting and fighting the current SAC control of education. At the same time, however, they are also imagining a new education system. As Rosalie Metro (2021) argues, there are a number of emerging alternatives to "military slave education" (another historically rooted motto), all based on principles of federalism and selfdetermination. So, what does an independent and federal university mean to students? What are their demands for the government and politicians? Most importantly, what is their alternative education model like? One proposed model is embodied by Virtual Federal University (VFU), led in part by members of the University of Yangon Student Union. Three principles underpin VFU: 1) to experiment with a learning and teaching model that will facilitate the federal education system; 2) to provide free education; and 3) to make students' voices and demands central to the operation of the university. The VFU seams to interpret federalism in terms of everyday civic actions, including students' interactions with each other, educators' views of their students, and the role of classes in promoting self-esteem, dignity, and a sense of belonging to a community. Experiments such as the VFU aim to foster federal conversations and practices, and to build a federal democratic country from the bottom up. This process would entail bridging the differences among organizations and individuals from different backgrounds¹⁷¹ and bringing back into the conversation wider political issues that were side lined by student unions under the NLD government.

The last significant question is: what happened to the international actors in the higher education sector? At the time of writing, support for Myanmar higher education reform has been suspended as

authoritarian/pro-democracy movements such as various country-based Spring Revolutions. Protesters in Thailand and Myanmar have adopted the protest salute from the fictional Hunger Games movie series as a sign of resistance by people facing injustice everywhere.

¹⁷¹ One fact is particularly interesting in relation to this issue: in March 2021, various universities in Mandalay issued statements apologizing to Rohingyas and other minorities for having failed in the past to speak out on their behalf over human rights violations. As already mentioned, the Rohingyas crisis was not one of the grievances central to student politics during the transitional period. It is now part of the debate, however, and this overall debate is gaining new language linked to human rights and federalism.

the statements issued by the World Bank, Asia Development Band, EU¹⁷² and other main donors specify that no more funds are scheduled to be transferred to the government.

Against this backdrop, it is clear that, with the 2021 military take-over, the interplay between state authority, student politics and international donors in the higher education system is undergoing further shifts. Higher education has been replaced under the dominant influence of a single influential actor: the state. All former spaces of autonomy are being progressivity closed to the point that even the "physical" autonomy of universities is in jeopardy, with the military junta reestablishing tight control over campus spaces (some of my interviews have reported an increasing presence of military personale on universities grounds). The Myanmar higher education system seems to be "transitioning back" to the pre-2011 era. In spite of this rather dismal outlook, I hope that international actors will soon re-engage with the higher education sector, as it cannot be left in the hands of the military state alone. Therefore, I offer a few policy suggestions aimed at fostering a more careful logic of intervention, one that benefits from lessons learned in terms of the shortcomings of our previous actions (As I myself have been of the international actors, the next section is also a self-reflection on my work) in the "period of transition".

- Policy suggestions

My PhD work has taken me on an enlightening and complex journey during the course of which I have engaged with multiple disciplines and conceptual frameworks, and learned about higher education through different perspectives that have served to deepen my understanding and widen my views. I had the privilege to discuss the Myanmar reform process with different actors and they have given me a complex picture of the logic of the situation (not always easy to fit into clear-cut analytical frameworks) that I tried to convey in this dissertation. Thanks to these different voices, I have also called into question my personal role as an international actor and my arena of action. At the time of writing, most of the country's higher education institutions are shut down, the reform process is on hold and the political future of the country is unknown. Most of the international actors have left the country or are taking a "wait and see" stance. The recommendations and suggestions outlined below, drawn from the main findings of this study, are formulated for use when these international actors reengage with the Myanmar higher education sector. Especially in the aftermath of recent political events, it is pivotal that international actors consider diversified and alternative routes of intervention

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¹⁷² The full statement is available at: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6287-2021-INIT/en/pdf

in the country's higher education sector. I thus offer a few main policy suggestions in the spirit of potentially contributing to these actions, with the understanding that they will depend on the changing political contexts and status of individual higher education institutions.

As discussed in Chapter I, it has been proven that higher education can foster social transformation and self-determination; alternately, it can entrench the long-term domination of elites, fuel the grievances of excluded communities, and suppress critical thinking and the growth of national intellectual capital (among youth). Looking at the history of higher education in Myanmar it is possible to find examples of both. Taking for granted that the international community is interested in supporting higher education reforms that would lead to positive social transformations, considering the specific context of Myanmar I argue that, in the future, a more careful approach should be taken in relation to two aspects: the local arena of actors with whom interactions occur and the rationale behind interactions. Regarding the first aspect, international actors need to better coordinate their actions, take more time in the planning stage and in translating policies in the local context, and engage with the entire arena of local actors. Myanmar higher education institutions located outside the main urban centres, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, were overlooked as interlocutors during the "period of transition". Their involvement could have contributed to peacebuilding and equity agendas and spread the benefits of a better higher education system more evenly across Myanmar. At the same time, international actors' actions didn't reach the student population directly and to acknowledge their agency in setting educational agendas. Most of the international actors did not touch on topics such as student engagement, activism and representation, as these topics were defined as too sensitive. This had the effect of side lining one of the country's main contentious actor, one that was actually pushing for a more inclusive agenda in higher education. Student movements, like other social movements, undergo periods of radical mobilization and demobilisation but this does not mean that they become or will become less relevant. New higher education agendas should address past grievances, bringing to the discussion table all national and international actors. During the transitional era, debates about higher education reform seemed to lack any serious reflection on the historical influence of that system, specifically the fact that, even when it was functioning "at its best", it was generating forms of social and educational discrimination. A deeper understanding of historically situated institutional and societal contexts and cultural and political enablers and barriers will enable more equitable international partnerships that respond to societal needs, including those of post-conflict reconstruction.

Considering the second aspect, the rationale behind interventions, during the transitional period, there was little effort to leverage international collaboration in higher education for self-determination and

peacebuilding purposes and the sustainable growth of the human capital of the country not continuously dependent on foreign aid and expertise. Considering higher education solely in terms of "knowledge economy" and policy-borrowing for regional and global integration is important but it has also curbed a vital opportunity for long-term societal transformation. Indubitably, the Myanmar higher education system needed a better system of governance and management, and the trajectory of granting autonomy to selected institutions was creating a "transition" process that has now been interrupted by the military takeover. At the same time, that trajectory was nonetheless at risk of neglecting various different institutions in rural and ethnic-minority areas, of "leaving them behind" and thereby failing to address one of the main issues of the higher education system, that is, lack of access, limited inclusion and the breakdown of the link between ability and opportunity. Access to higher education should have been put forward as one of the main topics of discussion, not reduced to a "restructuring" of matriculation exams or scholarships offers or better alignment with the job market. Moreover, even though autonomy can be a path of action for creating a better higher education system, it does not "automatically" guarantee the quality of teaching and learning. A path to better governance should have been coupled with concrete support to for research, teaching and skills-development, given that these aspects are vital for quality and quality itself should be pursued by considering all the institutions and fields of study involved, not only certain selected ones.

Ultimately, my policy recommendations as to how we international actors should proceed when a new "policy window for change" eventually opens can be summarized in three main points. First, we should diversify our rationales of action by focusing on the role universities can play in post-conflict Myanmar. Economic and policy-borrowing rationales in education cannot sustain the kind of transformation and support that Myanmar society requires. This narrowly economic approach was a risky path in the "period of transition", it is even more dangerous under the current political conditions. My second recommendation is to engage more effectively with the entire array of institutional and political actors in the national arena, without focusing exclusively on the top of the pyramid and thus, perhaps unwittingly, supporting the perpetuation of inequalities. As my work shows, the social and political arena of actors involved in educational matter in Myanmar is quite wide and complex, and it is important to embrace such complexity so as to avoid involuntarily siding with conservative policies. My third recommendation is to frame our commitments openly and clearly so as to foster mutual understanding in partnerships with Myanmar institutions and, in so doing, to work towards altering the power structure of global academia. These recommendations are outlined here in the hope that we will be able to re-engage with the Myanmar higher education system in the near future.

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