

EMPOWERING HIGHER EDUCATION

A Vision for Myanmar's Universities

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of Myanmar's main development priorities. In recent months three initiatives have opened the debate on the future of higher education in the country.

The Comprehensive Education Sector Review has completed its initial assessment of national education and is now embarking on the detailed review. Two parliamentary committees have begun redrafting the legislation for higher education and planning the revitalisation of Yangon University, and the National Network for Education Reform has carried out its own consultation and is making policy recommendations.

In early May, a delegation representing each of the parliamentary committees undertook a ten-day study tour of British higher education bodies and institutions. The tour culminated in a Policy Dialogue, held in London, which explored the challenges of higher education reform.

This report summarises and reports on the outcomes of ***Empowering Higher Education – A Vision for Myanmar's Universities***, a second Policy Dialogue which took place in Naypyitaw on 29-30 June 2013. This second dialogue brought the initiatives described above together with an aim to deepen the consultation in the spirit of the Naypyitaw Accord.

Empowering Higher Education, organised by the British Council with support from ADB, AusAID and UNESCO, was set out to define a contemporary vision for the sector, based on national priorities.

The outcomes of this meeting will help to inform policy and planning as Myanmar continues to push ahead with its ambitions and efforts in education reform.

Susana Galván
Director Education designate
British Council, Myanmar
July 2013

FOREWORD

It is not often that writing a foreword brings me as much satisfaction as being able to introduce this report, *Empowering Higher Education*. The report reflects on the second of two events in which the British Council has been involved concerning the future of higher education in Myanmar. The first was a study tour of British higher education bodies in the United Kingdom. The second was this historic policy dialogue that took place in Naypyitaw on the 29th June 2013, which I had the very great pleasure to open and attend.

I believe this event was historic because it brought together over two packed days people from a broad cross section of organisations and institutions concerned with higher education, both in Myanmar and internationally, in a spirit of collaboration and earnest endeavour. Everyone involved worked energetically and enthusiastically towards *A Vision for Myanmar's Universities*, the sub-title of the conference and of this report. Often the assumptions and starting points differed but always the discourse was conducted in the spirit of the Naypyitaw Accord. The quality of the debate and the willingness to engage were both impressive and the issues debated were diverse, ranging from legislative frameworks for tertiary education, university governance and management, institutional autonomy and academic freedom to quality in teaching and learning and student success and campus life.

In the vitally important area of higher education, significant strides were made towards achieving national priorities for education reform and engagement with the best and most relevant contemporary international policy and practice. I felt enormously privileged to be part of these deliberations and commend to you this fascinating account of the proceedings.

Dr Jo Beall
Director Education and Society (Executive Board)
British Council



BACKGROUND

The ***Empowering Higher Education – A Vision for Myanmar’s Universities*** Policy Dialogue took place on 29-30 June 2013 at the Thingaha Hotel in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, and was organised by the British Council, in partnership with ADB, AusAID and UNESCO. This event was envisioned as a follow up to the study tour of British Universities undertaken by a delegation of Myanmar government representatives in May 2013, and to the first Myanmar-UK Policy Dialogue held during that visit, in London, in conjunction with the University of London.



To put it into context, the study tour of the UK was held at the direct request of the leader of Burma’s National League of Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in her capacity as chair of two *ad hoc* parliamentary committees for 1) Higher Education Law Reform and 2) the Revitalisation of Yangon University. These committees are formed by members of parliament, ministry officials and university representatives, a number of whom sit on both.

The tour was proposed in February 2013 during a meeting of the law committee at the Burmese parliament in Naypyitaw, to which Kevin Mackenzie, Director British Council Myanmar, and Kenneth King, Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh were invited. Professor King had been commissioned by the British Council to carry out a review of Higher Education in the country and make recommendations to the committee, also at the request of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi¹.

Further tours to Australia, India and Thailand are also envisaged, although by the time of this report being written, none had taken place. The overall aim of the tours is to learn how higher education is governed and implemented in these countries in order to inform the deliberations of each committee.

A report of the May 2013 UK study tour and of the Policy Dialogue in London can be found here:
<http://bit.ly/13pvEcG>

The ***Empowering Higher Education*** Policy Dialogue in Naypyitaw aimed to define a vision for Higher Education by sharing some of the learnings of the UK study tour with other education reform initiatives – especially the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) and the consultation led by the National Network for Education Reform – and with relevant stakeholders involved or with an interest in the reform process.

This was the first Higher Education policy dialogue to take place in Myanmar since the beginning of political transition, and bringing together – also for the first time – a wide range of the stakeholders involved, from University rectors and academics, to student leaders, representatives from different ethnic groups, members of Parliament and from relevant Ministries.

¹ Professor Kenneth King’s full report of his review is included in Appendix C.

THE DIALOGUE²

Attended by 130 invited participants, the **aims** of the Policy Dialogue were:

- ✓ Promote international coordination and cooperation among Higher Education stakeholders
- ✓ Begin to establish an agreed vision for Higher Education in Myanmar
- ✓ Develop an understanding of autonomy in Higher Education Institutions
- ✓ Encourage inclusivity, diversity and equity in Higher Education
- ✓ Find ways and means to achieve a modern, empowered Higher Education Sector and accelerate reform

The **Speakers, Chairs and Panellists** for this Dialogue were:

- Dr Myo Myint, Deputy Union Minister of Education
- Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Chair, Higher Education Law and Yangon University Revitalisation Committees
- Dr Mya Oo, Chair, Women and Children's Affairs Committee, Amyotha Hluttaw
- Dr Chan Nyein, Chair, Education Development Committee, Pyithu Hluttaw
- Dr Mya Oo, Secretary, Higher Education Law Committee, Pyithu Hluttaw
- Dr Maung Maung Wint, Reforms and Evaluation of Development and Progress Committee, Pyithu Hluttaw
- Dr Aung Kyaw Myat, Director General, Ministry of Science and Technology
- Dr Tin Hlaing, Director General (Rtd), Ministry of Science and Technology
- Dr Thein Lwin, National Network for Education Reform
- Prof Tin Htut, Rector, Yezin Agricultural University
- Prof Aung Tun Thet, Senior Advisor, UN Resident Coordinator's Office
- Dr Soe Yin, Secretary, Hluttaw Rights Committee, Pyithu Hluttaw
- HE Bronte Moules, Australian Ambassador to Myanmar
- Dr Chris Spohr, Senior Education Economist, Asian Development Bank
- Prof Martin Hayden, Southern Cross University, Australia (ADB-AusAID TA 8187 Consultant)
- Jillian Ray, First Secretary (Development Assistance), AusAID
- Dr Kaye Schofield, Principal Education Specialist, AusAID
- Dr Jamil Salmi, Special Advisor on Tertiary Education, AusAID
- Sardar Umar Alam, Head of Office, UNESCO
- Dr Libing Wang, Senior Programme Specialist in Higher Education, UNESCO
- Dr Jo Beall, Director Education and Society, British Council
- Prof Kenneth King, Special Advisor, British Council (University of Edinburgh)
- Kevin Mackenzie, Director, British Council Myanmar
- Susana Galván, Director Education designate, British Council Myanmar
- Dr Tharaphi Than, Assistant Professor, Northern Illinois University
- Oleksandr Shtokvych, Senior Programme Manager, HE Support Programme, Open Society Foundations
- Daniel Bwe Doe Aye, Alumnus, OSF Empowerment Programme for Parliamentarians

² Full programme of the Policy Dialogue is included in Appendix A



SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS³

The event was opened by Dr Jo Beall, from the British Council, who set the context of the Dialogue and emphasised the willingness of the British Council and of the UK education sector more widely to support Myanmar's education reform efforts.

This was followed by a rich and interesting keynote address from Dr Myo Myint, Deputy Union Minister of Education, emphasising the areas that need to be prioritised, developed and strengthened, if the Higher Education reform is to be a successful one. Amongst them, he emphasised the importance of private-public partnerships and the links to employability, the need for meaningful and reciprocal international collaboration at all levels, the need for capacity building programmes to ensure the sustainability of the system, the assurance that the system is built upon the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, diversity, equality and tolerance, and the need for the development of a robust quality assurance mechanism. All of this should be built within a clear vision and mission for Myanmar's Universities.

Dr Myo Myint's keynote was followed by a second address from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This focussed on the theme of the conference – ***"Empowerment"*** – and the importance to ensure that the reform provides and supports empowerment in four key areas: empowerment for autonomy, empowerment for inclusiveness, empowerment for change and empowerment for the future. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stressed the fact that education should be a right that every individual in Myanmar should have access to, and that education goes well beyond the academic boundaries, as it encompasses an intellectual as well as a spiritual process. The reform of the education system should be a process which enriches individuals and supports the development and improvement of society. She also reminded the audience that the right of education comes with a great degree of responsibility – that is why empowering the people to bring about change, to think for themselves and to develop the ability to find solutions to their own problems is absolutely key. In essence, the process should be a balance between negotiation and compromise, with the aim to build a society which is sustainable as well as empowered, a society which will thrive in the achievement of its "hopes and dreams".

The session was concluded with the remarks from HE Bronte Moules, Australian Ambassador to Myanmar, who emphasised the importance of the development of sustainable education systems and policies, of ensuring open and strong collaboration between different key stakeholders, of the continued support and investment in education and of ensuring there is a link between the different parts and areas connected to the reform.

The rest of Day 1 was divided into a series of presentations and panel discussions which looked at some of the consultations that have already taken place – the findings of the CESR Phase 1 review of Higher Education, the review conducted by the National Network for Education Reform, recommendations from the study tour of the UK carried out in May and the consultation conducted in February by Professor Kenneth King (both organised by the British Council) – as well as a session which looked at the legislation of Higher Education. There was plenty of debate as well as input, comments and discussion from the floor.



³ All presentations are available at <http://bit.ly/16z5BP5>

On Day 2, there were presentations on the changing face of global Higher Education and on the very topical areas of the role of HE systems in strengthening equity and diversity. These were followed by a session with participation of members of the two parliamentary committees, who shared their insights from the conference, as well as suggested next steps. The conference concluded with closing remarks from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Professor Kenneth King.

The discussions focussed around these main areas:

Policy Legislation, Governance and Management

There was a lot of discussion about the need for a clear and long term vision for the system and for the sector, which brings in the views, interests and engagement of all the different stakeholders, including the 13 different Ministries under which the country's 168 HEIs fall. The process needs to be open, coordinated and consistent. This long term vision and plan must be evidence and data-driven and must precede the drafting of any concrete legislation. Consultation and consensus on the vision must be implemented, and this must be informed by evidence.

At a legislation level, there needs to be a review of the effectiveness of the Universities Central Council and the Council of Universities Academic Board and it is also very important that there has to be a clear legislative basis for private providers.

There is also a need to build, within the legislation, a robust (and possibly arms-length) Quality Assurance mechanism and a system-wide qualifications framework. This should include a system-wide approach, including course and credit transfer.

Appropriate funding and financing models need to be put into place, in support of the system and its mission. These models should include, amongst other things, a right proportion of public sector expenditure into education, financial aid structures for students, research funding and incentives for private sector investment.

Finally, the process of reform for Higher Education should not be looked at in isolation, but within the wider Education sector in Myanmar, in a coordinated and coherent fashion.



Decentralisation and Autonomy and the Role of Universities

The issue of autonomy was discussed repeatedly throughout the day, not just institutional autonomy, but also autonomy of students and financial autonomy. The system as it currently stands was thought to be highly centralised in its management, which leaves very little space for institutional autonomy.

There was a lot of debate about the meaning of autonomy and what “real” autonomy actually entails. As much as there are different models of autonomy, a concept which is very much based around the western tradition of Universities, there was pretty much consensus in saying that, at the core, autonomy entails the right and freedom of academic institutions to manage themselves, with no government interference, and the right of academic staff to decide how and what to teach, and how to assess. A free and open space for students to form unions and associations is also a key element of this autonomy.

It was clear from the contributions that Universities in Myanmar would prefer to re-establish academic freedom and to defend this space against government influence/interference, allowing students and academics to operate and choose freely. There are considerable pressures on Myanmar’s rectors as HE leaders. Some participants considered the proper role of government is to step back from the HE sector to allow it to grow, and further develop to meet the needs of the 21st century.



Challenges aside, there was overall consensus that the road to full institutional autonomy is a challenging one and that there is a need to act with caution and adequate pace, allowing for flexibility and also acknowledging the degree of accountability and responsibility that goes with the process of change. It is essential to have the right balance between accountability and autonomy – again, a need for negotiated compromise between government and institutions.

There was also an agreement on the role of Universities as drivers for public good. While the reform must go alongside national development priorities, and space should be given for market-driven competitiveness, all of it must be held within the ethos of education and the role of Universities in society – these principles must remain tight.

Careful thought must be given to the links and relationship between the education sector and other sectors, particularly the private sector, and the role of private universities within this. Links between academic content and qualifications and employability are to be explored and developed. The role of the private sector as a driving force and important element of the reform has to be defined.

Access, Inclusivity and Equity

This area was also at the heart of all of the discussions. Tertiary Education plays a key role in the process of nation-building. However, for this process to be successful, the education system has to be successful and equitable. Based on this basic principle, there is a widespread and unanimous agreement that the process of reform has to be built upon the foundations of an Education system which is inclusive, accessible as well as tolerant and equal. This is a considerable challenge in Myanmar, where the diversity of ethnicity, religion, language, and disabilities is challenging the state provision of education. Language in particular remains a very sensitive and political issue, with continuing pressure on government to ensure the safeguarding of indigenous cultures and the teaching of Myanmar and other indigenous languages.

The journey towards equity is long, and there will be barriers to participation and to success which will have to be removed. Dr Kaye Schofield from AusAID shared the experience of Australia's journey towards equity and some interesting lessons were picked up from that. Particularly, the need for data to drive the consensus and the right approach, and the understanding that Higher Education is not an island in itself, but part of a wider set of reform processes, which should have equality and inclusiveness at their core.

Internationalisation

The need for international links, as well as the building of a system which is rooted with internationalisation in mind, is not disputed. The support from donor agencies and from countries with more developed education systems is very much welcome and appreciated. But ultimately, Myanmar's ambition is to build its capacity in Higher Education so that the system can stand on its own feet. Pockets of excellence and best practice must be identified, and lessons from Myanmar as well as from the outside world can be learned.

Ultimately, Myanmar's institutions will best flourish by establishing international partnerships which are developed on the basis of reciprocity and mutuality. As part of this, it is important to have a strategic and targeted approach to the signing of MoUs between Myanmar and overseas institutions. Collaboration and partnerships must serve a purpose, and this must be to support the overall vision and mission of the reform. There is also a need for incentives to develop research, and this research can benefit from an international component.

Another important aspect of internationalisation is the use of the Myanmar diaspora, and the creation of incentives to bring Myanmar talent back home.



CONCLUSIONS

There are many urgent and pressing needs that Myanmar needs to address in its journey towards Higher Education reform, as well as many challenges to face along the way.

As Dr Jamil Salmi⁴ said during one of the sessions, “*never waste a good transition*”. That is, that the current political transition in Myanmar presents the Government and different stakeholders with a unique opportunity to start afresh, make bold decisions and “get it right”.

There was overall recognition that this event provided an unprecedented and unique platform for an open and honest dialogue and debate, with the participation, for the first time, of many different stakeholders, including representatives from student associations and different ethnic groups. In this respect, the two-day Dialogue was a ground-breaking event, as well as a great testament to the will of the Myanmar government and the Myanmar people to bring much needed change to its education system.

It also proved valuable and very important to have the support and commitment and participation of the development partners, who see the reform as one of the key (if not *the* key) component to Myanmar’s successful nation-building and transition to full democracy. The discussions showed an appetite for debate and participation and this event is expected to be just the beginning of a continued dialogue.

A critical aspect of this is and will continue to be the Myanmar-led, development-partner supported CESR, which will now move into Phase 2. The CESR directly informs the reform process, acts as a platform for review and may also provide a critical forum for drawing together the different strands, threads and perspectives into a unified dialogue on evidence-based reforms of HE and the education sector as a whole.



⁴ Dr Jamil Salmi’s think-piece on his own impressions of the Dialogue is included in Appendix B



This is a **snapshot of the key recommendations, conclusions and final thoughts**:

- Can't change everything! Setting priorities and focus on what is feasible – agree on a common VISION.
- Importance of keeping inclusivity, equity and accessibility at the heart of the reform.
- Empowerment can only be achieved by law: the legislation of HE Act is a priority.
- Need for wide public consultation to inform the drafting of the legislation – small groups to be set up for discussion in specific areas. Draft of legislation to be brought back to public for comment.
- Approach: Top down, bottom up or both? The vision should be drafted as part of a consensus-building process.
- However... consensus must always be informed by evidence – collection and access to quality data must be improved.
- There will be consideration to establishing an HE Reform Committee to oversee transition.
- Striking the right balances: Need for speed but “not too much”, short cuts and quick gains vs long-term, autonomy vs regulation and accountability – the need for a negotiated compromise.
- Balance between economic development and the role of Higher Education as a source of public good.
- Education Reform in all sectors – HE reform must be carried out within the context of the wider sector.
- Provision of a framework which allows for flexibility and for new initiatives to be created and to flourish.
- Need to find Myanmar solutions to Myanmar problems.
- The role of technology as an enabler for transformation, not as the solution *per se*.
- Learning from the experience of neighbours and other countries.



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- Existing Universities to focus on upgrading their capacity and quality.
- Bring campuses back to life, with no restrictions - government to safeguard and implement this directive.
- Develop sustainable and effective funding and financial mechanisms.
- Continue the debate on languages and ensure this is part of the reform discussions.
- Need for effective, coherent as well as cohesive donor coordination, in support of Myanmar's overall vision and strategy, while maintaining the right balance between what donors can offer and what Myanmar can achieve by itself.

Overall, there is a strong desire to maintain momentum, to push forward with the reform and to continue the dialogue. One of the main conclusions was the need for a consensus-driven agreement on the vision for Higher Education within the context of the wider education sector and national development priorities, with a clear outline of realistic priorities, both in the immediate term as well as in the long-term.

Despite the challenges outlined during the two days of the Dialogue, there was a real sense of passion as well as hope for what is possible. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said in her opening keynote, “the process of reform is irreversible, but the mindsets of the people can be changed”. Now the dialogue must continue.

“The sea is dangerous and its storms terrible, but these obstacles have never been sufficient reason to remain ashore” – Ferdinand Magellan (1520)



APPENDIX A

Empowering Higher Education Policy Dialogue Programme⁵

Saturday 29 June 2013

09:00 – 09:30	Registration
09.30 – 09.35	Welcome and introduction Kevin Mackenzie
09:35 – 09:45	Opening remarks Dr Jo Beall
09:45 – 10:10	Keynote Speech 1 Dr Myo Myint
10:10 – 10:35	Keynote Speech 2 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi
10.35 – 10.40	Welcome remarks H.E. Bronte Moules, on behalf of Development Partners
10:40 – 11:10	Tea/Coffee
11:10 – 12:00	Presentation and discussion 1 CESR Phase 1 Report on Higher Education Prof Martin Hayden Panel: Sardar Umar Alam, Dr Jamil Salmi, Jillian Ray (Chair)
12:00 – 12:50	Presentation and discussion 2 Higher Education Policy Recommendations, National Network for Education Reform Dr Thein Lwin Panel: Dr Kaye Schofield, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Dr Jo Beall (Chair)

⁵ All presentations available at <http://bit.ly/16z5BP5>



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12:50 – 14:00	Lunch and Networking
14:00 – 15:10	<p>Presentation and discussion 3 Policy Insights and Recommendations for Higher Education from the United Kingdom</p> <p>Policy Insights and Recommendations: Prof Kenneth King Brief overview of UK Study Tour: Kevin Mackenzie Findings and Implications: the Myanmar Delegation</p> <p>Panel: Dr Myo Myint, Dr Mya Oo (Amyotha Hluttaw), Dr Mya Oo (Pyithu Hluttaw), Dr Aung Kyaw Myat, Prof Kenneth King, Susana Galván (Chair)</p>
15:10 – 15:40	Tea/Coffee
15:40 – 16:30	<p>Presentation and discussion 4 Legislating Higher Education: HE law in other countries and implications for Myanmar Dr Libing Wang</p> <p>Panel: Dr Chan Nyein, Dr Mya Oo (Pyithu Hluttaw), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Chair)</p>
16:30 – 17:00	<p>Plenary discussion Led by Dr Jamil Salmi</p> <p>All participants</p>
17:00 – 17.10	<p>Closing remarks – Day 1 Dr Chris Spohr</p>
17:10	Close



Sunday 30 June 2013

08.30 – 09.00	Registration
09:00 – 09:05	Welcome and Introduction to Day 2 Susana Galván
09:05 – 09:55	Presentation and discussion 5 The Changing Face of Global Higher Education Dr Jamil Salmi Panel: Oleksandr Shtokvych, Daniel Bwe Doe Aye, Dr Maung Maung Wint (Chair)
09.55 – 10.45	Presentation and discussion 6 The Role of Tertiary and HE Systems in Strengthening Equity and Diversity Dr Kaye Schofield Panel: Dr Libing Wang, Dr Tharaphi Than, Prof Tin Htut (Chair)
10:45 – 11:15	Tea/Coffee
11:15 – 12:05	Panel discussion Members of the law and revitalisation committees share insights from the conference, next steps and their vision for the future Panel: Dr Mya Oo (Amyotha Hluttaw), Dr Chan Nyein, Dr Soe Yin, Dr Maung Maung Wint, Dr Tin Hlaing, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Chair)
12:05 – 12:20	Final remarks Daw Aung San Suu Kyi
12:20 – 12:30	Closing remarks Prof Kenneth King
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch and depart



APPENDIX B

Reconstructing Higher Education in Myanmar – Lessons from a Policy Dialogue Dr Jamil Salmi⁶, 31 July 2013

The last time the world took notice of higher education in Myanmar, it was in the aftermath of the brutally repressed students uprising of August 1988, which resulted in thousands of deaths and arrests and stronger sanctions from the international community. The political transition that started in 2011 has triggered the resumption of international collaboration in the higher education sector and the launch of a comprehensive education sector review led by the Government of Myanmar with strong support from development partners. The purpose of this analytical exercise is to pave the way for increased external assistance based on an objective diagnosis of the present situation and needs that would help the Government and other stakeholders formulate a strategy for the future development of higher education in Myanmar.

The first higher education policy dialogue workshop in Myanmar since the beginning of the political transition took place in Naypyitaw on June 29, 2013, with a focus on “Empowering Higher Education: A Vision for Myanmar’s Universities”. Convened by the British Council with strong participation and support from AusAID, the Asian Development Bank and UNESCO—I was invited as an advisor to AusAID—the two-day meeting brought together representatives of the various ministries overseeing the operation of higher education institutions, university rectors and academics, student leaders, and members of Parliament, including the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The workshop offered a unique platform for policy dialogue around the main issues facing higher education in Myanmar, allowing many stakeholders who had not had a voice in several decades—especially students from all over the country—to participate actively in the deliberations.

It was of great significance and symbolic value that, after the official opening statement by Dr Myo Myint, Deputy Union Minister of Education, who outlined changes the government has already made to improve education as well as plans to revitalize higher education and intensify international partnerships, the second official speech was then delivered by Aung San Suu Kyi in her role as Chair of the Parliamentary Committee for Revitalization of Yangon University.

In her inspirational speech about the role of education in constructing a democratic Myanmar, the Nobel Peace Laureate spoke about the priorities for restoring the country’s universities, articulating four dimensions of empowerment as the organizing principles that should guide higher education development in the present reconstruction phase. The first one is *empowerment through autonomy*, which would allow universities to manage their academic activities in an effective manner, as opposed to the present situation of strict government control. The second is *inclusiveness*, a basic requirement to ensure equal opportunities for all groups in Myanmar society in terms of access and success in higher education. This emphasis on equity is all the more important as large segments of the population have been excluded from higher education since the 1988 crackdown. The third principle is *empowerment for change*, referring to the ability of each university to transform itself into an innovative institution. The last one is *empowerment for the future*, through reforms of the curriculum and pedagogical practices with the purpose of better preparing the young women and men of Myanmar who will be responsible for creating a more democratic society and building a more productive economy.

After the presentation of the preliminary results of the sector review—indicating major performance gaps in terms of coverage and equity, quality and relevance, financing and governance—I urged the workshop participants to consider five key points as Myanmar moves forward to reconstruct its higher education system with possible support from several donor agencies: opportunities, challenges, vision, consensus-building, and coordination. First of all, the political transition represents a unique opportunity to “get it right”, that is to

⁶ Global Tertiary Education Expert, former Tertiary Education Coordinator at the World Bank.
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construct a sound and balanced higher education system for the long term. Many if not most countries in the world are hampered in their efforts to improve higher education by the weight of traditions and the reluctance of stakeholders to embrace change. The present situation offers a unique opportunity to undertake courageous reforms that are often not possible in other countries because of vested interests and entrenched positions that make meaningful change difficult if not impossible.

Second, the national authorities and the university leaders face a perplexing dilemma as they work on reconstructing the higher education system. On the one hand, they are faced with a myriad of immediate tasks to get the system to operate again properly. On the other hand, they should devote, as a matter of priority, sufficient time to think seriously about the future of higher education in preparation for the long-term transformation that is needed. Balancing the resolution of urgent problems and the careful preparation of future developments is a major challenge that must be addressed effectively.

Third, preparing for the future requires elaborating a vision and formulating a strategic plan to guide the harmonious development of Myanmar's higher education system. This would involve setting clear targets in terms of quantitative expansion and reduction of social and ethnic disparities, defining the desirable institutional configuration of the system, that is the types of institutions—universities and non-university institutions—that would operate to satisfy the demand for higher education, as well as the specific mission of each category of institution. Finally the plan would include identifying the conditions for the proper functioning of all institutions from the viewpoint of supporting quality assurance mechanisms, appropriate governance, and sustainable funding.

Fourth, the development of the vision and strategic plan should not be a technocratic exercise rigidly controlled from the top. It would only become meaningful if prepared in a participatory mode as a consensus-building process bringing together the diverse constituents of the higher education community and allowing for a high degree of tolerance for controversies and disagreements around the content of the needed reforms and the proposed changes. Achieving consensus on higher education policies requires transparency of approach and creating confidence among all stakeholders.

Last but not least is the need for effective donor coordination. Countries in transition like Myanmar, emerging from a long period of international isolation, often become the donors' latest darling. Offers for university partnerships abound all of a sudden; many projects are being prepared concurrently. But these concrete manifestations of good intentions are not always coordinated, carrying the risk of pulling the higher education system in several directions. The onus is on the government and parliament of Myanmar to make sure that donor support is consistently and coherently anchored in the country's vision, plan and priorities.

As Myanmar moves forward to reconstruct its higher education system, all stakeholders should bear in mind the notion expressed by the president of the University of Maryland, at the beginning of the financial crisis in the US, that "a crisis is an opportunity not to be wasted". I would paraphrase his observation by stating that, in the case of Myanmar, the political transition is too good an opportunity to be missed as the country commits itself to establishing the basis for a strong higher education system.



APPENDIX C

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN BURMA: POLICY INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS⁷

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This is a report of a visit to Burma to advise the Parliamentary Higher Education Law (HEL) Committee on the challenges of higher education reform. The visit took place between the 4th and the 16th February 2013. There was an initial meeting with the Parliamentary Committee and its Chair, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, on the 6th February. This was followed by an intensive week of visits to a range of universities and a series of education-related meetings, the details of which are to be found in the appendix to this report, along with the terms of reference (TOR) for this trip. There was then a discussion with a sub-group of the Committee on the 14th and a report to the full Committee and its Chair on the 15th February. One of the outcomes of the visit is a series of study tours by Committee members to Australia, India, Thailand and the UK in May 2013. Following the study tours, there will be a policy dialogue meeting to draw together the findings of these visits with the insights from two other current review processes, associated with the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR).

Higher Education Reform and the Wider Education Law Reform Process

The work of the HEL Committee is taking place, as just mentioned, alongside two other reviews, associated with the CESR and the NLD. The first, rapid assessment phase of the CESR had produced, on 28th January 2013, a valuable report on The Higher Education Sub-Sector. In a separate initiative, the NLD Education Committee had just produced a short, first draft of its 'Education Policy Recommendations', a dimension of which related to higher education (Thein Lwin, 2013). Prof. King's visit to the NLD Education Committee was followed by a joint meeting of one of its committee members, Dr Thein Lwin, with members of the CESR. At this, the summary outcomes of the NLD education review were outlined along with the seven focal areas of the CESR process,⁸ and the draft papers from both processes were exchanged.

Two other higher education review processes took place also in February 2013. The UK HE International Unit's Burma: Higher Education Scoping Visit, organised through the British Council, was designed to identify opportunities for UK higher education organisations to support the reform and development of the Burma (UK HE, 2013). Secondly, the Institute of International Education (IIE)'s Report on the IIE Burma Initiative, entitled: Investing in the Future: Rebuilding Higher Education in Burma derived from a delegation of ten US universities which had come to Burma for a week of visits in that same month (IIE, 2013).

The HEL Committee's work is itself part of a wider Parliamentary education review process. There is a Standing Committee on Education Promotion which has 15 MPs and currently at least three ad hoc committees. The most general of these is the National Education Law (NEL) Committee concerned with all sub-sectors of education, as well as formal, non-formal, public and private education. It has 11 MPs and 20 other members from the Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), Ministry of Health (MOH) and other ministries. Second, and more specific, is the Higher Education Law (HEL) Committee, already mentioned, with 10 MPs and 9 other members. Most specific of all is the Rangoon University Renovation Committee with 6 MPs and 10 other members.

It can be seen that all three committees have some preoccupation with higher education. One is institution-specific, one is concerned with the HE sub-sector as a whole, and the NEL covers all education sub-sectors including HE. There will need clearly to be careful coordination in their final analysis and reporting. Fortunately, there are some members who are on each of the three committees.

⁷ Carried out at the request and through the support of the British Council in Burma.

⁸ For the seven focal areas, one of which is higher education, see the TOR of the CESR (2012).



But there has also been a Committee concerned with the Private Higher Education Law, whose work is apparently nearly completed. It will be crucial to ensure that its findings are consistent with the on-going work of these other three Committees. Finally, it is important to note that in Burma, the vocational education and training sector is considered to be part of higher education. Hence if a Skill and Employment Law is also being developed, it is crucial that this too is consistent with the decisions of these other four Committees.

There is therefore a considerable coordination challenge ahead. The three consultation and review processes mentioned at the beginning of this report will need to be seized of the outcomes of these different Parliamentary Committees.

This short paper will review a number of the other key challenges facing the higher education sector as they appeared in a series of visits to universities in several parts of the country. Beyond the written sources already mentioned, the paper draws on very open discussions with students, senior staff, both current and retired in a range of higher education settings, including TVET, but all in a very short period. Meetings were both formal and informal. In some cases it has been possible to maintain contact with senior staff by email after leaving Burma in mid-February.

The Multi-Ministry Higher Education System

One of the first impressions in visiting universities in Burma is that they fall under 13 different ministries. Numerically, the highest number of these are linked to the MOE (64), but there are almost as many linked to MOST (61). The MOH has 15, and the other 10 ministries have between one and five. Although the total number of universities for which the MOE and MOST are responsible is very similar, it should be noted that some 60% of all enrolled students are in distance education (CESR, 2013: 8). As the two main distance education universities (in Mandalay and Rangoon) are both under the MOE, then clearly the majority of the 470, 912 students, as of 2012, fall formally under the MOE. Indeed the MOE is responsible for some 77% of all HE enrolments (CESR, 2013:6).

We shall return to the issue of distance education below, but it is worth noting at this point that the overwhelming numbers of distance students is just one of the features that makes Burma highly unusual. While the temptation may be to deal in higher education reform with regular, face-to-face students, it must be remembered that the distance education community of students in Burma does contain many students, who simply cannot afford full-time higher education, as well as a good number of students who could have attended full-time but wanted to combine work and study.

As my terms of reference had suggested that I visit three universities, one under the MOE, one under the MOH, and one under the Ministry of Agriculture, it was clear from the outset that there was a potential issue around the multi-ministry university system. However, there was very little discussion during this visit about the importance of re-integrating the fragmented universities into a single system. Universities under MOST, MOH and Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI) had become used to relating to constituencies in their respective ministries which were much closer in disciplinary terms to their own professional backgrounds. Thus, for several university rectors, this issue of re-integration seemed far from being the first priority in their list of reform issues.

In this respect, it is interesting to note, however, that the draft 'Recommendations' from the NLD Education Committee do assume that there will need to be a change:

'[Among the government ministries] only the MoE shall be associated with educational institutions (universities, vocational education, basic education, early childhood education, etc)'. (Thein Lwin, 2013: 6)

By contrast, the CESR recognises in one of its recommendations the importance of developing in the future an options paper that 'addresses the viability of having one ministry only responsible for the higher education sub-sector' (CESR, 2013: 13).



Although I met with rectors from universities which were linked with six different ministries, the issue of re-integration did not emerge as a key element in their agendas, as mentioned above. This is not to say that rectors and others were not conscious of the political reasons that had encouraged the original fragmentation. But since then, a variety of new factors had suggested some advantages of links to professional sectoral ministries.

In comparative terms, it may be useful to look at the example of China, across the border from Burma, in relation to multi-ministry systems. There has been in China a long tradition of universities being linked to particular ministries other than Education. But even in 2013, no fewer than 25 out of 98 central universities were under ministries other than Education.⁹ It would be valuable to examine the experience of China in this regard.

Gender Balance in Higher Education

One of the other striking features of Burma's HE system is what the CESR has termed the 'extent of the gender imbalance'.¹⁰ According to CESR, in 2012, no fewer than 60% of all HE students and 82.6% of all staff were female (CESR, 2013: 8). Visits to universities confirm this. Sometimes almost the entire cohort of senior staff appears to be female, even in technological universities. The CESR notes correctly that the reasons for this situation have not been systematically researched (CESR: *ibid*). But apart from the universities that recruit only male students such as the Defence and Maritime, there are clearly issues connected with salary and with the need to migrate for work that are related to this now established pattern.

Revitalisation of Learning in Higher Education

This is one of the recurring themes in most of the current reviews of higher education in Burma. Thus 'the promotion of education quality' in no less than 12 different dimensions is one of the key issues in the terms of reference for the 'Renovation, Construction and Promotion of Educational Quality of University of Rangoon'. Equally, the recognition of 'the continued emphasis on rote learning' is picked out in the IIE report (IIE, 2013: 19). Also in the CESR, there is a recognition of the 'almost ubiquitous extent of what is commonly termed "parrot" (rote) learning' (CESR: 24). But in the NLD 'Recommendations', it is noteworthy that at each of the main levels of education (primary and lower secondary, upper secondary, and university) there is a strong emphasis on the need for a reformed system of 'teaching, learning and assessment'. This makes the point that the learning system in higher education has been reinforced by earlier stages of education. But it is noteworthy that the 'Recommendations' emphasise that 'Student assessment criteria shall not be based on rote learning and memorisation. The student shall be assessed according to his or her individual quality of academic work and research' (Thein Lwin, 2013: 7).

What is not sufficiently underlined in some of these reviews is just how powerfully this minimalist learning system has become established across higher education, including both face-to-face and distance education. The system of single 'sacred texts' per subject, in English, is reinforced by handbooks, study guides, student guides, answer-books, and private tuition. There are some slight differences in the various universities, but the very poor quality of English across the education system has re-emphasised the importance of memorisation. For the majority of current students who are in distance education, as for those in face-to-face instruction, the key text is the handbook or study guide. This is the essential toolkit to be memorised. In the words of one informant:

These handbooks – for they are the real textbooks – are identified by subject discipline and by year and by university. The students don't need to use library books nor do they use reference books. It is not

⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Yang Rui of Hong Kong University's Comparative Education Research Centre for this information.

¹⁰ Of course in many university systems there is an entirely opposite gender imbalance, especially at the highest levels of academic staff.



necessary. They actually can't read the textbooks; they are too difficult. The handbook has summarized the essential facts. (Rector to KK, February 2013)

The culture of studying without recourse to libraries, textbooks or face-to-face instruction is very evident in the two very large University of Distance Education systems, where only ten days of targeted advice, if that, is necessary prior to the crucial examinations.¹¹ But it is embedded in most of the higher education system. Students in the regular universities have said that they would not need to go to classes, were it not for the roll call. Some have admitted that 'they got a degree, but didn't know anything'.

Undoubtedly, the necessity of memorisation is intensified by the weakness of very many students in English. Even in the universities with the top performing students it is possible to visit classes where the textbook on the student desks is in English, the Powerpoint on the board is in English, and the lecture is being conducted mostly in Burmese. In recognition of this situation, there was a decision in 2012 to provide summaries in Burmese in the textbooks for the Rangoon University of Distance Education.

It is worth underlining the pervasiveness of this very widespread 'culture of learning'. Not least because major investment in new libraries, internet and other resources may risk being ineffective if this minimalist approach to learning is not itself tackled. It should be recognised that while the system has poor learning outcomes, it is from the students' point of view relatively low cost. Indeed, it is in some sense a reflection of a student body that has for years been dispersed from campus life, and is often looking for ways of combining work with getting a qualification, at minimum cost and minimum time.

Certainly, pedagogy cannot be changed by law. But there will need to be very powerful incentives to promote the kinds of quality outcomes that are described in the NLD's 'Recommendations',¹² in the discussions about quality in the CESR, or in discourse about 'learner-centred approaches' of the MOE.¹³ But complex quality assurance systems are currently a world away from the realities of teaching and learning in Burma.

Before leaving this enormous reform challenge in the learning system of higher education, it may be worth referring to just one example of a university that seems, at first glance, to operate in a fundamentally different way. This is Yezin Agricultural University (YAU). Its library seems to be heavily used; the students have access to the internet on campus; the staff and the students both report that there is no private tuition. The university appears to have many links and partnerships with international agricultural centres and universities. Many staff have doctorates from overseas universities. Perhaps most importantly, it is residential, and all the students are on the compound.

In addition, it has had a very particular history right back to 1924 when it was the Burma Agricultural College and Research Institute (YAU, 2013). But after a series of different incarnations as a constituent college, a faculty of agriculture, an institute of agriculture regarded as a university under the MOE, it has been a university under the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation for 20 years. However, many other universities have had a similar history of frequent institutional change. So that may not be the principal reason for its having an apparently very different culture of learning.

¹¹ There is in fact a very rich learning kit in principle available for University of Distance Education students including for each subject a study guide, textbook, CD, and MP3, as well as programmes on TV and radio.

¹² For instance the NLD report (p.5) describes this ideal at the upper secondary level: 'Teachers shall evaluate the capacity of each student and guide them to create impact. The teacher shall mentor the student and help develop self-study skills. Freedom of thought and freedom of academic expression shall be encouraged. Ideas and thoughts vary according to individual values and interpretation, and thus analytical and well-structured arguments shall be encouraged. Coherence and reasoning shall take precedence over 'right' or 'wrong.'"

¹³ Thus, it is claimed that 'Learner-centred approaches, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning and fieldwork were incorporated into the learning experience of higher education students; (MOE, 2012: 27).



In concluding this short section on the learning culture, we should acknowledge that Burma is far from unique in having such a minimalist approach to learning through rote memorisation. It seems possible, however, that the absence of student-centred learning and of the encouragement of critical thinking is accentuated by the lack of academic and institutional autonomy more generally in the higher education system. To this we turn after a brief word on the social dimensions of student life.

Autonomy in Social Learning: Towards ‘A Vibrant Campus Culture’?

For many years, the student bodies have been dispersed and with few exceptions such as YAU, just mentioned, the students have had to find accommodation in shared private rooms and ‘hostels’.¹⁴ With several of the universities allocated premises far outside city or town centres, there is a considerable expense for students regularly to reach the universities, as their cheapest accommodation is in the towns. In a real sense therefore even many of the regular universities have become ‘distance universities’.

Paradoxically, these regular access problems and the need to cover the costs of regular meals away from the cheaper food of the towns has led to some students preferring to join one of the large Universities of Distance Education, even when they had the grades to attend one of the good day universities. There was then minimal pressure to be physically present on campus, except in the case of science students who are encouraged to attend on some weekends.

Even though some of the initial pressures to encourage distance learning were political, over the subsequent decades, many students have actually preferred to follow the distance modality over the regular university, and perhaps especially some young men. They could then combine a full-time job with the absolutely minimal requirements of attendance at the distance universities. Interestingly, the gender ratio in distance education is more balanced than in regular universities where women outnumber men by two to one.

Despite dispersed and often distant accommodation, there are some student societies in face-to-face universities, but most of these are organised by discipline, by language, or even by religion or region of the country. There are few if any university-wide student associations. No student newspapers. There are very few international students, and almost no student travel or exchange. Equally, there is no participation by students in university committees or councils. The minimalist culture of learning discourages involvement in such commitments. Even in regular universities where class attendance is meant to be not less than 75%, it is widely acknowledged that it is often as low as 50%. In other words, just like library use, attendance at lectures is not seen to be essential given the crucial role of the single handbook per subject.

In terms of formal fees student costs are very small, but there are major additional costs to study, with the need to buy guides and handbooks, and in some universities hire older ‘student guides’ and pay for private tuition. One rector calculated that these latter costs would add 125,000 kyats to the formal fee of 800 kyats.

Despite the discussion amongst some of the members of the HEL Committee about the desirability of a ‘vibrant campus culture’, and ‘campus life’,¹⁵ and despite the occasional seminar on the ‘promotion of the quality of students’ and the aspiration to develop ‘the academic and social environment conducive to professional and total development of graduates’,¹⁶ the realities of student life are currently a world away from these ambitions. Changing the social environment of students will be almost as challenging as changing the minimalist learning system. Indeed, currently these two elements reinforce each other; student societies and student activities are not essential to securing a degree or a certificate in the minimum time possible.

¹⁴ The former hostel accommodation for students in the Universities of Rangoon and Mandalay has long since been reallocated for the use of staff, or occasionally for graduate students if they participate in tutoring

¹⁵ Tin Hlaing. 2013. Suggestions for the draft of a new higher education law of Burma.

¹⁶ Terms of reference for the Renovation, Construction and Promotion of Educational Quality of University of Rangoon. n.d.



Academic Autonomy

As we move now to what was a central issue for many of our discussions about the reform of higher education, it must be noted that the more thoughtful responses recognised that there could not just be change just at the level of higher education:

We need capacity building; academic autonomy; more time for students; better student teacher ratios; financial autonomy; and we need access overseas; there is a need for sincerity in reporting and sincerity in analyzing and for speaking our minds. But we need to emphasise the critical importance of change in BASIC education. Otherwise these won't work. It is too late if you start in HE. (Rector to KK, February 2013)

This emphasises, of course, the need for the work of the Parliamentary National Education Committee to go hand in hand with the work of the Higher Education Committee. A similar point was also made about the higher education sub-sector itself: that it would be inappropriate to focus a whole series of changes just on one or on a tiny group of 3-4 centres of excellence, leaving the rest of the constituency till later on.

The term 'academic autonomy' was frequently mentioned in interviews and the related reports, but the range of what was covered by this umbrella term was very large.¹⁷ Universities have 'no authority on appointments, travel, research, promotion, curriculum development, disciplinary association conference, even the planning of a golden anniversary university conference' (Senior staff comment). Another rector noted that there was no authority to appoint even lower order maintenance staff, even a window-cleaner. Everything had to go up 'through proper channels'. Even when a member of staff is invited to a prestigious conference in the region, the conference date may have passed before any decision is taken 'on high'. If someone is allowed to travel to a meeting, the passport has to be returned afterwards.

Academic autonomy meant different things to different people. Academics were in fact civil servants but many were not in fact anxious to change this status. For others, academic freedom meant a change to the situation in which they had almost no free time. For staff in regular arts & science universities there were major demands on their time from the several cycles of assessment, intensive 10-day preparation, related to the requirements of the distance university students. This was compulsory for them. So their concern was not so much academic freedom, but they had almost no free time at all during the year.

It may appear strange that on the one hand there is a learning culture which might seem to make minimal demands on teaching staff in terms of student-centred learning, small group work, curriculum development, research supervision etc and yet on the other hand there is a very great deal of work related to assessment and certification.

Academic freedom is often presented in rather general terms without a direct relationship with multiplicity of different processes which at the moment have to be put up 'through proper channels'. Indeed the very first lines of the NLD Education Committee's 'Recommendations' claim: 'The goal of Burma Education Policy is based on educational freedom, in order to increase opportunities for learning, raise the secondary school completion rates and the quality of education' (Thein Lwin: 1). And it goes on later to state that: 'There shall be academic freedom in research and freedom to publish the findings. Universities shall have the freedom to engage with different universities and institutions around the world for educational purposes' (Thein Lwin: 7). But the same 'Recommendations' suggest that although different university departments should write their own curriculum, they also say that the university's council should compile a draft curriculum, and then send it up to the Universities Central Council for approval. Surprisingly, the NLD Committee consider that on the very critical language question, which we have noted is a key issue in the culture of learning, the 'Medium of instruction shall be decided independently by each university [e.g. English, Burmese, etc.]' (ibid.).

¹⁷ Interestingly, the term 'academic autonomy' does not appear in the terms of reference of the Committee for the Renovation of University of Rangoon.



When so many dimensions of individual academic and wider institutional autonomy have been restricted over such a long period, discussions about how to move towards a policy regime of greater autonomy have scarcely begun. On the one hand there is a view that it is a time for a bold and comprehensive approach; but at the same time it is recognised that despite the attractions of rapid change, it will need to be a question of making haste slowly. Even the CESR, which has thought about this issue of institutional autonomy more than most, is cautious in its first rapid assessment report: 'HEIs are not all ready for institutional autonomy - indeed some may feel more at ease in not having it' (CESR, 2013: 17). Hence they proceed to recommend a pilot project for bringing in gradually greater institutional and financial autonomy in a small number of the strongest HEIs.

Towards Greater Financial Autonomy?

HEIs have been formally without financial autonomy since the 1970s. However, from 1998, there has been the possibility of a measure of income generation through what are termed Human Resource Development (HRD) courses in most if not all HEIs under the MOE. These often take place early in the day, before regular working hours, or after work. As the CESR notes, the scale and the income associated with what are in effect parallel courses are not well-known. But in at least one major university, the HRD numbers in masters and diploma courses are almost 50% of the entire university enrolment.¹⁸ Also, CESR notes that the total number of HRD courses are 195 as compared with regular courses which are 215.

HEIs under other ministries may deal with income generation in different ways. For instance, the medical universities acknowledge that involvement in private practice can compensate staff for there not being income generation from the parallel HRD courses. By contrast, the universities under MOST have generally not been involved in this form of income generation, but at least two of the major institutions under that Ministry are currently planning for substantial income-generating HRD courses.

Beyond HRD, there are opportunities for income generation through private tuition in many HEIs. But again the scale of this, as in so many other systems of 'shadow education', is not well known. However, what both the popularity of the HRD parallel courses and private tuition testify to is a huge demand for certification, often combined with working. This is also evident in the range of completely private providers, offering courses that are attested by foreign bodies whether in the UK or in Australia.

Further, there is some discussion of the potential of the private sector, alumni gifts, public private partnerships, and funds from overseas research bodies. But there are currently few formal incentives for private sector involvement in the public higher education sector. Again, Yezin Agricultural University appears to be unusual in attracting scholarship funds from foreign multinationals as well as from Burma's domestic private sector. Research partnerships and internships for the private sector are also underway.

Before leaving the issue of financial autonomy, it is worth underlining the point that Burma's planned approach towards technical and vocational education and training (TVET) – which is seen as part of higher education - is strongly influenced by what is the Swiss dual system of vocational training where students/apprentices divide their time progressively between the private sector (workplace) and the classroom. This has been illustrated by the Swiss Centre for Vocational Training in Rangoon since the 1990s. As in Switzerland, it is now planned that those in vocational tracks in Burma nationally can connect with higher education if their talents and interests coincide. This is another key feature of Burma's higher education.

Review of Options for Greater Autonomy

Greater autonomy is at the centre of the current debate and discourse about higher education in Burma, and it may be noted that the NLD Committee's 'Recommendations' for the University are that: 'Universities and colleges in Burma shall remain autonomous and be managed by the University Council (UC) of the

¹⁸ I owe this to Amanda Selvaratnam of the University of York.



respective universities, rather than any particular government ministry' (Thein Lwin: 6). But in a system that may be characterised as having very little autonomy, what might be the starting point for any plan to increase progressively university autonomy?

It is important to recognise that there is very little written about the relationships amongst the several kinds of increased autonomy that we have been discussing: greater autonomy in student learning; greater academic staff autonomy; more institutional autonomy; and greater financial autonomy. We shall conclude this section with a review of some of these critical inter-relations.

At one level, it should be recognised that many measures of institutional autonomy do not make sense without greater financial autonomy. On the other hand, certain measures of financial autonomy such as HRD classes, private tuition, and private consultancy may directly work against greater autonomy in student learning. Equally, measures designed to provide staff incentives to secure prestigious research moneys may prove much more demanding than staff involvement in the easily accessible private tuition and HRD parallel teaching markets.

If staff time is not to be taken up merely with teaching similar material in three or four different settings, - regular classes, HRD parallel classes, distance education, and private tuition, there will need to be serious incentive systems introduced to encourage research applications, publications, conference travel and fieldwork. But even though the NLD 'Recommendations' affirm that 'University learning shall be founded on academic research', the CESR notes that 'there are at present no incentives for lecturers to conduct research' (CESR: 32).

If on the other hand, a primary concern is to create greater autonomy within the students' currently minimalist 'culture of learning' and to create a more vibrant campus culture, is the starting point a change in the examination process, or is it halls of residence, libraries, and ready access to the internet? These are very different initiatives carrying very different costs.

Consultation, Review and Policy Learning

We stated at the beginning of this short report that there are three review and consultation processes currently underway, linked to the NLD's 'Education Policy Recommendations', to the seven domains of the CESR's first phase, and to the Higher Education Law (HEL) Committee. The first two of these are already engaged in a series of regional and national consultations; and it can be assumed that within the higher education area, the focus will be on the stated sub-themes of each. In the case of the NLD's 'Recommendations', these are: Management & Planning; Curriculum; Faculty; and Teaching, Learning and Assessment. In the CESR's summary of priority areas for HEIs, the domains are: Need for a vision; Coordination & Planning; Structure; Governance & Management; Finance & Private Sector Investment; and Quality Assurance. Given that both these two processes are concerned with the whole of the education system, and not just with higher education, there will inevitably be a need to prioritise and to focus within these key areas of higher education. In the consultation process, it will be entirely possible that concerns from the public may not be with greater autonomy, but rather with greater access and with the links between higher education and employment.

The third review and consultation process via study tours for members of HEL is getting underway at the very beginning of May 2013, and they too have a rich agenda of concerns even if there is not yet any draft from their current Committee deliberations. No less that 16 'areas of focus' have been identified for these study tours. Many of these are directly related to the concerns we have discussed – such as university management and finance; staff and research incentives; teaching and learning resources; academic and social environments for student development.¹⁹

¹⁹ See for fuller detail, 'UK HE Study Tour for Burmese Parliamentarians', British Council, Rangoon.



The key challenge of any study tour circles around policy insights, policy borrowing and policy learning. Whether in Australia, India, Thailand or the UK, the study team will be confronted with what may seem mature systems for quality assurance, assessment of research excellence, and teaching and learning. Hopefully, the study processes will also pay attention to the history of higher education reforms in the four case study countries, recognising how much that is now regarded as part of the HE landscape was simply not in place 20 or 30 years ago.

Successful study tours revolve around policy insights rather than policy borrowing or policy transfer. So the issue is less one of sourcing models of quality assurance, research assessment, or qualification frameworks. Rather, it is to encourage a process of policy learning whereby insights gathered abroad can fit into a process of local learning. For this to happen, there needs to be an awareness of 'best practice' in some of these domains within Burma, and a series of strong mechanisms for adapting rather than adopting insights from abroad that resonate with the best of local traditions. This is a tall order, and not least as the study tours will have been exposed to four rather different external traditions of higher education.

Some of these generative ideas from other traditions may reinforce themes that are emerging in the Committee for Higher Education Law; others relating for example to pedagogy may not be appropriate for including in formal legal frameworks. But they may, nevertheless, support emerging initiatives for reform of teaching and learning in Burma such as we noted in Yezin Agricultural University.

By the time these three streams of review and consultation come back together in late June or, more likely, early July 2013, there can then be a well-informed national policy dialogue around higher education reform. But carrying these insights into practice may well require policy learning by a more powerful higher education commission or coordinating body than is presently evident in Burma's higher education landscape.

Towards Some Initial Policy Recommendations for Higher Education

There are already embedded in this short report a number of preliminary recommendations. It is entirely appropriate that these recommendations are marked as preliminary and tentative, since they emerge from a review process of just over a week of intensive visits and conversations. The very much longer period of analysis by the CESR and by the NLD Education Committee must be borne in mind. However, for what they are worth, the following recommendations for further reflection are offered, drawing particularly on a comparative and international education perspective.

Recognise the mutually reinforcing nature of the present system

The present HE system is extremely low cost, and its key components reinforce each other. No single initiative is likely to change this, whether in campus life, examination reform, staff autonomy, or institutional autonomy. HE reform will need to impact on many of the different elements of the current system, and hence will involve substantially higher costs. We look in turn at a series of reforms that might impact on each of the key dimensions of the present system, but they will need to be considered as a whole.

Revitalising student life on campus

In approaching this, we should be aware that the majority of the country's students have voted against campus life, by enrolling in one of the two huge distance universities. Arguably, their interest is to secure certification at minimal cost and in minimum time, in ways that allow continuation of work or employment. Changing the requirements for interaction with staff on campus may lead to a reduction in the numbers of distance education students.



For the bulk of undergraduate students who are not currently on campus,²⁰ and not in halls of residence, there will be massive additional costs in recreating student residences, even for a small proportion of students. The four study tours will reveal many different approaches to the provision of student accommodation, including by both the public and the private sector.

Vibrant campus culture is not derived from a single element such as residences. But it could include the much more complex issues of student elections to representative bodies, student participation in university committees, student connections to political parties, student media, student travel, the role of international students, access to wifi and social media. On either side of Burma there are countries which illustrate very different dimensions of this. In China, there are student residences and a very powerful culture of student learning, but very little interest by students in politics. In Bangladesh, a highly politicised student culture with political parties closely connected to students.

Staff Salaries

The currently very low level of staff salaries is one explanation for the unique gender balance in favour of women in Burma's universities. These low salary levels are also the reason that many staff secure additional income from Human Resource Development (HRD) parallel courses, or from private tuition. Thus it can be seen that changing salary levels could impact not only the gender balance but also on the parallel systems of higher education in HRD and tuition.

On the other hand, there will be little hope of making many of the current staff 'research-active' unless they have sufficient salary to encourage them to undertake research, in addition to teaching.

Equally, if the intention is to create an increasing number of 'research universities', the incentive to carry out research, often for no extra income, has to outweigh the attractions of doing a series of consultancies. The promotion systems have to reinforce research productivity rather than engagement in HRD or consultancy. Similarly, salaries have to be sufficient so that staff are ready to take on the supervision of doctoral students rather than doing consultancies.

So again the salary issue has implications for many other dimensions.

Impacting on the Culture of Learning

This is one of the most demanding areas for possible intervention. The current system has developed over the last 40-50 years, and is powerfully embedded in schools as in higher education. It is focused around the single 'sacred text' per subject, and the memorisation of answers in a language, English, in which the majority of students have inadequate skills. Reforming this system-wide phenomenon has implications for examination reform, but equally for the reform of language policy.

There are of course compelling reasons for maintaining English as the 'gold standard'²¹ for higher education, but there are very substantial costs for this in a nation which has shifted its position on English so dramatically over the past 40 years. A nation of 60 million people might want to reflect on how nations as small as Denmark (five million) can offer the majority of its degrees in Danish while ensuring that English as a subject is so effectively taught.

Equally, in respect of the learning culture, reinforced by the examination and tutorial system, there are very major costs involved in changing examinations to be more challenging to students. These have implications for capacity building in the examination bodies, as well as with teachers, and with text books. A move

²⁰ There are research students currently residing on the campuses of the Universities of Mandalay and Yangon, but no under-graduates. Students are however on campus in Yezin Agricultural University.

²¹ President Julius Nyerere was persuaded that English needed to be retained at university in Tanzania, so that what he called the 'gold standard' was secured.



towards more critical thinking in examinations is easily said but is intimately related to many other dimensions of the system.

Arms-length Funding, Quality Assurance and Qualification Bodies

There are good reasons for there to be bodies between universities and the government which take responsibility for funding, quality and qualifications. Such bodies are increasingly common. But there are also good reasons for Burma to proceed hastily when it comes to such bodies. They have very major implications for capacity building and for the introduction of dedicated units in the higher education institutions which take responsibility for these new demands. Often they are based on developed systems of peer review which, again, can be very demanding in terms of staff time.

What may be useful is to be clear about the existing, internal systems for the evaluation of quality, for example, and to explore ways in which, at relatively low cost, these can be made more robust.

It should be noted that at present there are very powerful incentives for staff not to fail students, and not to pay attention to the 75% rule for attendance in class. The evaluation of their own performance as staff may relate to the success of their students in the examinations.

The Role of the Private Sector

It is interesting that the legal situation for private HE bodies appears to be being expedited more rapidly than the legislation for the public HE sector. There are however a series of areas where the private sector should be strongly encouraged to be involved. One very obvious area is in the dual system of vocational training, where, as we have noted, there is a strong interest in Burma in developing a local version of the dual system. The Swiss Centre for Vocational Training in Rangoon is an illustration of this.

The private sector could also be involved, as in the UK, in the provision of student accommodation at rates parallel to the public sector.

As mentioned above, there may soon be legally accessible private universities in Burma. These may include bodies with links to home universities in Australia, US, UK and elsewhere. It will be very important that the quality of Burma universities is increased prior to any such situation of alternative provision.

Shortcuts and Longer Cuts in Higher Education Reform

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi talked in the London Policy Dialogue meeting of 9th May 2013 of the importance of a 'shortcut to an education system that will enable us to face the 21st century and centuries to come'. She also underlined the recreation of campus life as her first priority for HE reform.²² And she told us in the UK 'to tell us what we should do' to find this shortcut.

The burden of this report, however, is that Burma's academics, policymakers and politicians are not so much asking Australia, India, Thailand and the UK what they should do, but rather what they in Burma can learn from these four very different higher education policy environments. This is precisely Aung San Suu Kyi's own message about learning also: 'Now we have to learn all over again. We have to learn not only from you (in the UK) but from other countries in the world who have managed to change their education systems'.

On the British side, there will of course be a good deal of interest in re-establishing partnerships with the universities of Burma, and with other parts of its higher education system. It will be very important to ensure, however, that any new partnerships are not a distraction from the essential reforms in higher education. Partnerships, therefore, which offer the opportunity to explore via one-year masters degrees the pros and

²² Aung San Suu Kyi 2013 'Keynote address', May 9th 2013



cons of the quality assurance and qualification systems of the UK and Australia could be very valuable. Equally, the attachment of British staff (perhaps retired) in initiatives for examination reform, English language teaching, and distance teaching could all be invaluable.

In the very near-term, one of the greatest contributions of the British resource could be to support Burma in drawing together the different strands of analytical work going on at the moment, including the NLD and CESR consultations, as well as the insights from the four study tours. A policy dialogue meeting in 'Tying the Strands together' could provide an invaluable opportunity for genuine policy learning.

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