

Myanmar

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I. A Brief Description of Myanmar's Higher Education System

Since Myanmar's political transition away from military rule began in 2011, there has been a major review of the education (including higher education) sector underway, with the strong involvement of international partners such as foreign universities and development agencies. This is expected to lead to an equally major overhaul of the higher education system in Myanmar, which has been isolated and neglected since the military junta seized power in a coup in 1962. Compounding this problem, all universities in the country had been shut down for periods of two to three years, in the late 1980s and late 1990s, following major student protests against the military junta. Yet in the 1950s, the universities in Yangon (known then as Rangoon) and Mandalay were regarded as among the best in East Asia.

There are 164 higher education institutions in Myanmar – which the government calls “university level institutions”, consisting of universities and colleges – which are all public. Myanmar's universities and colleges are highly specialised in their field of study and, as mandated by the University Education Law of 1973, each is managed by one of 13 ministries, generally depending on the institution's speciality. The Ministry of Education is still the dominant ministry, administering 66 of the country's 164 higher education institutions.

The Ministry of Education coordinates all higher education institutions in the country through two Departments of Higher Education, one for Lower Myanmar and one for Upper Myanmar. Academic and administrative policy matters relating to higher education in the country are managed by the two councils chaired by the Minister for Education. They are: the Universities' Central Council and the Council of University Academic Bodies. Reports suggest that these two councils only meet once in a few years. Recently, in April 2011, a National Education Committee (NEC) was formed and tasked with coordinating the national education system, including the higher education subsector. Each higher education institution has its own management committee, which is required to include two members nominated by the parent ministry.

In May 2012 (latest available data), there were 470,912 higher education students in Myanmar, most of whom (60.3%) were enrolled as distance education students, who are generally either rural residents or have failed to be admitted to regular programmes, and have more limited employment opportunities upon graduation. Of the 186,668 students enrolled in regular programs, 174,771 were undergraduates. Only 8 universities are permitted to award doctorates, and there are a reported 2,000 PhD students, up to half of whom are most likely enrolled in the University of Yangon, still considered the country's most prestigious university.

The provision of private higher education is technically outlawed by the Private Tuition Class Law of 1984. Nevertheless, private higher education institutions exist in Myanmar by registering instead as a general service provider. This appears to be an accepted practice. Data such as enrolment numbers in these institutions is therefore difficult to trace. These institutions depend entirely on tuitions fees collected from students. These fees tend to be several times the GDP per capita in Myanmar. Their status as bona fide higher education providers is unclear since they are not regulated by the state as such, and they tend to offer foundation programs for further degree-level studies. Some private institutions advertise that they award a UK Higher National Diploma (HND) after two years of coursework — a UK qualification operated

by the UK Examinations authority that is roughly equivalent to the first two years of a three-year degree level study. A legislative bill to create a private higher education sector is currently under discussion. Business interests and faith-based groups are said to be waiting for its approval, with the expectation that it will enable them to establish private universities and colleges in Myanmar.

Nevertheless, there are private higher education programmes, rather than whole institutions, in Myanmar. Notably, a professional development unit within the state-run Myanmar Medical Association provides continuing education and postgraduate training to qualified private-sector medical doctors, estimated to total 22,000, who are not eligible for postgraduate programmes in Myanmar's public universities.

The Department of Technical and Vocational Education (DTAVE) within the Ministry of Education is primarily responsible for vocational and technical education of young persons, before or after completion of higher-level basic education. There are ten types of institutes under the DTAVE, and they offer three kinds of regular full time study courses – tertiary level, secondary level and short course. The Government Technical Institute (GTI) and the State Agricultural Institute (SAI) offer Diploma-level courses and the other eight institutions/schools offer the Certificate-level courses.

Major contemporary issues

The National Education Bill was passed in September 2014, notably stating that universities and colleges must be “autonomous”. Civil society groups and student organisations criticised the bill for its vagueness and staged protests, alleging that the formation of a National Education Commission and Higher Education Coordinating Committee, also provided for in the bill, would in fact limit university autonomy. In particular, critics felt that the bill did not include any key recommendations that were drawn up after wide consultations with students and teachers. The bill is expected to change little in terms of university autonomy and higher education in general, but details, which may come through in possible further subsidiary legislation, have yet to be articulated. Among other issues pertaining to subsidiary legislation emanating from this bill, student groups also hope that the ban on students living on campus would be lifted, as part of re-creating campus life. The ban was a result of the military junta's wariness of mass gatherings of politicised students, an outlook that had been said to effectively reduce the university experience in Myanmar to rote-learning within classrooms.

As alluded to earlier, a bill to create private universities is being planned, which will allow overseas institutions to establish joint or wholly-owned campuses in Myanmar. The policy has the support of the opposition, too. Given the low levels of funding of the country's higher education, which is completely under the administration of the state, it therefore makes sense to open the sector up to private providers. The government would, however, have to consider what to do with regard to the setting of tuition fees, which have been maintained at a very low level for decades (see more below on trends in tuition fees).

II. The Financing of Higher Education¹

¹ Singapore Ministry of Education. 2015. *HEAD K*. Singapore.
[http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2015/download/27 MOE 2015.pdf](http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/data/budget_2015/download/27%20MOE%202015.pdf).

It was only since about 2011 that the public funding of Myanmar's education system had shown signs of significant improvement. The education budget for the 2013-14 fiscal year was equivalent to 14.1% of total government expenditure and 2.1% of GDP². By international – and even regional – standards, the government's contribution remains low; Vietnam, for example, spends 20% of its budget on education.

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. Moreover, there is also a common practice to 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.

The public budget for higher education is predominantly (78.3%) allocated to recurrent expenditure, primarily on salaries. Even so, the salaries for university and college lecturers are widely considered to be inadequate, leading to the reluctance of many males to seek to become lecturers, due to cultural factors. Consequently, 82.6% of all academic staff members in 2012 were female.

Trends in tuitions fees

There is ongoing consideration, primarily among the government bureaucrats in dialogue with external advisors and aid agencies, over raising Myanmar's very low and antiquated level of tuition fees. There is recognition that poorer, rural families, women and ethnic minorities would be sensitive to any increases in tuition fees, a situation which has produced a very equitable higher education sector, though with subpar standards. Fears as to what kind of political impact this could wreak in a fledgling democratic system are obvious concerns to the country's leaders and the opposition.

In higher education institutions such as those under the purview of the Ministry of Defence, tuition fees are not only absent – students are in fact considered employees. Introducing tuition fees would thus fundamentally alter the character of such institutions, which are not strictly military training institutes or cadet schools. Such are the resultant peculiarities of a system in which different higher education institutes are overseen by different ministries.

Table 1. Myanmar Higher Education Expenses Borne by Parents and Students, First Degree, Instructional expenses for one academic year

² Htoo, Thant and Steve Gilmore. 2016. "First Public Expenditure Review Delves Into State-Spending". *Mmtimes.Com*. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/business/20012-first-public-expenditure-review-delves-into-state-spending.html>.

[National currency Myanmar kyat converted to \$US by 2011 ICP Purchasing Power Parity Estimate at US\$1 = 234.97 kyats]

N.B. Fees indicated here are cited from international reports on higher education in Myanmar, the figures of which were often obtained anecdotally (e.g. interview with a university rector), given the various difficulties of obtaining data. These figures were generally obtained in 2013.

	Public	Private
	Low cost Universities <i>(commonly cited tuition fees & costs)</i>	High cost Unregulated providers offering foreign qualifications such as the UK Higher National Diploma (HND)
Tuition fees	20,000 kyats (US\$ 85)	845,900 kyats (US\$ 3,600)
Other fees	125,000 kyats	
Books, etc		
Subtotal instructional expenses	145,000 kyats	970,900 kyats
Lodging	Students are banned by law from living on campus (pending legislative change). ³	
Food	234,970 kyats (US\$ 1,000)	
Transport	58,740 kyats (US\$ 250)	
Other personal expenses	47,000 kyats (US\$ 200)	
Subtotal cost of living expenses	340,710 kyats (US\$ 1,450)	
TOTAL	485,710 kyats (US\$ 2,067)	1,311,610 kyats (US\$5,582)

III. Financial Assistance

³ Morgan, John. 2016. "Hope In Myanmar". *Inside Higher Ed*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/25/signs-home-higher-education-myanmar>.

Financial support and loan schemes for students are practically non-existent in Myanmar, where micro-financing is more predominant. There are very few available scholarships. Since tuition fees are currently very low, coupled with the fact that only 10% of the population attend universities,⁴ there has been no pressing need for loan schemes hitherto. The financial and banking sector in Myanmar is also the least developed in Southeast Asia.⁵ Meanwhile, private institutions are sufficiently expensive to exclude all but the wealthiest of students.

⁴ Morgan, John. 2016. "Hope In Myanmar". *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/25/signs-home-higher-education-myanmar>.

⁵ Foerch, Thomas, Thien San, and Sophie Waldschmidt. 2013. *Myanmar's Financial Sector*. Yangon: GIZ.
<https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2013-en-financial-sector-myanmar.pdf>.