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An Overview of Higher Education in Myanmar

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Introduction

Myanmar is officially known as the Union of Myanmar. In 1962, shortly after the accession to power of the revolutionary government, there were some positive changes in Myanmar's higher education sector as the University Education Act was passed. The Act was later replaced by the Union of Myanmar Higher Education Act (1973). With the enactment of these Acts, more regional colleges were set up to meet the increasing demand for tertiary education (Do, 1994). Short-and long term development plans were also established with the aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education and to promote diversity at higher education institutions (HEIs) (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004). Since then, the number of HEIs in Myanmar has been steadily increased. There were 129 institutions in 2000, and the number has risen up to 156 in 2008. Table 1 shows the breakdown of HEIs in Myanmar.

The number of HEIs in Myanmar has totaled 158 in 2009, with 64 under the Ministry of Education and another 94 under other ministries. All the HEIs are state-funded (Naing, 2009a).

In Myanmar, higher education is provided by universities and specialised institutions (teacher training schools and colleges, technical

and professional institutes and the Institute for Foreign Languages), which are all state-run and state-funded institutions. There are several universities and colleges in the seven states and seven divisions of the Union of Myanmar, except for the medical universities which are located in Yangon, Mandalay and Magway. In every state and division, there are arts and science universities, education colleges, technology colleges and computer colleges (Naing, 2009a). HEIs in Myanmar specialise in variety fields and levels of study such as undergraduate, postgraduate diploma, master's degree and doctorate programmes (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004; Naing, 2009a).

Table 2 shows the types and number of programmes offered by HEIs, under the Ministry of Education. Most of the HEIs are under the control of the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education. HEIs in upper and lower Myanmar are run by two separate entities: (a) The Department of Higher Education of Upper Myanmar and (b) The Department of Higher Education of Lower Myanmar. Their headquarters are based in Yangon and Mandalay respectively. National policies are established by the Universities' Central Council and the Council of University Academic Bodies and both are chaired by the Minister of Education.

TABLE 1 Number of HEIs in Myanmar (2008)

No.	Ministry	Number
1	Education	64
2	Health	14
3	Science and technology	56
4	Defence	5
5	Culture	2
6	Forestry	1
7	Agriculture and irrigation	1
8	Livestock, breeding and fisheries	1
9	Cooperatives	5
10	Civil service selection and training board	1
11	Religious affairs	2
12	Progress of border areas and national races and development affairs	1
13	Transport	3
Total		156

Source: Tin (2008: 122)

TABLE 2 Types and number of programmes offered by HEIs under the Ministry of Education

No.	Type of programme	No. of courses
1	First degree	50
2	Diploma	22
3	Masters	41
4	M. Research	24
5	PhD	20
6	Human Resource Development Program	169
Total		326

Source: Government of the Union of Myanmar (2004: 39)

Higher Education Policy and Reforms in Myanmar

Between 1997 and 2000, five seminars were conducted by the Ministry of Education to discuss the quality of higher education in Myanmar. Issues concerning higher education such as course relevance, credit system, quality of teaching, and utilisation of ICT were covered. As a result, far-reaching resolutions on postgraduate courses, doctoral programmes, doctoral research, facilities, multidisciplinary courses and computer training programmes were achieved (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2010). In the subsequent years, under the Special Four-Year Educational Plan (2000-2004), various strategies were established and implemented for the development of higher education sector in Myanmar. These strategies focused on five core areas: (1) the promotion of quality education, (2) introduction of ICT in education, (3) advancement of research, (4) development of a lifelong learning society, and (5) enhancement of international collaboration. These reform efforts have brought about some positive changes to the higher education sector. Through a 30-Year Long-

Term Education Plan (2001/02-2030/31), the government is placing additional emphasis on the development of human resource and lifelong learning while preserving the national identity and national values (The Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004). Developing human resource is a key focus area in Myanmar's efforts to consolidate its higher education sector so as to meet the increasing demand for human capital. One of the strategies to handle the shortage of human resource is by utilising the expertise of retired academics, for instance, in the establishment of the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science, Medical Science, Technology, Agriculture, Forestry, Livestock and Fishery Sciences. The promotion of open education system is also an attempt to meet the rapid increase in the demand for tertiary education. The distance education universities of Yangon and Mandalay have been converted into universities of open education. This more flexible and open system has provided an alternative method to teaching and learning in the country. Under the 30-year Long Term Education Development Plan, Myanmar is aiming at improving its higher education, including the development of human resource, utilisation of ICT at HEIs, expansion of research capacity, and promoting quality education (SEAMEO RIHED, 2008).

Access and Participation in Higher Education

Myanmar is aiming to achieve equitable development in all its geographical regions which are divided up into 24 development zones. According to Naing (2009b), the government is opening more and more schools and upgrading old ones so that every child has access to basic education, and opening universities of particular subjects for local young people to pursue higher education in their own regions. As a result, the population of graduates of the nation is on the increase. The expansion of Myanmar's higher education is hoped to promote equitable and accessible development in all the various regions. In fact, each development zone now possesses at least one arts and science university, one degree conferring technological institute and one computer science institute (Tin, 2008; Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004). Despite the increasing numbers of HEIs for the younger generation to further their tertiary education, Myanmar students who have opted to pursue education in foreign countries has increased significantly from the academic year 2007- 08 (Tong, 2010). The declining quality of the state education system has driven students abroad for better study and qualifications opportunities. This is an option only for the rich and upper classes, who can afford to send their children abroad (Lall, 2008). Over the past five years, there are many outstanding students in Myanmar, including those who passed the matriculation examination and are in the top-ten overall sought university education abroad on scholarship programmes (Tong, 2010).

Internationalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation of higher education in Myanmar is still limited. All the 158 HEIs in Myanmar are state-run institutions (Naing, 2009a). The Special Four-Year Educational Plan (2000-2004) has provided impetus to HEIs to form linkages and

collaborations with international institutions and research organisations so as to harness local and foreign sources for the development of the higher education sector. The Long-Term Education Plan has further created an upsurge in the number of international and regional collaborations such as in the forms of Memorandum of Understandings (MoU), training programmes, conferences, workshops, seminars, joint research programmes and student and staff exchange. Such efforts are particularly critical to the development of human capital and intellectual capacity of the country. Cross border student mobility are usually via official channels managed and sponsored by the Ministry of Education. Under various higher education programmes, students can go abroad and access higher education in foreign countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand, India and other neighbouring countries. Unfortunately, there is no available data on the number of international students in Myanmar, which is believed to be extremely low.

The Developing of Research Capacities

As compared to other countries in the region, research and development in Myanmar are lagging behind. It is due to inadequate research funding, shortage of facilities and human resource, as well as a lack of research culture (Tin, 2008). In fact, “the most serious factor hindering research in Myanmar is the need to further enhance a research culture, ...an abiding belief in research as a necessary tool for development” (Soe & Tuu, 2000: 11). A number of education plans have been drawn to build universities’ research capacities on basic and applied research. There are initiatives to upgrade research facilities and increase the funding for research by the government. Research centres at the various institutions are also being upgraded under the long-term education development plan. These centres are located within the HEIs (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004: 53-54), for example:

1. **The Universities Research Centre (URC), Yangon University**
It assists and fosters research activities by providing research facilities and guidance to students and faculty.
2. **Asia Research Centre, Yangon University**
It assists and fosters scientific research activities and collaborates with the industry.
3. **Microbiology Research Centre, Myitkyina University**
It is a microbiology laboratory focusing on the research of fauna and flora of the region.
4. **Aquaculture Research Centre, Yangon University**
It conducts research on the breeding of various species of fish (both local and foreign).
5. **New Century Biotechnology Development Centre, Yangon University**
It provides knowledge and awareness on biotechnology to the public, leads the way to public-private partnership ventures at HEIs for the development of research activities.

6. Pathen University Biotechnology Laboratory

It focuses on the production of bio-fertilizers for community needs, the production of bio-antiseptic and the cultivation and extraction of medicines from traditional Myanmar medicinal plants.

There is an emerging trend among HEIs to provide research services to government departments and private enterprises through these research centres. Most of these centres are located in major universities. In contrast, the research capacity of other institutions is still limited. They have limited financial resources, poor research facilities, poor and limited human resources for research, development and commercialisation activities.

“Developing human resource is a key focus area in Myanmar’s efforts to consolidate its higher education sector so as to meet the increasing demand for human capital.”

Accreditation and Quality Assurance

At present, every country in ASEAN, except Myanmar has an agency responsible for accreditation and quality assurance, either within their Ministry of Education or without (Vroeijsstijn, 2009). Nonetheless, the country’s interest in quality assurance is acknowledged within the ASEAN University Network (AUN), when in 2002, the 3rd AUN-Quality Assurance Workshop entitled “QA Practices: Teaching Best, Learning Best” with the focus on the sharing of good practices in teaching and learning, was held in Yangon, Myanmar. As a result with the support from ASEAN, the AUN (which comprises of 20 leading universities from 10 ASEAN countries) is offering training programmes in various aspects to enhance the quality of higher education at the Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) countries, including Myanmar (Gajaseni, 2007).

The Challenges and Future Developments

Myanmar is rather behind in social-economic development, which to a certain degree underlies the slow progress of its higher education sector. In fact, the worsening socio-economic situation in the country has resulted in the inadequate development of many of the social services available to the population. Education is the most deprived sector as public expenditure on education in Myanmar is amongst the lowest in the world (European Commission, 2007). The higher education sector is confronted with issues such as shortages of equipment, teaching and learning materials, and more importantly quality teaching staff. These issues have adversely affected the standards of HEIs in the country, particularly the newly established ones.

“The Myanmar government hopes to achieve education reforms through a 30-year Long Term Education Development Plan (2001/02-2030/31). Successful implementation of the projects under the first phase of the plan has contributed to the multifaceted development in the higher education sector.”

Much investment and tremendous effort will have to be made in order to improve the quality of higher education and to gain recognition at the international level. The Myanmar government hopes to achieve education reforms through a 30-year Long Term Education Development Plan (2001/02-2030/31). Successful implementation of the projects under the first phase of the plan has contributed to the multifaceted development in the higher education sector. The plan to date has enormously contributed in developing qualified human resource by increasing the equity and accessibility of higher education in the country (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004). It has also upgraded the research facilities and established new research centres. Such efforts have renewed university communities' interest towards research. Through its 'one campus-multi-system', the country hopes to promote lifelong learning in the society as the system allows convenient learning hours, flexible entry equipments and create wider access for tertiary education. Other on-going reforms include the introduction of new teaching methodologies, modernisation of curricular, improvement of faculty training and expansion of HEIs. All these aim at building a quality higher education system in Myanmar, which ultimately hope to contribute positively to the socioeconomic growth and development of the country (Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2004).

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