



The Progress and Challenges of Higher Education in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar's education reforming plans were set up often under different kinds of governments with the aim of changing its education system. In 2012, "Comprehensive Education Sector Review" (CESR) was launched by the Ministry of Education (MoE) with the aim of analyzing the situation of education and shaping new policies to draft a comprehensive education plan by 2014. Under the leadership of the democratic government, a "New Education Law" was approved by the Parliament in 2014 and did amend. Based on the outcome of those two education policies and laws, the latest reforming plan which is called National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) was launched in 2015 by the democratic government. This NESP education reform is a long-term plan with two periods. The first period is from 2015 to 2021 and the second period is from 2022 to 2030. This NESP aims to reform the whole education sector from primary level to higher education level. This research focuses on the higher education reform section in the first period, between 2015 and 2021. In this research paper, there were two objectives which were (1) to identify the progress of the higher education reforming plan and (2) to examine the challenges of higher education reform in Myanmar. The qualitative research method was used to collect data. Approximately, six participants were interviewed. This research found that the higher education reform plan (during 2015 and 2021) brings some positive impacts such as increasing budget spending on education, improving university authority, and educational opportunities for its stakeholders. However, the higher education reforming plan did not reach what it aimed and faced several challenges including an insufficient budget, resistance to changing the stakeholders, the harms of Covid-19 and political instabilities.

Keywords: Myanmar's higher education, education reform, university autonomy, National Education Strategic Plan (NESP),

1. Introduction

The education system of Myanmar was one of the best education systems in Asia until 1962 before the military government took power (Vrieze, 2017). However, it was changed from the best to the worst education system under the military government, in which they cut government spending on education and emphasized memorizing learning. Although Myanmar obtained independence in 1948, its military government regime was about 50 years, from 1962 to 2011 (BBC News, 2020). During this period the military government practiced isolation for 50 years. As a result, the higher education infrastructure of Myanmar such as buildings, libraries, and laboratories had experiences of luck in development (Kamibeppu & Chao, 2017). By leading Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner, the new democratic government that won the 2015 election had made the education reform process the top national priority to form sustainable development and equitable economic growth (Teacircleford, 2017).

To form a better education in Myanmar, four main problems needed to be solved. The first one is, the lack of decentralization that the administration of educational institutions has been greatly centralized by the government, and the educational stakeholders are not allowed to be involved in the process of educational policies and educational laws. When the higher educational institutions could not set up their own rules or lacked university autonomy, it caused weak education. For example, university students do not have a choice to choose the course they are interested in as the result of their grade from the matriculation exam is based on accepting the students by the universities. Thus, a student cannot apply English major for higher education even if they are eager to learn that field if that student gets a low grade from that matriculation exam result. When the subjects or departments that the students pursue were not what they are interested in. It only results in a worse situation. In other words, the student who passes the matriculation exam with low grades has neither choice to choose the subjects nor a certain future (Kirkpatrick, & Hlaing,



2013). The second problem is, that the higher education curriculums are outdated and not applicable to the students. Basically, the government publishes and administers the curriculum, course syllabus and textbooks, and orders to use of those same books throughout the country. And the content of the textbooks and the curriculum does not really suit the local community, especially for different ethnic groups. Which has caused a significant problem for Myanmar's education as Myanmar is a diverse country that officially has 135 ethnic groups under the seven-major ethnic groups which speak more than 100 languages and most of the ethnic people from rural areas cannot speak Burmese (Minority Rights Group, 2020). Third, there is no equal access to higher education throughout the country. There are 171 public higher education institutions (HEIs) under the 8 different ministries in Myanmar (Kamibeppu & Chao, 2017). However, nearly half of 33 HEIs were launched in Yangon which is the old capital city of the country and 35 HEIs in Mandalay, the second major city, and only 10 universities can confer doctorate degrees (Kamibeppu, & Chao, 2017). Fourth, most teacher staff from the higher education institutions still need to improve their capacity and the qualifications to provide the essential education to the university students. Thus, the government should initiate continuing professional development programs for each staff based on their roles and responsibilities (Win, 2015). To address those educational problems, it is really important to implement an education reforming process.

The government of Myanmar had considered reforming education as one of the national priorities and had begun reforming education in 2011 with the aim of developing human resources (Soe, Swe, Aye, & Mon, 2017). If the university cannot provide even the basic skills for the students, occurring lack of job opportunities for graduated students won't be a surprising issue. In Myanmar, due to the gap between job requirements and the qualification of graduate students, the students are required to take outside training apart from university education to enter the job market (Mullins & Naing, 2014). For instance, the students have to learn the English language from their primary level, but they have no basic English language skills until they graduate and have to take English language training from outside. It proves that how the education system of Myanmar is far from a great education system. If a student were familiar with the rote learning system, the student would practice that system when they become a teacher, and there is no way to know the value of a great education which is based on critical thinking skills. To address a poor education system trap, the democratic government tried to reform its whole national education.

In 2012, the Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the "Comprehensive Education Sector Review" (CESR), which aimed to analyze the situation of current education, shape new policies and draft a comprehensive education plan by 2014 (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). The national education law or a "New Education law" was approved by the Parliament in 2014 and had amended under the leadership of the democratic government in 2015 (Kamibeppu & Chao, 2017). The reason was to provide the implementation of a complementary reform through the national education system, such as free education for all citizens, compulsory primary education and basic education system expansion up to 13 years, support of nationalities languages and culture, and support for decentralization within the education system. The experiences from those two Education policies and laws produced a brand-new education plan, "National Education Strategic Plan" (NESP) which was formed in 2015 (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). The brand-new education reform plan was a five-year plan from 2016 to 2021 and it was launched by the democratic government and reformed the whole education system of Myanmar from kindergarten to the university level. The goal of NESP is "improving teaching and learning, vocational education and training, research and innovation leading to measurable improvements in student achievement in all schools and educational institutions" (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). As Myanmar is still a developing country, it has several problems such as civil wars, a high rate of economic inequality and poverty, and a huge gap in gender inequality. Therefore, only education development is the main solution to reduce those negative impacts. To bring educational developments requires updating or reforming its education by analyzing how it works and its challenges. That's why, the researcher believe that this research topic is important to study.



1.1 Definition of Terms

Higher Education: Higher education refers to a college or university education where advanced level education is provided as it is beyond a high school. It can also be called tertiary education and is an essential part of obtaining an academic degree.

Reforming Education in Myanmar: Myanmar's reforming education is a structure or plan of educational transformation which aims to bring a better significant change to the whole education system, from primary to higher education. Reforming education is one of the priorities of Myanmar's democratic government to catch up with the international education system.

University Autonomy: University autonomy means a university has the right to set up its own rules or regulations in which higher education institutions are independent and curriculum and academic programs of universities are not influenced by their state.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Myanmar Education System

Myanmar's education is mainly supported and managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and is divided into three main parts, five years of primary education, four years of lower secondary (middle school) and two years of upper secondary (high school) and higher education. From the primary to upper secondary education is considered basic education. Which, through monastic, private, community and other types of schools, a remarkable number of students access basic education (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). Myanmar has provided free education at the primary level since 2011, the lower secondary level since 2013, and then followed the high school level since 2015 (Soe, Swe, Aye, & Mon, 2017). That is why Myanmar has become one of the countries which support free education for the basic education level, from primary to the high school level. In terms of joining universities, the students are required to sit for the matriculation exam which is considered the final exam of high schools (Xinhua, 2018). Indeed, the matriculation exam is the most difficult part for the students as the exam system is based on memorization. The students are required to memorize all the lessons that they have learnt during the whole year. Around 30 percent of students could pass it; the pass rate of matriculation exams at the nationwide level was 33.89 percent in 2017, 32.82 percent in 2018 and 31.44 percent in 2019 (Eleven media news, 2019). Thus, every year, of those about 70 percent of the students who do not pass the matriculation exam faced undesired options; taking the exam again or quitting school.

1.2.2 Myanmar Higher Education

In Myanmar, there are about 171 higher education institutions including colleges, degree colleges and universities. During the 2015-2016 academic year, there were 225,178 full-time students and 411,164 students studying through distance learning (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). Howson and Lall (2019) stated that those who join distance education have financial problems which drive them to access only a very poor distance learning system. Although this system was not sufficient enough, it could offer access to the poor citizens who do not afford to access daily university education. However, Marie Lall (2020) argued that there are some reasons why Myanmar ran one of the largest and possibly worst distance education systems. The previous military regime supported distance education after the experience of the 1988 and 1990 student revolutions. They tried not to have a student gathering and wanted the students to be less interested in the national protest so that they supported distance education and building the universities far away from the central city. Till today, Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) for Lower Myanmar and Mandalay University of Distance Education (MUDE) for Upper Myanmar are operating for distance learning in Myanmar Higher education.

All higher education institutions in Myanmar are state-financed and the way they accept the students is based on the national matriculation exam results that the students must choose the subject according to their high school's final exam scores. Howson and Lall (2019) stated that the operating system of Myanmar universities is also quite different from most of other higher education systems around the world, that curriculum and assessments for the universities are set by the Ministry of Education and hiring



staff is also decided by the government. All staff are transferred from one university to another around the country every a few years and are not able to set up research teams. In other words, most of the universities in Myanmar have no autonomy and research activities. Marie Lall (2020) also argued that Myanmar universities have never had systematic research culture for decades which is a sign of a weak educational structure.

When the education system is not good enough, students and parents from Myanmar have been trying to access better education from foreign countries. During 2011 and 2016, more than 8,000 students left Myanmar annually to study overseas such as in Thailand, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore, North America, or Western Europe (Oxford Business Group, n.d.). The majority of the students have the only hope to be better educated in the country. The democratic government also considered the educational reform plan as a priority and set up the NESP (2016-2021) by emphasizing university autonomous supporting and improving the research skills of the university teachers.

1.2.3 Myanmar's Higher Education Reforming Plan

Higher education was not a priority even in the global policy in the last few decades as goals in the education and the millennium development goals focused on only the primary education. Actually, higher education and economic development have a strong relationship that higher education is fundamental for the social and economic development of a country (Kruss, McGrath, Petersen and Gastrow, 2015). Furthermore, higher education can be considered as the main responsibility for serving the skilled human capital needed in business, government, and industry that HEIs produce the innovative and creative thinking needed for an economically competitive society. As the Myanmar democratic government also wanted to sustain economic growth and compete in the global economy, its HEIs had been reformed to enable greater knowledge production and to develop highly-skilled research centers to support social and economic development (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016).

By accepting foreign aid, reforming Myanmar universities to become Asia's leading universities again was the priority of the country leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She encouraged the United Kingdom and Australia to support the reforming plan of NESP 2016-21 which was set up in 2015 (Howson & Lall, 2019). "Improved teaching and learning, vocational education and training, research and innovation leading to measurable improvements in student achievement in all schools and educational institutions" is the goal of NESP. This new educational reform aimed to change the entire education institutions from basic education to higher education including monastic, faith-based and private education. Basically, the NESP has three strategies related to reforming the Higher Education System (HES).

The 1st strategy: Strengthen higher education governance and management capacity

The 2nd strategy: Improve the quality and relevance of HEIs by Encouraging local teachers to accept quality research and offering effective teaching to provide the students with an effective learning

The 3rd strategy: Expand equitable access to higher education for all students regardless of social background (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016).

1.2.4 The Progress of Myanmar's Higher Education Reform-NESP (2016-2021)

According to the National Education Strategic Plan of 2016-2021, the special higher education reforming process has been begun at the beginning of 2016 and brought some progress to the plan although it is still far from achieving all its goals (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). One of the progress is increasing faculty members in higher education institutions. Within three years of reforming the plan, it could promote the number of deputy-directors general, professors, assistant professors, associate professors, lecturers, and assistant lecturers (Yandanar, 2019). During the 2016-2017 academic year, there were 19,900 teachers at different universities (Ministry of Education Annual Performance Review Report FY 2016-2017, 2017) and this increased up to 22,506 in the 2018-2019 academic year (Ministry of Education Annual Performance Review Report FY 2018-2019, 2019). Furthermore, more than one hundred foreign volunteers and professor experts were assigned to several universities. Meanwhile, 42546 students were given opportunities to stay in 384 Hostels to access



higher education and 16924 staff were provided free accommodation to serve in the educational sectors (Ministry of Education Annual Performance Review Report FY 2016-2017, 2017). Under the reform strategies, some students and teachers were provided educational opportunities and support by the state.

Although higher education governance and management was the key strategy of higher education reform, there was no improvement in university autonomy until 2019. The Ministry of Education stated that if a university becomes autonomous, it must address academic, staffing, administration and financial issues by itself. That is why Myanmar educational experts noted that Myanmar's higher education institutions do not have enough experience in implementing self-determination and it is not easy to form universities autonomous within a short time (Phyu, 2018). On the other hand, at the beginning of this year, in January 2020, Union Minister for Education Dr Myo Thein Gyi said that 14 universities in Myanmar, especially the universities in the main cities of the county, Yangon and Mandalay will surely have university autonomy (Thu, 2020). In Yangon, the university would cooperate with international universities in upgrading and reviewing the existing curriculums and creating new towns for research improvement (Thu, 2020). Although all higher education institutions have not yet become autonomous institutions, this change is a part of significant improvement in higher education as well.

The assistance from foreign nations is a key in implementing the reforming education plan since NESP is a big expense plan for Myanmar. Some foreign nations such as Australia, Switzerland and Japan support a significant amount of aid for education. Actually, since 2013, Switzerland had been providing \$5million annually to support vocational training sectors: sewing, electrical, beauty, carpentry and hospitality. However, Japan and Australia's support for the education sector started in 2017. For instance, the Australian government agreed to provide \$50.8 million between 2017 and 2020 for the implementation of NESP. Under Japan's Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP) Scheme, Japan committed to supporting a \$501,075 grant for building schools and roads (Standards rising across the Myanmar educational system, n.d.). Moreover, the government spending on Education has also increased more than double over the past six years. The budget allocations to MoE was 1,784 billion MMK in 2018. It is equal to 7.75 percent of the government's expenditure (UNICEF Myanmar, n.d.). Among them, 85.45 percent were used in basic education and only 10.76 percent were for higher education. The rest of the budget was spent on Non-Formal Education and Innovation (UNICEF Myanmar, n.d.).

2. Objectives

- 1) To identify the progress of Myanmar's higher education reform
- 2) To examine the challenges of higher education reform in Myanmar

3. Materials and Methods

The study of the current situation and challenges of Myanmar's higher education reform was mainly focused on this research and used the qualitative research method. Both primary and secondary data were used in this research and conducted a semi-structured interview.

3.1 Data Collection

In terms of data collection, the information data were collected through primary and secondary sources in this research. In terms of the primary sources, six participants were interviewed. For the secondary sources, the information data were collected from the government reports, other published articles and news which are related to the higher education reform in Myanmar. After collecting the data and information, the researcher analyzed what the authors acknowledged and the perspective of the stakeholders on Myanmar education reform and then discussed the progress of Myanmar's higher education and its challenges.

3.2 Participants

Six respondents participated in this research paper. Approximately, three university professors and three university students were selected from the urban and rural regions to know whether they have equitable educational support from the government or not. This research aimed to identify that university



professors and students from rural areas have received equitable access to higher education same as those professors and students who are from urban regions. Normally, there is an inequality gap between urban and rural universities as the educational support from the government is not the same. The universities from the rural region used to get less support than urban universities. However, expanding equitable access to higher education for all students regardless of social background is one of the objectives of current Myanmar's higher education reform.

For university professors, there were two professors who are from urban areas and one professor from a rural area selected based on their work experiences and their workplace. They have to have at least 3 years of work experience and they must currently work in the urban universities such as Mandalay University or in the rural universities such as Myeik University. According to the NESP report, there are 171 higher education institutions in Myanmar (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016). Among them, nearly half of higher education institutions are only in Yangon and Mandalay, the most famous cities of Myanmar. Therefore, the researcher would like to know whether there is any different support from the government among urban and rural universities.

For students, there is only one criterion that the students have to be at least second year because they should be able to provide more detailed information about education reform that may have some changes in universities. However, students were chosen from both distance learning and traditional learning program to compare the perspective of students who are attending the universities through the different structures. Table 1 shows the list of participants in this research.

Table 1 List of Participants

| | Position | Experience of Teaching/Learning | University | Interview Date (dd/mm/yy) |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Participant A | Professor | 11 | Wet Yangon | 5/4/21 |
| Participant B | Professor | 3 | Mandalay | 10/4/21 |
| Participant C | Assistant-Lecturer | 5 | Mandalay | 15/4/21 |
| Participant D | Student | Second Year | Myeik | 17/4/21 |
| Participant E | Student | Second Year | Dagon | 22/4/21/ |
| Participant F | Student | Third Year | Mandalay | 30/4/21 |

3.3 Limitation of the study

The interview section was interrupted for a while due to the military coup situation in Myanmar which caused some limitations and weaknesses for this study. First, it was hard to contact the participants from Myanmar as there was no internet and Wi-Fi access in Myanmar at that time. Thus, the researcher tried to contact those who stayed outside of Myanmar for their exchange program and the researcher could find only one interviewee. Second, the researcher tried to reach out to the university teachers from Myanmar as soon as the internet was reopened in Myanmar. However, it is still hard to contact them due to the military coup situation getting worse and the teachers being involved in Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Therefore, the researcher sent the interview questions to the participants except for one professor who was able to make an interview through video call as she was arriving in a foreign country. As a consequence of the first and second limitations, a small simple size became the third weakness or limitation of this study. As mentioned above, the researchers used a mixed-method, collecting primary data for qualitative and secondary data for documentary review in this research paper. For the primary data, the researcher could interview only 6 participants. In fact, the sample size should be bigger and add more 2 to 3 key stakeholders who had the responsibility for higher education reform in Myanmar.

4. Results

This part will present about research result, in which all the responses of interviewees regarding the progress and challenges of Myanmar education reform will be reported. Basically, this part will mainly express the interviewees' responses to report how the situation of higher education reform is in terms of



changes and progress, the ratio of teachers and students, and the gender equality situation under the reforming process. In each topic, the responses of university teachers will be expressed first. Then, it will discuss how university students are different from what university teachers reported.

4.1 Progress of Higher Education Reform

All the professors from this research agreed that the situation of Myanmar's higher education reform could bring some positive impacts on Myanmar Education even though it is not enough to say a successful reform plan. Participants A and B answered that the current education reform has brought the universities autonomy and encourages the lecturers and professors to do their own research projects. In which, the university promotes the position of the professors and lecturers based on the performance of their research projects and performance. Moreover, they responded that their university's exchange programs and conferences programs with foreign universities are also improving during the reforming process.

"I also got a scholarship for my exchange program, and I am currently arriving in the United States. I believe that the scholarship opportunities for Myanmar university teachers and students are getting better during this education process. Because, at my university, there were only about two professors who got scholarship opportunities before 2015. However, it increased more than double that there were about 5 professors provided to study overseas for their further educational opportunities during the 2015 and 2020" (Participant A, personnel communication, April 5, 2021).

However, participant C, who is from a rural area reported that she has not seen any noticeable changes at the university level although the changes are remarkable for basic education level during this reforming process. She argued that her university does not have its university autonomy yet and still practices the same system as before. In fact, all university teachers consider that university autonomy is greatly important, and the quality of universities will improve if all universities have a self-government system. They all responded that the changes of the educational reform may remarkably reach the university in the future as the changes of the education reform can be seen in the basic education level within five years. In conclusion, while the researcher interviewed three university teachers, two out of three university teachers responded that Myanmar's higher education reform is getting better while one stated that the specific changes have not been seen yet at the university level. However, all of them hope that this reform plan may be achieved in the long term, and it was not interrupted by the military coup which has happened since the first day of February 2021.

The response of the university students is different from what the university teachers answered. All the university students reported that they have not seen any changes during the education reform process. Participant D who joins distance education mentioned that she does not think that the education reform plan works because she feels the same as before and does not see any noticeable changes during her university student life. Participants E and F also mentioned similar messages that they do not see any improvement under the education reform plan.

"I believe it is still the same because teachers do not allow you to question her teaching methods and if you did, you have to leave the class. The textbooks that were used to teach us to involve very narrow views and focus on superficial lessons" (Participant F, personnel communication, April 30, 2021).

All students from this research considered that the teaching system and structure of the university are still the same and nothing much changed during their student life. The students from both sectors, traditional learning and distance learning could not mention any changes to this current reform plan. They all just mentioned that everything is running as the previous method, that there is no university entrance exams system yet, and it all depends on the score of the matriculation exam results. This means the students do not have chances to study the field that they are interested in. They must take the course based on the score of the high school final exam results, as in the old system. They all considered that the education reform plan in Myanmar might be incredibly challenging as the whole structure needed to be reformed. However, all of them responded with the same answers that it is still possible to accomplish the reform plan, and it can be



successful if the democratic government could continue reforming the process, but of course, it will take time.

4.2 Challenges of Higher Education Reform

In terms of challenges in the reforming process, the issue of teacher and student ratio, gender inequality, and adapting research culture were mainly mentioned by the participants. Of those university teacher's interviewees, two reported that they have no fair ratio of teacher and students. They mentioned that a teacher must teach more than one hundred students in one class, and it is hard to handle the class. On the other hand, participant B who is from Mandalay university argued that her university has a fair ratio of students and teachers.

“It has a fair ratio of students and teachers at my university. The number of students in my university is small, not more than 40 in one class. However, most of the universities in our country cannot have a fair ratio. Normally, they have at least a hundred students for one class.” (Participant B, personnel communication, April 8, 2021).

In terms of students' responses to student and teacher ratio, all students from this research stated that they believe the teacher and student ratio is not good enough to study. There are over one hundred students in some classes with one teacher, which makes it super crowded and ineffective teaching.

“There is not a fair ratio of teachers and students at my university. The reason is, there are more than a hundred students in one class with only one teacher. It is not possible to handle that number of students by the teacher and to do practical activities” (Participant E, personnel communication, April 27, 2021).

All of the students from this research stated that their university still uses memorizing systems and does not have any effective practical classes either. They considered the changes had not reached yet to their expectation or impression result. But they believe the changes can be seen in the future as now they can see some changes in the basic education and improvement during the educational reforming process.

For the gender inequality situation, all the university teachers stated that they have no discrimination based on gender or race at their universities and all are treated equally. However, participants A and C discussed that the required score for the students to join the universities is still different. Although the students are treated equally by the teachers and the university compounds or communities, the required scores of the male and female students are still different in some subjects.

“There is one issue concerning educational opportunities: the limited score for the female students is higher than male students for geology major at our university. When we started accepting the students for that major, 90 percent of the students were male students while there was only 10 percent of female students. Moreover, the same curriculum is used in both rural and urban areas, but the universities in the rural areas do not have enough school materials for the practical learning part, which causes unfair opportunity for learning and teaching among the universities” (Participant C, personnel communication, April 10, 2021).

The responses from the university students were like what the university teacher answered. All of the interviewee students stated that there is not any gender discrimination behavior at their universities. On the other hand, participant F reported that there may be some discrimination issues based on gender differences although there have been no noticeable issues during studying times at university. Basically, they all noted the different scores of universities based on gender. For example, the required score for medical universities depends on gender and female students need to score more than male students. They all argued that they do not like this system and wish to end it soon as the system is nonsense.

Apart from those above issues, the teachers from Myanmar are also facing challenges regarding adapting research culture as well. Participant A from Wet Yangon University stated that the reform plan encourages university teachers to improve their research skills. She mentioned that conducting research projects were counted as one of the main measurements when university teachers were promoted to higher



positions as the reform plan targeted to support the research skills of university teachers. However, she highlighted that most teachers had been facing a bit of challenge as they were not familiar with conducting research projects and when it came out with plagiarism or any other mistakes. Moreover, she continues to note that the government spending budget on education does not reach up to its demand although it was increasing compared to the past. For example, the Myanmar government's budget spending on its education was increasing each year, and the current amount of government spending on education is about \$1.85 billion which is equal to 8.4 percent of the Union budget (UNICEF Myanmar, 2020). The way of spending the educational budget has changed as well. At the beginning of the reform, HEIs were provided about ten percent of its total education budget, but it increased up to over seventeen percent after the five years of reform. However, it hasn't reached what it requires. When the budget is not enough, it harms the process of developing research projects for the university's teachers and causes crowded classrooms and an unfair ratio of students and teachers' problems.

5. Discussion

This section will divide into two parts. The first part will mention the factors which drove the progress of education reform and the second part will demonstrate the factors which are remaining as challenges in higher education reform.

5.1 *The Progress of Myanmar's Higher Education Reform*

There are three factors that lead to better educational reform in Myanmar. These three factors are the government support for research sectors at universities, providing university autonomy, and improving foreign engagement during the reform plan. Moreover, all teachers who are participants in this research reported that the situation of Myanmar Higher Education is getting better after five years of reform because of these three factors.

5.1.1 *Government Support on Teachers' Quality*

All the participant teachers stated that the government has supported improving the quality of the university teachers through imposing research projects, training, and exchange programs for the university teachers. According to the Ministry of Education Annual Performance Review Report FY 2018-2019 (2019), both writing a research paper and publication paper has increased in Arts and Science Universities and Technological Universities, Universities of Computer Studies and Education Colleges in 2018-19. Since the education reform plans were focused on Myanmar, teacher training programs were also launched. For example, the British Council Myanmar's project, the English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) project run to support the quality of education by providing language proficiency and methodology training for all state teachers education from 24 education colleges and universities throughout Myanmar. The project was run by the collaboration of the British Council Myanmar and the Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) and co-funded by the UK Department of International Development. That training program was a two-year project from 2014 to 2016 (Ulla, 2018). In order to support the education reforming sectors, the government increased its budget spending under the reform process. During 2019-2020, the budget spending of the Ministry of Education (MoE) increased up to about MMK 2,685 billion or \$1.85 billion which is 8.4 percent of the Union budget while it was 8.3 percent of the total union budget in 2018 and 3.66 percent of total union budget in 2011 (UNICEF Myanmar, 2020). In which, 17 percent of the total budget of the MoE was used for higher education while over 74 percent and 6 percent represented Basic Education and the Department of Technical, Vocational Education and Training. After the Ministries of Electricity and Energy, Planning and Finance, and Defence, the MoE has also become the fourth largest budget holder ministry. In fact, the government spending on education had significantly increased and reached 2.9 percent of its GDP in 2020 although it was about 0.71 percent in 2012, the year before educational reform had started (UNICEF Myanmar, 2020).



5.1.2 Supporting University Autonomy

Due to the education reform plan, the situation of supporting university autonomy also improved. The university teachers, participants A and B mentioned that before the reform plan there was no university autonomy and all are managed by MOE, however, the university autonomy was noticeably supported by the reform plan. They reported that under the reforming process, they have more freedom than before. Soe Thant Zin (2020) also argued that 16 universities were granted autonomy under the reforming process. Those universities are the University of Yangon, Mandalay University, Yangon University of Economics, Yangon University of Education, Sagaing University, Yangon University of Foreign Language, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, Yangon Technological University, Mandalay Technological University, Technological University-Mandalay, the University of Computer Studies-Yangon, University of Computer Studies-Mandalay, the University of Information Technology- Yangon, Myanmar Institute of Information Technology-Mandalay, the university of Distance Education-Yangon, and the University of Distance Education Mandalay. The director-general of the Department of Higher Education, U Thein Win also said that the university management issues would not be interfered with by the ministry. As supporting university's autonomy was one of the main strategies, the reforming plan focused on it and could provide autonomy for those sixteen universities. In fact, these were some positive changes after five years of the reforming process but still need to improve.

5.1.3 Foreign Engagement

In this education reform, another positive change is the success of the foreign engagement. Participant A from this research stated that their university has better relations with foreign universities and held exchange activities. She believed that these improvements or exchange opportunities occurred as the result of education reform. Soe San also (2021) argued that Myanmar's education reform cannot be accomplished by the Ministry of Education alone. Over the last few years, the role of international aid and nongovernmental organization in Myanmar's education reform has played a big role. Rupik Marsden (2020) also noted that UKaid works together with Myanmar to support the quality of education access for Myanmar students as two of the critical challenges in education policy are how to improve access and how to improve quality. Through UNICEF, UKaid also supported the "Learning Together" project in Rakhine state to support over forty-five thousand students from 163 schools. In which the UK's overall support reached the US \$200 million per year. Galloway (2021) also noted that foreign engagement plays an important role in Myanmar's Higher education reform; European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Japan and others have greatly supported in terms of finance for this current reform. Moreover, Myanmar's academics from the higher education sectors were mainly supported through exchange programs, scholarships, and study tours over the last few years. The graduates from overseas programs which run through international government projects are already returning to Myanmar to be part of the next generation in Myanmar's educational sectors. Under the current reform process, international support networks and research collaboration have greatly developed.

On the contrary, the university students responded that the situation of the Myanmar Education reform has no impact on the university students. The reason is, that they consider the teaching methods and the teaching style of university teachers is still the same. For example, they cannot choose any subject or field that they are interested in as the system of accepting students by the university depends on matriculation exam scores, universities in Myanmar do not have an entrance exam system. Therefore, they have no chance to choose the course or subjects that they are interested in if their score is low in their matriculation exam. Moreover, they reported that the university classroom and student size is still the same, with about a hundred students in one class, and the required score for a female and male student is still different for medical universities. For example, according to the Myanmar education system, to have a chance of attending medical universities, students require to have more than 80 marks out of a hundred in each of the six subjects in their matriculation exams (Kyaw, 2017). In fact, it is harder for female students as the total requirement score is higher than their male counterparts to enter the medical universities in Myanmar (Lwin, 2017). For example, the overall requirement score of female students to join medicine



universities is the score of 510 while male students need to obtain only 590 from their matriculation exam (Su, 2019). For these reasons, the participants in this research consider that there is no significant impact of higher education reform, and it is still using the old system of teaching or accepting students. Additionally, they also mentioned that they hope to see some changes in the reform process at the university level in the near future because they have seen some improvements and changes at the primary and middle school level such as changes in curriculum and teaching methods.

Although all participants mentioned that the situation of the Myanmar Education Reform seems to be getting better, they all worry about the impact of the current political situation in Myanmar on the education reform process. The military coup happened on the first of February of 2021 (Yeung, 2021). All the participants stated that if the military government controls the country again, the education reforming process will not become a successful reform. They mentioned that most of the university teachers and students who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement showed that they were against the military coup. According to the Irrawaddy news (2021), the civil servants who participated in Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), were threatened by the junta. The majority of teachers have been participating in CDM so the schools and universities could not be opened yet. Waa (2021) also expressed that thousands of academic and university staff, about 13,000 have been suspended for involvement in CDM. Moreover, claimed that it would be about 45% of educators from higher education as higher education members were 28,851 according to the Myanmar Statistical Yearbook 2018. Since the end of 2019, the covid-19 breakout has already caused the education reform progress to slow. Now, the military coup may harm more as it stalls entirely the foreign engagement which is a key player in higher education reform in Myanmar. The NESP in the second period (2021-2031) was drafted before the military coup. However, it has been quashed due to political instability, and many educational staff, teachers and students participating in the CDM believe that there will not be any further progress in terms of academics and independence under the military regime.

5.2 Challenges of Myanmar Higher Education Reform

This education reform has four main challenging issues. The first one is, that the university teachers cannot adapt to the research culture although the reform plan encourages building research projects by the university teachers. The university teachers in this research responded that most of the university teachers faced a bit of a challenge under the reforming process because the teachers were not familiar with research projects. Doing research projects by themselves becomes a hard task for university teachers. Participant A mentioned that most university teachers and students do not know how to do research projects as they have never done before. As the result of an unqualified education system that focused on memorization, even the papers of the university teachers appeared as plagiarism and failed the projects. Only a few professors know how to do research papers as the international standard and most. That is why it has become a huge challenge for the university teachers in Myanmar's Higher Education reform process. Marie Lall (2020) also stated that Myanmar universities have not had systematic research culture for a few decades. Even today, after the first phase of NESP reform, Myanmar universities' academics are not as research-active as Western ones. The teachers from Myanmar will need a period of time to adapt to the critical teaching system and research culture by jumping out of the rote learning trap or the memorization-based education system.

The second challenge is outdated curriculum and practicing memorizing systems. Marie Lall (2020) also indicated that the curricula and subjects' syllabuses in Myanmar Higher education are outdated and not linked to the research because the educational institutions in Myanmar have not had access to international content, models, and standards for a few decades. As the education ministry set up what to teach, including choosing textbooks and the students have to learn content by rote learning system, the teaching methodology which is based on a teacher-centered approach and rote learning system become a part of the problem in this reform. The reason is the students are not expected to demonstrate independent critical thinking skills under the rote learning system even if the current educational reform wants to focus on the critical thinking of the students.



The third one is the insufficient budget for the current expensive reform. As mentioned above, the improvement of budget spending is very impressive; however, it has not reached yet its requirement and still as the challenges of the reform process that Vrieze stated this educational reform is an expensive plan and require about \$2.1billion annually while the government can spend under \$2billion on Education. All the university teachers in this research also argued that insufficient budget also becomes a challenging one in this reforming process. When the government cannot support enough for the costs of research projects, some university teachers, especially the teachers from the rural areas cannot do enough research projects. According to Marie Lall (2020), the universities in remote areas of the country face more challenges in that they do not have enough internet access and the books and materials that they have are still out of date. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the schools in Myanmar were closed for a year as the majority of students have no internet access to the internet and technology required for remote learning (CHI Covid-19 impacting education, 2021). The teachers and students from this research also responded that their universities could not also provide enough universities supplies for research projects, school building, libraries, and internet access which harm the process of doing research and active learning. All the participant interviewees point out that there is not enough university building, technical and financial support, and an unfair ratio of students and teachers' issues occurs when the educational budget is not sufficient.

The last challenge is the current political instability of the country, the military coup which started on the first of February 2021. Cornish (2021) argued that along with the military coup situation in Myanmar, the majority of foreign donors' organizations responded how they will handle their aid policies not to benefit the military. As a result, the United Kingdom has stated that it will review its aid programs to Myanmar. Meanwhile, the government of New Zealand and the United States announced that they will make sure their aid does not benefit the military and will redirect development aid away from the military and toward civil society. However, it is not easy to adapt those structures to the international aid programs and will take time (Decobert, 2021). All the interviewees from this research also stated that Myanmar's education will not be successful if political instability keeps going and the NLD government does not possess the power. Most of the students and teachers have participated in CDM since the beginning of the coup as they believe that there will not have a chance to get a quality education under military control. All in all, educational reform could bring a lot of changes but still have challenging situations. However, this current political crisis causes more difficulties for the reforming process, and it is impossible to say educational reform will achieve its goal under this unstable political situation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

In summary, the researcher has analyzed the progress of the education reforming process and challenges of its. To improve students' skills for the job market and catch up with the rest of the world, Myanmar's Higher Education has been reformed. The reforming process has begun in 2012 when MoE launched the Comprehensive Education Sector Review to form new policies and draft a comprehensive education plan by 2014. The new education law was approved in 2014 by the parliament and amended in 2015 under the democratic government. After that, the brand-new education reform plan, "National Education Strategic Plan" (NES) was formed, which is a five-year plan from 2016 to 2021 and aims to reform the whole sector of Myanmar Education.

Before the military coup, the situation of Myanmar's education reforming was forwarding in a good way and it could be considered a good reform plan. The reason is that education reform brought some positive changes to Myanmar's higher education sectors. The first improvement is launching research projects for university teachers. Both teachers and students from Myanmar did not research activities until the reform plan was set up. Today, this reform began to introduce how to do the research projects to the university teachers. Moreover, some of the universities were granted autonomy by this current reform plan so that those universities will become the ones that can arrange the government and governance sector by themselves. Another improvement was the impressive increasing amount of government spending on the



educational sector. Even though it does not meet what is planned, it still could be counted as one of the big positive changes.

In this research, four main challenges were found. The first challenge is the “rote learning trap” that which the students are taught with a rote learning system and those students become teachers and do not know how to use critical learning methods. Even if they were provided opportunities to do research projects, they do not know how to adapt to the research structure and face difficulties. The second challenge is outdated curriculum issues that the universities need to have an updated curriculum by having its autonomy. Till now, only 16 universities have the university autonomy among over one hundred universities. The third one is insufficient budget spending by the government and the reformed plan seemed expensive for Myanmar. The last one is the current political instability that the second part of the reform or NESP-2 (2021-2031) was reviewed but it has been quashed due to the military coup (Galloway, 2021).

Actually, the Covid-19 outbreak has harmed the reforming process since the end of 2019, but now the instability of the country will harm the whole sector of education reform. All in all, the reforming plan (2016-2021) could bring some impressive changes but still face those mentioned challenging issues and still need to figure it out. However, the researcher also believes that it is not possible to overcome those challenging issues under the political instability and military government.

6.2. Recommendations

- To support the critical thinking system, the main barriers which are the matriculation exam system need to be removed from the country’s education system.
- The support of the teachers from the rest of the educational sectors is needed to students have the experience of critical learning as the university students were also from the primary one.
- University autonomy should be provided in different regions, not only in two main cities.
- The other important recommendation is to remove the system of discrimination of university’s requirement scores. As gender-based scores have been practiced in Myanmar for a long time, most people and students from Myanmar might think it is a normal situation and nothing important.
- The last recommendation is to keep the great support from international nongovernmental organizations and foreign engagement and increase its budget for the higher education sector.

In terms of further study, the researcher considers more conducting research is required to assess the impact of current political instability on this reform plan. A bigger sample size of participants, especially the participants from rural should be used so that the researcher of this research could not contact most of the participants from Myanmar when conducting this research.

7. References

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