

# MYANMAR'S HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM: WHICH WAY FORWARD?



CHINLONE

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CHINLONE's main goal is to support Myanmar universities in their quest to profoundly reframe the national Higher Education System (HES). In the heart of every citizen of Myanmar, the word "chinlone" holds a very special place, since it is the name of a traditional sport, very popular among local youngsters, based on a non-competitive mechanism whose objective is not winning or losing, but how spectacularly the game is played while passing the ball back and forth to each other using feet, knees, and heads. In other words, while enjoying the game of "chinlone", the players' experience can be considered as a team-building exercise, as demonstrated by the way they support each other to keep the ball in motion.

As prescribed by the rules of this traditional sport, the CHINLONE platform aims to support the reorganization of Myanmar HES in a non-competitive environment where different institutions can actually work together for a shared goal. Accordingly, the project encourages local stakeholders to engage in the modernization of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by socializing all actors in the process (university governance representatives, faculty members, staff, and, above all, students) in a harmonious and integrated manner. To do so, the CHINLONE consortium includes three European universities - the University of Bologna (UNIBO), the University of Granada (UGR), and Uppsala University (UU); one EU university association, the Coimbra Group; five Myanmar universities - Dagon University, the University of Mandalay, the University of Yangon, Yangon University of Economics, and Yezin Agricultural University; along with the Ministry of Education of Myanmar. As a result, the exchange with EU universities is expected to put local HEIs in the position to be trained from different perspectives, ranging from university quality assurance management, the design and implementation of updated degree programs based on a "student-centered" approach, to the drafting of sound internationalization strategies that can lead to the development of fully functional International Relation Offices (IROs).

The drafting of this Preliminary Report stands out as the most relevant by-product of the tasks and activities performed under the framework of the first project's Work Package (more information on the CHINLONE project activities here: <https://site.unibo.it/chinlone/it/project/activities>). Accordingly, after having finalized the fieldwork and interviews with the aim of collecting detailed information and data on the current status of HES, the analysis has sought to be a timely assessment of the key issues, obstacles, and aspirations of specific target groups in Myanmar's academia, embodied respectively by university leaders, faculty members, administrative staff and students. For more information on the CHINLONE project's achievements: <https://site.unibo.it/chinlone/it/results>.



# CONTENTS

<b>5</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Governance</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>Teaching</b>
<b>27</b>	<b>Research</b>
<b>35</b>	<b>International relations</b>
<b>43</b>	<b>Policy recommendations</b>

The focus is not about  
winning or losing,  
but how beautifully  
one plays the game.



# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODU



# DUCTION



In the last few years, Myanmar has undergone a profound political metamorphosis that has resulted in the suspension of economic sanctions that had been applied against the country, the normalization of its relations with the international community, and a deep political transition. These crucial achievements have gradually paved the way for the formulation of major structural reforms that involved a wide range of issues and sectors.

The reform of Myanmar's National Education System (which has not been modified for more than 20 years) has undoubtedly become of the utmost importance as this vital challenge needs to be effectively addressed to put the country on the path towards a lasting and sustainable development (and also in order to achieve the national goal of turning Myanmar into an upper Middle Income Country by 2030). Such a process has already taken shape in the following three steps:

- » in 2012, the Ministry of Education (MoE) launched the "Comprehensive Education Sector Review" (CESR), with the aim of analyzing the current education situation, shaping new policies, and drafting a comprehensive education plan by 2014;
- » as a result, in 2014 the Parliament approved a new "National Education Law" (NEL), amended in 2015. The NEL and subsequent Amendment aimed to provide a national framework for the implementation of a range of complementary reforms across the national education system (still under debate), such as: recognition of the right of all citizens to free, mandatory education at the primary level; establishment of a standards-based education quality assurance system (thanks to the establishment of ad hoc commissions for quality assurance); expansion of the basic education system to 13 years; support for the learning of nationalities' languages and cultures; and greater decentralization within the education system;
- » these two experiences laid the foundations for the launch, in late 2015, of a brand new five-year "National Education Strategic Plan – 2016/2021" (NESP).

This last plan stands out as an overarching reform impacting the Myanmar Educational System as a whole - with a particular emphasis on the primary education sector - encompassing nine goals/transformational shifts, as enumerated on the next page.

**Diagram NESP GOAL  
and nine Transformational Shifts**



With regard to the Higher Education System (HES), NESP sets three specific strategies:

01. Strengthening higher education governance and management capacity;
02. Encouraging local teaching staff to undertake quality research and offering effective teaching, in order to provide students with an effective learning experience;
03. Improving the access to a high quality education with no discrimination and regardless of the students' social and economic backgrounds.

The first goal implies a shift of the national HES from a centralized model of governance, leadership, and management to a different paradigm in which each institution enjoys greater institutional autonomy in setting its own goals, while accepting greater responsibility and accountability. In the coming years, according to the governmental plan, all Myanmar HEIs should reach autonomy on different levels: organizational, academic, staffing, and financial. In order to consolidate both the knowledge/expertise and the legal basis to perform their new functions, Myanmar HEIs have been recently asked to draft university charters to set guidelines and regulations for the establishment of university councils.

While this first process is ongoing, Myanmar HEIs have also been requested to put their efforts into capacity-building actions to better train their staff to teach and to carry out research in today's global era. As this preliminary report will show, teaching staff in Myanmar is generally overstretched both in terms of numbers (referring to the 134 HEIs under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, in the academic year 2017/2018, 21,157 lecturers were teaching 835,433 students) and of the different types of activities and tasks that they are asked to perform (given that the teaching staff is often entrusted with administrative duties). NESP acknowledges the key role of teachers in shaping and molding the national education system, and, accordingly, it includes several support actions by asking for the collaboration of international partners. The CHINLONE project itself represents a clear example of the establishment of international partnerships aimed at fulfilling such goals.

As far as the third point is concerned, the Myanmar education system follows a 5-4-2 model (until the NEL and the NEL Amendment are fully implemented), i.e., a model encompassing a five-year primary education stage, a four-year lower secondary education stage, and, possibly, a two-year upper secondary education stage. At the end of this path, students aged 16 take "matriculation exams" which not only measure their academic performance but also consist in a basic requirement for the students' acceptance into higher education. Apart from requirements derived from their academic performance, prospective students with poor socio-economic background need to deal with a lack of financial support, which goes hand in hand with a severe shortage in terms of scholarships, loan systems, and campus facilities like dormitories. The provision of these supports is one of the strong requests that emerged from the CHINLONE interviews with the students.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this preliminary report is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to gather the opinions of specific target groups, namely governance members, teaching staff—as it will be explained in this report next sections, in most cases, Myanmar teaching staff does not only accomplish teaching tasks, but is also appointed for managerial duties in their universities' administration—and students on the current status of Myanmar's HES reform. To achieve this goal, in March and September 2018 the CHINLONE staff interviewed all target groups by following the qualitative research methods of semi-structured interviews and of focus groups. In the interview sections a meaningful sample was taken into account, including 20 HEIs, 35 governance staff members, 120 teaching and administrative staff members, and 45 students. These interview sessions allowed a comparison of the past and present experiences of the actors involved in local academia with their future expectations, especially in light of the enduring challenges and constraints at the core of NESP. What is important to underline is that while governance members and teachers represent a pivotal element of this ongoing transformation, they also report that it is not always easy for them to get their opinions be heard. As for students' views, the consultations have emphasized how crucial it is to take into greater account their positions and their needs, despite the fact that students' centrality is not sufficiently accentuated in the NESP pages. The data and insights obtained from the interviewing sessions have been scrutinized on the basis of four criteria (governance, teaching activities, research activities, and international relations) to get the reader acquainted with an array of key educational issues currently faced by Myanmar educational actors.

As regards the second objective, besides eliciting data and gathering information, the conclusions of this preliminary report point out some policy recommendations aimed at bridging the gap between analysis and practice. At the moment, Myanmar educational situation is quickly changing due to the profound, overarching transformation process that is ongoing, even though many challenges remain to be overcome. Thus, the CHINLONE project seeks to formulate viable and constructive recommendations on the methods with which the Myanmar HEIs can be effectively modernized, while also endeavoring to organize capacity-building activities and knowledge-sharing experiences explicitly designed for Myanmar educational staff by encouraging a proactive attitude nurtured by cooperation, sense of belonging, and team spirit.

With the inception of the HE reform kick-started in 2012, the idea of giving “institutional autonomy” to HEIs had been endorsed. In the Myanmar context, the word “autonomy” is generally understood as the transition from a state-controlled system to a state-guided system allowing universities a degree of freedom to decide their own policies and activities.



# GOVERNANCE

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# GOVERN

MINISTRY OF REFERENCE	SUB-CATEGORY	NUM.
Ministry of Education	Arts and Sciences Universities	42
	Universities of Economics	3
	Universities of Distance Education	2
	Universities of Foreign Languages	2
	Universities and Colleges for Teacher Education	25
	Technological Universities	33
	Universities of Computer Studies	27
<b>Total</b>		<b>134</b>
Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation		7
Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry		1
Ministry of Defence		6
Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture		5
Ministry of Border Affairs		3
Ministry of Transports		2
Ministry of Health and Sports		16
<b>Total</b>		<b>174</b>

Data provided by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, The Republic of Union of Myanmar, November 2018.

# FINANCE



Since the 1960s, Myanmar's HES has been characterized by a high degree of governmental control and intervention in the day-to-day management of HEIs by different ministries. Today, this centralized structure revolves primarily around the Ministry of Education (MoE), coordinating and administering most of the country's HEIs (134 HEIs out of the country's total of 174). The Department of Higher Education (DHE) under the MoE is the governmental body in charge of HEIs' organizational regulations (like the selection and dismissal of Rectors), their academic affairs (final decisions on the introduction of new programs, validation of curricula and their content, setting student intakes, etc.), staffing procedures (allocation of teaching and administrative staff) and the distribution of financial resources among the various institutions (including also procurement procedures and the management of the HEIs' buildings). In addition, the DHE presides over a supplementary group of 40 academic institutions that are fragmented among 7 different ministries.

## THE CONTEXT FOR INCREASED INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

The recent Myanmar educational reforms are shaped around the idea that this over-centralized system leads to different shortcomings, which can be addressed in granting more institutional autonomy to different HEIs. Moreover, a specific provision was included along the lines of the MoE-sponsored CESR, which has explicitly suggested gathering Myanmar's HEIs under a single ministry. Somehow, this process has already started in 2012, when the multi-ministry higher education system was reassessed (in 2012 only half of the 134 HEIs mentioned above were under the MoE, and Myanmar HEIs were scattered across 13 Ministries). According to interviewees, the shortcomings of the present centralized system can be summarized in five main points.

### **1. Excessive bureaucratization**

According to the current decision-making processes, each university needs to address a formal request to the ministry of reference for every change needed in every aspect of academic life. For example, when a HEI needs to buy specific equipment for a laboratory to support research, a request must be sent to the pertinent ministry, which must therefore assess the needs of the HEI, but also its feasibility in terms of budget. This procedure may require months or even years (if the budget has already been allocated for the other expenses). This inverted funnel mechanism not only prevents HEIs from acting promptly in the event of necessity, but also forces university leadership and teaching staff to spend quite some time in administrative reporting. This inefficiency in decision-making processes is even more problematic in this new national political phase, since both the country and its HEIs are subject to pressures from the globalized world's fast transformations.

### **2. Precariousness of the academic leadership**

Interviews have clearly shown that Myanmar academic leadership is working feeling a sensation of continuous precariousness. Rectors are appointed directly by the ministry of reference and their mandate does not have a fix end of term since it is subject to confirmation or removal in accordance with ministerial decisions. For this reason, usually, rectors only passively comply with ministerial directives, with the net effect of discouraging any possible implementation of innovative and distinctive strategies based on objectives, contingencies, and constraints specific to the individual HEI. Also, rectors display very limited leverage in recruitment procedures, another pivotal process of academic life, which are managed at ministerial level. The teaching staff recruitment procedures are based on a "transfer/rotation system" according to which academics must regularly "rotate" from one campus to another. This is one of the main causes of frustration among teaching staff, since their position in a certain university is always perceived as "temporary" or "precarious." Moreover, this rotation system prevents medium/long-term planning in research and teaching. If teachers have to rotate and move from one university to another, universities cannot set up stable research groups with continuing collaborations with external stakeholders. At the same time, an effective renewal of curricula can be accomplished only if universities can rely on the expertise of their academic staff.

### **3. A widespread passive attitude**

Given the university authorities and staff members' perceived precariousness, it is not a surprise that interviews have shown an insufficient degree of consolidation and agency even when they are appointed with a position in collective bodies such as departments. In fact, these organs tend to ratify decisions endorsed by rectors, replicating the same kind of subordinate mentality that shapes interactions between academic leaders and the higher echelons of the national hierarchy, represented by governmental departments.

### **4. A system that does not inspire an "active culture of learning"**

Myanmar penalizing centralized system of governance is

also reflected on the students' outcomes. Myanmar teaching staff is dependent on directives and guidelines issued at the ministerial level regarding the design and content of their courses, which often results in the reliance on outdated syllabi and textbooks, as well as in the employment of one-way teaching processes that tend to encourage rote learning and passive memorization. It emerged in the interviews that students often study textbooks that can be "older than them" and professors are frustrated by not having the opportunity to add new courses to the curricula. As the final outcomes of this centralized system, graduates not only lack basic updated knowledge in their field of study, but also critical thinking and other transversal skills needed for the fast economic transformation of the country, which, as a consequence, needs better trained human capital.

### **5. Insufficient Budget and Financial Allocation**

Financial resources allocated to Higher Education in Myanmar are insufficient, as clearly indicated by the fact that out of the 7% of the country's GNP allocated for educational expenses (a figure that has increased exponentially since 2011) only 12% of this is assigned to HEIs. On top of that, two issues make the situation even more problematic. First, financial resources are dispersed by the ministries of reference among the country's various institutions without taking into account their performance in terms of quality and excellence. Second, given the absence of financial autonomy, HEIs are not able to rely on different sources of revenue, such as raising students' fees or profiting from commercial activities. Moreover, this lack of financial autonomy could prevent Myanmar universities from gaining access to international funding schemes and international programs such as those launched by the European Commission.

Lastly, it is important to mention that the interviews held in universities under the umbrella of the different ministries (excluding the MoE) also underlined a series of positive effects of the multi-ministerial system. In fact, it was indicated that these universities could enjoy a smoother and more intimate relationship with their governing ministry, not only in the construction of a more synergic linkage between HE and the labor market, but also in the periodic updating of teaching and research programs to conform with regional and international standards. Unsurprisingly, interviews held across the country have somewhat validated the assumption that sees the excessive centralization entrenched throughout the system - rather than the multi-ministerial architecture per se - as the key priority that needs to be addressed by gradually expanding the autonomy of Myanmar universities.

### **WHAT INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY?**

With the inception of the HE reform kick-started in 2012, the idea of giving "institutional autonomy" to HEIs had been endorsed. In the Myanmar context, the word "autonomy" is generally understood as the transition from a state-controlled system to a state-guided system allowing universities a degree of freedom to decide their own policies and activities. In other words, allowing increased institutional



autonomy means that governmental bodies increasingly “exit” from the day-to-day management, allowing each university to determinate their own path. It is important to underline that in ministries’ vision not all the HEIs of the country will move in this direction. Among the HEIs under the MoE, for example, educational colleges and institutions in remote areas will be excluded; the Ministry of Defense has also declared that the HEIs falling under its umbrella will remain controlled by the government.

It is clear from the interviews that there is a good consensus on the need for this reform and its general objectives and priorities, yet, when asked about the actual steps for implementation and their viability, positions are very contrasting. The general consensus on autonomy is based on the idea that these four specific objectives and priorities can eventually be achieved at the end of the process:

- » The enhancement of the efficiency of HEIs by linking decisions more closely to actions.
- » The enhancement of the quality and relevance of academic programs by allowing each university to modernize and differentiate its degrees and courses.
- » Strengthening the relevance of teaching and research

by allowing HEI staff to choose their academic path with more freedom.

- » Facilitate international relations by allowing each university to stipulate agreements with its international partners that might lead to external financial and capacity, building support for the universities’ reform process.

In contrast, interviewees’ positions diverge with regards to what kind of institutional autonomy is needed and feasible for Myanmar, and how different layers of autonomy can be reached. Since university autonomy is a complex concept that potentially covers many different reform measures, the analytical table on the next page has been assembled considering the four internationally recognized aspects of institutional autonomy. Organizational, Academic, Staffing, and Financial autonomy are fleshed out in indicators as they emerged during the interviews; therefore they are not meant to represent a complete list but one that is usable in the context of Myanmar (for example, under financial autonomy the right to set fees for international students is not considered, since it is a topic of discussion in European academia but not in Myanmar).

<p><b>ORGANIZATIONAL</b> Organizational autonomy refers to a university's capacity to determine its internal organization and decision-making processes.</p>	<p><b>ACADEMIC</b> Academic autonomy refers to a university's capacity to manage its internal academic affairs.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Election and dismissal of University leadership</li> <li>• Election and dismissal of decision-making bodies</li> <li>• Right to make decisions regarding the academic structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to determine student admissions and their total number, as well as their selection according to the level of preparedness</li> <li>• Right to determine the content of programs at various levels of education</li> <li>• Right to abolish or cancel academic programs</li> <li>• Right to formulate quality evaluation criteria</li> <li>• Right to choose the core content of the program</li> </ul>
<p><b>STAFFING</b> Staffing autonomy refers to a university's ability to recruit and manage its human resources.</p>	<p><b>FINANCIAL</b> Financial autonomy refers to a university's ability to manage its funds and allocate its budget independently.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to make decisions regarding the staff (recruit and dismiss academic and administrative staff)</li> <li>• Ability to decide on the level of salary</li> <li>• Ability to make decisions regarding professional development of administrative and academic staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Duration and type of funding</li> <li>• Profitability</li> <li>• Credit opportunities</li> <li>• Right to set the fees for local students</li> </ul>

From the interviews it clearly emerges that:

- » Organizational autonomy is perceived as the first necessary step, even if there is a general skepticism on the degree of autonomy in decision making that the ministries will allow the various universities.
- » Academic autonomy is perceived as the most important autonomy to reach in the shortest time possible. All five aspects mentioned in the table clearly emerge as a priority in all the interviews held in the country, proof of the perceived necessity to reform not only the structure but also the "culture of teaching" in Myanmar. At least in more prominent universities, thanks to the international exchanges that have taken place in recent years, the interviews show a degree of awareness of some of the models of academic autonomy used for example in Europe and how they can also be implemented in Myanmar.
- » Staffing autonomy is generally perceived as a way to escape the "rotation system" that forces teaching staff to move frequently among the universities around the country, but interviewees had no concrete suggestion on how to replace this method. Permanent assignment to specific universities seems the hoped-for solution, but at the same time this would lead to procedures based on competition that are new to the country.
- » Financial autonomy is generally perceived as very risky since it comes with significant duties of accountability and possible risks of underfunding.

Summarizing, the interviewed Myanmar governance members, teaching staff, and students would like for the HE reform to move forward, giving substantive autonomy to HEIs. Substantive autonomy means the possibility to make decisions on the "what": each HEI can establish its role and mission and seek to fulfill them. At the same time, there is the fear that at the end of the process the autonomy gained by the HEIs will be only procedural, meaning administrative freedom on the "how" without real authority to make decisions on substantive priorities but greater authority over their implementation.

### FIRST STEPS TOWARDS AUTONOMY AND ITS CHALLENGES

In the last couple of years, Myanmar universities have achieved remarkable progress in their attempt to work toward the first step of institutional autonomy: statutory autonomy. The most prestigious universities of the country are leading the way by establishing internal commissions to draft new charters. Moreover, at a national level the Rectors' Committee has been established with the aim of giving recommendations on how to implement the plan drafted in the NESP. However, one clear methodological weakness can be identified: the inputs of important stakeholders - students, for instance - have not been systematically taken into account. This is mirrored by the fact that "student representation," which is the statutory right of students to be present in the academic governance with, for example, a student

council, is an issue not yet tackled by the reform process.

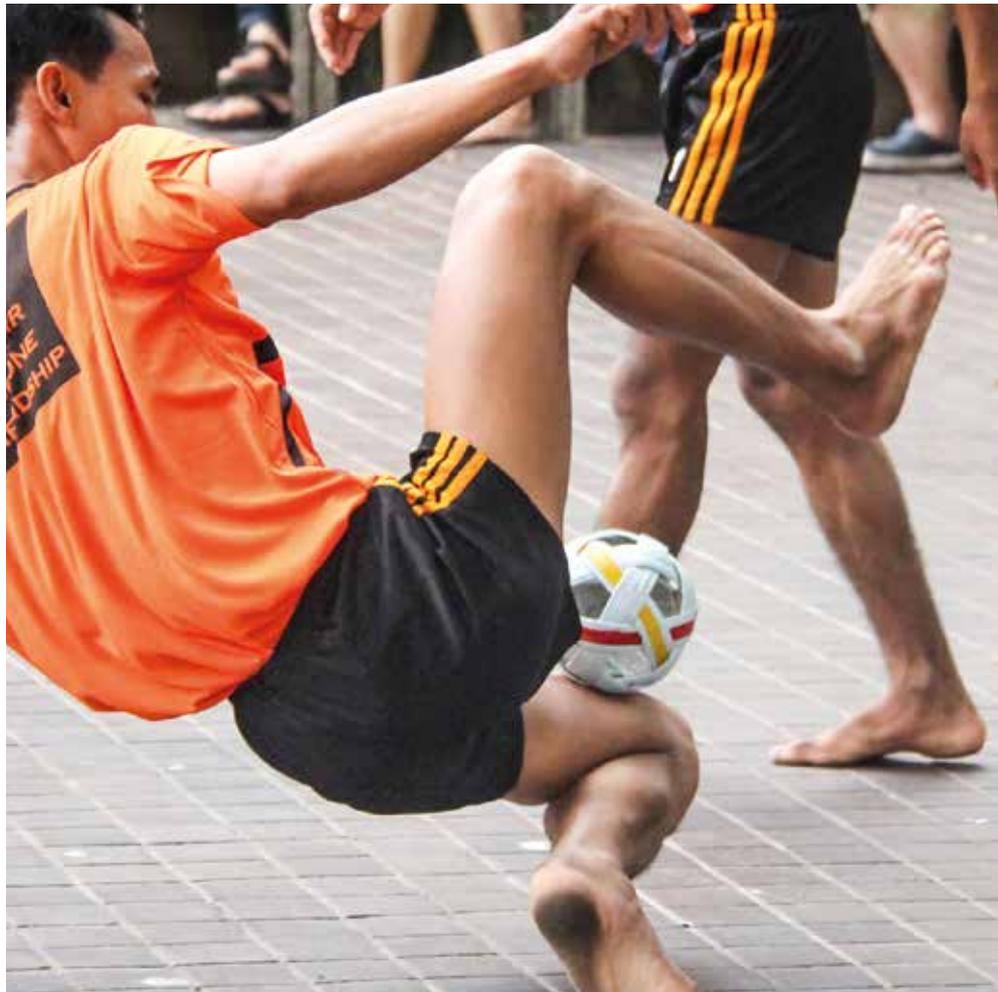
In the field of academic autonomy, the MoE has established a national commission for the drafting of a national qualification framework and a national quality assurance system that is the first measure of accountability if universities are to gain academic autonomy. These are definitely two steps in the right direction. The next challenge is the reform of curricula in terms of structures, programs, and actual teaching. In fact, with respect to academic autonomy, while educational systems are primarily the responsibility of governments, educational structures and contents fall within the remit of HEIs and their academic staff. Since all the Myanmar HEIs are undergoing these processes of reforming educational structures and content there is the clear need to create “spaces” where they can coordinate efforts and discuss possible references that can be drawn by international partners. The next phase of the CHINLONE project moves in this direction, setting up a platform where EU and Myanmar partners share tools for curriculum planning and institutional quality assurance measures, sharing the Bologna process lesson and experience.

Reforms in the layers of staffing and financial autonomy have not yet been implemented. This step-by-step approach can be considered adequate, since the road towards institutional autonomy is a challenging one and there is a need to act with caution and a measured pace, allowing for flexibility. Regarding this aspect of “timing” it is important to point out that

the efforts made and possible breakthroughs attained so far still face an ambiguous vacuum in terms of national legislation, given that the NEL amended in 2015 contains few basic provisions on the issue of institutional autonomy. As a consequence, in the absence of a new and much-awaited higher education law capable of establishing an updated normative framework, the steps taken can hardly make any substantial difference in granting greater agency and legitimacy to local HEIs. Hence, due to the effects of this “suspended” transition at a central level, at present Myanmar HEIs maintain the same propensity to excessive centralization.

Summarizing, CHINLONE interviews indicate that substantive institutional autonomy is considered the first step needed for the modernization and internationalization of Myanmar HEIs even if there is uncertainty on whether the process will lead to actual substantive autonomy or only a procedural autonomy. Meanwhile, important steps have been already

taken in the layers of statutory and academic autonomy, but there is still the need to include all the stakeholders in the discussion (most pressingly students) and to amend or update or promulgate a new national law that can give a normative framework to the milestones already achieved. Academic autonomy is definitely now the bigger concern for Myanmar academic staff that is actively trying to bargain over new spaces of academic freedom, moving like spiders in the web of the new national NESP guidelines on education and the inputs that international stakeholders are bringing into discussion. Finally, it is important to point out that according to other countries’ experience, even in Asia, HEIs’ autonomy comes with market-driven competitiveness and intra-institutional conflicts that Myanmar HEIs have not yet experienced. At present, these factors are not sufficiently considered by either governmental bodies or HEIs, but they must be tackled as soon as possible to avoid undesirable effects on the reform.



...new tools for autonomy are definitely necessary, but to fit the purpose they should be shaped around a new “teaching and learning culture” able to empower both teachers and students.



TEACHING

# TEACHING





At the heart of the Myanmar HE reform is the acknowledgment that the country needs to produce young, qualified human resources who can guide the country's transition towards a knowledge-based economy. To achieve this "transformational shift" the NESP entrusts a critical role to teachers in Myanmar's academia, as primary engines and catalysts behind the progressive consolidation of an equitable and advanced HES that provides real opportunities for graduates' employment, as well as tangible contributions to the socio-economic progress of the whole country.

In light of this background, this section formulates an assessment on the state of the art, highlighting the main challenges faced by professors in teaching and by students in learning, two sides of the same coin. First, the profile of a Myanmar instructor will be outlined, focusing on how the country should re-invest in the "teaching profession." After concentrating on the "who," the second paragraph will move on to the "how," meaning the "teaching and learning culture." Even if pedagogical approaches cannot be changed by the law or by external inputs, new educational methodologies and a new "campus culture" is urgently needed in Myanmar. The last paragraph will be devoted to how to implement a "student-centered learning" approach in Myanmar as the first necessary step in shaping the academic autonomy currently under discussion at a ministerial and institutional level.

## EMPOWERING TEACHERS

It appears clear from the interviews that teachers occupy a unique and influential role in Myanmar society and have the potential to act as agents of change helping students (and their families as a spill-over effect) to move away from the centralized type of society that existed until recently in the country. This empowerment process can be activated only if teachers themselves are empowered to act to the best of their abilities. CHINLONE interviews have underlined three sets of structural constraints that must be overcome to make this possible.

**First, HE teaching staff should be supported in their own training.** Currently, the progression in academic careers is determined only by seniority (years of teaching) and the degree held by the individual, not by measurable merits or public examinations. After Bachelor studies graduates can become Tutors, the first mandatory level of the academic career. After few years they can become Assistant Lecturers, then Lecturers and, only if they earn a PhD, they can be named as Assistant Professor and finally Professor. Therefore, most of the teaching staff carries out their professional life in parallel to their own studies: most instructors are very young and wish to be enrolled in doctoral studies to progress in their careers. Since in Myanmar there are only few universities that can issue PhD degrees, international partners are asked to provide support for young Myanmar teachers to complete their training, for example establishing PhD grants available on the basis of merit. At the same time, from the interviews the need clearly emerged for the professors to update their training. In fact, most Myan-



mar professors have completed their education in times when HE in Myanmar was in a critical condition. Universities were closed for most of the time between 1988 and 2003 (they were only open for 30 months between 1988 and 2000 and shut down completely between 1996 and 2000) and this has not allowed a continuous academic education for most of the current academic staff. Moreover, the medium of instruction has changed twice in recent decades: the University Law of 1964 (that established the first universities in the country apart from the universities of Yangon and Mandalay) indicated Myanmar as the language of instruction also for HE. English was reintroduced in 1981, but still today there is the need to foster teaching staff's English proficiency to allow instructors to use it fluently as required by law.

**Second, there is a generalized shortage of human resources in the academic sector.** Due to the significant number of academic institutions scattered across the whole country (between 1989 and 2004 the number of colleges and universities increased from 32 to 154, with students enrollment rising from 120,000 to 890,000), the student-teacher ratio is still quite unbalanced, even compared to sub-regional standards. For example, in the 2017-2018 academic year the overall number of teachers and instructors employed in the 134 HEIs under the responsibility of the MoE was 21,157, with a student population of more than 830,000 individuals. These numbers, which are significant proof of the general shortage of personnel, became even more concerning considering that teaching staff also serve as administrative staff in Myanmar HEIs. In fact, management roles like registrar or financial officer are performed at an institutional and department level by teaching staff that are severely overstretched by a very high workload in terms of teaching hours and management duties (without any additional income for serving different roles). This reverberates significantly on research and production, since teaching staff has little time to dedicate to their own scholar activities. Discussing this "teaching staff overstretching" with the DHE,

it has been underlined that one of the corrective measures can be the training of proper administrative staff, meaning graduates that can be employed by the HEIs to perform purely administrative tasks, freeing up some time for teaching staff. This issue should be addressed before HEIs reach the autonomy status, as in fact more autonomy also means that tasks that were once performed by ministries will be accomplished at an institutional level, increasing the need for qualified personnel to carry out specific administrative tasks.

**The third aspect that makes academic careers in the country less attractive is certainly the low salaries in academia,** which is directly responsible for another tangible distortion that distinguishes Myanmar's case, namely a striking gender imbalance among men and women. According to figures provided by the CESR, in 2012 more than 60 per cent of all HE students and 82.6 per cent of the academic staff were female prevalently due to the low wages and also to the aforementioned "rotation system" that pushes faculty members to move very frequently among different departments and institutions, with enormous repercussions in terms of personal and family life. Under the current conditions, the salary issue has a negative impact on many levels, with a spillover effect that transcends the mere implementation of teaching activities.

Unsurprisingly, the combined effect of the shortage of qualified human resources plus the salary issue severely limits the possibility of delivering innovative teaching activities, while at the same time fostering research, sound international exchanges with foreign partners and acting as a catalyst for change. The HE debate in Myanmar is very much focused on reforming academic structures: this is definitely crucial, but if teachers are not empowered by providing them with better professional training and working conditions, these reforms cannot have a solid foundation and they will not lead to the outcomes hoped for.



## DELIVERY OF QUALITY LEARNING

When exploring the paramount priorities that need to be tackled before discussing academic autonomy, Myanmar “teaching and learning culture” and “campus culture” are certainly at the top of the list.

Key issues of Myanmar “teaching and learning culture” revolve around the teaching methods and evaluation mechanisms utilized, which have traditionally tended to discourage “deep learning” and critical thinking. To pass their exams, students are most often asked to memorize textbooks that are read aloud in repetition during classes (so-called “rote memorization”). This tendency towards passive memorization seems to be reinforced by a generalized weakness in the command of English that affects both students and teachers, with the net effect of turning instructors into “language mediators” whose main task is to translate, adapt, and simplify English sources for their classes. This very passive “teaching and learning culture” is widespread at all levels (from kindergarten to university) and it is commonly regarded as the biggest weakness of the national education system. In recent years, at the HE level, teaching staff have focused their efforts on overcoming this deficiency in different ways: updating their syllabi where possible given the lack of complete academic autonomy; adding different inputs to their lectures (using also online sources like YouTube videos); welcoming students’ inputs. Further efforts should definitely be invested in the establishment of multiple channels of interaction between students and faculty members. In particular, Myanmar HEIs are still largely unfamiliar with two basic instruments that may prove extremely beneficial in the attempt to build a more prolific relationship between students and professors: the first regards the introduction of fixed office hours devoted to students, whereas the second concerns the establishment of an institutional quality assurance system. Ideally, institutional quality assurance procedures should

be geared towards the creation of positive incentives for the better performing teachers rather than relying on negative sanctions for those who fail to comply with certain standards, especially in a country like Myanmar that is still coming to terms with its recent past and its corresponding “culture of punishment.” Furthermore, to foster timely and extensive communications between professors and students, it is also essential to enhance the Internet and digital (ICT) platforms of Myanmar HEIs by establishing university email systems and updated websites to provide key information on the various curricula and courses.

As a matter of fact, there is no vibrant “campus culture” in Myanmar. The first reason is that Distance Education plays a pivotal role in Myanmar’s HE system: according to the data provided by the DHE, in fact, more than two-thirds of the 835,433 students currently enrolled in the HEIs under the MoE benefit from distance learning programs that have a long and important tradition in Myanmar. The first distance education institution, called University Correspondence Course (UCC), was established in 1976 under the Rangoon University and served the whole country. In 1981, UCC was placed under DHE and teaching and assessment was delegated to different universities and colleges. UCC was upgraded to University of Distance Education (Yangon) in 1992, and subsequently renamed Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) in 1998, when the Mandalay University of Distance Education (MUDE) was also established. Today, YUDE and MUDE remain the two distance education universities (DEU) that operate throughout the country thanks to their numerous regional branches. According to governmental sources, distance education was created with the aim of making HE accessible to all students at a minimal cost and without having to leave their homes and jobs, especially for students residing in border areas. Yet, and in spite of their virtuous philosophy of “leaving no one behind,” there is often a lack of quality in distance education courses due to the very limited period of targeted and face-



to-face training between students and teachers (especially for students that choose Arts Specialization UDE, where classes are scheduled only right before the annual examinations; the Science UDE students have to attend the classes regularly every weekend). In fact, the bulk of the preparation is left to basic tools such as textbooks, synopses, CDs, and MP3s developed every year by YUDE and MUDE. Weekend and final preparation lessons are usually given in “regular” universities affiliated with YUDE or MUDE and this is a factor that further stretches the teaching staff. Therefore, an increase of “face-to-face” hours in DEU can be achieved only if more teaching staff will be appointed to HE or modern techniques of online courses (like “blended learning”) are developed. At present, the only experience of online learning is in the YUDE Department of

Law that has offered an LLB (Bachelor in Law) degree since 2013 and a PGDL (Post Graduate Diploma in Law) since 2012. These degrees are considered a success by the DHE, which hopes to develop of courses in different fields of studies with the support of international partners.

### STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING: A NEW APPROACH FOR MYANMAR HEIS

As already mentioned, the most pressing issues regarding HEIs’ autonomy that surfaced numerous times and in multiple forms across all the target groups involved in the interviews revolve around the topic of academic autonomy, meaning an institution’s capacity to manage its internal academic affairs. In particular, respond-

ents were concerned on how academic autonomy can be translated into the ability to determine: students recruitment and their total number as well as their selection according to level of preparedness; the content of programs at various education levels, their abolishment or the creation of new ones; the quality assurance evaluation criteria. In fact, notwithstanding the official endorsement of the concept displayed in the pages of the NESP, Myanmar teachers and instructors are trying to understand which tools should be put in place to achieve the desired degree of autonomy. The second step of the CHINLONE project will aim to support this process, providing tools for curriculum planning and design and an institutional quality assurance mechanism. Against this backdrop, new tools for autonomy are definitely necessary, but to fit the purpose they should be



shaped around a new “teaching and learning culture” able to empower both teachers and students. One approach that is being increasingly used at universities across Europe is the so-called student-centered learning (SCL), an approach to education that aims at overcoming some of the problems inherent in more traditional forms of education by focusing on students and their needs rather than being centered on the teacher’s input. Europe-wide projects on SCL (like T4SCL and PAS-CL) have defined SCL as “both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach that is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterized by innovative methods of teaching that aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and that take students seriously as

active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking.” Myanmar should definitely find its own national approach for a more inclusive, modern, global paradigm of education. SCL, as developed in other countries, can be used as a possible inspiration on how to rethink the country’s “teaching and learning culture” while developing new tools for academic autonomy.

To sum up, the picture that emerged from the interviews and surveys performed by the CHINLONE team has made it possible to underline how teachers in Myanmar are asking to be empowered through training and an investment of economic resources to eliminate the need to perform both administrative and teaching functions. Secondly, both teachers and students

feel the need for a paradigm shift in the country’s “teaching and learning culture” towards a more inclusive model of education that not only considers the students’ needs as learners but also fosters their critical thinking and related skills, so necessary in this transitional phase of the country. The only way to improve the current status quo of teaching and learning in Myanmar in a durable and sustainable manner requires formulating and then implementing comprehensive, consistent, and organic strategies while reinforcing the bridge between HEIs and society at large.

The setting up of a thriving research environment entails a multiplicity of tasks that encompass the provision of materials, funds, and infrastructure; new regulations to encourage research productivity, while prioritizing sectors that are considered strategic for socio-economic development; as well as a series of intangible efforts aimed at establishing an embryonic research culture.



RESEARCH

# RESEARCH

The area of scientific research has recently started to benefit from the overall HE reform process and is now widely regarded as a pivotal driver to nurture a sustainable path of socio-economic progress for the whole nation. The strategic value of research is increasingly acknowledged by ministerial bodies and HEIs' leadership, as a core element in the general mission pursued by Myanmar's HEIs, while teaching staff are finally experiencing increased freedom when it comes to their involvement in projects with international exposure.

The progressive construction of a brand-new research apparatus inside Myanmar HEIs inevitably entails a multiplicity of tasks and priorities, which can be grouped under four categories: the upgrading of research environments (physical and digital infrastructure); the introduction of new mechanisms to reward research productivity; the identification of strategic sectors deserving the utmost priority in the quest to effectively modernize the country's socio-economic outlook; and a set of ideational and psychological challenges, such as the establishment of a widely shared "research culture" among the actors involved.



## UPGRADING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS

With few notable exceptions, the fieldwork and interviews conducted in the country have clearly shown that local HEIs largely lack the physical and digital infrastructure that could allow them to carry out innovative research activities. As might be expected, the shortage of laboratories, libraries, computers, specialized equipment, and information technologies is particularly felt in the field of natural sciences, with the net effect of severely limiting the production of innovative knowledge in areas such as medicine, biology, physics, and chemistry.

To start overcoming these hurdles, a group of Myanmar universities has recently partnered with relevant international institutions in the implementation of international projects aimed at spreading the use of e-libraries within Myanmar's higher education sector. For example, a consortium composed of the Universities of Yangon and Mandalay, together with the Open Society Foundation, has paved the way for Myanmar students and faculty members to access more than 130,000 pieces of digital contents, including the most important academic databases. In parallel, the Open Society Foundation and the University of Manchester are also working with more than 20 Myanmar HEIs to spread the use of "eTekkatho," a free digital library

containing over 1,700 full academic texts and journal articles, that is easily accessible even in rural areas with low-bandwidth networks.

Another positive innovation that has emerged in recent months concerns the setting up of so-called "University Research Centers" in some Myanmar universities. Their role as spearheads of scientific and socio-economic progress, however, requires a more attentive planning in building synergic relations between academic institutions, international stakeholders, and governmental bodies.

These recent positive experiences may prove extremely beneficial on research productivity, pushing local faculties to build a more dynamic and vibrant linkage between teaching and research, while ensuring a smoother inflow of cutting-edge concepts and content in Myanmar classrooms: for example, some lecturers are now encouraging their students to develop project papers and project assignments based on active research work rather than on passively replicating the teaching delivered to them. An even more encouraging scenario can be seen in the efforts put in place by local HEIs to build a synergic relation with a rapidly changing labor market, as demonstrated by the zeal showed by some universities in setting up annual labor fairs and career guidance services for their graduates.





## REWARDING RESEARCH PRODUCTIVITY

As already analyzed in the teaching paragraph, Myanmar scholars who wish to undertake research in their respective fields currently face a variety of obstacles, including a disproportionate workload in terms of teaching hours and administrative duties, as well as a promotion system that lacks the proper incentives to reward research productivity. On the other hand, the shortage of worktime and funding is deeply intertwined with the principles and procedures that have traditionally shaped the allocation of the national budget in the field of higher education. It is worth remembering that in Myanmar resources and subsidies are still distributed somewhat evenly among the overall (and disproportionate) number of HEIs through a sort of “watering can” principle, without providing any forms of incentives for the most dynamic and efficient ones in terms of research performance. Unsurprisingly, the net effect of similar constraints severely hinders the possibility of fully unleashing the potential of faculty members when it comes to the creation of fresh and innovative knowledge, while perpetuating a biased reward system that will hardly prove beneficial during the gradual transition towards a “knowledge economy.” To resolve this situation, Myanmar’s HES should strive for the creation of a new framework where research productivity is effectively assessed and incentivized by relying on formal and universally-recognized benchmarks and on a series of rewards for the highest performing scholars. These rewards may include career advancement, as research (measurable on the basis of the publication in national and international journals) can be considered one of the available criteria for career advancement (currently only decided based on the years of teaching and the degree held).



### PRIORITIZING KEY RESEARCH FIELDS

If the ultimate goal of the ongoing efforts targeted at reviving research activities in Myanmar universities is to provide a new and additional incentive to the country's socio-economic advancement, it is pivotal to frame such endeavors within a comprehensive and long-term growth strategy, while concentrating all the available resources on a few specific areas that are deemed to constitute the backbone of Myanmar's development in the years to come. In such a perspective, the only way to capitalize on the ongoing economic boom and establish a durable, sustainable, and more equitable path of progress is to invest in human capital, so as to enhance the quality and skills of the local labor force, while, at the same time, raising the living standards of the population. To do so, the Myanmar government has recently implemented a series of legal and economic reforms aimed at opening up the country to international trade and investment after decades of isolation. In fact, the underlying paradigm embraced by Myanmar seeks to ignite a specific kind of transformation that has been successfully finalized in many Asian states, namely the progressive shift from a rural-based model to an industry- and service-driven one.

As a consequence, in the near future agriculture is expected to retain its prominent role as the country's major economic catalyst, also in light of the fact that it still accounts for more than 30 per cent of the national GDP, but its dominance will be increasingly contested by the ascendance of new strategic sectors like tourism and the extraction of natural resources. Therefore, to fully unlock the unexplored potential of these drivers of growth and make them sustainable for the foreseeable future, it is crucial to draw a more effective and intimate connection between tertiary education, academic research programs, private economic stakeholders, and the labor market. To alleviate funding problems, moreover, new venues of public-private cooperation in the field of applied research should be attentively explored, with the aim of providing new impetus to the diversification of Myanmar's economic outlook.



## ESTABLISHING A SHARED RESEARCH CULTURE

The setting up of a thriving research environment in developing states that are experiencing massive political reforms entails a multiplicity of tasks that encompass the provision of materials, funds, and infrastructure; the implementation of new regulations to encourage research productivity, while prioritizing the production of innovative knowledge in sectors that are considered strategic for socio-economic development; as well as a series of intangible efforts aimed at establishing an embryonic research culture. Hence, in countries characterized by a deep-rooted research culture, HE systems place the utmost importance on the advancement and dissemination of research, while providing a normative framework to outline how research activities should be conducted from a procedural and ethical standpoint. In the case of Myanmar, there is still a long way to go in the attempt to create a distinctive research culture. In spite of recent breakthroughs, the principle of independence in research is still not adequately recognized and supported, nor is the idea that in tertiary education research activities should be granted greater or equal priority than other goals. In a similar vein, access to scientific resources and professional networks, both national and transnational, is severely limited. Urgent efforts are also required in terms of the effective dissemination of sound guidelines and good practices regarding the possible risks of plagiarism and the employment of standardized evaluation procedures such as peer reviews.

To sum up, research activities in Myanmar are still encumbered by numerous constraints and limitations, notwithstanding the rising importance attached by ministerial authorities to the production and dissemination of innovative knowledge within HEIs, as shown by the overt will to establish the National Research Council and a National Research Center. The most pressing issues revolve around the quality of research environments and infrastructure, the absence of effective mechanisms to incentivize research productivity among Myanmar scholars, and the widespread lack of a shared research culture among the actors involved. Last but not least, the strengthening of research programs in the country also entails the shaping of an organic and comprehensive growth strategy capable of focusing on the most strategic sectors within a general framework that looks at new synergies between private and public stakeholders in the quest to rapidly modernize Myanmar's socio-economic outlook.

A crucial prerequisite that comes into play in the quest to rebuild a sound web of cooperative ties with international institutions regards the conceptualization of a coherent, organic, and far-reaching blueprint, capable of articulating a clear internationalization strategy for Myanmar universities.



# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Although the idea of “internationalizing Higher Education” has emerged in the agenda of the Myanmar Ministries and HEIs only recently, it has quickly become a hot and largely discussed topic. The evidence collected through interviews and fieldwork in the country suggests that all the target groups (from academic governance to students) are currently persuaded that raising the international outlook of Myanmar universities is an issue of utmost importance. The necessity of internationalizing the HES is also a response to pressures coming from outside, especially from international partners looking to establish an active cooperation with Myanmar universities. On the one hand, this pressure is favorable as far as it fosters positive changes in Myanmar HES. However, on the other hand, it may lead Myanmar universities to shape their international strategies on the basis of other countries’ and other universities’ needs and drives.

In terms of international relations, the first challenge faced by Myanmar universities is the framing of a relevant, comprehensive and bottom-up vision for internationalization. Second, once internationalization strategies are defined, Myanmar universities ought to address the development of dedicated tools for their fulfillment, starting with the establishment of International Relations Offices (IROs). Third, in order to put in place the strategies mentioned above, officers of the new IRO would have to develop international relations activities as mobility schemes, capacity-building actions and third-mission (outreach) actions.

## FRAMING A COHERENT INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY

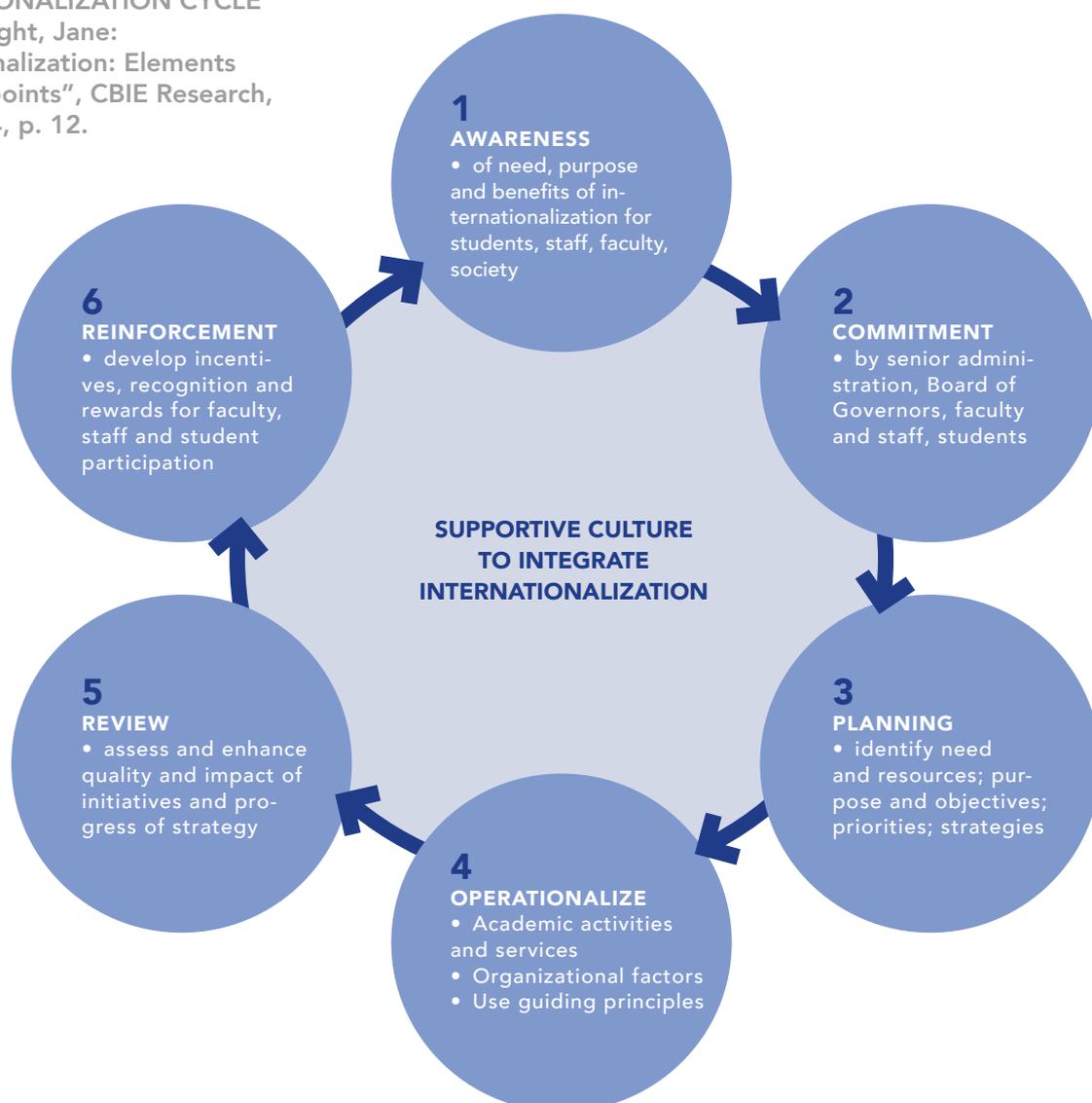
A crucial prerequisite that comes into play in the quest to rebuild from scratch a sound web of cooperative ties with international institutions regards the conceptualization of a coherent, organic, and far-reaching blueprint, capable of articulating a clear internationalization strategy for Myanmar universities. Such a project may be represented with a so-called “internationalization cycle” (see table below), consisting of six stages: (1) awareness, (2) commitment, (3) planning, (4) operationalizing activities, (5) review, and (6) reinforcement of the activities put in place. Following this cycle, according to the interviews carried out, it is possible to state that Myanmar’s academic leadership, staff, and students are aware that opening up to the international academic community is a crucial need for their HES. At the same time, the national bodies are deeply committed to putting in place effective actions to internationalize Myanmar academia.

Having fulfilled step 1 and 2, under the present circumstances Myanmar HEIs may be tempted to prioritize quantity over quality, by setting up as many agreements and exchange programs with international institution as possible by skipping the third step (planning), that is to say without framing them within an overarching strategy. Without serious planning activities, universities would expose themselves to a severe risk of overstretch and having little or no impact at all on the overall quality of their academic programs. In contrast, a more gradual and phased approach stands out as best suited to the country’s needs and current realities.

Against this backdrop, it is critical that the international community be aware of these risks and support Myanmar universities in establishing their strategy for global actions with clear purpose and achievable objectives. The international academic community can do this with positive actions (e.g., the involvement of Myanmar HEIs in targeted projects on international relations capacity building) but also avoiding pressuring Myanmar HEIs to sign empty agreements (just for the sake of having “a new flag” on the a international relations map) that have no clear overarching strategy.

### INTERNATIONALIZATION CYCLE

Source: Knight, Jane: “Internationalization: Elements and Checkpoints”, CBIE Research, No. 7, 1994, p. 12.







## ESTABLISHING EFFECTIVE IROS

Until a few years ago, no HEI in Myanmar had an IRO. In fact, such offices could not be part of the institutions' organizational charts due to the lack of Ministerial provisions. The new awareness of the need to open and support international contacts has increased awareness among the ministerial bodies of the urgent need to establish such offices. At present, in some universities there are embryonic IROs formed by teaching staff who have been instructed by the rectors to take care of these activities, in some universities there is only one person that helps the rector to maintain relations with international universities.

CHINLONE project held a focus group in September 2018 in Nay Pi Daw, including five people who currently work in their universities for the embryonic IRO. They were asked to express their opinions on the steps that must be taken to ensure that the IROs are fully established. First, they stressed that there is still a lack of ministerial guidelines on the legal frameworks of the IRO. Without these guidelines, for now, it is not possible to have stable IROs in the HEI organization charts with a clear organizational structure. This first step should be achieved shortly.

The second step is the training of the future IRO personnel. Also in this case, the staff of the IROs would be constituted by few professors of the universities who have been given additional assignments. Until it is possible to employ administrative staff with specific responsibilities (and according to the respondents this will not happen soon) it is important that the teachers in charge of working in the



IROs have access to specific training opportunities: internships in the IROs of international universities, specific courses to improve the knowledge of the English language, training courses on the instruments typical of the management of flows of mobility or of international projects.

According to respondents, two aspects need to be considered with care. First, the staff involved in the IRO must have the opportunity to work with a medium-long perspective in these offices, since acquiring the necessary skills takes time, and if according to the already mentioned rotation system the staff must change university frequently, this is a clear limit. Second, new offices will need different staff, because even if the international relations actions are at the moment limited, there are a number of activities that will fall under the responsibility of this IRO, like organization of conferences involving international professors or English-Myanmar translations that are somehow new tasks in Myanmar HEIs.

As a last point it appeared clear during the focus groups that new offices will have to have clear procedures of autonomy and of course transparency and accountability. Currently, university rectors must be involved in each decision, making procedures farraginous and inefficient. The respondents hope that once the IRO is established with clear procedures, this long decision-making process can be shortened. In this way, the IROs will be the first administrative organizations of Myanmar universities with a true procedural autonomy.

## FINE-TUNING INTERNATIONALIZATION ACTIVITIES

Once strategies are created and offices are established, Myanmar HEIs can focus on specific international relations activities. Typically, when asked, Myanmar HEIs staffs consider “the signature of Memorandum of Understanding” (MoUs) with international partners to be the main international activities. Once again, it is important to remember that MoUs are just the “how,” not the “what.” The international relations activities that can be fostered in Myanmar are mobility schemes, capacity-building actions, and third-mission (outreach) actions.

International mobility for students and staff is a key international relations activity that can support Myanmar HE, but it is hampered by the lack of adequate national funds. Under such circumstances, the wide majority of MoUs signed since the launch of the higher education reform by Myanmar institutions rests on a basic yet indispensable premise that requires foreign partners to bear all the costs of both inbound and outbound mobility, given the scarcity of financial resources that can be allocated in the country to sustain the influx and outflow of students and scholars alike to and from Myanmar. Still, several relevant HEIs located in the northeastern part of the Asian continent and in the West have recently signed a series of agreements with local universities for the specific purpose of providing this type of support. As it could be expected, the interviewees who could effectively benefit from these embryonic opportunities have significantly praised the impact of an educational period abroad in enriching their academic and human backgrounds, while also acknowledging that much could be done in order to make mobility programs smoother and more accessible. Ad hoc agreements with international partners, moreover, account for just a small fraction of the overall demand in terms of outbound mobility, and many of the students who wish to go abroad to study are still unable to do so. In a similar fashion, viable venues for faculty or staff mobility are also highly problematic and confined to specific circumstances, as epitomized by the almost unprecedented engagement of several Myanmar HEIs in the framework of the CHINLONE project, which entails an intense schedule of training programs for local IRO staff in various European universities aimed at the transfer of new skills and good practices. Lastly, it should be noted that the funding problems that affect the field of academic IR and exchange programs are intimately intertwined with a much wider and intricate dilemma for the future of Myanmar’s higher education, which revolves around the issue of financial autonomy. In fact, due to the country’s socio-economic outlook and the resilience of a highly centralized structure, local HEIs have to continuously rely on the financial support of governmental bodies to perform all their functions, whereas students’ fees are kept significantly low to safeguard accessibility and participation. As a result, their inability to develop alternative sources of income through complementary channels severely inhibits the possibility of enhancing exchange programs to and from Myanmar.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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In conclusion, there are several priorities and imperatives that should be attentively tackled in order to further nurture Myanmar's ongoing reform in the field of higher education. In accordance with the structure of this preliminary report, they are categorized and listed below by looking at four pivotal dimensions of the current transition: academic governance, teaching activities, research, and international relations.

## GOVERNANCE

CHINLONE interviews indicate that substantive institutional autonomy is considered the first step needed for the modernization and internationalization of Myanmar HEIs even if there is uncertainty on whether the process will lead to actual substantive autonomy or only a procedural autonomy.

Meanwhile, important steps have been already taken in the layers of organizational and academic autonomy, but there is still the need to:

- » amend or update or promulgate a new national law that can give a normative framework to the milestones already achieved;
- » enlarge the reform outreach including all the stakeholders in the discussion (most pressingly students);
- » negotiate the place of students representation in the organizational autonomy;
- » involve also smaller/rural universities in the discussion of academic autonomy (at least) to not "leave them behind";
- » open the discussion tables on staffing and financial autonomy without forcing Myanmar Universities to move in too-fast pace.

Finally, it is important to point out that according to the experience of other countries, even in Asia, HEI autonomy comes with market-driven competitiveness and intra-institutional conflicts that Myanmar HEIs have not yet experienced. At the present, these factors are not sufficiently considered by either governmental bodies or HEIs, and they must be tackled as soon as possible to avoid undesirable effects on the reform.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Moving to the domain of teaching activities, the NESP explicitly envisions a transformational shift towards a "student-centered" approach, aimed at producing qualified young graduates who can act as the protagonists of Myanmar's socio-economic development in the years to come, while safeguarding accessibility to high-quality education with no discrimination and regardless of the students' social and economic background. To pursue these ambitious objectives, however, it is critical to concentrate significant efforts on the following areas:

- » re-investing in the "teaching profession," meaning empowering teachers by providing them with better professional training (PhD opportunities, English courses to strengthening the use of English as medium of instructions) and working conditions (better working hours and salary);
- » promoting the paradigm shift in the country's "teaching and learning culture" towards a more inclusive model of education that not only considers the students' needs as learners but also cultivates their critical thinking and related skills, so necessary in this transitional phase of the country;
- » fostering a more vibrant "campus culture" establishing multiple channels of interaction between students and faculty members.





## RESEARCH

As far as research is concerned, Myanmar HEIs are increasingly regarded by policymakers and citizens as key hubs to nurture a sustainable path of socio-economic progress and political transition, while faculty members are experiencing much more maneuverability with respect to international projects. The current key issues and constraints can be tackled with:

- » a strong overhaul of the physical infrastructure devoted to research (laboratories, libraries, etc.) that can be achieved thanks to national (public and private) and international investments;
- » the introduction of new incentives (like career advancement) to reward research productivity (measured with internationally recognized benchmarks like publications);
- » the consolidation of effective links between academic research and the labor market, especially in exploring new venues of public-private cooperation in the field of applied research in line with the economic growth of the country;
- » the establishment of a shared research culture that allows Myanmar academics to put their efforts into creating synergy instead of competition between different institutions, pooling resources and intents.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The field of International Relations has recently witnessed relevant progress through the establishment of embryonal IR strategies and offices in the some Myanmar universities. These promising signs, however, need to be sustained by achieving the following goals:

- » supporting Myanmar universities in the framing of a relevant, comprehensive and bottom-up vision for internationalization that prioritize quality over quantity;
- » strengthening of nascent IROs through dedicated policy, staff (with adequate training) and resources;
- » drafting clear procedures of autonomy and of course transparency and accountability for the new IRO giving them a true procedural autonomy;
- » increasing significantly the availability of funds for instructor, staff, and student mobility.



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## PROJECT PARTNERS

The CHINLONE consortium works under the supervision of UNIBO as Project Coordinator, and it gathers five Universities from Myanmar, together with three Higher Education Institutions and one University Association from the EU. The Department of Higher Education of Myanmar's Ministry of Education, moreover, acts as Project Partner.

Partners: University of Bologna, Yangon University, Yangon University of Economics, Yezin Agricultural University, University of Mandalay, Dagon University, Uppsala University, University of Granada, The Coimbra Group, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education - Republic of the Union of Myanmar.



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