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## **The Role of Private Higher Education in Myanmar:**

### **Opportunities, Challenges, and Hopes**

စာတမ်း

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# **The Role of Private Higher Education in Myanmar: Opportunities, Challenges, and Hopes**

By  
Private Higher Education Institutions Association (PHEIA)

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## **Abstract**

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) are prevalent throughout the world. The rate of development of PHEIs has been rising in Asia. New PHEIs are being established at a significant rate, due to the huge mismatch between the demand for higher education among the population and the supply of higher education through public colleges and universities. While such a growth must be welcome, associated with it are common concerns of consumer protection, quality assurance, and accreditation. In this paper, opportunities leading to PHEIs' development, challenges posing to PHEI's existence, and hopes leading to PHEI's advancement in Myanmar are presented.

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## **Introduction**

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) play an important role in the development of a country's human capital, along with public HEIs. This is evidenced by the sheer presence of PHEIs. In fact, the number of PHEIs, in general, surpasses that of public higher education institutions in any region of the world.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the rate of PHEIs' establishment in Asia is much more than that in other regions,<sup>2</sup> and the rate at which PHEIs are established in Myanmar within the recent decade has also been astounding.

The concept of private education, defined in this paper as the education provided by any person or organization other than the state or government, is not unfamiliar in the Myanmar context. The most famous example of non-state/non-government private education can be found in Buddhist monasteries, in what is known as monastic education.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it could be argued that learning in such a system preceded that in a formal government-institutionalized one. Yet, monastic education has normally been limited to basic or alternative education, with a very few exceptions in higher education. Private institutions of higher education in Myanmar, most of which are currently not regulated by the Ministry of Education or any other governmental body, have always been mostly established by individuals or associations. This paper analyses opportunities leading to PHEIs' development, challenges posing to PHEI's existence, and hopes leading to PHEI's advancement in Myanmar.

## **Myanmar Private Higher Education Institutions at A Glance**

There are several ways to categorize private higher education institutions in Myanmar, based on financial models,<sup>4</sup> disciplinary specialties, level of studies, and identity-based education.

PHEIs are financed through either for-profit or not-for-profit models. The former includes having (a) shareholder(s) in the institution, with the expectation of return of investment (dividends) at the end of a fiscal year. The institution, as a for-profit entity, is allowed to sell shares to buyers. A Board, whose members are permitted to take the dividends, governs the institution. The not-for-profit model also operates under a Board;

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<sup>1</sup>*The Shape of Global Higher Education: Understanding the ASEAN Region*, British Council, vol. 3, 2014

<sup>2</sup>*Private Higher Education Across Asia: Expanding Access, Searching for Quality*, Mandaluyong Coty, Phillipines: Asian Development Bank, 2012

<sup>3</sup>For further resources on monastic education, please visit Monastic Education Development Group; <http://www.medg.org>

<sup>4</sup>Morey, A.I. Higher Education (2004) 48: 131. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.0000033768.76084.a0>

however, the board members are not permitted to take any profit whatsoever. The institution is allowed to make profits, so long as these profits are not divided and distributed to any one person.

PHEIs in Myanmar offer a wide range of different disciplines depending on the market demands or/and social/national needs: business and management, travel and tourism, accounting, engineering, IT, arts and sciences, health sciences, banking and finance. Many PHEIs can respond to what is urgently needed or assumed to be needed in the market, such as business & management.

Currently, Myanmar PHEIs offer a wide range in the levels of education, starting from the UNESCO level-4,<sup>5</sup> which is defined as post-secondary non-tertiary education to the UNESCO level-8, which is defined as doctoral or equivalent education. In general, these include certificates, diplomas, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees.

Depending on where PHEIs are located, they can become identity-based or non-identity-based. Many PHEIs in metropolitan areas are usually non-identity-based, while those in rural areas, especially those of ethnic areas, are identity-based. These include many ethnically based community colleges or religiously affiliated institutions, which focuses on educating their own ethnicity-affiliated or religion-affiliated students.

### **Opportunities**

There is a plethora for opportunities that drive private HEIs to play in the provision of higher education and help guide the development of higher education in Myanmar. While the lack of regulation on registration, quality assurance and accreditation could give space to the establishment of questionable schools or, perhaps even diploma mills, it also presents a number of opportunities for private HEIs to test out the terrain and get a sense of how the private HE system in Myanmar could be strengthened.

Myanmar is undergoing a great deal of reforms, as laid out in *National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021)*,<sup>6</sup> towards greater autonomy in government universities.<sup>7</sup> Understandably, a lot of processes and institutions are still greatly centralized under the current system. All public universities have always been centrally regulated either by the Ministry of Education or corresponding ministries since early 1960s. As the Ministry of Education does not regulate PHEIs, and even if the Ministry of Education regulates them, there will be a much greater deal of freedom and autonomy than public higher education institutions in terms of what can be taught in these PHEIs, and how they are taught in PHEIs. This is a golden opportunity that must be taken advantage of to provide educational programs that are in line with the market needs or social/national needs.

Another opportunity that lends to the development of PHEIs is the unmet high demand for higher education. The number of students that public universities can take up is less than the number of students who want to enroll in higher education programs. This provides a window of opportunity for PHEIs to play in the form of providing students with more access to higher education, especially in remote areas of government's provision of higher education is non-existent.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there are many specific programs or specific learning environments that the students may not find in public universities. For example, some students may want to immerse themselves in an academic environment that uses a particular language, such as English as medium of instruction.

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<sup>5</sup>International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012

<sup>6</sup>*National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021)*, Ministry of Education, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar

<sup>7</sup>“Officials Say More Time Needed for University Autonomy.” *The Myanmar Times*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/officials-say-more-time-needed-university-autonomy.html>.

<sup>8</sup>Kim Jolliffe and Emily Speers Mears, 2016, *Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar Ethnic Areas*, The Asia Foundation. Available at: <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Strength-in-Diversity-Toward-Universal-Education-Myanmar-Ethnic-Area.pdf>

The potential of using business practices in the development of higher education is another opportunity that drives the development of PHEIs—whether they are for-profit or not-for-profit. Business leaders, entrepreneurs, or local/international non-governmental organizations use business strategies and tactics to solve complex challenges in the provision of higher education in the context of Myanmar. In fact, this is the primary reason that there is a surge of foreign investment in the provision of higher education, as soon as Myanmar Investment Commission permitted foreign investment in education in April 2019.<sup>9</sup>

## Challenges

While there are many opportunities that drive the development of PHEIs, there are mounting challenges that are yet to be overcome. The first is the lack of industries' and governments' official recognition of the qualifications provided among PHEIs. This is a major challenge because graduates from PHEIs are not *officially* recognized to go into employment in specific industries or government sectors. This becomes a bigger issue when it comes to students' upward mobility academically in higher levels of studies locally or abroad or professionally in employment. As such the legalization of the PHEIs is one of the biggest challenges facing the higher education sector in Myanmar.

The second challenge is the lack of national qualifications framework. While many PHEIs in Myanmar look to international standards of qualifications, such as UNESCO, as a way to gauge the levels of education that they are providing, the lack of one clear qualifications framework becomes a source of great confusion among stakeholders, including policy makers, students, parents, educators, and teachers.

The third challenge facing PHEIs is strengthening Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) mechanism. This is particularly daunting in the absence of any regulatory quality assurance and accreditation frameworks within which PHEIs are supposed to operate. While many PHEIs aspire to achieve good regulatory standing, the lack of such quality assurance mechanisms even in public universities makes the direct observational learning of IQA practically impossible for many PHEIs.

The fourth challenge is the lack of clearly defined terminologies.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly confusing because many academic or institutional partners that Myanmar PHEIs affiliate themselves hail from many different countries, which use different terms to mean the same thing, or worse, the same terms to mean different things. For example, the term *college* is used in the United States only at or above higher education; whereas the same term is used in the United Kingdom at high school level or above. While different countries of partnership must be warmly welcome, the convolution of the associated terms and meanings must be addressed to ensure that students and parents are making informed decisions.

The fifth challenge for PHEIs is the initial investment cost associated with infrastructure. Real estate costs in Myanmar are relatively substantial and the infrastructural environments absorb a lot of unpredictable expenses. The lack of any support system limits the growth of the private sector in higher education.

## Hopes

While there are opportunities as well as challenges for PHEIs, recent years have witnessed hopes for the development of quality PHEIs. First and foremost, National Education Policy Commission (NEPC)<sup>11</sup> was established in late 2016 as a statutory body of Myanmar National Education Law of 2014 and the amended law of 2015, with the hope to provide policies guiding national educational development and reforms. Under the guidance of NEPC were formed three bodies: National Curriculum Committee (NCC, formed in 2016), National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC, formed in 2017), and Rectors' Committee

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<sup>9</sup>"Notification to Carry out Investment Activities in Education Services." *Directorate of Investment and Company Administration*, <https://www.dica.gov.mm/en/news/notification-carry-out-investment-activities-education-services>

<sup>10</sup>Knight, Jane. *Higher Education in Turmoil: the Changing World of Internationalisation*. Sense Publ., 2009

<sup>11</sup><https://www.nepc.edu.mm/mm/>, accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019

(RC, formed in 2018). The two committees that are most relevant to PHEIs are NAQAC and RC, which will provide policies and frameworks within which Myanmar PHEIs will be able to operate.

It is hoped that PHEIs in collaboration and consultation with NEPC, NAQAC, and RC can overcome the aforementioned challenges to fulfill the opportunities presented to PHEIs. In fact, this fruitful collaboration and consultation have led to the recent formation of Private Higher Education Institutions Association (PHEIA) in August 2019. The mission of PHEIA is to advocate for the development of PHEIs as well as to strengthen the quality and integrity of its member institutions. Currently, PHEIA is made up of thirty nine founding members, ranging from schools that offer business and management to engineering; information technology to tourism and hospitality; banking and finance to health sciences; and liberal arts and sciences to accounting. The degrees that are offered in partnership with foreign colleges, universities, and institutions range from diplomas all the way to doctoral degrees: 35 institutions are granting diplomas, 18 institutions are granting bachelors' degrees, 22 institutions are granting masters' degrees, and 4 institutions are granting doctoral degrees. Out of 39 member institutions, five of them are in partnership with US institutions, 31 have affiliations with UK institutions, 5 are working with European universities, 12 have associations with Asian institutions, 3 institutions partnering with Myanmar, Australian, and Russian institutions each. Out of 39 member institutions, 36 are for-profit and 3 are non-profit institutions.

It is in the interest of PHEIA to help promote the sector of the private higher education as well as to help facilitate the development of our nation through education. With the establishment of PHEIA, there now is a representative voice for PHEIs to work in tandem not only with Myanmar education stakeholders but also with international counterparts. With such progress, there will be better governmental recognition of the private higher education sector, improved mechanisms of private-public partnership, and reduction of government's burden to provide the education for all.

### **Conclusion**

While many challenges need to be addressed before private higher education institutions can become *tours de force* in utilizing the opportunities that are presented to them, the recent steps of reforms in education have shed a great deal of hope on delivering the full potential of PHEIs. Strengthening private higher education will bridge the gap to serve the needs of our students, thereby contributing in creating leaders in various sectors for the development of our country and our world.