

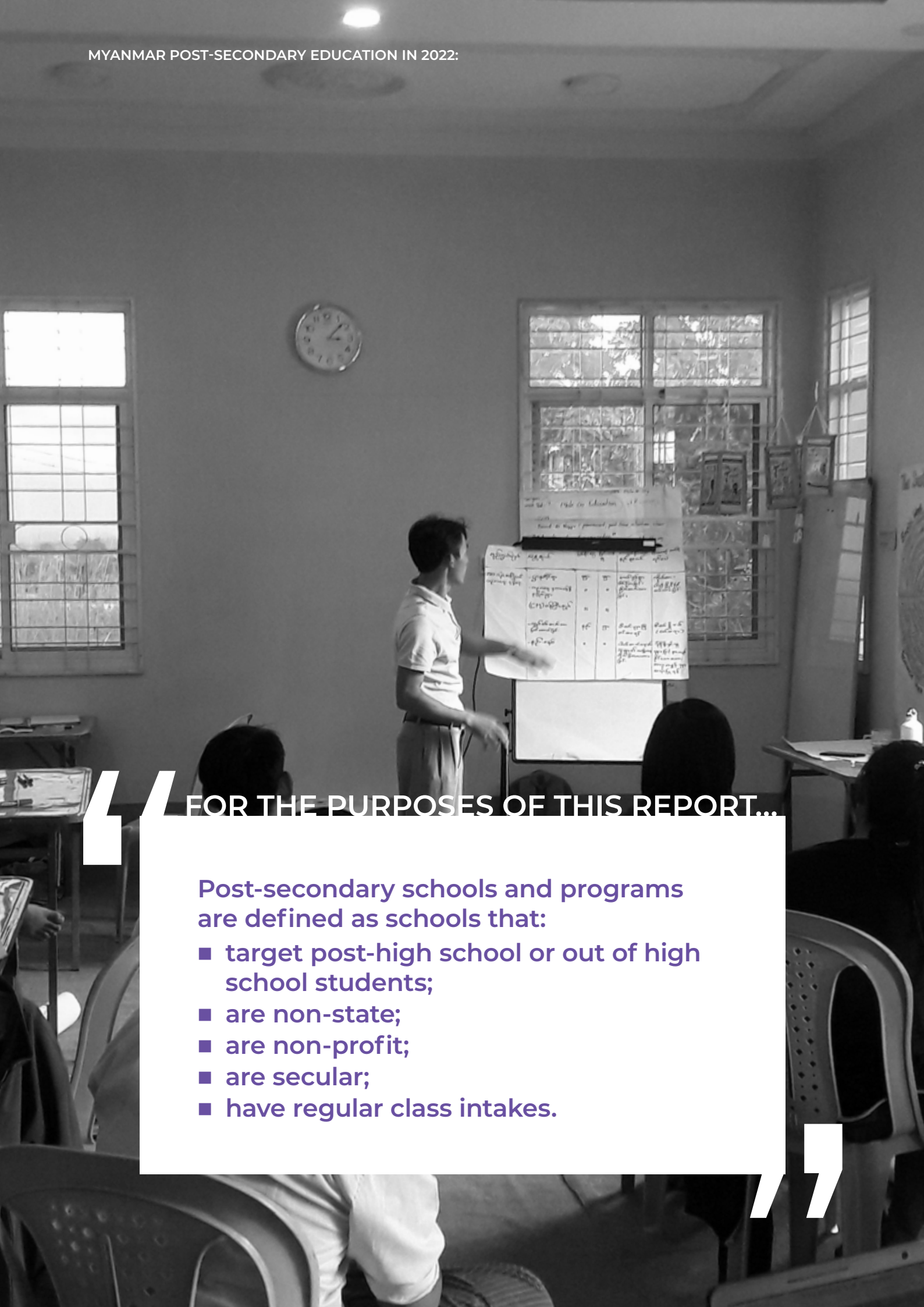


MYANMAR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN 2022

HISTORICAL GAINS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS REPORT...

Post-secondary schools and programs are defined as schools that:

- target post-high school or out of high school students;
- are non-state;
- are non-profit;
- are secular;
- have regular class intakes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Post-secondary education in Myanmar has made a vital contribution to migrant, refugee, ethnic and other communities that have long been underserved, neglected or marginalised by the state education system. By filling these gaps, a range of post-secondary providers have made higher education more accessible for thousands of Myanmar's youth.

The research and findings presented in this report will be of interest to those involved with Myanmar's post-secondary institutions, including principals, teachers, students, non-state and ethnic-based education providers and associated civil society, curriculum developers, academics interested in Myanmar's post-secondary education sector, local and international education-focused NGOs, and donors.

The research conducted for this report draws on interviews conducted with principals, teachers, former students, donors and others involved in the sector, as well as relevant academic literature, reports and commentary from practitioners.

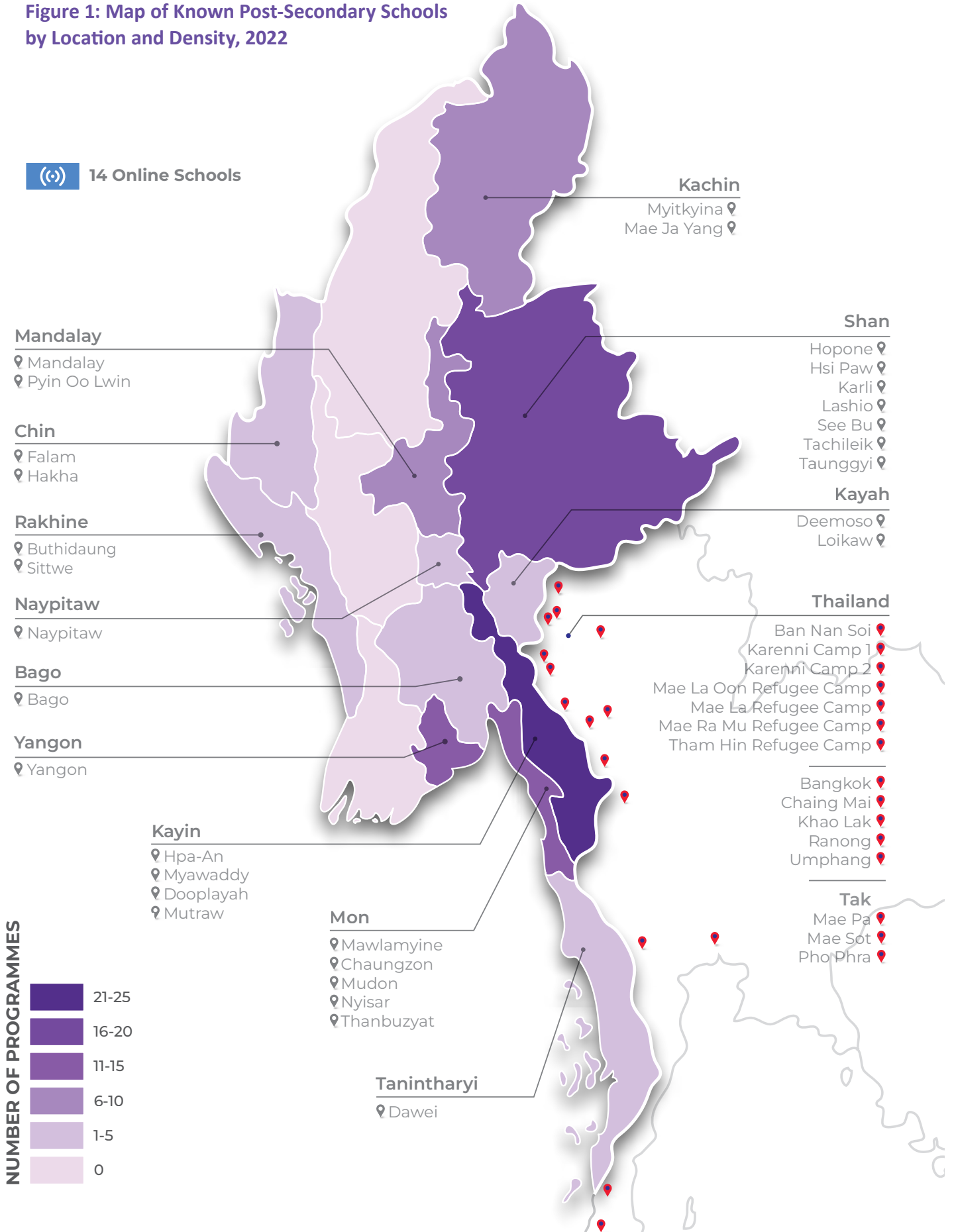
This report provides an overview of the historical context, development, diversity and contributions of various post-secondary education providers within Myanmar and

along its borders. It also raises awareness about the needs and current challenges the sector faces due to the pandemic and political upheaval over the last two years. This report coincides with Myanmar's first post-secondary education conference in June 2022.

FINDINGS

- Post-secondary schools have managed continuous provision of post-secondary education fulfilling vital education needs under exceptionally difficult circumstances.
- The post-secondary sector is currently facing very significant challenges due to the pandemic and political upheaval, including restrictions on face-to-face teaching, access to finances and security concerns.
- Post-secondary providers are rising to these challenges and finding innovative solutions including moving to online teaching where practical.
- The sector needs greater levels of support, recognition, resource allocation and capacity development.

Figure 1: Map of Known Post-Secondary Schools by Location and Density, 2022



1. INTRODUCTION

Post-secondary generally means any education after high school, and is often used synonymously to mean tertiary institutions. However, in Myanmar and within the communities of exiles, refugees, migrants and activists living on its borders, the sector serves rather different purposes. It often functions as an alternative to tertiary institutions, and sometimes as a bridge to them.

Within this context¹, post-secondary schools and programs are defined as schools that:

- target post-high school or out of high school students (generally aged over 16);
- are non-state;
- are non-profit²;
- are secular³;
- have regular class intakes (as opposed to one-off, or sporadic training workshops).

Basic and higher education in Myanmar have suffered generations of neglect, and **attempts to rehabilitate** these systems during the country's reform period, have, as yet, failed to accomplish much of their **transforming agenda**. Since the Covid-19 epidemic started in early 2020 and subsequent political events, education reforms have stalled.

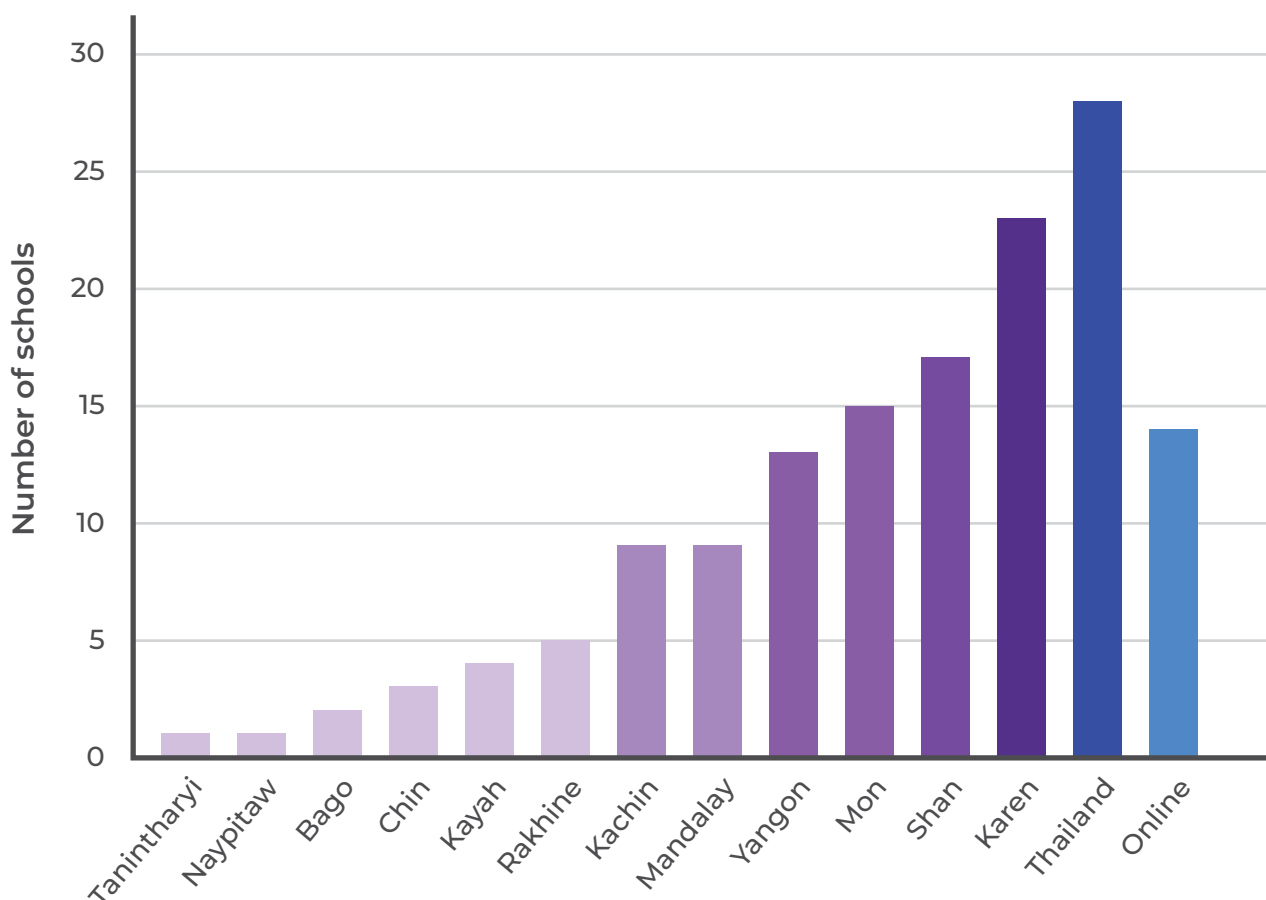
The non-profit, secular post-secondary education sector in Myanmar has carved itself out an essential role in providing education to those without viable alternative options. It is perhaps globally unique in its size and scope. Whereas many other countries have non-profit adult or youth-focused educational institutions, they normally cater only to narrowly-targeted groups and are nowhere near as widespread.

1. As defined by the Coordination Committee for the 2022 Post-Secondary Education: Realities and Possibilities Conference

2. Some schools charge fees for attendance. The distinction here is fees that support running costs, rather than a school set up for reasons of financial gain.

3. We have, however, included schools established and supported by religious organisations, as long as their purpose is not specifically religious instruction.

Figure 2: Known Post-Secondary Schools in Myanmar and on the Thai-Myanmar Border, 2022



“Non-formal post-secondary education has been playing an important role in empowering Myanmar’s youth for decades due to the absence of high quality university education. Furthermore, this sector has been able to respond to the needs of youth coming from various, often unaccredited, educational backgrounds.”

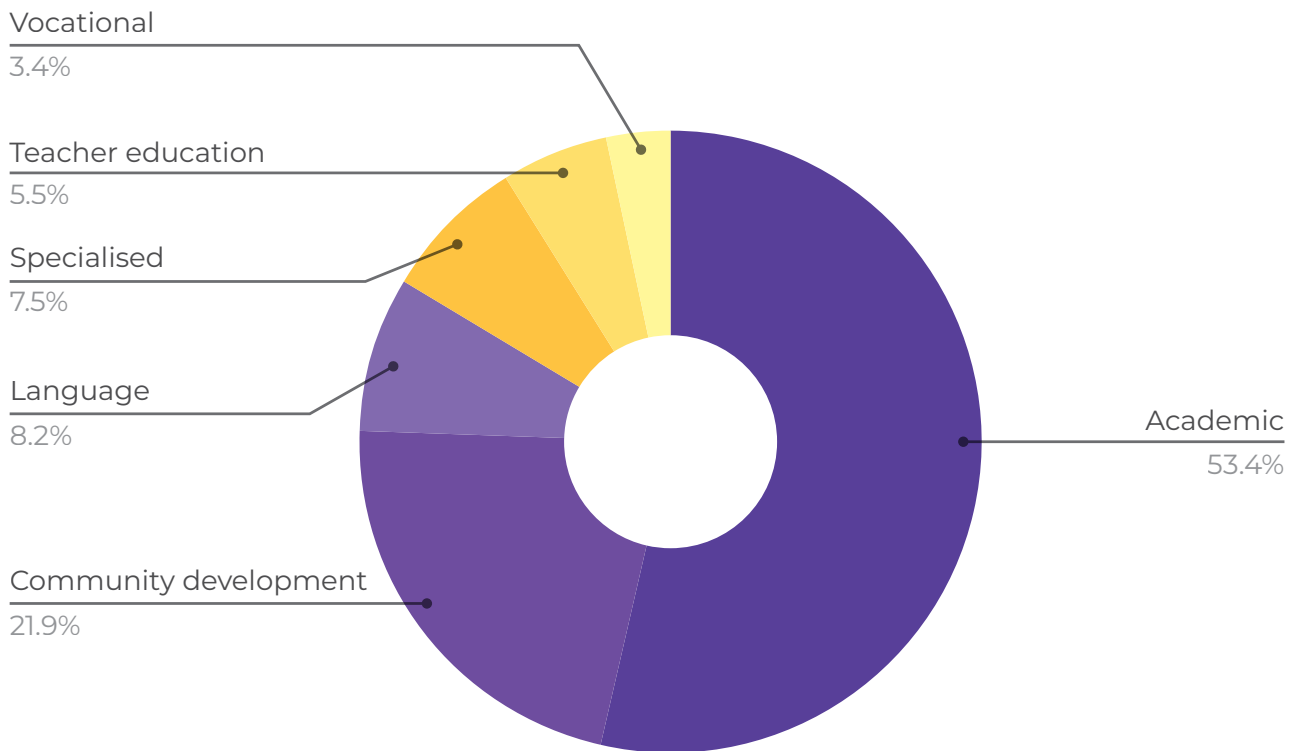
(Daniel Seigfried, Child’s Dream Foundation, 2022)

Myanmar’s post-secondary sector, currently comprising around 150 schools⁴, has its own networks, student and teacher support services, curricula, professional and academic pathways and donor agencies. With much of formal education remaining inaccessible, we argue that this sector needs greater levels of support, specifically in terms of recognition, resource allocation and capacity development.

The scope of post-secondary education is wide ranging. Subjects including civic education, social science, community development, information technology and English language are taught relatively consistently across most post-secondary schools. The sector also has a support

4. Based on the invitation list for the 2022 Post-Secondary Conference and unpublished research for a Post-Secondary directory compiled in 2020.

Figure 3: The Curricular Focus of Known Post-Secondary Schools, 2022



network of associated local partners providing teacher training, curricula, capacity building and other services.

“In the words of a post-secondary principal, these schools and partnership organisations comprise a ground-up ‘ecosystem of learning’ developed in response to the inadequacies of government-led education. What the Ministry of Education (MOE) does not provide, post-secondaries will do themselves”

(Loong and Rinehart, 2019)

Figures 1 and 2 in this section illustrate the spread and scope of the post-secondary education sector. With schools opening and closing frequently and the likelihood of there being several schools we are as yet unaware of, this information should be regarded as indicative rather than precise.

The curricular focus of each of the schools (shown in Figure 3) was identified in different ways, including schools’ self-identification, past profiling in curriculum-building activities with schools, and online research.

2. THE ORIGINS OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

There have likely been schools catering to adult and young adult learners, established by community groups, ethnic organisations or professional and academic interest groups in Myanmar for a very long time. However, the acknowledgment of post-secondary education as a sector could have started on the Thai-Myanmar border in the 1990s. Refugees fleeing conflicts in Kayin, Mon, Shan and Kayah States increased demand for education services at all levels. The relevant Karen, Karenni and Mon Education Departments initially focused on basic education, with community groups stepping in to provide further training to meet identified community needs, such as teacher education and language classes.

2.1 THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER

One of the first post-secondary schools to open on the Thai-Myanmar border was the Personal Development Course (PDC), set up in Mae Ra Mu Laung Refugee Camp in 1993. PDC focused on identified gaps amongst school-leavers and on community needs, and developed a curriculum focusing on community development, health education, life skills, human rights, and English and Burmese languages. Initially staffed by senior teachers from the Karen community and an Australian teacher and fundraiser, PDC is still running today, and has produced upwards of 500 graduates who have gone on to serve as teachers, medics, community workers and advocates.

In 1995, the Further Studies Program in Mae La Refugee Camp, Karen Northern Further Education Programme and Karenni Post-10 in Karenni Refugee Camp 3 were founded with academic objectives. By this time scholarship opportunities had opened up, largely through private universities in Thailand, and entry to these required either matriculation from an internationally recognised high school or a high school equivalence qualification. The U.S. General Education Diploma (GED) proved easier for students from Myanmar as the access to test-taking sites and passing rates were much higher than other exams. The Burma Project Education Office (BPEO)'s Intensive College Preparation Course opened in 1998 to coach students through the GED exam.

Over the next few years more post-secondary schools were established catering to different ethnic and geographical groups: the Mon Post-10 in Holochanee Refugee Camp, Shan State School for Nationalities Youth (SSSNY) in Chiang Mai and Special Education Program in Umpiem Mai Refugee Camp were early examples. At the same time a range of institutions specialising in different disciplines were established, including the Karen Young Women's Leadership Course and the Agriculture Learning Centre in Mae Ra Mu Laung Refugee Camp, English Immersion Programme in Umpiem Mai Camp, Karen Economic Development Course in Nu Po Refugee Camp, Engineering Studies Programme in Mae La Camp, Karenni Social Development Course in Karenni Camp 3, Leadership and Management Schools in Karenni Camp 3, Mae Kha Khee Camp, Mae La Camp and Mae Pa, and Teacher Training Programmes in several locations.

Additional programmes were set up in urban centres in Thailand, including the Journalism School, EarthRights School, Foreign Affairs Training and Intensive College Foundation Course in Chiang Mai. These schools accepted youth from throughout the border area and Myanmar, including many graduates of the camp and urban-based post-secondaries.

The Burma Project Education Office (BPEO) administered a range of university scholarships and was funding three camp-based post-secondary schools. In 2001, they established the **Curriculum Project** and Burma Volunteer Program⁵ to provide support services to post-secondary schools and civil society organisations. Other donors in the early 2000s included ZOA Refugee Care, World Education and **Child's Dream Foundation**.

In the mid-2000s, the **Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity's Institute of Higher Education** was formed to **standardise the curriculum** among participating Karen camp-based schools. The initial six schools taught Karen and English languages, social studies, maths, science and philosophy of education. Subject curricula was negotiated by subject teachers from participating schools together with support organisations.⁶

One issue facing the sector at the time was the lack of further education opportunities for post-secondary graduates. There were a limited number of scholarships for tertiary study at international universities in Thailand, and a very few to other countries. Competition for these scholarships was intense, and a place in the Intensive College Foundation Course⁷, which awarded scholarships to most graduates, was highly sought after. Many post-

5. The Burma Volunteer Programme, which operated from 2001-2012, supplied international volunteer teachers to CSOs and post-secondary schools, on a model of volunteers neither paying to participate nor receiving any payment, other than on-site accommodation and food where possible. Many of these volunteers stayed for many years, some finding funding sources so they could remain on staff, a few participating in the founding of new schools, including Global Border Studies in Nu Po camp, Wide Horizons, Youth Connect and Minmahaw in Mae Sot and Theik Khar (Dignity) Myanmar in Taunggyi.

6. This curriculum development model was later taken on by other networks of schools, including **PDI-Kintha** and **Myint-Mo Foundation**.

7. The Intensive College Foundation Course (1998-2010) took intakes of 24 students through a GED course, with most getting a scholarship to study at a Thai university on completion. There were 8 intakes in total.

secondaries taught with the aim of getting their graduates into this course, despite the few spaces available. Another consequence was school-hopping, whereby a student would graduate from one post-secondary programme and enroll in another and then another, in the hopes that eventually they might get a scholarship.

There were (and still are) few future options for people without citizenship documentation.

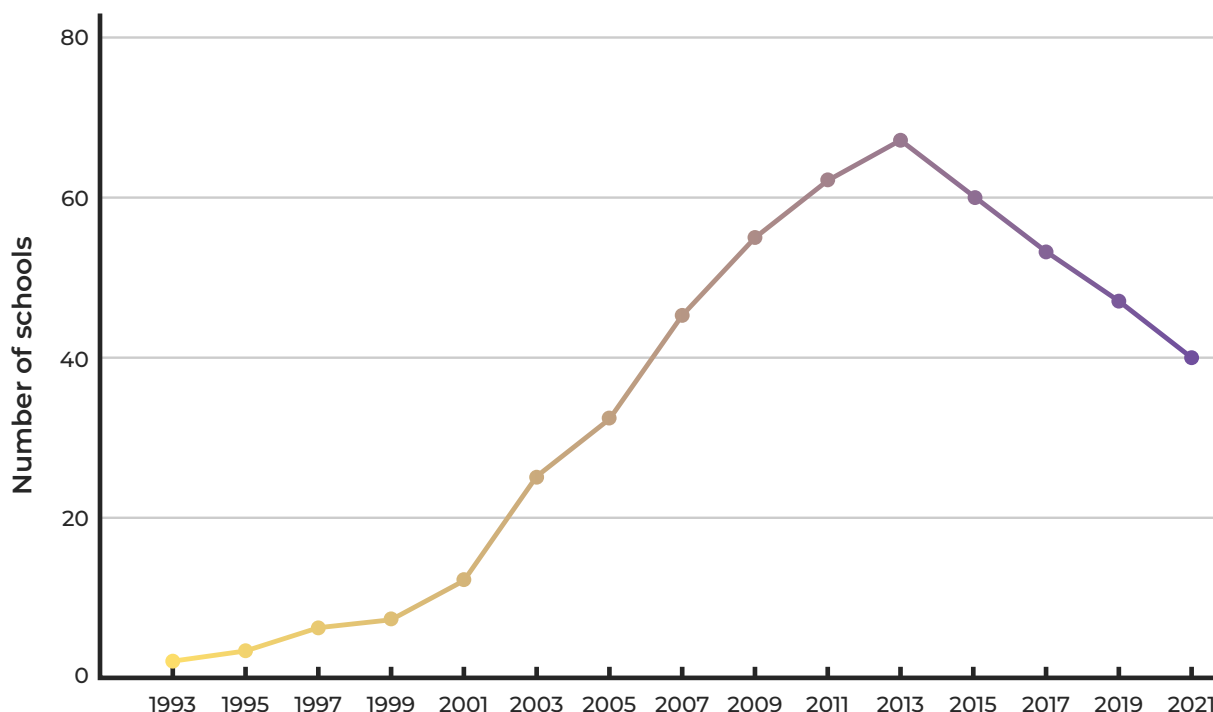
BPEO set up a short-lived career counselling service to address this lack of clear career pathways. However, there were (and still are) few future options for people without citizenship documentation. These options were restricted to teaching or health care within the migrant, refugee camp or ethnic organisational milieu, or a very limited number of positions with community-based organisations or local and international NGOs. A university scholarship, which usually came with assistance in acquiring appropriate documentation, exponentially increased a student's career and life opportunities.

An early initiative in both distance delivery and accreditation was the Distance Education Programme (DEP), run by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma's National Health and Education Department.



A university scholarship, which usually came with assistance in acquiring appropriate documentation, exponentially increased a student's career and life opportunities.

Figure 4: Numbers of Post-Secondary Schools on Myanmar’s Borders Over Time



Running from 1998 to 2004, the DEP offered Australian Level Three Certificates in Community Management and Primary Health Care, accredited by the South Australia College of Technical and Further Education (SA-TAFE). English language programmes were set up in several camp and town locations to support these programmes. The courses were based on SA-TAFE’s courses for remote Australian indigenous communities, contextualised to the Myanmar border and available in English and Burmese languages. This proved very expensive, even at a reduced rate, as the process of accreditation requires external invigilation and quality control, as well as a substantial administrative fee.

Figure 4 tracks the growth of post-secondary schooling on Myanmar’s Thai, China and India borders.⁸ The imprecise nature of what qualifies as a post-secondary school means that these are estimates only. 1995-2013 information is taken from Curriculum Project (2012), and 2021 figures are from the invitation list to the 2022 online Post-Secondary Education Conference.

In January 2005, third country resettlement programmes opened up to UNHCR-registered refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border.⁹ Much of the post-secondary sector left. Students, teachers and administrators who had been living in the camps for years and asylum-seekers from activist organisations living

8. By ‘border’, we refer to countries which border Myanmar (Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh, Laos) and areas within Myanmar which are commonly accessed via bordering countries. This includes a school in New Delhi previously run by Prospect Burma working with the Myanmar community there, and the schools located at the education hub of Mai Ja Yang in Kachin State, across the border from Yunnan Province in China.

9. Since 2005, **135,000 refugees from Myanmar have resettled from Thailand** to 14 different third countries

precariously in the border towns now had a way out, and over the following few years the schools were **drained of expertise**. A consequence of mass resettlement was that significant numbers of university scholarship holders with refugee status left for third countries mid-way through their university studies. This resulted in scholarship donors no longer allowing those holding refugee registration to access scholarships, regardless of any stated intent to resettle. Later, this was one factor in the gradual withdrawal of donor funding from border post-secondary programming, alongside perceived greater opportunities in Myanmar itself. However, while many were leaving to start lives in the US, Canada, Australia or Scandinavian countries, more people were arriving at the border, including activists fleeing crackdowns in the wake of the 2007 Saffron Revolution and people whose homes and livelihoods had been destroyed by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. A 2017 report by World Education claimed **1,520 students were enrolled in Thailand-based refugee camp post-secondary schools**.

Thailand's gradual recognition and registration of migrant workers allowed migrant-focused education initiatives to be established in many towns and cities. These initially targeted the children of migrant workers, and gradually attracted increasing numbers of students from Myanmar unable to access decent educational opportunities in Myanmar, especially at higher levels.

POST-SECONDARY STORY:

SANDAR LWIN

I was one of Wide Horizons' 2008-2010 students. I first came to Thailand as an illegal migrant worker, and I have just completed my Ph.D. in Educational Administration at Prince of Songkla University Thailand.



I've worked for more than ten years with development agencies and learning centers providing access to continuing education for marginalised children and youth within Myanmar, its neighbouring countries and IDP, and refugee camps. I have a strong passion for helping others, particularly supporting access to continuing education for marginalised groups.

I don't know the best way to say thanks to Wide Horizons and how lucky I am. WH enlightened and broadened my mind to move forward to reach this far.

I look forward to paying it forward.

2.2 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ALTERNATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS IN MYANMAR

In the 2010s, educators in Myanmar started to establish similar post-secondary schools. Some were founded by graduates and former teachers of border programmes, or supported by donors of border programmes. A key difference in these Myanmar-based schools was that rather than providing the only opportunity for education after high school, these schools often positioned themselves as alternative or complementary to formal university education.

Prior to the 2010s, non-formal education was often affiliated with faith-based organisations, and those focusing on adult and young adult learners were commonly English classes designed to fit around students' work or university study. Monasteries, churches, temples and mosques often ran classes for local youth, with a few also offering other languages, first language literacy and occasional other subjects. Many Theological Colleges, like Chin Christian University, were open to students of all faiths, and some included social science and civic education programming.

We promote critical thinking and equality at the same time we are preserving our identity and culture.

POST-SECONDARY STORY:

HARVEY VAN BIK

I have been Academic Dean at Chin Christian University (CCU) since 2010. I have two secular bachelor degrees and two religious master's degrees, and am currently pursuing a PhD in Hong Kong.

CCU offers both theology and secular studies, including a bachelor program in business administration. We combine federal and liberal education, and have courses such as human rights and feminist theology.

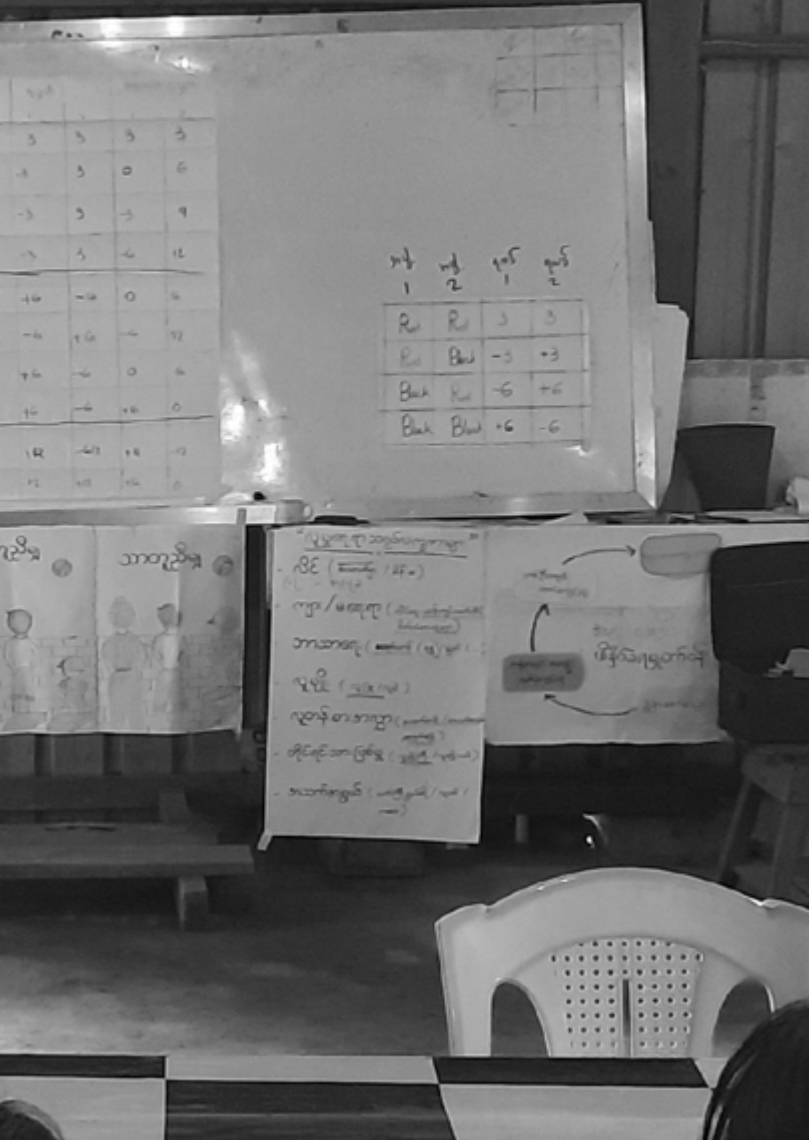


This university gives rural youth access to affordable higher education and introduces the students to an international community through our various partnerships with foreign institutions. We promote critical thinking and equality at the same time we are preserving our identity and culture.



Some groups also offered teacher training programmes, developing a base of teachers familiar with learner-centred methodology who could work in the religious and ethnic-based networks of basic education schools operating outside the government mandate. The **British Council** and **American Centres** in Yangon and Mandalay also ran courses in a wider variety of subjects, including teacher training, and had a reputation for high-quality teaching and curriculum. However, some of these programmes were expensive, although discounted fees and scholarships were often available for disadvantaged groups.

In Myanmar, due to the limited liberalisation in the 2010s that allowed the establishment of new education institutions, the number of post-secondary schools rapidly increased. Notable examples of post-secondary establishments setting up in Myanmar at this time included the Myanmar Community Academies Program (now Myint-mo Education Foundation), a network of initially three schools in Hpa-an, Loikaw and Myitkyina. These were set up by established community educators in partnership with donors and training organisations who had previously funded and supported post-secondary schools



POST-SECONDARY STORY:

ELIS TUN

I am a graduate of Business Administration, but I have mainly worked for youth education for the past 10 years. I believe that working in the educational field is one of the best ways I can contribute to my community.



I founded Level Up Academy (LUA) in 2012 to create learning opportunities for youth and to give them more choices for their career and participation in the community. Our objectives are to develop students' skills and abilities, increase students' civic engagement in the community and promote inclusion and equity.

LUA has become the choice of many young people over mainstream university education. Though it is not legally accredited yet, LUA and its alumni have proven that there is always space for quality education.

on the border. They initially used the models that had been operating in the most successful border-based post-secondary schools and adapted them to their specific contexts, with a standardised curriculum of English language, social sciences, community development, numeracy, life skills and IT. An educational hub was also emerging in Mae Ja Yang on the China-Myanmar border. By 2015, Mae Ja Yang was host to two general academic colleges, an intensive English school, a teacher training college and a law school.



As of 2022, no post-secondary programmes have been able to operate in the refugee camps on the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. **Olney, Haque and Mubarak (2022)** have outlined the circumstances that have inhibited the development of post-secondary education: “The underlying reason for the formal education ban during the first years of the response was the government’s position that the refugees would only be in Bangladesh temporarily and that there was therefore no need to develop a formal education system. The government also believed that providing educational opportunities would be seen as a pull factor that would attract more Rohingya to come from Myanmar to the camps. Rohingya disagree with this argument.”

Further to the west, Prospect Burma has operated a **post-secondary school in New Delhi, India** since 1998.

In the later 2010s, most donors shifted their priorities and funding to inside Myanmar due to assumptions at the time of ongoing democratic reforms. This resulted in closures of many schools in the refugee camps and border towns. A handful of schools moved into Myanmar and set up in Karen, Karenni and Mon States. This was often a difficult transition, conditions being very different on the other side of the border. Problems that the schools faced included: lack of internet access and irregular electricity, international staff and volunteers not being able to continue working with the school, security concerns and transportation difficulties. Nonetheless, the majority of these schools continued to operate, adjusting their curricula as needed.

I chose to be a teacher to help educate young people and promote a better future for people in Myanmar.

POST-SECONDARY STORY:

SAW TAR WAH (SAW WILLIAM WALLACE PALACE)



I am the Vice-principal of Pu Dooplaya Junior College (PDJC), which was set up in Nu Poe Refugee camp, Thailand, in 2008 and moved to Htee Wah Klu, Karen State in 2019. The school's purpose is to support the local community by educating young people and giving them skills at a higher education level.

I obtained my Diploma from PDJC and then completed a course in Specialised Education at Pu Taw Memorial Junior College in Mae La Camp. After that I attended Australian

Catholic University, which offers a diploma for refugee students, in Mae Pa, Thailand. Since then I have worked at PDJC.

Before studying at PDJC, I taught for a year. The community where I worked had many needs, including people with management and leadership skills, so I decided to further my studies in order to better serve the Karen community. I chose to be a teacher to help educate young people and promote a better future for people in Myanmar.

2.3 POST-SECONDARY RECOGNITION

Myanmar’s tertiary education sector has suffered decades of neglect and underinvestment, and is **in need of substantial renovation**. Proposed higher educational reforms in the late 2010s promised some improvement, with 16 universities granted autonomy from the Ministry of Education. This would have allowed the schools to take control of their **curriculum, staffing and management**. Non-state education providers, on the other hand, enjoy institutional autonomy, free of **excessive bureaucratisation** from the state. However, they are neither recognised, accredited nor regulated by the Myanmar Ministry of Education; both a challenge and an advantage.

Alongside traditional academic programmes, there was an **identified need** and demand for courses in **civic and peace education**, minority rights and social cohesion. These were seen as “crucial in order to bring people together around a shared vision of common prosperity with other ethnic groups and all other oppressed minorities, such as women marginalised in society, LGBTQ communities,

factory workers, farmers, and Muslims in Myanmar” (**Zin Wai Yan, 2022**). In addition, post-secondary schools offer an alternative to rote learning. They encourage critical thinking and open discussions of different perspectives on Burmese history, peace-building, and issues surrounding identity in Myanmar. (**Loong and Rinehart, 2019**).

In 2016, a private education law was drafted which would allow ‘private’ schools to obtain legal status as educational institutions. Many schools found the requirements unrealistic. These and other factors, such as financial constraints, have created difficulties for the non-state sector in providing higher education to Myanmar youth. Specific related challenges facing complementary education providers in IDP and refugee camps, including educational policy decision making and recognition of their services, are discussed in more detail in **Thet Zin Soe, (2020)**.

Post-secondary schools are currently navigating how to accredit their courses affordably whilst maintaining autonomy





Although some have forged partnerships with international universities, most post-secondary institutions are self-accrediting.



over their curriculum. According to Kyaw Moe Tun, Director of **Parami University**, accreditation is important not only in ensuring recognition of learning, but also as assurance that an institution “has ensured a certain minimum quality of instruction, academic offerings, student support services, and other administrative services that the institution provides to the students. It is a nonverbal communication from the institution to other institutions that it is constantly reviewing its institutional quality”. However, **Marie Lall (2021)** cautions the need for balance between teaching to the needs of the local context, and engaging with international organisations to link with global scholarship. A lot of international programming, materials and assessment places too great a learning burden on students (and teachers) unfamiliar with the academic norms, topics and contexts described, as well as working in a second, third or more language.¹⁰

Whilst the private sector runs courses accredited to international institutions, these are only affordable by a small minority. Two notable fees-free initiatives providing international university qualifications to

students from Myanmar were run by Open University Australia (approx. 2008-2020) and the Australian Catholic University (approx. 2007-2021).

Although some have forged partnerships with international universities, most post-secondary institutions are self-accrediting. Payap University Thailand’s Centre for Social Impact runs a **Certificate in Social Entrepreneurship and Community Development**, charging schools \$3,000 USD each per cohort of students for accreditation. However, most other options, which charge per student for accreditation of post-secondary schools, are significantly more expensive.

This lack of recognition has caused major disadvantages to graduates from such schools in securing permanent jobs at government departments. To obtain government-recognised degrees, many post-secondary students also study in distance university programmes¹¹ and **combine their studies with state distance education**. The post-secondary schools then have to adjust their schedule accordingly.

10. In 2012, the average student entering post-secondary school on the Thai-Myanmar border had an A1/2 (elementary) **level of English**. There is no evidence to suggest this has changed in recent years, or is different in central Myanmar.

11. Myanmar Universities’ Distance Education Programmes have provided an alternative tertiary pathway for students who cannot afford to live near a campus. In the late 2010’s, they had around 500,000 student enrolments.



2.4 ONLINE INITIATIVES

A recent feature since the pandemic and the political upheaval in 2021, is the rise of online further education opportunities. Increasing numbers of online academies, universities, colleges and institutes are opening. Often **founded and staffed** by former university teachers or students, these **provide education opportunities** for those without access to safe formal education. Admission fees, if any, are low, but participation depends on **access to reliable internet**. The number and scope of those currently operating is difficult to determine, and would include a range of online initiatives run by established schools used to teaching face to face. As they do not

need physical space, their set-up costs and staffing needs are comparatively low. However, **mastery of the technology and pedagogical aspects of online teaching and learning** have proven a steep learning curve for schools, students and support organisations.

Recent research¹² indicates over 10 online non-profit tertiary institutions have been established since 2020, not including schools who complement their face-to-face teaching with online courses, or are temporarily teaching online until the security situation stabilises.

12. Compiled in 2020 for an as-yet unpublished post-secondary directory (forthcoming) and in 2022 when inviting participants to the Post-secondary Conference

3. CURRENT OBSTACLES FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In the *Origins of Post-Secondary Education* section, we outlined some of the ongoing challenges the post-secondary sector has faced:

- the lack of official recognition;
- the lack of clear educational and employment pathways;
- changing donor priorities.

Since 2020, a range of new challenges have arisen. Financial dependency is an ongoing

problem for non-profit post-secondary schools. Unlike private schools who can charge high tuition fees to a wealthier student cohort, or schools operated by religious organisations which receive donations, post-secondary schools often depend on external funding, mostly through international aid organisations and foundations. Schools prioritising accessibility charge low to no fees, so financial constraints limit the schools' capacity to develop, grow and respond to new problems. External funding is often allocated

“

Reliance on an outside funder to keep the doors open is unsustainable. However the resources to educate low-income youth are provided by the state in most countries.

”



for a specific time period, making it difficult for long-term planning. Human resources are needed for making grant applications, reporting and donor relations; however, most institutions do not have enough human capacity to add such departments. Reliance on an outside funder to keep the doors open is unsustainable; however the resources to educate low-income youth are provided by the state¹³ in most countries. This is seen as essential to a fair and equitable development process.

A shortage in skilled teachers is a nationwide problem for state and non-state institutions at all levels. According to **research conducted in Chin State**, insufficient skilled teachers is one of the biggest problems that post-secondary schools face. Many teachers regard jobs at non-state institutions as less stable than jobs in state institutions, and they don't come with the housing and retirement plans that come with government jobs.

13. In many ways, private donors have replicated state oversight, by funding and supporting not only the schools, but various teacher training, curriculum development, counselling and educational management services. Consequently, they wield a lot of power within the sector, and have shaped and developed a range of rules and processes.

3.1 CHALLENGES DURING THE 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Soon after the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in March 2020 in Myanmar, the government's strict prohibition on public gatherings immediately halted all school-related activities. Students from the public universities were in the middle of their **mid-year examinations**, as were some non-state post-secondary educational institutions. One non-profit university in Chin State had to conclude their examination online. Another, which was in their orientation week, had to terminate their activities midway. Summer schools were cancelled and students who lived on campus were sent back home.

Amidst the new rules and restrictions, schools started to experiment with online teaching. A **survey of post-secondary schools in late 2020** reported two schools had to completely shut down due to no internet access and unsuitable facilities to adapt to the new conditions, and only four schools were able to run face-to-face classes, but with reduced class sizes. Most of the schools had to rely on online teaching.



While unlocking new possibilities and opportunities, online teaching and learning came with fresh challenges to both the teachers, the students, and the school administration.

The majority of Myanmar youth rely on mobile phones for electronic communications. Only a few students and teachers can get access to personal computers¹⁴. When online learning

14. Many schools have older donated desktops and laptops available, but these often remain largely unused due to lack of skilled IT personnel to maintain them.



became the only option, students were faced with an enormous challenge in securing necessary equipment. Getting learning applications installed on an old phone was difficult. Purchasing a more modern mobile phone or computer is expensive, and limited by both economic constraints and travel restrictions under the pandemic.

Students from rural areas faced difficulties accessing electricity and the internet. Some students had to travel to other villages in order to join their classes. Internet charges added more financial stress in the already worsening economy under the pandemic. Some schools were able to assist students with these, and some were able to move their students to urban areas for better access to the internet and electricity.

“It was surprising how it all happened so fast. We quickly had to adapt to online teaching-learning, as it was the only way available. For a country like Myanmar with a huge digital divide, the learning curve into online teaching is incredibly steep. It’s a struggle like no other for teachers, but a very worthwhile struggle.”

– Kaung Hla Zan, Senior Trainer, Mote Oo Education

Poor internet connection has been a major problem not only faced by students in rural areas. Nearly half of schools surveyed reported internet connectivity as one of their biggest challenges. Even those who used wifi often faced slow and unreliable internet connectivity as the stay-at-home order meant many people in homes and schools were all using wifi at the same time.

Adapting to the new form of teaching and learning requires time and practice, which causes frustration for teachers and students more accustomed to face to face teaching. Becoming familiar with different learning apps, tools and functions has been another challenge. Many surveyed schools requested training in how to use online learning platforms, while training providers were also finding upskilling in online technology and online teaching techniques rather arduous.

According to Kaung Hla Zan, Senior Teacher Trainer at Mote Oo Education: “it was surprising how it all happened so fast. We quickly had to adapt to online teaching learning, as it was the only way available. For a country like Myanmar with a huge digital divide, the learning curve into online teaching is incredibly steep. It’s a struggle like no other for teachers, but a very worthwhile struggle.”

These difficulties on top of the general depression and uncertainties caused by the pandemic affected students’ motivation to learn. Many, accustomed to face-to-face classes and constant supervision from teachers, found online learning not as engaging. Additionally, some teachers believed online teaching was **less productive** than the traditional face-to-face teaching, thus impacting their motivation.

3.2 UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES

Higher education was one of Myanmar's **most affected sectors** in the aftermath of the political upheaval in 2021, with students and teachers participating in various movements. According to 2018-2019 data, there were about 21,000 lecturers working in the state higher education sector. By the end of May, 2021, approximately 90% of them – **19,000 lecturers** – were discharged.

The non-state sector also faced numerous unprecedented challenges. In mid-2021, one post-secondary school experienced two-thirds of its students dropping out. Schools operating in conflict-active areas such as Karenni, had to shut down completely and some schools were forced to consider relocating to safer places. Students had to leave school to provide economic support to their families as Myanmar faces a double crisis – a political crisis and a public health crisis – weakening the socio-economic situation for the entire country. Students have relocated to other countries to work to support their family or to live in a possibly more secure environment. Despite the challenges, most post-secondary schools continued to deliver their services adapting to the changing needs.

Many NGOs and educational institutions are under the constant threat of raids. Some schools have switched to online teaching as a safer option, and some schools that offer face-to-face teaching have to arrange campus accommodation for their students for increased student safety.

Some schools are modifying the titles of their courses to avoid using terms perceived as sensitive. Transporting and storing resources on sensitive topics is also a concern. The use of social media platforms such as Facebook for student recruitment has also been limited as these sites are banned and can only be used with a VPN. Some schools fear that advertising their programs and events on social media would attract harmful attention. For example, one school mentioned: “We only send information about our programs and events to a few people instead of advertising it on Facebook.”



Both crises have caused extra financial burdens for the schools. Schools have had to bear costs associated with online learning, Both crises have caused extra financial burdens for the schools. Schools have had to bear costs associated with online learning such as the cost of data and fuel for generators to compensate for erratic supply of electricity. In 2022, Myanmar has faced worsening power shortages leading to power cuts of over 12 hours a day at unpredictable times across most of the country. Therefore, schools have had to invest in generators (if possible) or install power supply systems charged by solar or batteries in order to have electricity to run effective programs. Also, Myanmar has seen a doubling in the price of data costs. On top of

all of this is the high inflation rate. One school mentioned:

“We now use an (electric) generator every day because the electricity is so unreliable. Oil prices have become so high as with everything else. We are spending a lot more money on a daily basis than before.”

With the banking system stalled, receiving funding, especially from abroad, has become extremely problematic. This causes delays and inconvenience. One post-secondary staff member comments:

“I told my boss and the finance team that my teacher salary can wait a month or two because I know that the funds from abroad are being stalled, and I know that they’re sort of struggling. But they insist on paying me on time. Probably because it is my only income. I sometimes wonder if my boss pays me out of his pocket.”

Internet connectivity worsened in 2022, and in some cases it is not possible to run an entire course online. On some occasions, only students joining from the border areas using foreign SIM cards could join the classes. A teacher comments:

POST- SECONDARY STORY:

NAW HTWE NYO

“There are days when we couldn’t even start class. The problems we faced with online teaching before were fixable; we have gotten a lot better at it. Just when I thought I can manage online teaching more effectively, these problems are now added.”

Non-profit post secondary educational institutions rely on networking and collaboration with local NGOs for internship and employment opportunities for their students, and running field trips and student exchange programs with similar institutions. This is now much more difficult.

Teacher shortages have become more of an issue. A principal mentioned how it has become more difficult to control the quality of the teaching that they provide as a result of skilled teachers being scattered and some teachers now living in IDP camps without internet access:

“A lot of skilled and experienced teachers have fled, and that makes it hard for us to provide the same quality of teaching as before. We try our best with what we are left with. But, despite all the trainings, time and money invested for teacher capacity development, the progress seems too slow. “

I am from Ye township in Mon State, Myanmar, but in 2007, I was living in Nu Poe Refugee camp. After high school, I studied at the Karen Economic Development Course, learning management, administrative and accountancy skills. After that I studied at the Global Border Studies (GBS) programme, an intensive academic program that prepares young adults to promote ethnic and cultural diversity, human rights, peace and gender equality. GBS changed me into a new person and opened my eyes to see the whole picture. There were different religious, ethnic, experience, culture and backgrounds but we are one and GBS showed me how we can colour our society from those different things.



Since then, I have been a peace trainer working all over Myanmar and the border. Now I have my baby and am back in my village, working as a volunteer teacher. It has been difficult for children to continue their education due to the political situation. Therefore, we have opened a school for these children.

4. THE FUTURE OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN MYANMAR

Despite the numerous challenges and uncertainties about the future, post-secondary schools have managed continuous provision of post-secondary education under exceptionally difficult circumstances, demonstrating their adaptability and commitment, and highlighting their vital function in Myanmar's Higher Education sector.

If the current political situation is prolonged, the sector may **continue to provide alternative education**. In a post-conflict setting, education may need to be reconstructed in a **weakened and unstable context**; it is beneficial to have a well-functioning sector to build upon. The sector is important not only to rebuild the

education system but also to boost recovery and reconstruction. As Dr Rosalie Metro has pointed out: “

“With the ambitious plans of these alternative providers, education in Myanmar could become not only a response to change but also a driver of it.”

Therefore, the post-secondary sector needs and deserves greater levels of support in terms of financing, training and advocacy for recognition of learning, and potential integration into a future formal education system.



POST-SECONDARY STORY:

ZAW HTAY

I graduated from Sittwe University with a degree in English Literature, and then I studied Environment and Sustainable Agriculture at the Network for Education and Environmental Development (NEED-Myanmar) Eco-Village Farm School, and then studied a Diploma in Social Science at the Akyab Institute (AI) Program in Sittwe in 2019.



“Our school received about 90 applications for 32 available seats. At that time, the internet was accessible only in 1 out of 9 townships. I believed we’d have received more if the internet were working like before. Five schools in our network have received a total of about 750 applications. This shows that we are needed more than ever before.”

– Salai Van Cung Lian, Principal, Victoria Academy

AI’s Diploma has been really useful in my career. I was able to join the Initiative for Peace Camp in Mae Sot, and did a four-month internship. After that a job as a community facilitator back in Rakhine State. Now, I work for Kintha’s Peace and Development Initiative (PDI) teaching environmental subjects to Muslim youths in Bu May Education Centre in Sttwe. I learned many things in NEED and AI, and I can apply the knowledge, experiences and skills in my workplace.

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

For post-secondary education providers:

- Prioritise building capacity of teachers, students and administrative staff in online pedagogies and technology
- Explore alternative modes of teaching delivery, including online, radio or home-based learning packs
- Encourage self-care among teachers in the current context
- Foster psycho-social understanding amongst teachers
- Promote online safety and digital security for all stakeholders
- Make technology available, especially laptops, to both teachers and students

For donors:

- Fund access to technology
- Invest in upskilling teachers in online teaching techniques
- Offer longer-term funding options, including funding of running costs and staff salaries
- Consider re-opening a volunteer placement program for external expertise
- Use funding mechanisms to support education in more remote and underserved regions
- Encourage income generation activities to support running costs and skills development
- Make emergency funding available and accessible

For post-secondary providers, civil society, governments and international academic institutions:

- Develop relationships with international universities and encourage fees waivers
- Encourage cooperation between actors, including ethnic education departments, and between ethnic, non-formal online tertiary education providers and other advocates
- Encourage relevant governments to recognise learning attainment gained from the post-secondary sector including by refugee and migrant populations

For more research on the sector, check updates on psecmyanmar.com

About the Authors

Katie Julian is from New Zealand, and has worked in Myanmar and on Myanmar's borders since 1995. She initially volunteered as a teacher in the border camps in Thailand, and then co-founded an educational materials development organisation that eventually became **Mote Oo Education**. She is an anarchist, knits a lot, and has been finishing a master's degree since the last century.

Nitha Bor Siangpum was born and raised in the Chin Hills and migrated to Norway in 2006. After finishing her Masters degree in Global Development & Planning in 2017, she went back to Myanmar to volunteer for six months and ended up there until March 2021. Bor founded and currently leads a diaspora organisation called **Bridge International**. She is a third culture kid who feels at home at airports.

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