



Early College Folio

Unconventional Paths to College Education

Volume 2, Issue 2 | Spring 2023

Case Study

Phaung Daw Oo International University

Yee Wai Than

Phaung Daw Oo International University

What, may we ask, is an unconventional path in education? One answer lies in programs that diverge from the typical mainstream educational system, a system which is managed and controlled by a government or an officially recognised organization. Fundamentally, education should be for everyone, even the children who are working in tea shops, in pagodas, or in the street. In Myanmar, however, we have some students who don't want to participate in mainstream, government-run education because of ongoing political issues. Therefore, college education is also considered to be a part of an unconventional path for them, one that offers opportunities for students in difficult situations to continue higher learning.

[Phaung Daw Oo International University](#) (PIU) is one such institution of higher learning. Located in the city of Mandalay, it offers an ideal alternative to the mainstream educational system. This case study will introduce PIU and explore how it provides unique opportunities to students in need.

BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa, said that “Education is the most powerful weapon to change the world.”¹ The new generation of students and educators should be aware of this in order to become changemakers for the welfare of society. Educators in Myanmar have been trying to transform the current education system due to the negative impacts of “parrot” or rote memorization², in which students simply copy information from textbooks onto answer sheets, but do not engage in larger theoretical discussions or critical thinking.

Efforts to change the educational system in Myanmar have been limited since February 2021 due to a military coup d'état, the third the country has faced. During this time there were also two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the students in formal, government-run secondary schools and post-secondary schools dropped out in protest, demonstrating their dissatisfaction with education under the control of the military government. Students are starting to lose hope. However, the Phaung Daw Oo Monastic School (PDO) and its

college-level program, the Phaung Daw Oo International University (PIU), have started to find ways to solve the problems arising from these political and educational issues.

PDO was founded in 1993 by The Venerable U Nayaka and his brother, The Venerable U Zawtika. Inspired by Christian schools that provided free education to Christians and others, The Ven. U Nayaka aspired to create a monastic school for the poor in Myanmar. The school, which provides instruction primarily in English, follows the Burmese monastic tradition of providing young people with literacy skills and a moral foundation to enable them to contribute meaningfully to society. The school's mission has been generously supported by various partners and benefactors since its early days and has been at the forefront of reshaping and transforming the education system in Myanmar. Counter to the traditional educational practices of rote memorization, The Ven. U Nayaka sought to instill critical thinking in the curriculum by introducing the Child-Centered Approach at PDO. The Child-Centered Approach emphasizes student engagement and active learning. Teachers use student-led activities such as in-class discussions, debate tournaments, student presentations, and lectures to promote critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the subjects. Teachers are trained to incorporate this approach into all activities both inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to changing the way students learn, PDO also aims to remove barriers to education by providing high-quality teaching and care to vulnerable students in Myanmar. The majority of the students come from low-income families or have faced challenges due to natural disasters and civil strife. The school welcomes students from all ethnic groups and religions, providing them with free education, housing, food, and healthcare while focusing on the well-rounded development of students. The goal is to equip students with the skills necessary for higher education and professional opportunities both within Myanmar and abroad. The Child-Centered Approach has proven successful in preparing students to become independent, creative, and active citizens.

As an alternative form of education, PDO seeks to provide educational opportunities to all, including those who didn't enter mainstream schooling at the required age and who are up to five years behind their peers academically. The school creates alternate lesson plans for these students to ensure they meet the educational standards and governmental attainment requirements, including standardized exams in grade eight and grade ten. Free from the constraints of a government-dictated curriculum, PDO bends the rules and limits of entrance and exit ages, providing a more engaging and customized student experience for a wider range of learners.

The school's innovative teaching approach has gained recognition both nationally and internationally. In 2017, The Ven. U Nayaka received the Citizen of Burma Award for his implementation of the Child-Centered Approach and his efforts to improve Myanmar's monastic education system. PDO continues to

strive towards its mission of providing free, quality education to those in need, empowering students to become engaged and globally competent individuals.

Students at PDO are not only learning typical high school lessons, but are also taking extra language classes like Chinese, German, and English. Students with additional language proficiencies have a chance to continue their education in foreign countries provided they meet requirements set forth by each institution. To support this transition to international post-secondary study, PDO established Phaung Daw Oo International University (PIU) in 2014. PIU was recognized as a prominent institution solely dedicated to private higher education by the Myanmar Investment Commission, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2021 just before the coup unfolded in the country.

PHAUNG DAW OO INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

An innovative educational institution, PIU is currently collaborating with universities in Thailand and Taiwan to support students trying to continue their college-level education as the effects of COVID-19 and the military coup worsen. College students in Myanmar now lack widespread opportunities to further their studies, but PIU offers a chance for them to fulfill their college education aspirations through a range of programs that align with international standards. These programs include short courses, associate degree programs, bachelor's degree programs, and master's degree programs.

In addition to reducing barriers to access to higher education by accepting students with varied proficiencies and educational backgrounds, PIU does not charge tuition or fees for the associate degree. This affords students remarkable opportunities in Myanmar's unstable situation. The associate degree is recognized as equivalent to two-year college degrees available in countries such as the United States, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Australia, and the UK, where students use the degree to lay the foundations of their higher education or as a stepping stone to a bachelor's degree program.

To be eligible for an associate degree (the "diploma program") through PIU, students must meet some basic eligibility standards, similar to what is required at the partnering foreign universities. However, students who are not prepared to enter the diploma program may access PIU's classes and educational support to develop the skills needed for eligibility. Even if they haven't finished high school, prospective students can still join the University and work toward attaining the intermediate or advanced levels in English. Before they can officially join PIU's diploma program, they have to first improve their language proficiency through the English language and personal development classes. Each program of study has additional requirements for admission including a minimum score on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

test and proof of completion of their high school education. By meeting these criteria, students enhance their academic experience and can successfully engage with the curriculum.

The diploma program offers majors such as English, Social Science, Tourism Management, Education, and Information and Communication Technology. Current bachelor's degree offerings include the Bachelor of Pāli and Buddhist Studies and the Bachelor of Nursing. However, the introduction of additional programs has been delayed due to limitations in teacher availability and financial constraints. PIU's newly established bachelor's degree in Pāli and Buddhist Studies gives students the opportunity to study for two years in Myanmar and two years in Thailand at the International Buddhist College. The two institutions have a memorandum of understanding and have mapped PIU's associate degree curriculum into a joint program of study, which includes classes like Buddhism in Modern Asia, Anthropology, Buddhism in India, Sanskrit, Pāli, and more. Similarly, Foguang University in Taiwan hosts "two plus two" bachelor's degree programs, through which students earn a total of 120 credits with the first 60 credits completed at PIU (which include Chinese language courses) and the remaining 60 credits obtained at Foguang University. Admission to these programs depends on language proficiency, which is typically assessed through the HSK Chinese test.

It is important to note that regardless of the university or program they choose, students will need to seek scholarships to fund all four years of their education. PIU only provides a two-year program, so students need to secure financial assistance at the foreign university of their choice. Scholarships play a crucial role in enabling students to pursue higher education abroad, covering expenses such as living costs and other educational expenses apart from tuition. Students at PIU are frequently advised to actively search and apply for scholarships to ensure they can continue their studies abroad and receive a bachelor's degree.

For the students who haven't yet finished high school, they can continue their studies through PDO's dual enrollment program and study in the United States at affiliated community colleges, junior colleges, and technical colleges. Northampton Community College (NCC), a partnering institution in Pennsylvania, is recognized as one of these high school diploma/associate degree dual enrollment programs. PDO students can also apply for financial aid to help offset the cost of their education at NCC.

The Master of Education aims to prepare students for various roles in the education sector. The program focuses on teaching, teacher-training, supervision, and school administration, covering areas such as educational management, pedagogy, curriculum development, and administrative duties. Students can expect to develop their academic, research, and practical skills in the field of education. The program offers graduate-level courses that allow students to explore different education-related topics from theoretical, professional,

and practical perspectives. Critical thinking is encouraged, and students are made aware of the ethical implications and personal care considerations when addressing these topics in practice.

In the near future, students in Myanmar will meet the international standard of education because of the opportunities created by revolutionary institutions like Phaung Daw Oo International University. This experience will help students handle the difficult situations caused by COVID-19 and Myanmar's political unrest. The country needs a large number of changemakers, not for individual welfare but for all people's welfare. At the end of the educational journey made possible by PIU, students will find satisfaction in what they have done for the country and people, and, as Nelson Mandela said, "change the world."

YEE WAI THAN is a dedicated educator and volunteer teacher at Phaung Daw Oo International University in Myanmar. Despite growing up in a challenging environment, she is committed to providing free education and support to children from diverse backgrounds, and is passionate about learning and teaching Pāli and English. She holds a master's degree in Buddhist Study from International Buddhist College in Thailand and is currently enrolled in a master's program in Education at PIU.

NOTES

1 Quoted in Paul Ellis, “Changing the World through Education: How Nelson Mandela Created the Conditions for Success,” Cambridge Assessment International Education, March 28, 2019, <https://blog.cambridgeinternational.org/nelson-mandela/>.

2 For more information about the historical foundations of Myanmar’s state-run educational system and the current pedagogical trends, see Licia Proserpio and Antonio Fiori, “Myanmar Universities in the Post-Coup Era: The Clash Between Old and New Visions of Higher Education,” Torino World Affairs Institute, December 1, 2022, <https://www.twai.it/articles/myanmar-universities-post-coup-era/> and, from Save the Children, “Myanmar: Number of Children Out of School More than Doubles in Two Years,” June 1, 2022, reposted on ReliefWeb, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-number-children-out-school-more-doubles-two-years>.