



Early College Folio

Unconventional Paths to College Education

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Solving Higher Education in Burma, the Global South, and Beyond

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I first met Moe in Chiang Mai, a lovely mountain town in northern Thailand. She came from a border province in Burma. By the time I met her in 2011, it had been long since she left her family in pursuit of better opportunities. She worked at a night market every evening, selling signature handicrafts of the kingdom of Thailand to eager tourists, but she spent most mornings attending classes at a migrant education center.¹

That was where I encountered Moe and her classmates learning about the 13 colonies of the United States of America. It was one of the lessons she had to study, along with the functions of the three levels of the US government and the taxation system, in order to prepare for the US history portion of the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) exam.

As bizarre as it was for a migrant student from Burma trying to attend university in Thailand to be taking an exam on US history, it was just about the only equivalent proof of high school completion that she could obtain since she did not finish high school in Burma and could not transfer to schools in Thailand when she moved.

Moe was one of the few fortunate youths who could still see the light at the end of the long and arduous path toward higher education. Youth in Burma, especially non-Bamar² minority ethnic youth from the mountains, have limited opportunities to access recognized higher education in Burma due to their nonconventional educational backgrounds. Some of them cross the border to Thailand for better work and educational opportunities, where different kinds of socioeconomic obstacles and systemic challenges await.

HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EXCLUSIVE AFFAIR

Education is straightforward for students who grew up in the plains of central Burma. They go to a public school for basic education, after 11 years of which they take the national matriculation examination and, based on the results,

are sorted into the upper echelons of professional/vocational colleges such as medicine and engineering or the pile of any other major. All higher education institutions in Burma are public. Access is limited to only those who passed the holy mountain—that is the national matriculation exam—and who attended public or government-recognized private high schools. This effectively keeps students who dropped out of school or who attended alternative schools out of the higher education system.

In Burma, the quality of education is inversely proportional to the distance of the school from the country's central government. Being assigned a teaching post in a rural area, especially in one of the areas resided by Burma's minority ethnic groups in the mountains, is widely regarded as punishment equivalent to exile. Everything from school funding to teachers' qualifications deteriorates with distance.

For youth from the highlands and those belonging to one of Burma's over 130 minority ethnic groups with their own distinct languages and cultures, public schools are either nonexistent or designed to fail. There are many villages where students do not have access to schooling beyond the primary level. The community and ethnic schools established independently in areas controlled by armed ethnic groups and administrations provide an education much better aligned to the needs of these communities, but they have never been recognized by any central government. As such, students from the alternative education systems—community schools, ethnic schools, or migrant schools across the border—have few viable pathways to higher education regardless of their academic performance.

One of Burma's biggest problems with access to higher education lies in it being a sector tightly controlled by the central authorities. No privately established colleges or universities are recognized, including the ones established by the ethnic administrations in the ethnic-controlled areas, where a lack of opportunities had necessitated them to establish teachers' training colleges and liberal arts colleges as opposed to medical and nursing universities. Lacking licensing from the central authorities, which is the essential requirement for, for example, medical school graduates seeking global accreditation, these private efforts to provide higher education for a population that is suffering under those same authorities remain unrecognized.

A NEW MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Parami University was established in 2017 under the conditions described above. Despite aiming to be a university with its own degree-granting authority since its inception, Parami spent four years exhausting all means to obtain permission from the central authorities to open a residential liberal arts college in Rangoon, the commercial capital of Burma. After the military coup on February 1, 2021, the plans for a brick-and-mortar college and campus were

scrapped, forcing the university to adopt a fully online education approach due to the security situations on the ground.

A silver lining emerged in December 2021 when Parami became aware of the possibility of obtaining a university license from one of the states in the US. Most jurisdictions put limitations on higher education access by constituents outside of their own. However, the US was open to licensing online institutions serving the global population “as long as there is no discrimination regarding service provision based on certain characteristics, including towards the US students,” remarked the Higher Education Licensure Commission of the District of Columbia in one of the licensing workshops. Opening up higher education access to students in the global south, including those from Burma, by using innovative technologies such as learning management systems, fully online electronic databases and resources, and synchronous delivery with faculty from around the world is an exciting venture that unveiled new opportunities.

The inaugural undergraduate cohort began classes in August 2022, two months after the license was awarded. The 57-person cohort featured mostly students from Burma, several from Thailand, and a few from refugee camps in Kenya, connected to Parami through Bard College, which has an academic partnership with Parami. These students take a full-time course load each semester, fulfilling the same graduation requirements and credit hours as students enrolled at Bard College in New York, and will obtain an AA degree after two years and a BA degree after four years, with the option to major in either Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) or Statistics and Data Science (SDS).

The licensure status is an extraordinary milestone in the context of global higher education, where recognition is only afforded to those institutions sanctioned by national governments. For institutions that work with populations that these same national governments fail to serve—students displaced due to conflict, migrant and refugee students, students from contested regions, and those suppressed by their respective governments, such as Rohingya youth from Burma and female students in Afghanistan—there is almost no pathway to obtain licensure and accreditation to provide education for the underserved and the oppressed.

Parami University became one of the few institutions (outside of those focusing on third-country education pathways³) to be able to deliver recognized higher education to communities that are left out of the global systems. However, despite the licensing status and online delivery mode allowing the University to offer recognized degrees across geographic boundaries, unique systemic barriers challenge access to education in the context of prolonged crises.

Moe, the migrant student in Chiang Mai, passed the GED examination in 2011 and secured admission and financial aid at a prestigious university in Thailand. This meant that she could finally obtain an official passport and student visa to study and have legal residence in Thailand. In 2016, she graduated and

returned to Burma to work at an advocacy organization that advances women's rights in the ethnic areas. Her journey is more than a matter of education. It is also about her finding a way to live her life with the dignity and security that a legal status in a foreign land afforded her, being able to secure her future and that of her future children, and having a chance at building a meaningful life by expanding those precious opportunities for others in her community.

Unfortunately, the situation has decisively taken a turn for the worse after the coup. Millions of civilians are being displaced inside Burma due to intensifying armed conflicts. Each day, more and more people cross the border into Thailand as they are forced out by the conflicts and face new challenges to remain safe and sustain themselves. The political repression in Burma leaves thousands of people at risk of becoming stateless. Despite her difficult path to obtaining a university education, Moe's story is one of the better scenarios for young people under current circumstances.

Consider some applicant profiles at Parami:

- a Karen student from an ethnic school in southeastern Burma, who does not have a state-issued identification card to access a GED test center in Thailand;
- a Kachin student on the Burma-China border in the north who has the required documentation and qualifications, but neither the travel documents required to attend college elsewhere nor internet access to join online programs;
- a migrant student on the Thai-Burma border who has finished the GED exam but cannot obtain a passport due to a pandemic- and conflict-induced travel ban or because of the passport freeze imposed by the regime in Burma; and
- a university student in central Burma on strike against higher education under the military regime who has no alternatives due to a lack of financial resources and being blacklisted by the regime.

Each applicant has a unique barrier to accessing mainstream education. From a lack of recognized high school certificates, state-issued IDs, and travel documents to instability on the ground and insufficient internet infrastructure, students face unique challenges that conventional higher education institutions are not equipped to address. Even online education, presumably accessible by people of any geographic location, cannot be delivered without internet and electricity, which are lacking or intermittent in areas of conflict.

FLEXIBLE ADMISSIONS AND ACCESSIBILITY

The lack of recognized high school diplomas is just the tip of the iceberg of issues faced by the students Parami seeks to serve. When the Parami team talked to a higher education working group⁴ in Mae Sot, the border town in Thailand that hosts a huge population of migrant laborers and, lately, war refugees, a number of problems were presented, one being the lack of proper

IDs. Not only do some students lack legal status across the border, but they may also not have any form of state-issued identification from their home country. That meant Parami needed to come up with a system to assess the level of education of the students in a far more accessible way than the GED or TOEFL exams, which have strict ID requirements; Parami needed to establish a student verification system that did not solely rely on state-issued IDs.

The working group brought to light the issue of students adopting multiple identities as they shift among different communities and border lines, which became a problem when they acquired legal identifications that are different from the ones they used to enroll in schools. Using inputs from these local sources, Parami University created an admission system that aimed to reduce some of these barriers.

This flexible admission system recognizes students' non-traditional education history by assessing and accepting high school certificates from a variety of community and ethnic high schools that are not necessarily under the regulatory bodies of the central state. This includes schools under migrant education associations and ethnic administrations that follow a mix of Burmese, Thai, and their own curricula. Recognizing these high school transcripts allows students to bypass the redundant and irrelevant GED track and focus on fulfilling language and other qualifications important for their academic trajectory in college.

Many students in both state and alternative education systems drop out of basic education as immediate needs arising from various socioeconomic and political challenges take precedence. For these students, the University administers a proctored entrance exam which is a federally approved ability-to-benefit test. Similarly, students face barriers in terms of paying for or providing identification for English language standardized tests. The University offers proctored online English exams free of charge to remedy this.

A verification system is also set up to assess localized cases of alternative or missing identities. There are applicants who applied to Parami with UNHCR-issued identification cards and other locally-issued IDs. The University works with the candidates, their respective communities, and leaders to make case-by-case assessments and configure possibilities.

In terms of student outreach and preparation, Parami University works with existing secondary or informal postsecondary institutions that are well established in respective communities. Such collaborations include Bard's Refugee Higher Education Access Program (RhEAP) in Kenya and other education organizations in Burma and on the Thai-Burma border that provide complementary university preparation programs.

With the above-mentioned components in place, Parami University received over 180 applications for the undergraduate programs that began in August

2022. Of the fifty-seven students who were admitted and enrolled in the program, three are from Kenya, four from Thailand, and fifty from Burma. The University aims to expand the student population further and create unique pathways that will make higher education accessible to the most marginalized populations.

LEARNING HUBS AND ON-GROUND SUPPORT

One of the first institutions the Parami team consulted before the launch of the online undergraduate programs is a postsecondary community school in Maijyang, Kachin state. Referred to as the education capital of Kachin State, Maijyang is under the administration of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which has been in armed conflicts with the Burmese regime for decades. As the war waged on, KIA established independent schools and higher education institutions to fulfill the societal need to educate the next generation, albeit without official recognition. The excitement of the school's teachers over the possibility of helping their students obtain recognized degrees affirmed that Parami would indeed be providing a crucial service.

It soon became apparent that Maijyang, which is on the Burma-China border, does not have reliable internet connectivity as it is fed through Chinese telecom services and is highly restricted. Students come from internally displaced communities and regions that see frequent conflict outbreaks. These students are in no condition to study from the safety of their homes, and the school in Maijyang cannot support the infrastructure that they need. The situation is similar in other places across Burma and in the refugee camps across the border.

To address this, Parami University partnered with local community schools across Burma and institutions such as Bard College to provide much-needed basic infrastructure such as internet, electricity, computers, and accommodations. Parami has set up two "learning hubs" in Burma that provide room, board, electricity, and internet access, as well as two "learning facilities" that are open to students who need to use electricity and the internet.

This enabled students such as Hkawn Nu Mai from Maijyang to attend one of Parami's undergraduate programs once it launched. She summarized her situation as, "I am originally from Kachin State, and now I am staying at Parami's learning hub in Mandalay. In my hometown, I couldn't join classes and study coursework due to the bad connection and electricity cut-off. When I told Parami's team about my difficulties, they assigned me to this learning hub. Here, Parami offers not only shelter but also internet and electricity without charge, so it is a great place for us to study with full facilities."

All instruction at Parami takes place online, synchronously, and with faculty from around the world. However, these nodes of learning hubs and facilities

allow students from diverse regions to access much-needed services as well as some in-person student engagement opportunities. Personal security is also paramount in these locations since students face threats from law enforcement due to the ongoing conflicts or their legal status. Community partners help provide secure accommodations and create a safe learning environment.

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR CHANGE

Access is just the beginning of the higher education journey but presents a highly intricate issue. Specific programming and innovative design are needed to address issues of accessibility effectively and to forge new, unconventional paths toward college education. Ultimately, Parami University believes that higher education has transformative power for developing individuals, communities, and societies. Communities that suffer from prolonged conflicts require an education that invests in the local youth who experience the consequences of turmoil firsthand to empower them to create change in their own communities and societies.

Burma represents a case study in the world that is increasingly seeing prolonged conflicts, from Syria to Afghanistan to South Sudan, where the lives of survivors are put on hold indefinitely. Whereas education is a right in the developed world, it tends to become secondary in the face of conflict, or even criminal for some populations under suppression. Using the experience in Burma and its access to global opportunities, Parami University aims to create new pathways toward higher education for students in the Global South with the hope that it will help build just and peaceful societies.

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NOTES

- 1 Migrant learning centers offer a variety of education programs to the migrant youth from Burma working in Thailand. Some of these schools teach English and help prepare students for college applications in Thailand.
- 2 The main ethnic group in Burma is Bamar, which is about 60% of the population. The military, political system and economy are largely dominated by the Bamar elite class. Minority groups face marginalization and suppression of their political, economic, and sociocultural rights.
- 3 A third-country education pathway is a strategy designed to improve access to educational opportunities, including higher education, for refugee students. Students in these programs have already fled their home countries and reside somewhere new. They then travel to a third country specifically for the purpose of continuing their education.
- 4 The higher education working group is an informal group of leaders from high schools and postsecondary education institutions in Mae Sot that want to expand higher education opportunities for their students, primarily Burmese migrants.