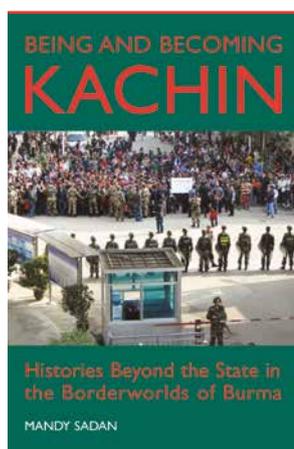


# Reflections on building an inclusive higher education system in Myanmar

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of Burma, sharing borders with China and India) has such a long history of armed resistance against the political heartland of Burma. Further information can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/pubs/)

In the following article, Dr Sadan considers the implications of the recent changes in Burma for the development of an inclusive higher education system.

Even those with only a passing interest in international affairs cannot fail to have noticed that some rather remarkable changes have been taking place in Burma (Union of Myanmar) in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Most obviously, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010; and then in 2012, alongside other newly elected members of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), she took up a seat in the newly convened Myanmar Parliament. Elections have been set for 2015 and, despite the constitutional bar against someone who has married a foreigner assuming such high office, many expect that it may not be long before Aung San Suu Kyi achieves her stated goal of becoming President.<sup>2</sup>

Following these events, a country to which access was limited for decades through restrictive visas,<sup>3</sup> and which was considered by many in the west to be a pariah, suddenly became the destination of choice for many leading international politicians. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the UK's Foreign Minister William Hague visited in quick succession, at the end of 2011 and in early 2012. Most strikingly, this was followed by Aung San Suu Kyi's own long-awaited return to Oxford. Oxford had been her home for many years as a student at St Hugh's College, and then when she was married to Oxford academic Michael Aris, a Fellow of St Antony's. The speed of change seemed baffling, exciting, unexpected and substantive, and Aung San Suu Kyi's return to Oxford seemed to encapsulate this remarkable process of positive transition.

These events have triggered new possibilities for academic engagement with Myanmar, too. Some notable academics-cum-activists have been able to return home after living in exile for many years – such as Kiriya Prize-winning author, Pascal Khoo Thwe.<sup>4</sup> It suddenly became possible for those involved in research about Burma to consider holding seminars and workshops within the country, even on issues that were still politically very sensitive in some cases. Whereas previously, if one had tried to develop a research project that involved hosting an event in Yangon such activities would have been considered with suspicion ('The bloodied hands of which General have been shaken to make this possible?' was the implicit reaction), it

1. The name of the country internationally was officially changed from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. However, for many years those with associations with the pro-democracy movement objected to this change and persisted in calling it Burma, as did most western governments.

In recent years, following signs of political change, there has been a marked inclination towards using Myanmar in international discourse. Many of those who previously objected to the change now state rather naively that 'Myanmar' reflects a notion of the country which incorporates a broader ethnic constituency than just the Burman grouping alone and therefore stands as a symbol of non-Burman hegemonic claims over the national identity. This is in reality a very simplistic argument. However, in line with 'good' diplomatic practice, this article will use both terms of reference and readers may insert their own term of choice as appropriate.

2. The present Constitution, which is highly controversial, was instituted in 2008. The bar against those who have married foreigners becoming President was widely, and not unrealistically, assumed to be directly targeted to inhibit the ambition of Aung San Suu Kyi and her supports in this regard.

3. Seven days was the norm for many decades.

4. His book *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* was published by Harper Collins in 2002 and details his personal flight from Burma and subsequent studies at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, with the support of Professor John Casey.

suddenly seemed impossible to get funding *unless* one held a ‘capacity building’ event locally. Of course, there were and are limits to what was and is possible, but the simple fact that events can now take place that were not even conceivable before has been a remarkable enough difference for those of us who had been forced to work more ‘creatively’ in the past if we wanted to engage with local researchers. In the UK, too, I also soon noticed an increased number of emails in my inbox from graduate students and others hoping to go to Burma and wanting advice. It was as if Burma/Myanmar had just been ‘discovered’ by academia again, and everyone suddenly seemed to want to get in on the action.

### 2013 delegation on higher education

In light of these opportunities, and reflecting the incredibly poor state of the Myanmar education system as a whole after decades of military dictatorship, in May 2013 a delegation from various government departments in Myanmar came to the UK to discuss ideas for the development of the higher education system there. The visit had been supported by the British Council, and it was intended that findings from the visit would feed back into discussions in Aung San Suu Kyi’s Parliamentary Committee on higher education and the related committee set up to oversee the reinvigoration of Yangon University. Founded as Rangoon University in 1920, it was widely believed to have been one of the foremost higher education institutions in Asia at its peak. However, decades of neglect and political control have rendered it presently incapable of functioning as a prestigious national university fit for the future. Aung San Suu Kyi addressed the group attending the seminar in London via a video message, and asked for external help with a fast track to improvement. The focus of concern was clearly on improving Yangon and Mandalay universities (with Yangon given priority), although this might help to raise the level of others over time.

This visit was undoubtedly an important moment of reconnection between the higher education sectors of Myanmar and the UK. It was also an opportunity to hear more about the educational vision of the delegates. But the lack of direct reference to anywhere beyond the central Burma region was striking.

### My research

My own work in Burma – which has been supported by the British Academy through a Postdoctoral Fellowship, and most recently by the publication of a monograph in the related series – has always been slightly at a tangent to the mainstream. It has been concerned principally not with the dominant Burmano-Buddhist narrative of the country’s national history, but rather with the production of ethno-nationalist ideologies and conflict in the country’s borderworlds. Most specifically, I have been working for many years on issues relating to the Kachin region of the country and associated areas in north-east India and Yunnan in China. This is a complex, challenging environment in which to work, and I am deeply grateful to the British Academy, which gave me ‘the iron rice bowl’ of support as a Postdoctoral Fellow, for enabling me to push the boundaries of my



Map showing the position of the Kachin State in Burma. The shaded areas in India, China and Thailand, together with the Kachin State, are the ‘borderworlds’ where Kachin and related minority groups live.

own knowledge about this subject.

One of Burma's most notable, yet unfortunate, characteristics has been that for the whole of its modern independent existence it has been wracked by internal conflicts. All sections of its borderlands (and sometimes areas deep inside its inner territory) have witnessed extended periods of armed conflict. Communist and anti-communist insurgencies, sub-national armed groups, and endemic narco-economy-fuelled violence have all crowded in upon each other within Burma's borders over decades. Some conflicts have continued for decades; others have demonstrated a tragic tendency to re-emerge when weakly constructed ceasefires have collapsed in the absence of real political progress at the centre. Many of the country's 'peripheries' hoped for greater autonomy when Burma gained independence, and the subsequent failure of those aspirations is at the root of many of these longstanding armed movements.

My book is an attempt to understand the manifestation of such violence in the Kachin region. Its publication has particular relevance given events in recent years. Despite all the apparently positive changes at the centre of the country, a 17-year-long ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Burma Army broke down in June 2011. This has been rather inconvenient for those who wish to present a simple narrative of Burma as a country on track to positive political change. Many in the Kachin region, as elsewhere, are less than convinced that the changes taking place are likely to produce significant new political structures of the kind that they feel are necessary to balance out the inequalities between Myanmar's centre and periphery.

### **The relationship between education in Myanmar and ethnic conflict**

Their experience of the national education system contributes greatly to how many non-Burman communities perceive discrimination and marginalisation. My own book deals with educational discrimination as a continuous thread in the narrative of ethno-nationalist resistance. This is an issue that seems to have been inadequately acknowledged by those currently discussing the rejuvenation of the higher education system. Perhaps it relates to a perception that border areas are peopled by 'the primitive', the 'tribal' – all of which act as metaphors for the 'uneducated' – for whom a university education is assumed to be aspiration rather than an experience. This misses the historical point that, while ordinary people, usually from rural areas, have been drawn into the manifold armed movements around the country as soldiers, both willingly and unwillingly, the early leadership roles of many ethno-nationalist elites were in fact formed through networks created in the general and higher education systems of Burma in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Burmese school and higher education systems were often formative social experiences for many of those who mobilised and organised the first armed opposition movements in the Kachin region. A group known as the Seven Stars, who went on to help found



A group of Kachin students outside Yangon University, where they performed 'traditional' dances during the university's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations in 1995. At this time, the university was open briefly and students were being rushed through their degrees. Throughout the 1990s, the university was repeatedly closed because of student protests. The early Rangoon (later Yangon) University student leadership of the KIA/KIO also promoted cultural activities of this kind to consolidate a sense of political and cultural identity among Kachin students. Photograph courtesy of Hkanhpa Tu Sadan.

the KIO/KIA, for example, emerged through Rangoon (Yangon) University. Their experience of the school system and of university life in the capital was a negative one, and refined their own sense of nationalism in opposition to the new Burmese state. Today too, the educated, urbanised, technologically savvy young men and women who have been mobilising support for the KIA, and organising relief provision to the many tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) along the border with China, are also products of the general Burmese education system, and many of its higher education institutions. They speak and write Burmese fluently, they understand Burmese politics and know fully what is going on.

But in the current debates about higher education reform, there seems to be no serious reflection on the historical influence of that system – even when it functioned 'at its best' – in creating experiences of social and educational discrimination that for many helped to justify the production of armed opposition movements. Reinvigorating Yangon University without addressing some of the social issues affecting wider relations between communities, or recognising that higher education systems can engage proactively to bring change in those relations, will result in limited impact on these other discourses of marginalisation and discrimination. Indeed, reform in higher education may even serve as a mirror that reflects them more clearly if it is badly handled.

### **Higher education provision in the Kachin State**

The capital of the Kachin State, Myitkyina, has its own local university. Yet many of the bright, energetic young men and women who are currently so active in the political affairs of Kachin region have in recent

years actively avoided Myitkyina University, and their parents also dissuade them from attending. Since the ceasefire of 1994, the perception of many parents in this region is that their children are more likely to come out of that institution with a serious heroin addiction than a worthwhile degree.<sup>5</sup> This is incredibly sad in an environment where the call for educational access has been central to the social demands of the ethno-nationalist movement from the early 1900s.

Kachin political elites expected educational development to be a foundation stone for the economic development of their region when independence from Britain came in 1948. Indeed, without it they felt that the newly constituted Kachin State would wither and die. The need for access to good, equitable, community-embedded education has been a constant, unchanging refrain for more than a century.<sup>6</sup> Instead, many young Kachin people feel that the underdevelopment of their local university is part of a 'conspiracy' by the Burmese state to undermine their intellectual and physical well-being. It is seen as part of a more sinister objective to 'destroy' Kachin identity and 'Burmanise' the region. Such is the manner in which ideologies of ethno-nationalist resistance are produced and sustained. It does beg the question, however, as to why the rejuvenation of local institutions should *not* be given equal priority with that of Yangon and Mandalay if there is any serious commitment to dealing substantively with the social issues that have underpinned ethnic conflict in the regions for so many decades. Failure to pay attention to these serious local circumstances only fuels the perceptions of threat.

### Opportunities

If attention could be paid to bringing key local institutions like Myitkyina University up to standard in tandem with the reinvigoration of Yangon, not leaving them simply to catch up when they can, it might demonstrate the sincerity of those on all sides of the political divide in Burma's national politics in engaging with the views and experiences of those beyond the heartland and in bringing socially transformative change for all. How wonderful might it be to have a locally embedded, autonomous yet state-supported research institution

that was relevant to all local communities (and not just those identifying as 'Kachin'), and capable of producing cutting-edge research involving local collaboration with academics from Burma and beyond. This would be of benefit to all.

The Kachin region is notable as a world bio-diversity hotspot, yet it is currently challenged by the prospect of large-scale hydro-power projects and aggressive resource extraction. Its flora and fauna have barely been enumerated. And there are significant local traditions of medicinal usage of plants which, running in tandem with rich and diverse cultural, social and linguistic traditions, are equally vital; but these too are threatened. Local knowledge that could be channelled through academic engagement in a locally embedded research institute could do much to support this region's political and economic aspirations.

### Inclusive narratives

Educational policy and the societies in which educational institutions are embedded are never fixed and unchanging. In the UK too, we are struggling with the issue of what an ethnically and religiously diverse country should look like, and how we might have to learn and relearn our national history to reflect this social diversity. It is, and always will be, a work in progress to ensure that our universities are 'fit for purpose'. Higher education systems have an important role to play in developing these new understandings within societies. I wonder whether the day might come when a revitalised Yangon University will have its own Blue Plaque stating 'This is the Founding Place of the KIO' in recognition that more than one reading of this institution is possible. In a truly inclusive and diverse nation, permitting such narratives may strengthen rather than undermine the whole. Perhaps this is the kind of vision that needs to be encouraged more explicitly through some of the higher education committees that are deliberating in the country's capital at Naypyitaw. And perhaps foreign academics involved in the contemporary 'rediscovery' of Myanmar should familiarise themselves with these concerns as they embark on a new set of encounters and research relationships.

5. There are many reports from local and international NGOs that detail the dramatic expansion of heroin addiction among young people in the region, especially since the ceasefire of 1994.

6. This is sometimes rather simplistically characterised as being inevitably premised on a demand for educational provision in local languages, which the state education system prohibited. However, the development of this argument is more complex than this alone suggests, as detailed in my research.