A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF MYANMAR UNIVERSITY ADMISSION: CONFLICT AND ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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**AN INDEPENDENT STUDY SUBMITTED TO CHIANG MAI UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS
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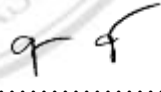
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บทคัดย่อ

การขยายตัวของการเข้าถึงการสอบเข้าศึกษาต่อและการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาในเมียนมาร์ระหว่างปี 2554-2564 ได้ก่อให้เกิดคำถามเกี่ยวกับความเท่าเทียม การนำกรอบ4'R มาใช้ การวิเคราะห์เอกสารเชิงคุณภาพนี้บ่งชี้ว่าความขัดแย้งมีผลกระทบในทางลบต่อการเข้าถึงการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาของนักเรียนผ่านการจัดสรรทรัพยากรที่ไม่เหมาะสมอันเกิดจากการปิดโรงเรียนและศูนย์สอบ นอกจากนี้ ความอยุติธรรมทางวัฒนธรรมที่เกิดจากการกำหนดมาตรฐานของภาษาพม่าและข้อกำหนดการเป็นพลเมืองที่เข้มงวดยังขัดขวางการเข้าถึงการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาของนักเรียน ทำให้เกิดความขัดแย้งในอนาคต การไม่มีตัวแทนในนโยบายการรับเข้าศึกษาในมหาวิทยาลัยมีรากฐานมาจากธรรมชาติของความขัดแย้งเหล่านี้เอง ในขณะที่มุมมองการสร้างสันติภาพของการรับเข้าศึกษาในมหาวิทยาลัยมักถูกมองข้าม จากการศึกษานี้ แนะนำให้รวมทั้งสี่มิติที่สำคัญ อันได้แก่ การจัดสรรการยอมรับ การเป็นตัวแทน และการประนีประนอม เข้ากับนโยบายการรับเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยในเมียนมาร์หลังความขัดแย้ง เพื่อส่งเสริมการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคม

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Independent Study Title A Critical Policy Analysis of Myanmar University

          Admission: Conflict and Access to Higher Education

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Degree   Master of Arts (Public Policy)

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of access to matriculation examination and higher education in Myanmar between 2011 and 2021 has raised questions about equity. Adopting the 4' R framework, this qualitative documentary analysis indicates that conflicts have a detrimental impact on students' access to higher education, through maldistribution of resources caused by closures of schools and examination centres. Additionally, culture injustices arising from standardisation of Burmese language and rigid citizenship requirements further hampers students' access to higher education, perpetuating conditions for future conflicts. The absence of representation in university admission policies is deeply rooted in the nature of these conflicts itself, while the peace-building perspective of university admission is often overlooked. This study recommends incorporating four crucial dimensions, namely redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation, into the university admission policy in post-conflict Myanmar to promote transformative social change.

Keywords: University Admission, Matriculation Examination, Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation, 4' R Framework

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 A Problematic University Admission

The current university admission policy in Myanmar[1] is arguably not equitable and contributes to the cultural injustice that spurs on-going conflict within Myanmar. In 2011, Myanmar underwent political, economic and social transitions, accompanied by a cease-fire initiative by the quasi-civilian government, which aimed at bringing peace to the country (Lall, 2020). Education sector reform has become a priority (Lall, 2020). The budget was increased ninefold to expand access to education at all levels including the higher education sector – a significant catalyst for the country's economic development (Ministry of Education, 2020; Myanmar Education Budget Brief, 2020) (refer to figure 1.1). One major strategy of the National Education Strategic Plan (2016) (NESP) in the higher education sector was to expand equitable access to higher education. This is reflected in the national statistics that the number of students taking matriculation – a stand-alone university admission criterion, increased from approximately 0.6 million in 2015 to 0.9 million in 2020, bringing more students to university education (refers to figure 1.2).

However, despite the expansion in the number of students taking the matriculation examination there are questions about equity. Students in ethnic areas which are long affected by the conflicts, and poverty – a consequence of long-lasting conflicts, tend to have less access to matriculation examination. For instance, the numbers of students taking matriculation in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin and Rakhine – which are long affected by conflicts, is comparatively lower than that in regions such as Yangon, Mandalay and Sagaing where the stability is prevalent (refer to figure 1. 3). In addition,

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[1] "Myanmar" is a contested term. While it was officially adopted by the military regime in 1989, some still refer the country as Burma, opposing against military legitimacy. In this study, the term "Myanmar" is used to refer the country while Bamar is employed for indicating the largest ethnic group in the country. Burmese is the language of Bamar and the sole official language of the state.
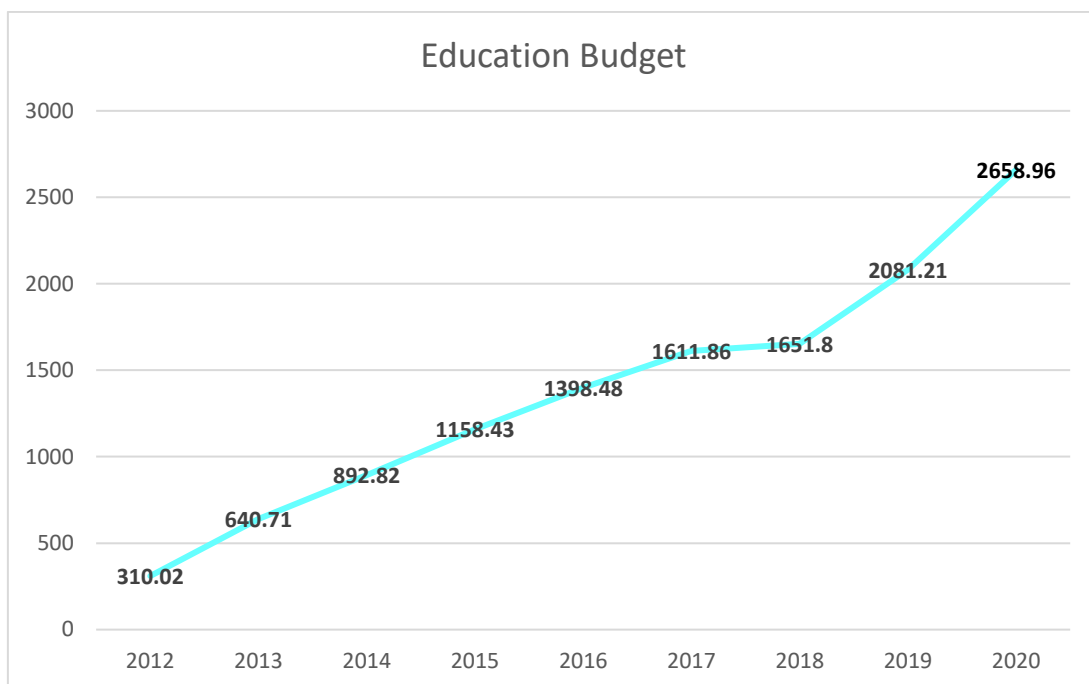
Figure 1.1 Yearly education budget in Myanmar (2011-2020) (in Billion MMK)

Source: (Ministry of Education 2020; Myanmar Education Budget Brief, 2020)
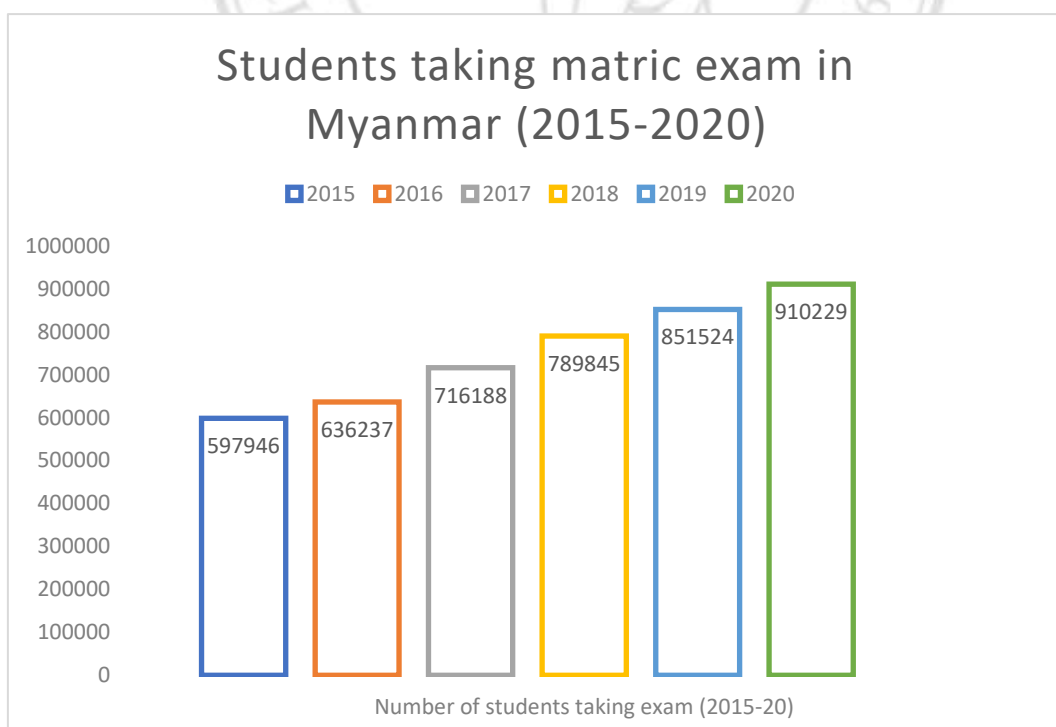
Figure 1.2 Number of students taking matriculation examination (2015-2022)

Source: Author's calculation based on MOE release
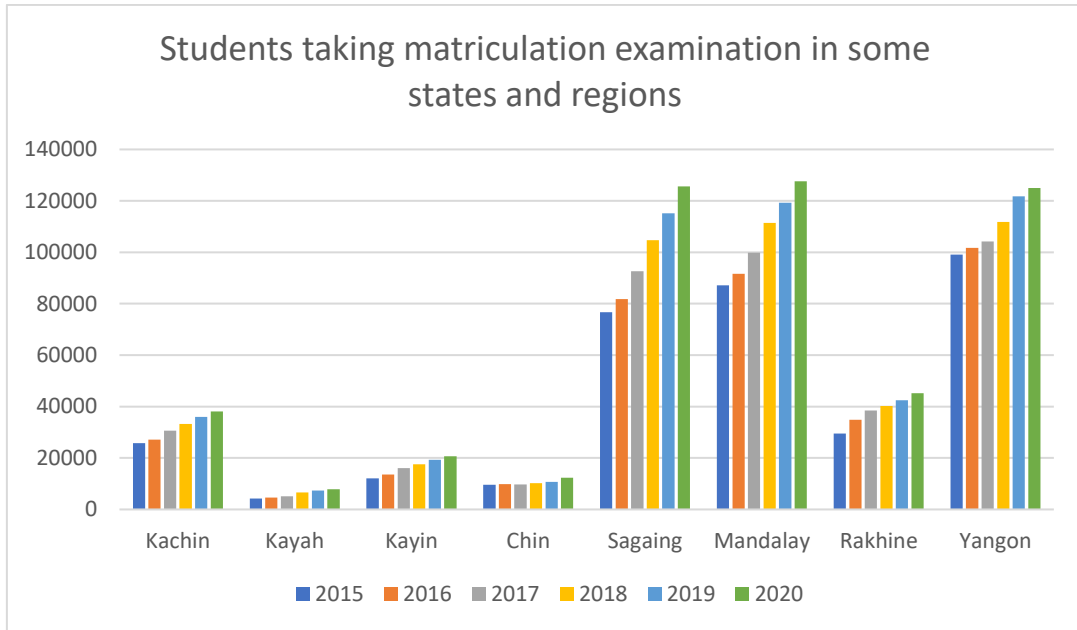
Figure 1.3 comparison of students' access to matriculation examination in some states and regions
Source: author's calculation based on MOE release
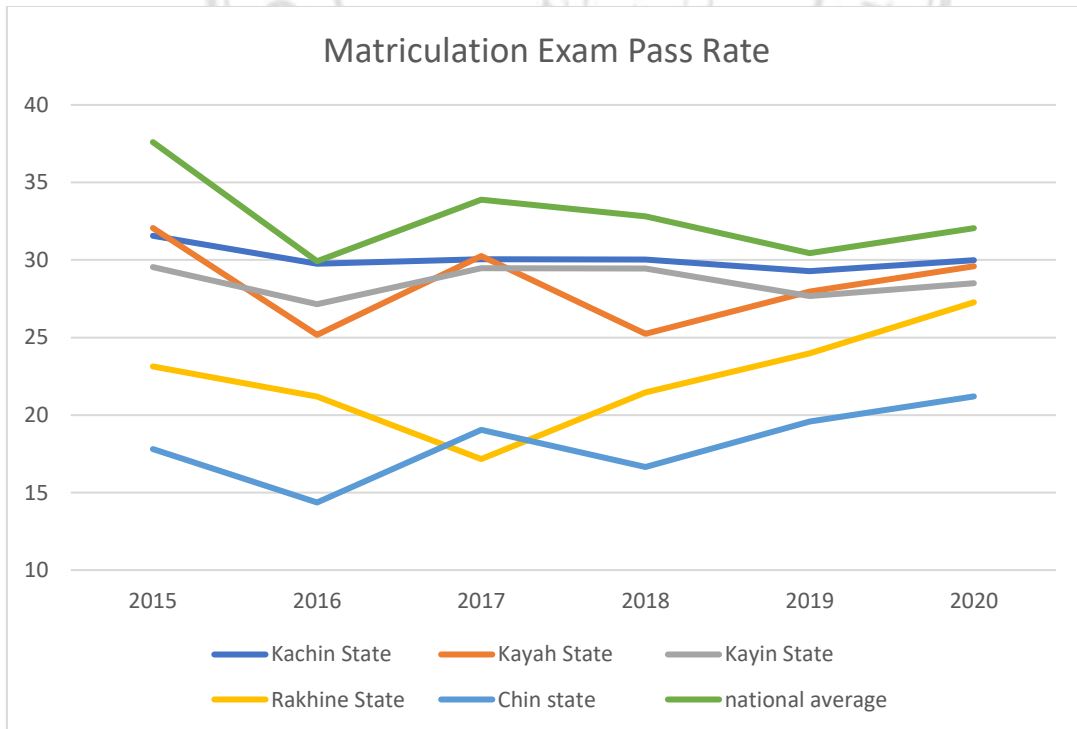
Figure 1.4 Comparison of matriculation examination pass rate in some states of Myanmar with national average
Source: author's calculation based on MOE release

students in those states tend to perform poorly in the matriculation examination. As illustrated in the figure 1.4, the matriculation pass rates of Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin and Rakhine states are below the national average. Moreover, there are other conditions to enrol in a university such as the requirement of citizenship identification, which the children in conflict-affected areas frequently lack. As a result, the students in conflict-affected areas tend to matriculate and enrol less in higher education.

Higher education is a key determinant of a person's social, economic and political participation. In Myanmar, people without matriculation examination pass certificate, cannot access higher education and tend to have limited access to public and private employment, resulting in lower upward social mobility. In contrast, those who earn the highest total marks in the matriculation examination not only enter the country's prestigious universities but also earn greater social, economic and political benefits later in life. As Jia & Ericson (2017) argue, university admission which is heavily based on high-stake exams, validates the existing structure, naturalises social and economic stratification, and exacerbates disparities. Most importantly, in a conflict-prone society like Myanmar, where conflicts emanate in structural exclusion, the university admission policy fails to consider the conflict context and can further exacerbate the already-widening disparities caused by conflicts and create grievances, further contributing to future conflicts (Higgins et al., 2016; Lall, 2020). Therefore, it is relevant to re-evaluate the relevancy of the current university admission policy in Myanmar through a wider structural approach. Additionally, considering the ongoing conflict following the 2021 coup de 'tat, it is important to envision a university admission policy for the post-conflict Myanmar society, by drawing on the experiences from 2011 to 2021.

This study aims to: (1) explore the impact of conflict on students' access to higher education within the existing university admission framework, and (2) propose a socially just and peace-building university admission policy relevant to Myanmar's context of recurring conflicts.

CHAPTER 2

Context of the Research

2.1 The development of university admission policy in Myanmar

Myanmar experienced a coup de 'tat in 1962, which led to state socialism, in which the education policy was envisioned in a way that granted superior status to science subjects (Lwin, 2000). To support this policy, two critical practices are adopted. Firstly, the 1964 University Administration Law was enacted, in which all the universities and higher education institutions are administered by a national level body, and the the autonomy of university in recruiting students was restricted (၁၉၆၄ခုနှစ်၊ ပြည်ထောင်စုမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတက္ကသိုလ်ပညာရေးဥပဒေ, ၁၉၆၄; Zobrist, 2013). Secondly, the results of the matriculation examination were employed as a single criterion to allocate students to university or specialisation, so that those who earn higher marks could be allocated into subject like sciences, medicine, maths and engineering, in accordance with the aforementioned science-privileged education policy (Lwin, 2000; Zobrist, 2013).

Currently, the university admission policy does not exist as a single document, but it is directed by the 1973 University Administration Act, the yearly admission application guidelines and related news releases. The relevant points of the policy for this study can be summarised as follow;

1) The university itself have no authority over the admission process and decision making. The Department of Higher Education assigns students to potential universities and specialisations based on the aggregated matriculation examination results[2] (၁၉၇၃ခုနှစ်၊ ပြည်ထောင်စုမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတက္ကသိုလ်ပညာရေးဥပဒေ, ၁၉၇၃).

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[2] Starting from 2018 AY, the university-administered admission practices are piloted at 11 selected universities. In addition, there are also some universities which are not under the Ministry of Education such as University of the Development of the National Races, and practice their admission policy separately.

2) Applicants must be Myanmar citizens in accordance with existing citizenship law and must provide the original or copy of citizenship card[3] (တက္ကသိုလ် ဝင်ခွင့်လမ်းညွှန် ၂၀၂၀ ပြည့်နှစ်၊ တက္ကသိုလ်ဝင်ခွင့် စာမေးပွဲ အောင်မြင်သူများ အတွက်)၊ ၂၀၂၀).

2.2 The significant role of matriculation examination

The matriculation examination serves as the only gateway to the 171 higher education institutions in Myanmar (National Education Strategic Plan, 2016). The students take this exam after completing Grade 10[4], the final grade of high school (upper secondary) in their 16 (Lall, 2020). It consists of six subjects – Myanmar Reader, English and Mathematics as compulsory and three elective subjects of their own choice from Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Economics, Geography, History, and Optional Myanmar Reader, choosing different streams (Suante, 2022). The bottom-line passing mark for all subjects is 40 out of 100. The examination largely focuses on the curricula content and examines how much a student can replicate the content accurately, resulting in that those students and teacher emphasise on rote learning and that students from ethnic education systems which follow their own curriculum are immediately excluded from higher education.

2.3 Conflict and university admission

In this study, conflict is defined using the World Health Organisation's broader definition to analyse the university admission policy through structural approach and to understand the relationship between state, individuals and different groups. Conflicts refers to;

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[3] According to the yearly-published university admission guidelines, there are only few universities which do not set the citizenship status as one of the criteria. For instance, University of Distance Education – a type of open university in Myanmar yet low-ranked, do not specified about citizenship status for most of the specializations with the exception of law, economic and business administration majors.
[4] Starting from 2016-17 AY, Myanmar has been implementing KG+12 education system with new curriculum.

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"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (Krug et al., 2002, pp. 5)

In Myanmar, long-lasting conflicts have impeded the development of higher education institutions and hindered students' access to university education. The military regime has forcibly closed the colleges and universities during the time of political crisis: 2 years in the 1988 crisis and 1 year in the 2021 coup de 'tat (Tun, 2022). Moreover, due to the 2021 Coup, the matriculation examination could not be conducted in 2021, and only 30% of the pre-coup de' tat exam-sitter population took the exam either due to affirming their solidarity with country-wide civil disobedience movement or due to conflicts in 2022 matriculation examination (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2022). In addition, ongoing conflicts between the military and ethnic insurgency groups have also led to the cancellation and migration of matriculation examination test centres.

Despite the repeating conflict context, university admission in Myanmar continues to rely solely on matriculation examination result without considering the country's long-lasting conflict. This policy legitimises existing social, economic and political inequalities, excludes students from conflicted-affected areas from accessing higher education, and exacerbates social tension (Jia & Ericson, 2017). This leads to exploring a relevant university admission policy for Myanmar' recurring conflict context with the aim of building sustainable peace.

CHAPTER 3

Theoretical Framework

3. 1 4' R Framework

In many societies, higher education plays a significant role shaping and influencing the social structure. Existing literature has summarised its impact into two approaches. On one hand, elite reproduction assertion argues that higher education system and its access naturalise social stratification, legitimising the privilege of hegemonic groups in society (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Heslop, 2019; Moore, 2004). On the other hand, the liberal theory suggests that higher education promotes progressive social change by fostering an open society and facilitating upward mobility based on access, inclusion and meritocracy (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Heslop, 2019; Moore, 2004).

Recent literature in Education in conflict context suggests that education systems, including higher education, are both influenced by and contribute to future conflicts. Innocenti (2000) contends in "*The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict*" that education provision in conflict contexts can promote social justice, inclusion and human rights (Innocenti, 2000). However, it can also perpetuate conflicts through practices that favour privileged groups, deny the culture and linguistic identity of disadvantaged groups and limit access to education. Heslop (2019) further asserts that disparities in access and participation in higher education can fuel conflicts.

In the context of the conflict in Myanmar, social inequality, including unequal access to education, has led to grievance and the escalation of conflicts. Higgins et al. (2016) identifies three roots of conflicts in Myanmar; the struggle of armed ethnic groups for self-determination in response to grievances brought by structural exclusion, pro-democracy movements and inter-religious tensions. Furthermore, educational

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inequalities including access to higher education have been documented as one of the causes of conflicts in Myanmar (Heslop, 2019).

However, much of the existing literature highlights the relationship between higher education, admission policies, conflict and equity from a positivist perspective (Darwish & Wotipka, 2022; Yamada & Matsushima, 2020). They contend that the conflict is negatively associated with students' well-being and their performance in education, due to (1) the school closure and student absenteeism, (2) interruption to education and decreased schooling time, (3) reduction of financial resource on education consumption and supply, and (4) decrease of government expenditure (Darwish & Wotipka, 2022). While these studies highlighted the detrimental effects of conflicts on access to higher education, they fail to debate the naturalisation of social stratification through the existing education system, leading to social tension and conflict. Most importantly, the access to higher education should be thus approached through critical lens as the access to higher education, the focus of this study, is determined by various factors such as the socio-economic status, the locality, the motivation, identity, gender and religion of the students, the crosscutting issues of the social structure (Jia & Ericson, 2017; Wondimu, 2004).

Applying Critical Realism to the study of education and conflict is relevant as it emphasises causal analysis. Critical realist research emphasises generative mechanism, exploring the structure, mechanism, and power that facilitate the consequences or actions (Couch, 2022; Heslop, 2019). This is relevant to analysing education policy in conflict context as the literature has highlighted that education policy and governance often support structures which reproduce conflict or insecurity (Couch, 2022; Novelli, 2016).

Building upon the critical realist ontology, Novelli et al. (2017) developed the 4'R framework. It expands Fraser's (2008) three dimensional social justice framework with an addition of reconciliation, which is particularly relevant in post-conflict context (Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2017). As Fraser (2008) argued, a socially just society must ensure 'parity of participation' through three interrelated dimensions: redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2017). The

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redistribution entails equitable distribution of economic resources, while, in contrast, maldistribution of economic resources including income, education and health leads to injustice (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019). In the context of education, distribution refers to a redistributive education policy and governance that ensures equitable access to education (Novelli et al., 2017). Secondly, recognition is imperative for culture justice encompassing the respect for each other's cultural identity such as ethnicity, language, class, gender and so on, and the acknowledgement of the right to practise it (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019). The language of instruction and the role of different religious and cultural groups within an education system pertain with Fraser's (2008) dimension of recognition (Novelli et al., 2017). Furthermore, representation refers to the arrangement of political, governance and decision-making processes and structures within a system (e.g., education governance) at different levels to ensure the participation of different stakeholders and right to claim justice (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2017). Additionally, Novelli et al. (2017) introduced the fourth dimension; reconciliation, which involves addressing past/historical experiences to bring transitional justice and to build trust in the (post-) conflict societies. It relates, in education, with how education policy promotes social cohesion or perpetuates segregation, and addresses the historical and contemporary economic, political and cultural injustices (Novelli et al., 2017). All these four dimensions do not exist separately but interrelate with each other (Novelli et al., 2017).

- Equitable access to education

- Equitable distribution of resources

- Outcomes (qualifications, employment opportunities)

- Analysis of education reforms/ policies to see if they are redistributive

- Language of instruction polices

- Recognition of cultural diversity through curriculum

- Place of religious and cultural identity in the education system

- Citizenship and civic education as a means of state-building

Redistribution

Recognition

Reconciliation

Representation

- Addressing historic and contemporary economic, political, and cultural injustice

- Analysis of how education strengthens/weakens social cohesion

- Teaching about the past and its relevance to the present and future

- Levels of trust—vertical (in schools and the education system) and horizontal (between groups)

- Extent to which education policy/ reforms involve stakeholders' participation (local, national, global)

- Analysis of political control/representation through administration of education

- School governance, involvement in decision-making (teachers, parents, students)

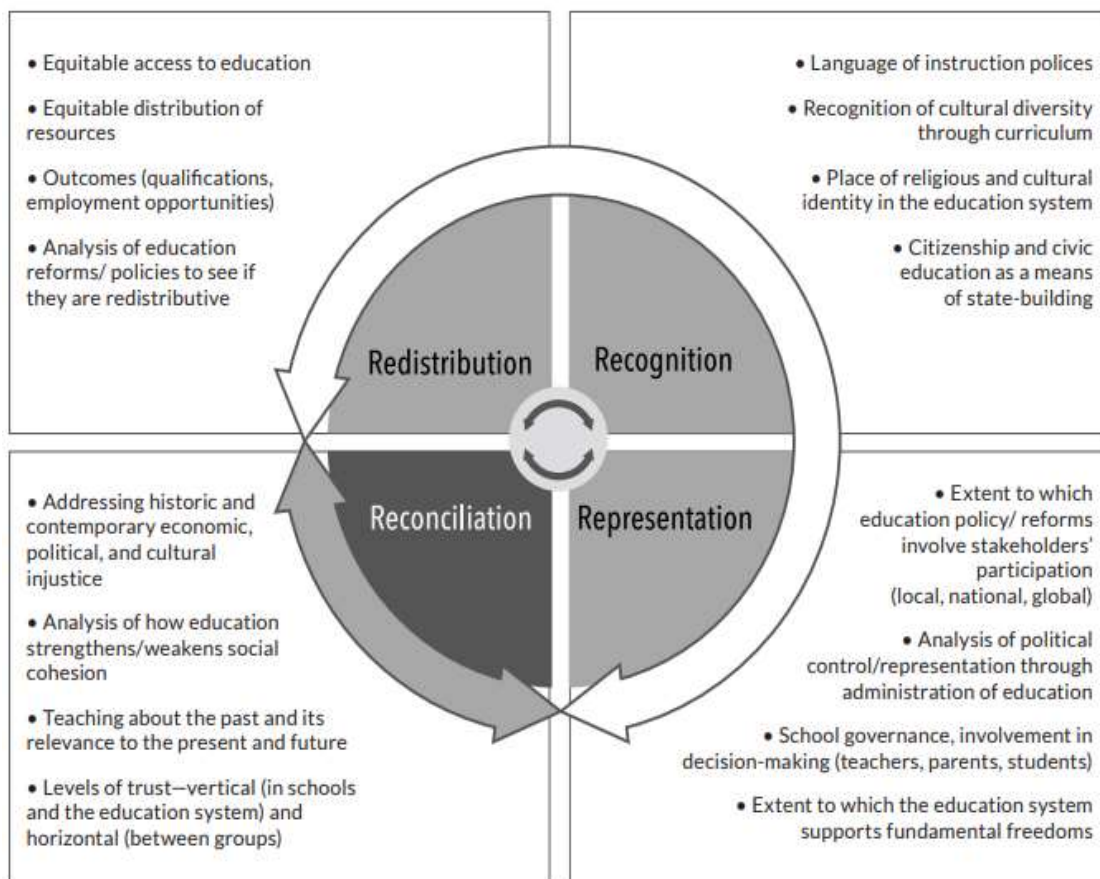- Extent to which the education system supports fundamental freedoms

Figure 3. 1 4' R Analytical Framework

Source: (Novelli et al., 2017)

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CHAPTER 4

Research Questions and Conceptual Framework

4.1 Research Objectives and Questions

This research aims

1. to identify the challenges faced by students in conflict-affected area within the existing university admission policy framework, and
2. to design a meaningful and socially-just university admission policy relevant to the recurring conflict context of Myanmar.

To accomplish these objectives, the research will address the following two questions;

1. How has the conflict hampered the students' access to university education within the current university admission policy?
2. What elements should be incorporated into the design of a meaningful and socially just university admission policy that is relevant to Myanmar's repeating conflict context?

4. 2 4' R Framework in Analysing the University Admission in Myanmar

To address the aforementioned research questions, this study adopts the 4'R conceptual framework developed by Novelli et al. (2015). As discussed in Chapter 3, 4'R framework asserts that in order to bring social justice and ensure sustainable peace, any education initiatives and development activities in the conflict context, should ensure four dimensions: redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation (Novelli et al., 2015).

This framework is relevant to this study because it enables the analysis of the role of education in conflict contexts through a structural approach. It recognises education as a driver that can have both positive and negative impacts on conflict-affected societies. By employing the four dimensions, it facilitates the identification of the impacts of

conflicts on Myanmar's high school students and the underlying structures and generative mechanisms. Furthermore, it provides a path for envisioning a socially just and equitable future university admission policy by encompassing these four domains. The themes related to these four dimensions in the context of university admission policy in Myanmar are summarised as follows;

Table 1: Related themes of 4'R framework in the context of Myanmar university admission policy

Dimensions	Related themes
Redistribution	1. The deliberate impact of conflict on the students' access to higher education 2. How the poverty and socio-economic background of those students in conflict-affected areas hinder their access to higher education. 3. How government education budgets are allocated in conflict contexts (e.g., whether there are subsidies for children in conflict-affected area).
Recognition	1. Language of instruction and its lasting impact on students' attainment in matriculation examinations. 2. How the conditions and criteria of matriculation examinations and university admission consider different groups within the system
Representation	1. the decision-making process of university admission policy and practices; How the existing legal framework include or exclude different stakeholders in the university admission policy process.
Reconciliation	1. How the current university admission policy deals with the past experiences of conflict and promotes trust and understanding among groups.

In addition, despite the significant prevalence of conflicts in Myanmar, only a few studies have examined the impact of conflicts on education. While some studies argue that conflict has a negative association with education, this relationship is not statistically significant (Stenning, 2019; Yamada & Matsushima, 2020). In the conflict context of Myanmar where the tension is rooted on culture recognition and political representation, such a positivist analysis fails to explain the wider systemic exclusion. For instance, existing studies have indicated that those students who are exposed to conflicts, are often ethnic students – non-Burmese speakers, and perform poorly in matriculation and barely have access to university because the language of examination largely rely on Burmese (Lall, 2020; Suante, 2022). Therefore, the concepts of 4'R, building upon critical realist ontology, is relevant to analysing these perspectives of the Myanmar conflict and, as Heslop (2019) also highlights, it should serve as the underlying conceptual framework in analysing the Myanmar education, particularly in higher education.

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CHAPTER 5

Research Design

5. 1 Research Methodology

Grounded on the critical realist ontology, this study adopted qualitative research methodology to explore the structural barriers encountered by students in conflict-affected areas within the current university admission policy. Qualitative tool is suitable for gaining in-depth understanding and capturing the complex interplay between conflicts and education (Heslop, 2019). The study consists of three main stages; (1) reviewing the existing literature, (2) collecting and analysing data, and ultimately, (3) interpreting findings to respond to the research questions.

5. 2 Scope of the Study

The study focuses specifically on the conflict dimension of the university admission policy in Myanmar during the reform period from 2011 to 2021. It does not aim to discuss the relevance of university admission practices from an educational assessment perspective.

5. 3 Data Collection

Considering the security concerns associated with 2021 political turmoil in Myanmar, this study adopts only an in-depth documentary analysis approach. Relevant documents such as research articles, reports from government, NGOs and INGOs, website content and articles are compiled by using the key search terms related to conflicts, higher education and matriculation (or their relevant Burmese terms).

5. 4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed in this study to identify and categorise the impacts to identify and categorises the impact of conflicts on students' access to university within the current university admission system focusing on four dimensions of 4'R; redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation. Based on the analysis and interpretation, the recommendations are developed by holistically considering those four Rs, towards socially-just university admission policy.

CHAPTER 6

Analysis and Discussion

This section provides an analysis and discussion of the experiences of students in the conflict-affected area within the existing university admission policy, through the 4'R framework; redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation.

6. 1 Redistribution: Economic Justice in University Admission

Redistribution, according to Fraser (2008), concerns economic justice and equitable distribution of resources in society (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019). In contrast, in the context of university admission practices in Myanmar, the conflict has led to a maldistribution of resources. This is evident through direct violence against schooling and the increased economic burden faced by conflict-torn students and family.

Firstly, the conflict has a direct impact on the students, teachers and school infrastructure. It has affected the learning of students and their performance in matriculation examinations. For example, due to intense conflict between Arakan Army and Myanmar military, and the military's extensive clearance operation toward Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in 2019-20 Academic Year (AY), more than 1,000 students including those preparing for the matriculation in northern Rakhine State could not attend schools (Myint, 2019). Due to those conflicts, in Paletwa Township of Chin State – a neighbouring territory of northern Rakhine, 191 out of 384 schools were closed, and over 200 teachers applied for transfer to other territories (Khai, 2022). Additionally, due to 2012 inter-religious tension, Rohingya students were prohibited to study at university partially because the government could guarantee their security (Mizzma Daily, 2022; Stenning, 2019). Furthermore, conflict has also led to the emergence of numerous internationally displaced communities living in camps, where schools have to be re-established and often lack basic resources and teachers. For example, fierce battles between the Myanmar military and Kachin Independence Army in 2012 displaced more

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than 12,0000 people, including school-age children, causing them to reside in IDP camps for several years (Bawk La, 2017; Myint, 2019).

In addition, the qualitative finding also suggests that the conflict has affected the students learning due to school closure and its impact on students' well-being. As a teacher from Chin State stated:

> *"The (school) in Se Taung and Ka Ma Maung did not open. The village also disappeared. As the schools are open and closed, the learning was disturbed. Even the children cannot do learning at their best."*
> ('ပလက်ဝမှာကျောင်းဆရာ၊ဆရာမ ရာနဲ့ချီပြောင်းရွှေ့ခွင့်တင်', 2020)

One of the education administrators from a IDP camp in Kachin State added:

> *"Many Grade 11 schoolchildren—an essential level for Myanmar students to pass in order to attend university— failed their exams due to physiological distress."* (Myint, 2019)

Furthermore, conflict has led to the reduction of matriculation exam centres, incurring more economic obstacles to the family and affecting students' performance in education achievement. In 2020, 20 examination centres in Rakhine, which accommodated more than six thousand students, were closed and merged with test centres in urban areas before the examination period (BBC News မြန်မာ, 2020a). This incurs more economic burden on students and their family, including increased cost on transportation and accommodation during the two-week long exam period as the government does not provide support for logistical arrangement. As a result, more than four thousand exam-registered students in Rakhine State as a whole, were absent from the 2020 exam (BBC News မြန်မာ, 2020b).

Most importantly, the effect of conflict is long-lasting. It deteriorates the economic prosperity of the individual family, leading to reduced investment in education, drop outs and less access to higher education (Darwish & Wotipka, 2022). This is apparent in the study conducted by Oxford Policy Management that the most affluent townships perform best in the matriculation examination, significantly a smaller number

of students took matriculation examination in the least affluent townships than medium and most affluent townships, and the poorest states such as Chin and Rakhine States have lowest matriculation pass rates with an average of 16% and 21% respectively from 2012 to 2019 (Stenning, 2019).

6. 2 Recognition: Culture Justice in University Admission

The dimension of recognition pertains to cultural justice which prevails in the presence of affirmation and recognition of each other's culture in a society. However, the university admission policy and the wider education system contribute to cultural injustice through the standardised use of Burmese language, and the rigid requirement of citizenship status for university application.

The standardised use of Burmese in education has negatively affected access to higher education of those students from ethnic groups, particularly those residing in remote and conflict-affected areas. This impact manifests in both immediate and long-term ways. In the immediate sense, ethnic students who do not speak Burmese fluently tend to perform poorly in the Myanmar Reader subject of the matriculation examination than their Burmar peers, resulting in lower overall marks and positioning them at a disadvantage within the education system (Stenning, 2019; Suante, 2022). This creates a form of cultural injustice by placing ethnic students, often from conflict-affected areas, in an inferior status within education.

Secondly, in a long-term manner, the sole use of Burmese as the medium of instruction hampers ethnic students' access to higher education. Myanmar's population includes over 30 per cent ethnic minorities, and children from these groups, particularly those from remote and conflict-affected areas, struggle with using Burmese in an academic setting (Lall, 2020; Salem-Gervais & Raynuad, 2020; Stenning, 2019). Studies has shown that ethnic students read and write Burmese at a slower pace than their Burman counterparts because it is their second (if not third) language, and tend to achieve significantly lower performance in reading, writing, and mathematics (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2019; Lall, 2020) (refers to figure 6.1).
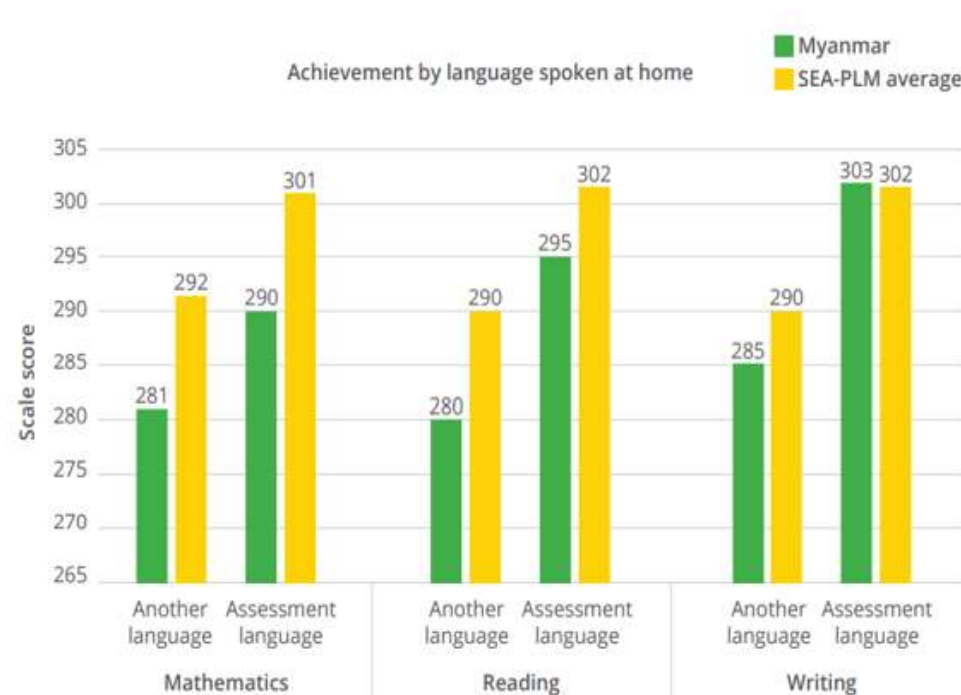
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Figure 6. 1 South East Asia Primary Learning Metrics result disaggregated by mother-tongue

Source: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2019)

This language barrier reduces their motivation and confidence in learning, leading to dropping out of school (Lall, 2020). In this regard, one teacher states:

> *"For students who do not feel good at school, can't keep up, and are made to feel like they have little value at school, the guilt of not doing well while their parents are sacrificing for them is a powerful factor leading them to drop out."*(Stenning, 2019)

Although there are indeed ethnic students who could remain in schools, they are comparatively behind compared to their Burman counterparts due to the education system. Most of them tends to earn poorer total marks in the matriculation examination because the language of assessment is either Burmese (in arts subjects) or English (in science subjects), causing them inaccessible to higher education and lower upward mobility (Lall, 2020).

In fact, the language issue and its long-lasting impact on students in conflict-affected areas should be approached by understanding the root of the conflict itself in Myanmar. The conflicts in Myanmar are originated from cultural injustice, the absence of recognition of ethnic culture and language, and the Burmanisation – the forced adoption of Buddhism as the official state religion and Burmese as the official state language, including in schooling (Fraser, 2008; Lall, 2020; Salem-Gervais & Raynuad, 2020). This has fuelled ethnic insurgencies aimed at preserving cultural identity (Suante, 2022). In other words, the sole use of Burmese in education perpetuates cultural injustice and creates conditions for the reproduction of future cultural injustice, causing more conflicts. Importantly, given the nature of conflicts, students in conflict-affected areas often belong to ethnic groups and face the compounded disadvantages of conflicts and language barriers (Lall, 2020).

Furthermore, the rigid citizenship status requirement in applying for universities reinforces the cultural injustice and negatively impacts students in conflict-affected areas. Almost all the universities in Myanmar, mandate that applicants hold citizenship status in accordance with the existing 1982 Citizenship Law (Lwin, 2000; တက္ကသိုလ် ဝင်ခွင့်လမ်းညွှန် (၂၀၂၀ ပြည့်နှစ်၊ တက္ကသိုလ်ဝင်ခွင့် စာမေးပွဲ အောင်မြင်သူများ အတွက်)၊ ၂၀၂၀; မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသားဥပဒေ၊ ၁၉၈၂). The law stipulates that only those who can prove that their ancestors resided in Myanmar before 1824, the first British annexation, shall be granted a citizenship (မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသားဥပဒေ၊ ၁၉၈၂). The law is discriminatory against the country's Indian and Chinese descendants, including Rohingya, totalling more than 1.5 to 2 million and students in conflict affected area, who often lacks necessary citizenship documents due to armed confrontations, and so become de facto stateless and unable to apply to university or access certain jobs (Lwin, 2000; Stenning, 2019). This exclusion from higher education and decent employment opportunities limits upward social mobility and fosters grievances, further perpetuating conflicts. In such a way, the rigid citizenship requirement for university admission, coupled with the overarching citizenship law fails to recognise the culture and identity of certain groups, contributing to the recurrence of conflicts.

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6. 3 Representation: Political Justice in University Admission

The dimension of representation refers to the presence of parity in politics (Fraser, 2008). In the context of university admission, it is associated with the governance and decision-making process of the university admission policy as well as of the recruitment of students.

To discuss the governance of university admission policy, it is crucial to understand the wider governance structure of universities in Myanmar. The university administration, including student recruitment, is highly centralised and bureaucratic, resulting in disparity in participation in university's governance (Lall, 2020). Following the 1962 coup de 'tat, both autonomous Yangon and Mandalay Universities were placed under the direct control of the national-level administrative body (၁၉၆၄ခုနှစ်၊ပြည်ထောင်စုမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတက္ကသိုလ်ပညာရေးဥပဒေ, ၁၉၆၄; Lall, 2020). The university admission process was solely based on the total marks obtained in the matriculation examination, so that highly-performed students could be allocated to such science steams as engineering and medical schools in accordance with the science-privileged education policy of the "Burmese Way of Socialism" (Lwin, 2000). In other words, the university admission policy was formulated neither by parity of participation nor by considering equitable principle, neglecting the country's prevailing conflict context. Since then, all the universities in Myanmar have been managed by the state, and student recruitment decisions are made by the national-level Department of Higher Education (Lall, 2020; Lwin, 2000). Literature has argued that these developments are closely associated with the conflicts, especially student activism as it was driven by the regime's political agenda to separate university student population who play a critical role in social movement (Heslop, 2019; Lall, 2020).

The necessity of achieving parity of participation in the university governance and its subset admission policy is evident in the 2015 student uprising. Students insisted on the inclusion of teachers and students in the development of education policies and

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law, including university admission policy, and the modification to admission practices (Heslop, 2019). The National Education Law (2014) also pledged for the university autonomy to be conferred and that the reforms of the university admission to be based on the preference of the students and principle of the individual university. As a result, starting from 2018 AY, 11 universities initiated the practices of admitting students by themselves based on their institutional principles, in addition to matriculation examination. One year later, three more universities and a cluster of medical-related institutions adopted the same practice (BBC News မြန်မာ, 2019). In September 2020, 16 universities were granted partial autonomy (Lall, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020). However, these policy reforms in university autonomy and its admission have predominantly been implemented in a top-down manner, and the lack of parity of participation of the education stakeholders in the policy-making remains prevalent. This is evident from the fact that after one year, those universities conducting their own admissions reverted to solely relying on the matriculation examination results for administrative efficiency.

6. 4 Reconciliation: Peace Building Perspectives in University Admission

Reconciliation, as the fourth component of the 4'R framework, focuses on peacebuilding (Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2017). In education, particularly in university admission policy and practices, it pertains to how education addresses past/historical experiences and builds trust among the stakeholders, contributing to peacebuilding (Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2015). This dimension is particularly relevant to (post) conflict societies like Myanmar.

Unfortunately, peacebuilding perspectives are often overlooked in the matriculation examination. According to interviews conducted by Heslop (2019), higher education personnel in Myanmar consider the practice of admitting students based on matriculation examination results as equitable, citing its national standardisation and reasonable cost. However, this attitude fails to acknowledge the disparities caused by socio-economic backgrounds, impact of conflicts, language, citizenship and so on.

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Reconciliation is often associated with ensuring the presence of diverse groups in admission. Myanmar has made some progress in this regard through admission reforms. For instance, the students from ethnic areas are considered to be admitted to the medical and education college with special preference on matriculation score (Asia-Europe Foundation, 2021). Additionally, as highlighted by Heslop (2019), the higher education administrators view the establishment of universities in the ethnic and conflict-affected areas as symbols of inclusivity and equity. However, it is essential to understand this from the historical perspective in which establishing universities in conflict-affected areas is driven by the regime's political agenda to suppress down campus activism by separating students and weakening social movement (Heslop, 2019; Lall, 2020; Tun, 2022). In addition, this may be driven by the human capital perspectives, the grounded ideology of NESP, expanding workforce necessary for service provision in remote and conflict-affected areas (National Education Strategic Plan, 2016).

6. 5 Conclusion

This section has analysed university admission in Myanmar through the 4'R framework. In terms of redistribution, the impact of conflicts has been observed in three forms: (1) the closure of schools, (2) the closure/ migration of test centres, and (3) the long-term economic burden. Secondly, in terms of recognition, (1) the standardisation of Burmese in matriculation examination and in the whole schooling, and (2) the rigid citizenship requirement was recorded as practices which not only hampers students' access to higher education but also reproduce conditions for future conflicts. Furthermore, the disparity of participation in university admission policy is a pressing issue caused by the absence of representation while the reconciliation, the peace-building perspective of university admission is overlooked by often citing the validity of the matriculation examination.

CHAPTER 7

Policy Recommendations

Myanmar is a society plagued by recurring conflicts, which are rooted in structural exclusion. The finding of this study indicates that the university admission practices reinforce exclusion and in turn, reproduce conditions for ongoing conflicts. To accelerate social transformation and peace-building, it is crucial to consider the following recommendations with the aim to bring the dimensions of 4'R: redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation.

7. 1 Redistribution

- *The government should subsidise students from conflict-affected areas:* The study highlights the economic burdens faced by students in these areas due to displacement and the closure of schools and examination centres. In addition to the allocated education budget, subsidies should be provided to support these students, along with psycho-social support. Funding should secure related costs incurred by the migration and closure of matriculation examination centres.

- *Education budget allocation criteria should consider the conflict situation*: Despite the significant impact of the conflicts, the budgeting practices of the Ministry of Education in Myanmar follow bureaucratic principle and emphasise on implemental approach. Funds are allocated based on three criteria; (i) number of students, (ii) number of teachers, and lastly, (iii) the execution of the transferred budget in the last three years (Myanmar Education Budget Brief, 2020). This approach results in less support for schools in conflict-affected areas with fewer students and teachers, which are less likely to operate the functions as normal. The principle should be modified to ensure equitable support that reflects the conflict context of the country.

7. 2 Recognition

- *Special consideration should be given to ethnic students from conflict-affected areas, in university admission in addition to matriculation examination results*: The findings indicate that ethnic students tend to perform poorly in Myanmar reader, resulting in lower overall marks compared to their Burmese counterparts. Special considerations such as lowering down the total marks, should be given to ethnic students' university admission applications, especially those into professional and prestigious institutions such as medical schools, Yangon University and so on.

- *Mother Tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) should be adopted in the Myanmar education system*. As findings revealed in this study, the standardisation of Burmese language in the schooling negatively impacts the students' access to higher education. In fact, it is one of root causes of conflict. Education system in Myanmar should thus embrace the diversity of language in the country, resulting in the recognition of each other's culture. In this regard, "Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)" approach, where the mother tongue of an individual is initially used as the medium of instruction in primary education before shifting into national and international languages (Salem-Gervais & Raynuad, 2020; South & Lall, 2016; Suante, 2022). This study recommends the adoption of the MTB-MLE approach as it increases access to education and it recognises the culture of specific ethnic groups and, thereafter, promotes sustainable peace in Myanmar (Asia Multilingual Education Working Group, 2014; South & Lall, 2016).

- *The rigid citizenship requirement in university application should be relaxed*: Studies and civil society groups have called for the amendments to the 1982 Citizenship Law (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017). This study recommends that the right to education should not be undermined by citizenship law. Therefore, Myanmar universities, including professional institutions should consider those students from conflict-affected area, particularly Rohingya, with special consideration for citizenship requirements.

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7. 3 Representation

- *Participation should be promoted in the education policy process, including university admission policy:* Historically, the development of university admission policies has excluded stakeholder participation. While there has been some progress during the reform period, policy makers are still bureaucrats, predominantly representing the regime's agenda. It is therefore imperative to ensure the parity of participation of the student's union, teachers' union and ethnic education stakeholders who provide extensive education to the students in conflict-affected areas. In addition, as argued by Fraser (2008), the dimensions of social justice are interrelated with each other and therefore, the dimension of representation must be ensured to achieve the presence of other dimensions such as redistribution, recognition and reconciliation. Policy tools that foster participation such as deliberative participatory policy framework, should be considered in this regard.

7. 4 Reconciliation

- *The university admission policy should promote diversity and reflect the historical experiences of Myanmar society.* The study suggests that the peace building aspects of university admission practices is often overlooked by referring to the validity of the matriculation examination. Admission practices have the potential to contribute to peace-building by ensuring diversity and providing opportunities for those who have been historically disadvantaged in the country. For example, the adoption of a quota system could be considered

All in all, the dimensions of the 4'R framework are interrelated with each other and therefore should be considered together to address the exclusionary practices in Myanmar university admission (Fraser, 2008; Heslop, 2019; Novelli et al., 2017). For instance, the process of modifying the budgeting criteria must ensure parity of participation with the attitude of the recognition of each other's culture and of building

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trust in the post-conflict Myanmar. The reconciliation aspects of ensuring diversity through considering past experiences of the society should be done through participation.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This study focuses on examining the impact of conflicts on students' access to higher education within Myanmar's university admission policy. The findings of this study indicates that the university admission policy in (post) conflict Myanmar not only was impacted by but also contributed to the reproduction of future conflicts by excluding certain groups from higher education. Therefore, it is imperative to address the structural barriers that underpin the root causes of the conflicts. It proposes adopting the 4'R framework of social justice and peace building to address these impacts and suggest possible responses.

Furthermore, this study contends that social justice and peace building 4'R framework should be adopted in analysing and developing the education provision in the (post) conflict society. Any education programme should address the four dimensions, namely redistribution, recognitions, representations and reconciliation, altogether in its delivery of education services so that it would contribute to transformative social change and foster peace. In addition, it is essential to consider the contextual distinctions and the roots of the conflicts in implementing these measures.

As Apple (2018) argues, education is always political and functions as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 2018). Consequently, education practices and programmes reflect various ideologies, including culture, language and politics. These practices and policies can potentially create (dis)parity and (in)equality one way or another among different groups. Access to education is therefore determined by multiple factors. While this study focuses on the conflict dimension and draws inferences based on the wider experiences of different groups, it recommends future research to explore dimensions such as gender, locality and so on, by delving into cases deeply.

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