

***The Role of Higher Education in Socio-Economic Development in Myanmar:
External & Internal Perspectives***

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Abstract

Political metamorphosis in Myanmar with the mandate of National League for Democracy paved the way for major structural reforms in various sectors. Unsurprisingly, higher education sector is one of them to undergo drastic changes since it is regarded as one of the key sectors in Myanmar's socio-economic development. And, efforts are made to reengineer the sector with the involvement of intra and international organisations. In this paper, three aspects are discussed to understand the overview of recent reforms and changes of higher education system in Myanmar: the role of Public Higher Education in Myanmar's Development Policy, triangle relationship between ministries, external agencies and public higher education institutions, formal and living autonomy of public HEIs in relation to national development. The first two aspects focus on the "external" dimension of the relationship public higher education institutions in Myanmar have with national government and international agencies and the last point addresses the "internal" dimension of the universities and their adaptation on national development initiatives. The methodology included review and analysis of scientific papers, policy documents, reports and other relevant sources. In summary, the findings reveals that Myanmar is heading towards decentralisation and increasing autonomy for universities by allowing universities to directly interact with local, intraregional and international stakeholders. However, the implications of enhanced autonomy in university leadership remains as an empirical question. Future research is recommended in the area of university adaption towards organisational change in alignment with recent development.

Keywords: Myanmar, Higher Education, Universities, Reforms, Development, Policy, National Development Initiatives, Government, International agencies, Ministries, Autonomy

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Introduction

Political metamorphosis in Myanmar with the mandate of National League for Democracy paved the way for major structural reforms in various sectors. Unsurprisingly, higher education sector is one of them to undergo drastic changes since it is regarded as one of the key sectors in Myanmar's socio-economic development. And, efforts are made to reengineer the sector with the involvement of intra and international organizations. Although there are several studies emphasizing recent development efforts in Myanmar, research studies focusing on the higher education sector are insufficient to see the whole picture from external (national and international) and internal (institutional) perspectives. Thus, in this paper, three main questions will be addressed to understand the overview of recent reforms and changes of higher education system in Myanmar.

- (1) What is the role of Public Higher Education in Myanmar's Development Policy?
- (2) What is the relationship between ministries, external agencies and public higher education institutions?
- (3) How much formal and living autonomy do public HEIs have in contributing to development?

The first two questions will be addressing the "external" dimension of the relationship public higher education institutions in Myanmar have with national government and international agencies. The last question will address the "internal" dimension of the universities and their adaptation on national development initiatives. For question 3, the University of Yangon will be the focus of analysis due to the fact that reform of University of Yangon (UY) will be used as the template for country wide university reforms. UY was designated as a 'Centre of Excellence', and given priority to upgrade its facilities to international standards as well (Esson & Wang, 2018).

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

In the brief literature review that follows, concepts and an analytical framework in relation to the questions above will be discussed. In the Cloete et al article, HEIs formed the social contract (or "pact") with society by performing four contradictory functions; generating and transmission of ideologies, selection of elites, generation of new knowledge and training of labour force. The authors further emphasized that "The ability to manage such contradictions while emphasizing the universities' role in generating knowledge and training labour in the context of the new requirements of the development process will to a large extent determine the capacity of countries and regions to become part of the new world economy" (Cloete, Maassen, & Pillay, 2017, p. 1). Since Myanmar has been under military regimes for the past five decades fulfilling the first two functions of the social pact, the development framework that emphasized the last two functions is assumed to pose challenges for universities maintaining the contradictory functions.

In Shin's article, education development in East Asia is grounded on human capital theory whereby the political leaders regard education as the main driver to enlarge and enlighten the mind of society and to train human resource for economic development. It is also a belief that education decides the social hierarchy in the

region of study and that drives educational development. The article also stated that contemporary higher education systems are becoming similar due to global scripts and converging trends of HE across Europe, Asia and the rest of the world (Shin, 2015). Reform efforts in Myanmar reflected the underlying vision of human capital theory, and they also emphasized research capacity building in universities. “Knowledge economy” and “innovation” are the frequently used terms in reform policy documents. Thus, it is a question if such used of terms are due to international influence (both South and North). It is also important to analyze if “Internationalization” has taken place in HEIs to allow the mobility of students and staff across national boundaries to determine the international influences on development plans (Tijssen, 2015).

The point mentioned above in regards to capacity-building in Myanmar could be translated to HEIs being regarded as the “academic core” in broad policy perspective. Academic core is referred as knowledge being the key in the university contribution to development either by knowledge transmitting (teaching) or knowledge producing and disseminating (research, engagement). It is further stated that academic core should be strengthened if a university is to contribute to development (Bunting, Cloete, Wah, & Nakayawa-Mayega, 2015).

In order to understand the university’s contribution to development, the formal and living autonomy of university will be discussed. In Maassen et al, “living autonomy” is referred as the real autonomy universities have after analyzing the limits imposed on the actual use of formal institutional autonomy (Maassen, Gornitzka, & Fumasoli, 2017). The analytical framework consisted of five dimensions, centralization, formalization, standardization, legitimization and flexibility when analyzing living autonomy when organizational change occurred in universities.

Centralization refers to the way in which decision-making authority is dispersed within an organization. The questions in relation to where the decision-making takes place in the university’s governance structure, how the rules of decision-making are promoted, nature of control systems, who controls the resources and workflow etc. The interest lies in identifying formal and de facto decision-maker in the organization so that we may be able to address if there is any discrepancy.

Formalization refers to the degree in which communications and procedures are written and filed in the organization. It is important to distinguish the source of formalization if it’s stemmed from legal requirements or individual ideas. In Maassen, it is addressed that increased autonomy calls for formalization of internal communications that ensure accountability. From these requirements, professional administration is emerged (Fumasoli, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2014)

Standardization refers to the degree in which decision-making, information provision, implementation processes are standardized by the organization. Standardization ensures that there are rules that cover those processes and the role to carried out such processes are defined according to the qualifications required, titles, symbols, status and rewards rather than on individual personal basis.

Legitimization comes from institutional perspective and refers that a normative match of between an institution and government initiatives can accelerate the change process to be accepted and institutionalized.

Flexibility refers to the feasibility of the organization and its governance structures and processes can shift according to the changing circumstances, expectations, requirements from external environment. Flexibility concerns with informal structure and processes within an organization and the amount, the speed and the acceleration of change and adaptability are three important aspects to measure flexibility. It is an important aspect in analyzing Myanmar HEIs because of their long history of being state's apparatuses that could have lead them being precarious to utilize the given autonomy.

Findings

In the following sessions, the findings from scientific papers, policy documents, reports will be discussed. The table in Appendix 1 provides the brief overview of non-scientific documents for better understanding of the context of these documents.

1. The role of Public Higher Education in Myanmar's Development Policy

From literature review, training human resource and generating knowledge are often regarded as the main functions for HEIs in development. In the case of Myanmar, the broad policies linking several sectors as well as the narrowed sectoral framework validated these functions are important.

In Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan's (MSDP) there are three main pillars, namely, peace & stability, prosperity & partnership and people & planet. They are introduced as the nation's macro-level priorities. From this plan, Pillar 2 and 3 specifically mentioned that HEIs are prioritized to develop academic core and strengthen the quality at all levels in all forms (Ministry of Planning and Finance, n.d.). In relation to this, National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) indicated the goal of developing world-class higher education system that provides equitable access, leading to better employment for graduates and significant contributions to a knowledge-based economy. It is also stated that HEIs in Myanmar are responsible for nurturing skilled human capital needed in government, business and industry. They also have a key role to play in undertaking research and incubating the innovative and creative thinking needed for a globally and economically competitive society.

The strategies mentioned above clearly indicated that HEIs in Myanmar are aimed to perform the functions of knowledge generation and training of labour in alignment with the development plan. This role is supported by the development strategy in NESP which emphasized on developing a world-class higher education system, where universities have autonomy over their own curriculum and the ability to conduct independent research. This notion indicates the aim to decentralize university governance which will eventually lead to universities directly interacting with market. However, it is important to underline that not all HEIs in the country will move in this direction, for example, educational colleges and institutions in remote areas and HEIs under Ministry of Defense will remain under the government's umbrella.

In the following sections, the nature of triangle relationship between the three bodies, ministries, external agencies and universities will be discussed to understand how the role is supported by different agencies to fulfill the development objectives.

2. Triangle relationship between ministries, external agencies and public higher education institutions

The triangle relationship between ministries, external agencies and HEIs in Myanmar is heterogeneous in nature. Currently, the ministries are the decision-maker with the highest-level of formal authority. However, the development plans aimed to convert this relationship and strengthen the autonomy of the HEIs. It comes with future vision of HEIs as self-governing bodies which directly interact with local and international agencies.

Previously, there were 170 HEIs performing under 13 different ministries. However, this structure is currently reformed and currently 174 HEIs are reporting to 8 ministries. Nearly 80% of them (134 HEIs) are under Ministry of Education (MoE) and the rest are fragmented into 7 different ministries. The detailed list of HEIs under each ministry is stated in Appendix 2. This could be a move towards the direction of gathering all HEIs under a single ministry suggested by Comprehensive Education Sector Review in 2012 (“CESR,” n.d.).

Currently, MoE is the primary governmental body coordinating and administering most of the HEIs. Under MoE, Department of Higher Education (DHE) is governing HEIs’ organizational regulations (such as selecting and dismissal of Rectors, highest rank in a university), academic affairs (including decisions on introduction of new programs, validation of curricula and their content, setting student intakes), personnel policies such as allocation of teaching and administrative staff and distribution of financial resources to various institutions.

Currently, international relationships with regard to higher education development are handled by Office of Union Minister in MoE. Office of Union Minister reports to “Ministry of the Office of the Union Government” which is a ministry-level body that serves the Government of Myanmar. Office of Union Minister in MoE takes care of communication with external agencies (ASEAN, Supranational agencies, EU, International agencies, NGOs) in relation to educational development (“Ministry of Education |,” n.d.).

However, a project, called CHINLONE project co-funded by Erasmus+, is underway to implement/strengthen International Relations Offices (IROs) in universities. The project includes initial five Universities from Myanmar (University of Yangon, University of Mandalay, Dagon University, Yezin Agricultural University and Yangon University of Economics) and aims to contribute to the modernization and internationalization of Myanmar's Higher Education System (CHINLONE Project, n.d.-b). The description from individual university websites suggested that the majority of them are well in progress of establishing IROs. It could be one of the indicators that the government is withdrawing from centralized position in international relationships and communication with external agencies (including donors). Once the IROs are fully equipped, universities will be assigned to take initiatives in direct coordination with external agencies.

In both ministry and institutional level, coordination with North especially EU is more visible than coordination with South (especially ASEAN) in Higher Education sector. One of the reasons would be that ASEAN has more interest in integration of trade sector than education sector. One of the papers examining research/academic collaborations between ASEAN flagship universities shows that regional collaboration is at a very nascent stage for many public universities in the less developed HE system. Interestingly, intermediary agencies based in Japan, Korea, and EU are coming in to provide the platform for flagship universities and other universities in ASEAN together to collaborate in research and perform academic exchanges. Due to the current need of regional harmonization, these platforms have facilitated meaningful academic exchanges and student mobility between flagship universities and other universities in ASEAN region. This, in the longer term would bring the regions closer in terms of HE development and cooperation (Sirat, 2017). The paper on Higher Education and Myanmar's Economic and Democratic Development also advised that Myanmar should actively engage in ASEAN higher education initiatives for capacity building, quality enhancement, mutual recognition, and, in time, meeting ASEAN higher education standards (Kamibepu & Chao, Jr., 2017).

Currently, there is not much information to explain the weak integration of ASEAN in Myanmar HE development, however, Myanmar's recent interest of participating in ASEAN student mobility programme could be an indicator that a change is expected ("2nd ASEAN Student Mobility Forum kicks off in Yangon," n.d.).

Ministry and institutional level relationship with EU and Australia is a lot stronger in comparison to intraregional integration judging from the number of activities and projects. For example, University of Yangon has four Erasmus+ projects with EU partners. However, projects aimed for integration with South Asia/East Asia partners were not found ("University of Yangon | Official Website," n.d.). The president scholarship that is arranged by MoE and universities showed that nearly half of the scholars are sent to Australia universities compared to Asia counterparts. It would be fair to state that unequal relationships still characterize the current development architecture due to North-South dichotomy that is still integrated in development discourse as well as development practices (Mueller, 2017).

3. Formal and living autonomy of public HEIs in relation to national development

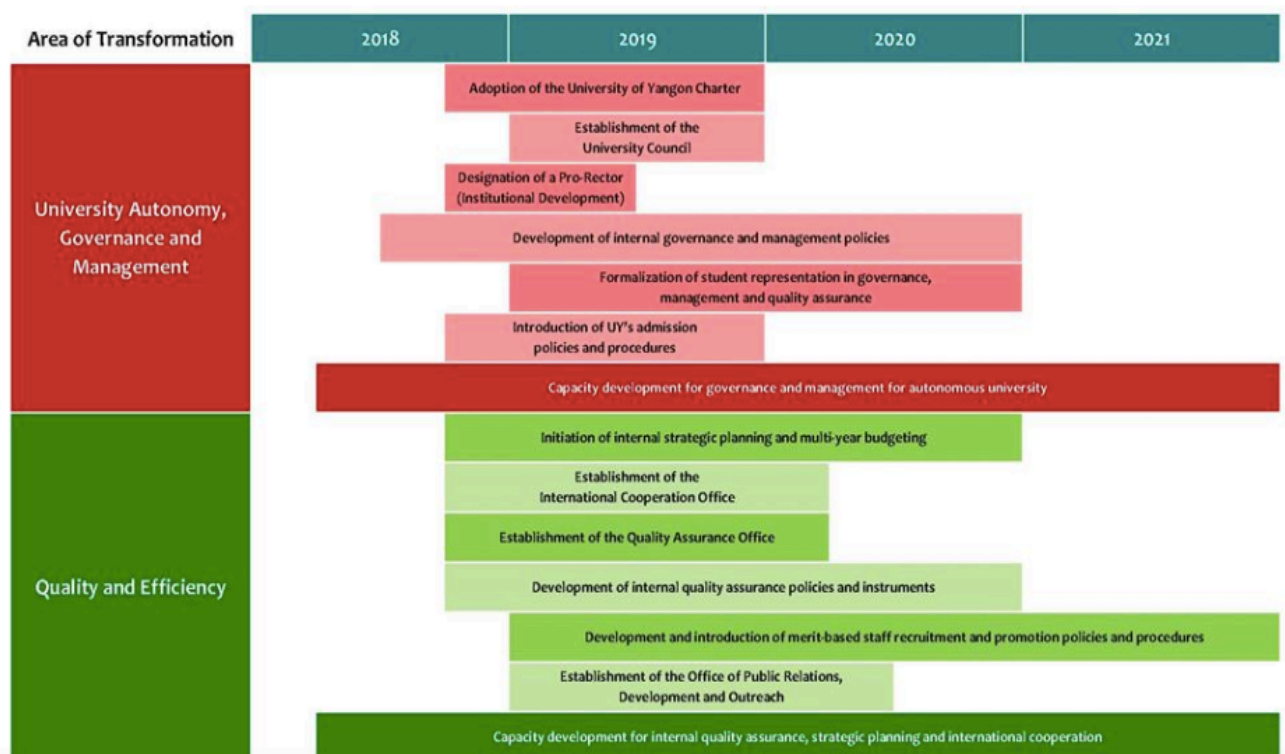
In retrospect, the Myanmar HE System has started formally when Rangoon University was founded in 1878 by the British Colonial Administration (Chongcharoen & Daungkaew, 2016). During that period, universities were run by a council of professors, scholars and government officials. Although the formal authority given to the university leadership was high, the real autonomy the university possessed was arguable due to the fact that the university was carrying the function of ideological transmission and elite recruitment (Castells, 2001) by British Colonial Administration (Khan Mon Krann & University of Singapore, 2000, p. 150).

The critical turning point for Myanmar HEIs was in the 1960s when the a military coup put the universities and colleges under the Directorate of Higher Education, a central government agency. During the five decades of military regime, Public HEIs

in Myanmar have suffered isolation, neglect, underinvestment and lack of academic freedom (Kamibeppu & Chao, Jr., 2017). Under the military regime, Public HEIs in Myanmar had little to no formal autonomy with high degree of governmental control and interventions in day-to-day management of HEIs by different ministries. Thus, it is important to understand that the legacies of such authoritarian leadership style remains strong and creates challenges for university leadership during reform.

One of the strategies in NESP focused on strengthening autonomy and accountability of HEIs. “In Myanmar’s context, the word “autonomy” is generally understood as the transition from a state-controlled system to a state-guided system allowing universities a degree of freedom to decide their own policies and activities”(CHINLONE Project, n.d.-a, p. 10). Although the nature of Myanmar’s “formal” and “living” autonomy might be different from Europe, the analytical framework of living autonomy would still provide a lens to analyse university adaption of organization change and the tensions that could come up from increased institutional autonomy. By using the analytical framework, five dimensions are discussed based on the analysis University of Yangon (UY). The discussion focused on university’s Master Plan for reform as follow (“Master Plan | University of Yangon,” n.d.).

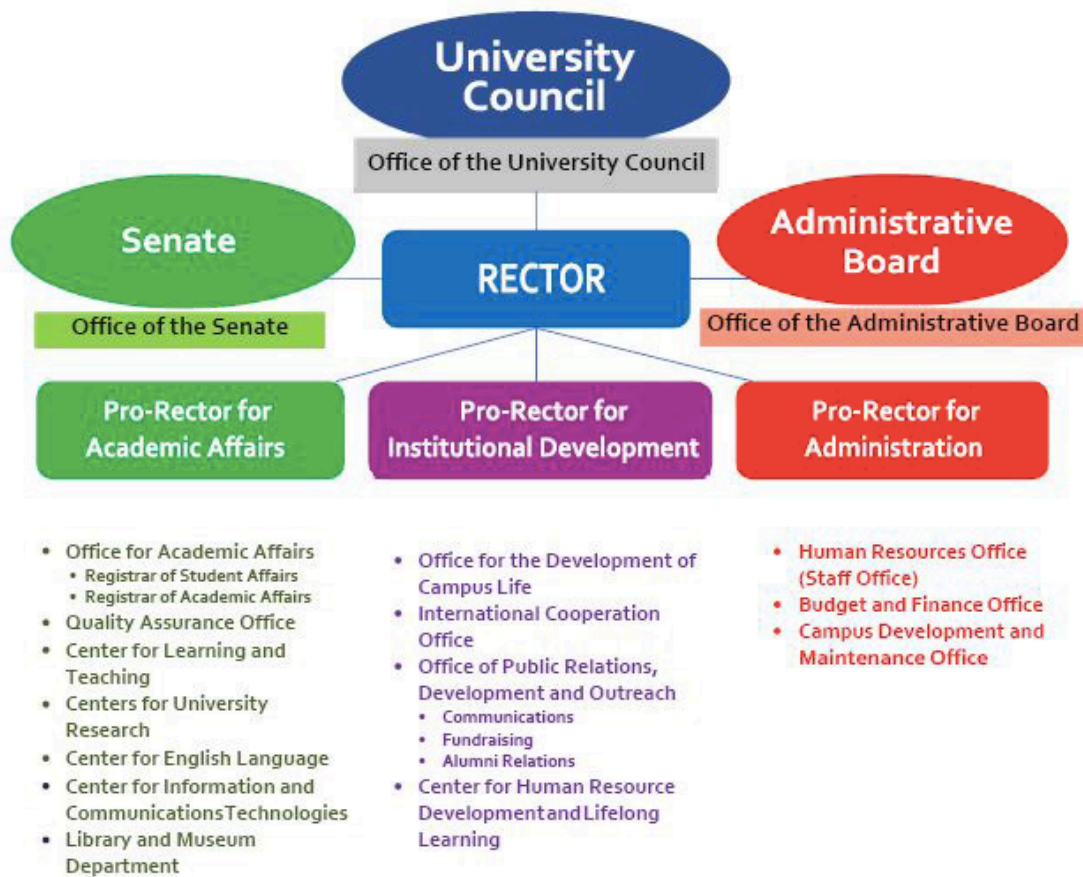
High Level Implementation Timeline 2018-2021



3.1. Centralisation

In UY, the leader of the organization is currently the rector, however, the university council, functioning as governing body for individual HEIs, will be established by end of 2019. From the future organization structure as follow, the university council would be the key governing body. Although the stakeholders involved in university

council are not specified, it is predicted that professionals would be involved based on a clause in NESP highlighting the strengthening of management capacity in university structure. Due to the fact that current university leadership hasn't exercised institutional autonomy previously, tensions from parallel centralisation and decentralisation of autonomy are expected to be minimal. However, it runs the risk of "institutional autonomy" becoming symbolic due to the university leadership precariousness.



3.2. Formalisation

It is understood from the literature that "Increasing autonomy (and accountability) should augment formalisation, in the sense that strengthened managerialism resulting from increased autonomy calls for formalisation of internal communications and procedures, particularly when intervening in a professional organisation, such as the university" (Maassen et al., 2017, p. 245). Although there is not much helpful information on formalising of communication and procedures, the establishment of Quality Assurance Office displays the plan to formalise the procedures in UY. The lack of technology-enhanced support system calls for a delay and there is a risk that university leadership will struggle to implement the changes in a short span of time.

3.3. Standardization

With increased formalisation, standardization is expected to increase as well (Maassen et al., 2017). It is found in the minutes of meetings in CHINLONE projects that management tools and curriculum templates are created for the participating universities, including UY and the standardization of procedures are introduced to university leadership and academics (“WP2—CHINLONE management platform,” n.d.). It is essential to find a fitting degree of standardization without creating tensions between management and academics and it is also important to understand the agentic factors displayed in collective body of academics.

3.4. Legitimation

Five universities involved in CHINLONE Project are interviewed in 2018 by the CHINLONE Staff to find out what kind of autonomy is feasible and how different layers of autonomy can be reached with regards to HEI reform. In this context, finding out “the feasible autonomy for universities” could be interpreted as individual HEI’s aim to find a normative match because “a higher level of normative match between a reform aimed at university change and the dominant collective academic regulatory rules, norms and beliefs, the likelier it is that the new practice will be accepted and institutionalized” (Maassen et al., 2017, p. 246). UY has been actively participating in the development and reform processes, thus it is easy to assume that current academic norms and values are in alignment with new directions. However, beyond what is visible through formal arrangements, it is questionable if the university’s active participation is actually derived from normative match or if it is just a passive approach to cope with current changes.

3.5. Flexibility

Flexibility is a difficult dimension to analyse in Myanmar context due to the rigid hierarchy and unequal distribution of autonomy between rectors/pro-rectors and other administrative and academic staff in the universities. Although the speed and the acceleration of change and adaptability in UY is the most recognizable among HEIs in Myanmar, it is still early to confirm if the flexibility, if existing, is spread across all levels in the university.

From the findings, conflicts of norms and values from institutional level to ministry level is prominent. But the empirical questions lie on how the university adapts to institutional change and increased autonomy in the society it operates.

Conclusion

The role of higher education in socio-economic development in Myanmar is discussed in this paper by addressing the role of HEIs in development stated in policies, triangle relationship of ministries, external agencies and universities and the living autonomy in universities compared to the formal autonomy.

In regards to the first question, it is clear that the role of Myanmar’s HEIs constituted in the policy is based on human capital theory with the heavy emphasis on developing academic core in existing universities.

The analysis of triangle relationship between ministries, external agencies and HEIs indicated the state aim to decentralize the external coordination to universities. Although it might be perceived as a more efficient approach, decentralization runs the risk of pulling the higher education system in several directions. In addition, with weak coordination. Thus, a clear framework in international relations with strong collaboration between universities is utmost important. Moreover, the development plan with strong intraregional integration is recommended based on the findings.

Analysis of formal and living autonomy in University of Yangon based on analytical framework by Maassen(2017) indicated that university adaption towards organizational change in alignment with recent development is understudied with many empirical questions emerged. Although it is apparent that increased institutional autonomy is expected to cause nuance in university's organizational structure, the implications of such reform efforts in the actual practices are left unanswered. Thus, the events following up to reform during the period of 2019 to 2020 in UY will be a critical case for future research in further understanding of formal and living autonomy in UY.

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Appendix 1

Background Information of the documents analyzed in this paper

Document	Period	Objective	Monitoring Methods	Author	Published Date
Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP)	2018-2030	To provide whole-of-government development framework	Treated as “living document” and conduct progressive monitoring and revising	Ministry of Planning and Finance	2018
National Education Strategic Plan (NESP)	2016-2021	To provide the government, education stakeholders and citizens with a ‘roadmap’ for sector-wide education reforms over the next five years	Periodical Monitoring and additional Funding for NESP Program	Ministry of Education	2016
CHINLONE Project Report	2018-2021	To contribute to the modernization and internationalization of Myanmar's Higher Education System (HES), in order to facilitate the country's transition toward a knowledge economy	Periodical Meetings	CHINLONE Project (assisted by EU)	2018

Appendix 2

The list of HEIs under each ministries

MINISTRY OF REFERENCE	SUB-CATEGORY	NUM.
Ministry of Education	Arts and Sciences Universities	42
	Universities of Economics	3
	Universities of Distance Education	2
	Universities of Foreign Languages	2
	Universities and Colleges for Teacher Education	25
	Technological Universities	33
	Universities of Computer Studies	27
Total		134
Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation		7
Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry		1
Ministry of Defence		6
Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture		5
Ministry of Border Affairs		3
Ministry of Transports		2
Ministry of Health and Sports		16
Total		174

Data provided by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, The Republic of Union of Myanmar, November 2018.