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## **Higher Education Enrollment in Myanmar After the 2021 Political Development**

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### **Executive Summary**

- Following the 2021 political development, Myanmar's higher education system has been facing severe declining enrollment numbers due to political instability, safety concerns, language barriers, and the post-COVID-19 effects of financial hardship and school closure.
- A key finding of the issue is that the number of students taking matriculation exams or university entrance exams dropped by over 85%, from 850,000 to 128,000 from 2019 to 2024, which suggests that Myanmar is facing a severe decline in human capital.
- It is in the best interest of Myanmar to restore stability, cultivate an inclusive education system, enhance the accessibility of higher education, and expand domestic and foreign higher education opportunities to prepare the much-needed human capital for post-conflict country development.

### **Introduction**

Higher education is a pivotal asset for personal and national development. It promotes cultural and knowledge exchange, which enables students to pursue their careers further after graduating from high school/diploma education level. In most cases, higher education or a college degree is a

passport to economic security and a stable future for students with vulnerable conditions.<sup>1</sup> With a massive and diverse population of over 57 million and 135 minority ethnic groups in 2024,<sup>2</sup> a college degree is crucial for many to achieve economic security.

However, the February 2021 political development triggered a critical decline in Myanmar's higher education. University enrollment dropped by over 85% due to political instability, safety concerns, language barriers, and the post-COVID-19 effects of financial hardship and school closure.

## **The Decline in Higher Education Enrollment**

In 2019, the number of students taking the matriculation exam/university entrance exam was over 850,000.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, the number increased to over 900,000.<sup>4</sup> This could mean that the education sector was developing upward and becoming more accessible for students. Not only were there 1,984 exam centers in the nation across the regions, but there were also 15 exam locations overseas. Moreover, the candidates included persons with disabilities and prisoners.<sup>5</sup>

However, the whole education system, along with some other sectors, in Myanmar came to an abrupt stop in February 2021 when the Tatmadaw, led by senior military general Min Aung Hlaing, conducted a coup d'etat on the previous government. Myanmar's extended public school closure started in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was extended until February 2022 due to the aftermath of the 2021 coup.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there was no matriculation exam in 2021 despite attempts by the State Administration Council (SAC) to resume schooling in June and November due to

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, "What You Need to Know about Higher Education", March 19, 2024,

<https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/need-know#:~:text=It%20promotes%20the%20exchange%20of,security%20and%20a%20stable%20future>.

<sup>2</sup> "Burma" The World Factbook, last modified May 28, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/burma/#people-and-society>

<sup>3</sup> Yinglun Shi, "Over 850,000 Students Participate in Myanmar's Matriculation Exam", Xinhua, March 07, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/07/c\\_137875228.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/07/c_137875228.htm)

<sup>4</sup> "Over 900,000 Sit for Matriculation Exam on Third Day", Ministry of Information, last modified March 14, 2020, <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/news/910>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>6</sup> Sutirtha Sinha Roy, Roy Van der Weide, Saurav Dev Bhatta, Mar Mar Thwin, "A Generation of Children are at Risk of Learning Losses in Myanmar", World Bank Blogs, last modified October 24, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/eastasiapacific/generation-children-are-risk-learning-losses-myanmar>

nationwide demonstrations against the military regime, armed clashes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other issues.<sup>7</sup>

In 2022, the Ministry of Education, under the regime of the SAC, finally hosted the university entrance exam after skipping a year. However, the number of students sitting in the exam centers decreased drastically compared to the previous exam in 2020. Only approximately 281,000 students took the exam.<sup>8</sup> The number continued to go down in the 2023 matriculation exam, as only around 161,000 students were taking the exam,<sup>9</sup> and in 2024, there were only approximately 128,000 students turning up for the exam in March.<sup>10</sup>

To put into perspective how severe the declining higher education enrollment is, the number of students taking the matriculation exam or university entrance exam dropped by over 85% from 850,000 to 128,000 from 2019 to 2024. This suggests that Myanmar's higher education sector is facing critical issues that must be addressed immediately, as post-conflict development will require massive human capital.

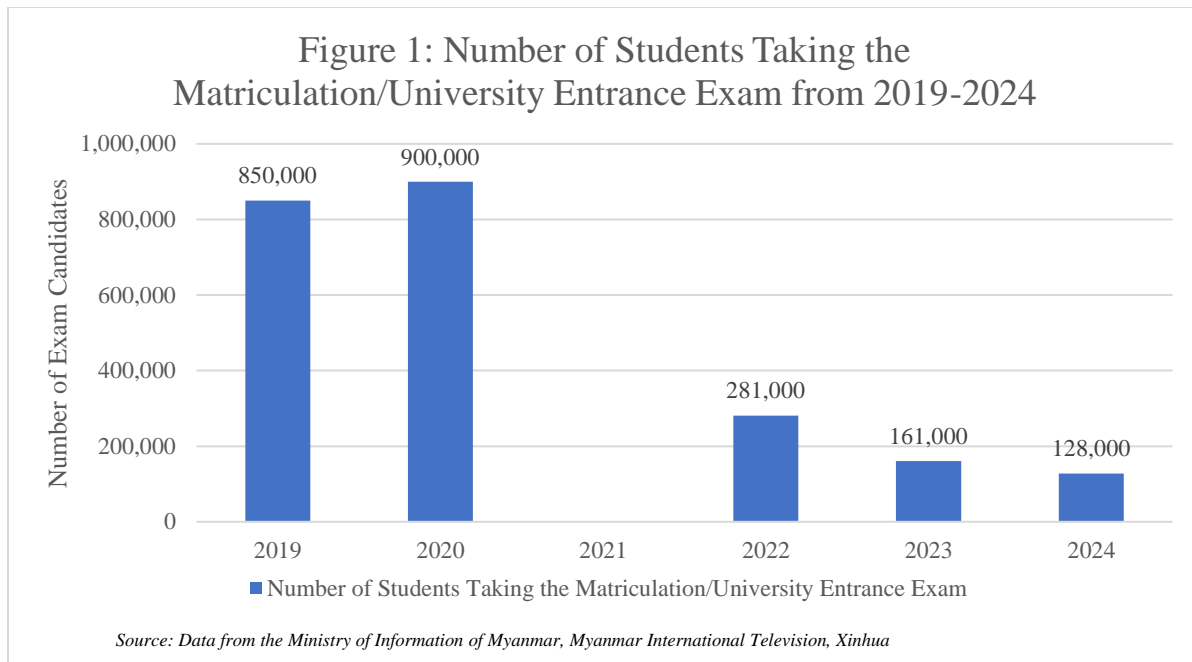
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<sup>7</sup> Sa Phan, "Matriculating amid Myanmar's Conflict", *New Mandala*, March 25, 2024, <https://www.newmandala.org/matriculating-amid-myanmars-conflict/#:~:text=Matriculation%20examinations%20could%20not%20be,caused%20by%20COVID-19%20outbreaks>.

<sup>8</sup> "Over 280,000 Students Sit Third-day of 2021-2022 Matriculation Exam", Ministry of Information, last modified April 03, 2022, <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/news/6663>

<sup>9</sup> "Matriculation Exam: 2023 Matriculation Exam Begins across the Nation", *Myanmar International Television*, March 09, 2023, <https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/matriculation-exam-2023-matriculation-exam-begins-across-nation>

<sup>10</sup> "128,725 Students Take English on 2nd Day of 2024 Matric Exam", Ministry of Information, last modified March 13, 2024, <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi%3Aeng/news/13358>



## Factors in the Declining Higher Education Enrollment

There are three explanations for the decreased higher education enrollment in Myanmar. Firstly, the education system has been disrupted due to political instability in Myanmar. The recent 2021 political incident in Myanmar led many students and educators to join the civil disobedience movement (CDM) against the military regime. Some students drop out of school because their families distrust the education system under the Ministry of Education under the State Administration Council's control, which many call the "military slave education system."<sup>11</sup> The aftermath of the 2021 military takeover disrupted the nationwide schooling system and caused massive educational resource setbacks. In June 2021, 139,000 high school and higher education educators were fired and arrested for partaking in the CDM.<sup>12</sup> The rocky relationship between the military government and civilians continued, as the SAC's attempts to reopen schooling in June and November 2021 failed, with barely any students showing up.

<sup>11</sup> Frontier Myanmar, "Parents, Teachers and Students Boycott 'Slave Education System'", May 06, 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/parents-teachers-and-students-boycott-slave-education-system/>

<sup>12</sup> Mary Shepard Wong, David Kareng, "Creativity in Crisis: Re-envisioning Higher Education in Myanmar's Spring Revolution", *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00776-4>

Secondly, students in conflict zones cannot attend school for safety and security purposes. Aside from potential arrests for being a part of the CDM, the civilians also worry for their safety and stay out of harm's way from armed clashes between the military and protestors, the People's Defence Force, and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). As there has been intense fighting across the nation since February 2021, there have been many casualties, fatalities, and displacements. As of January 2024, it is estimated that there are 2,625,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Myanmar, and 49% of them are children.<sup>13</sup> The security instability caused by the fighting results in deteriorating living conditions, such as movement restrictions, telecommunication challenges, roadblocks, and inaccessibility to crucial services.<sup>14</sup> This means that vulnerable students do not have the luxury of attending school and must prioritize survivability. The military government also acknowledges the condition and calls for a second chance for the matriculation exam in 2024 for students living in "terrorist-threatening" areas.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, with a diverse population of over 57 million and 137 minority ethnic groups, each speaking their respective ethnic languages since birth,<sup>16</sup> the language barrier poses major challenges to the creation of an inclusive education system from the primary level to the university level. Burmese, the country's official language, is the only classroom language used in the education system across the country's regions.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, ethnic students who speak little Burmese would find the curriculum more challenging than their Bamar peers, as the materials are only available in Burmese, discouraging the students from pursuing further education. A study conducted on 474 students from grades 2-5 found that ethnic students take up to four times longer to read a Burmese text passage than Bamar students.<sup>18</sup> That would mean an ethnic student would

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<sup>13</sup> "Myanmar Emergency Update", UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, January 24, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-emergency-update-1-january-2024#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20UN%2C%20the, South-East%20and%20Rakhine%20State>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

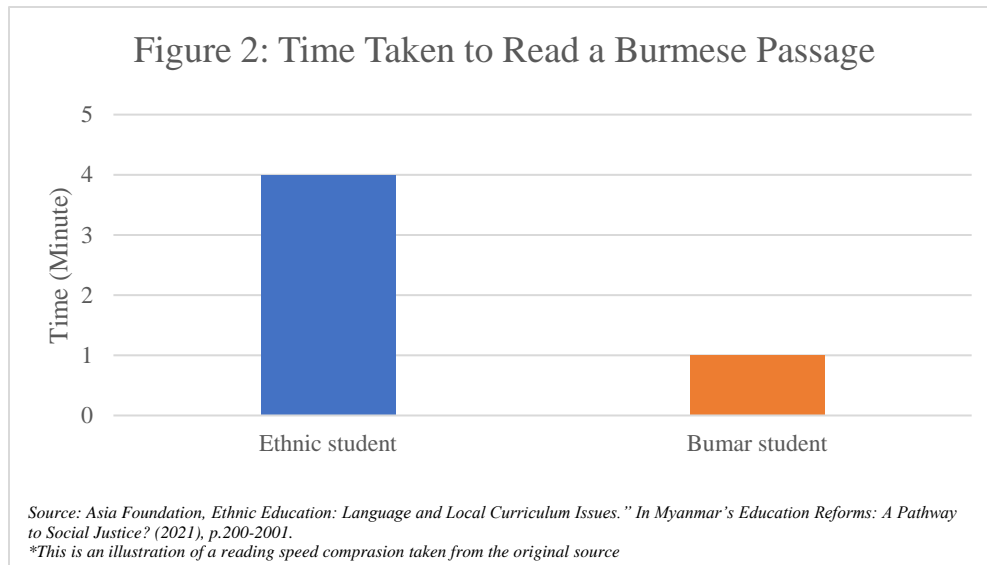
<sup>15</sup> "Second Chance for the Students: Matriculation Exam for Students who Lost Chance", *Myanmar International Television*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/second-chance-students-matriculation-exam-students-who-lost-chance>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>17</sup> Ashley South, Marie Lall, "Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-based Teaching in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, February, 2016, [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Policy-Brief\\_Schooling-and-Conflict-Ethnic-Education-and-Mother-Tongue-Based-Teaching-in-Myanmar\\_ENG.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Policy-Brief_Schooling-and-Conflict-Ethnic-Education-and-Mother-Tongue-Based-Teaching-in-Myanmar_ENG.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Marie Lall, "Ethnic Education: Language and Local Curriculum Issues." In *Myanmar's Education Reforms: A Pathway to Social Justice?*, (UCL Press, 2021), 197–237. UCL Press, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv13xprwx.12>

require 4-5 minutes to read the text passage while a Burma student would need only 1 minute (Figure 2). Among them, 15% could not read Burmese, while 18% could not read the whole passage.<sup>19</sup> The lack of educational materials in ethnic languages is a factor that leads to students dropping out of school at an early age, which contributes to the declining number of higher education enrollments at the national level.



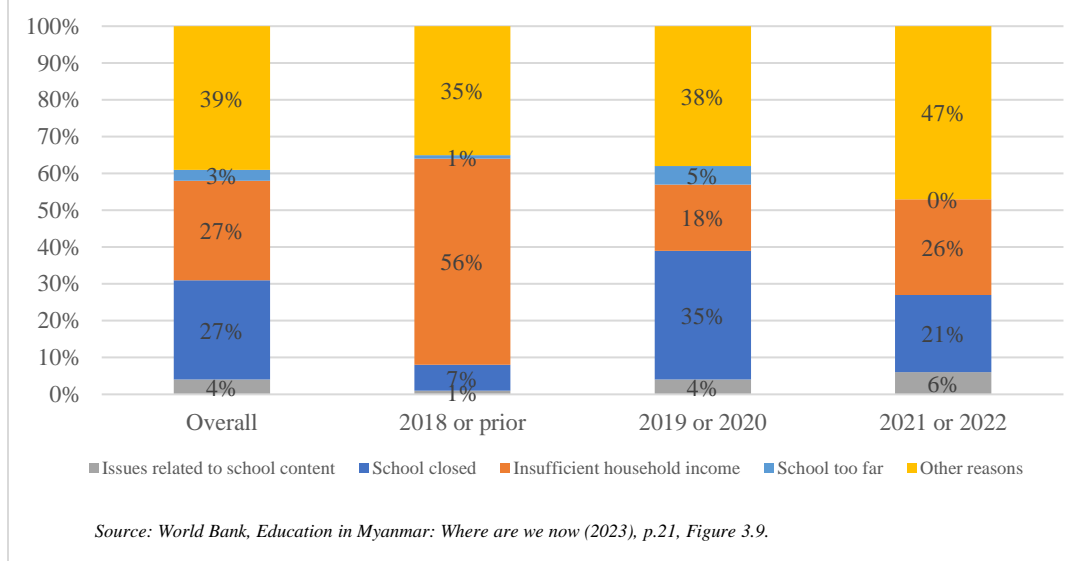
Finally, due to economic disparities, students faced different consequences from school closures and economic shocks. Students in rural areas with limited financial resources are less likely to enroll in school than those with higher family incomes in urban areas.<sup>20</sup> The world has been suffering from the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020. As other countries were slowly recovering, Myanmar experienced further challenges that led to the continuation of the financial crisis and school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military incident. According to a survey conducted by the World Bank, financial hardship and school closure were the two main identified reasons for the surge in school dropout rates from 2019-2022 (Figure 3).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Education in Myanmar: Where are we now", World Bank, May, 2023, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/716418bac40878ce262f57dfbd4eca05-0070012023/original/State-of-Education-in-Myanmar-July-2023.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Figure 3: Reasons for dropping out of school across the years (6–17-year-old children)



## Policy Recommendations

Higher education is essential for Myanmar's youth. However, the sector has experienced a downward trend in enrollment since the 2021 military incident. Therefore, higher education for the youth of Myanmar must be restored and resumed in any possible method. The following are some recommendations to alleviate Myanmar's declining higher education enrollment.

1. It is imperative to restore stability in the country. When the country is stable, it could create a safe learning environment, allowing them to regain their confidence and security in pursuing education, which was disturbed by the uncertainty of the conflict.

As such, stability restoration in Myanmar could be approached through inclusive dialogues to reach ceasefire agreements. There must be talks between all conflicted and involved parties, namely, but not limited to, the State Administration Council, the National Unity Government, and Ethnic Armed Organizations and external stakeholders, namely the ASEAN, ASEAN Special Envoys, and the United Nations. Those round table discussions could open windows of opportunities, even if they are the slightest, for stability and peace restoration in the country.

2. Given that up to 40-60% of the population are ethnic groups and speak their native languages,<sup>22</sup> The sole use of Burmese for the national education framework poses a significant language barrier to ethnic minority students, leading to a high dropout rate. For that reason, Myanmar should prioritize promoting an inclusive education system to facilitate ethnic students' staying in school and pursuing higher education.

Myanmar could consider the following methods. The government should introduce Mother-tongue-based teaching, which would determine the classroom language based on the most spoken local tongue. Therefore, the schooling system would include Burmese and the local ethnic native languages based on the region. Moreover, to facilitate an inclusive learning system, the curriculum and learning materials should be available in both Burmese and the local language, based on the region. The policy delivery requires cooperation between the state and regional governments and other stakeholders, such as ethnic organizations and development partners, to create and implement an inclusive education sector policy.

3. With limited access to public services, many students living in poor conditions and conflict zones do not have the privilege of going to school because they prioritize their survival and safety. Therefore, action must be taken to ensure that all levels of education, especially higher education, are easily and safely accessible. Myanmar should consider the following methods.

According to the findings above, vulnerable students struggle to access higher education in public or private universities. Consequently, to encourage students to pursue higher education, the government could consider assisting the students with scholarship opportunities, financial aid, or safety nets as a form of basic necessity security. That way, their financial burden could be alleviated. Additionally, youth could consider dropping out of school due to the hardship of traveling to school for security purposes if they live in rural or conflict areas with infrastructural challenges, such as damaged roads from armed clashes. Therefore, state and non-state actors, such as NGOs, private firms, EAOs, and related stakeholders, have important

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<sup>22</sup> “A Brief Overview of the Ethnic Minorities of Burma”, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, February 8, 2021, <https://www.hart-uk.org/a-brief-overview-of-the-ethnic-minorities-of-burma/#:~:text=Throughout%20its%20long%20history%2C%20the,inhabit%20half%20the%20land%20area.>



roles in providing support to the disadvantaged through programs or initiatives such as building schools or study centers in rural areas or repairing or paving new and safe roads to the nearest school for the youth.

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