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# INSTITUTIONALIZED INEQUALITIES

in Higher Education

## IN KACHIN STATE

NHKUM LA SAN AWNG

Naushawng Development Institute

NAUSHAWNG DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE



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## 1. Introduction

As part of its long-term development agenda, the government of Myanmar has introduced a number of education reforms through the National Education Strategic Plan (NSEP) 2016-2021, which was launched in Nay Pyi Taw in 2017. It aims to improve access to education of international standard quality and do away with rote learning. It focuses on inspiring students through a more engaging curriculum, equipping graduates with the skills to meet the demands of the labour market and creating life-long learning among the people of Myanmar.

While education reforms are underway, the issues of poor quality, underdeveloped infrastructure, weak institutions, human resource shortages and discriminations based on ethnic origin, religion, gender, language and physical attributes remain critical challenges to advancing the sector.

This study aims to enrich the existing body of literature that discuss the quality of tertiary education services and government policies on higher education institutions in Myanmar. The objective is to shed light on the human resource management in higher education institutions at sub-national and local levels, using Kachin State as a case. It seeks to deepen the understanding of HEI employees' experiences in recruitment, transfers, promotions, staff development programmes and administration of HEIs. It also explores how those experiences and practices are affected by government policies and by informal practices of the respective institutions. The research also documents various forms of inequality among employees of higher education institutions in Kachin State during the period of military rule from 1988 to the transition period under quasi-civilian rule until 2016. The study examines the experiences of various HEI employees, ranging from academics and faculty members to administrative staff. It seeks to understand the causes and effects of inequality as well as the effectiveness of programmes and interventions addressing inequalities among HEI employees.

## 2. Research Background and Objectives

The Naushawng Development Institute (NDI) is an independent and non-profit educational organization founded by Kachin scholars who are committed to strengthening democratic transition and community resilience in the northern Myanmar. Since its inception in 2009, NDI has undertaken capacity-building programmes for young community leaders and provided quality educational services, which are key to cultivating and strengthening vibrant civil society participation and community resilience in Kachin State.

NDI's motivation for this research stemmed from the need to document the experiences of employment practices in higher education institutions (HEI) and to contribute to the advancement of the discourse on and the policy agenda for hitherto structural reforms in the education sector, which have been pursued together with democratic transition, social mobility enhancement and peace-building efforts in Myanmar.

For nearly five decades, Myanmar's education sector was under military control. Therefore, policies related to the development of academic curricula, teaching methods, budget and human resource management were under military command. As a result, the education sector deteriorated, and despite a number of reforms, it is still marred by issues of poor quality, underdeveloped infrastructure, weak institutions, and discriminations based on ethnic origin, religion, gender, language and physical attributes.

### 2.1 Research objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To conduct evidence-based research documenting the various experiences of employees of higher education institutions in relation to the Ministry of Education's human resource management (HRM) policies and practices in Kachin State;
2. To study opportunities and challenges experienced by employees of higher education institutions in Kachin State;

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3. To explore the causes and effects of inequalities among employees of the higher education sector in Kachin State.

### **2.2 Research methodology**

Taking the complexities and sensitivities as well as unfamiliarity with research practices in the newly opening Myanmar into consideration, this study employed a qualitative method and used both primary and secondary data in its analysis. Primary data were generated through qualitative, in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key informants and employees at different types of HEIs. In-depth interviews were conducted with those who are working at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kachin State, in particular, Computer University, Myitkyina Education Collage, Government Technology Institute, Government Technology University, Mohnyin University, Nursing and Midwifery Training School, Myitkyina, and Myitkyina University. Interview respondents numbered 22 from Myitkyina, 15 from Bhamo, 10 from Mohnyin and 5 from Putao. Secondary sources included publications, reports, laws, policies, journals, newspapers, articles, and other relevant studies and statistics about various educational issues. The study also employed a non-probability sampling technique using a combination of purposive, snowball and quota sampling to generate reliable information and representative data.

### **2.3 Scope and limitation of the study**

The study focused on personnel management in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Kachin State for the period 1988 – 2015. Field research was conducted in all four major towns of Kachin State – Myitkyina, Bhamo, Mohnyin and Putao – where higher education institutions are located. A total of 52 current and former employees of HEIs were interviewed. Interviewees ranged in age from 27 to 64 years old; 69% are female and 31% male. Ethnically, 50% are Burmese, 40% Kachin, 6% Shan, 2% Rakhine and 2% Shan-Ni. This study was conducted over a five-month period, from June to October 2017.

### 3. Contextual Background of the Higher Education Sector

#### 3.1 Higher education sector before military rule

During the royal era in the territories currently known as Myanmar, education was largely religious and concerned moral matters. It was provided through monasteries and was primarily for boys. 'Formal schooling' and secularization of basic education, which extended learning opportunities to girls, emerged during the British colonial administration (James, 2005, p.78). No higher education institutions were recorded in Burma until the British took full control of Burma in 1885 (James, 2005, p.96). As an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta in former British India, the first tertiary education institution, Rangoon College, was set up between 1885 and 1886 (James, 2005). On the recommendation from the Calcutta University Commission, Rangoon College was re-established as the University of Rangoon in 1920 by merging with another institute, Judson College; the new university had its own faculties, examinations, libraries and Bachelor's degree programs on subjects such as science and law (James, 2005, p.99).

Although only the elites of the day in Burma attended the University, it was nonetheless at the center of the anti-colonial movement and produced student activists like U Nu and Aung San, who later became national leaders during the independence struggle. Other institutions such as Mandalay College, Teachers' Training College, Medical College and Agriculture College were opened in Yangon and Mandalay in the 1920s and 1930s and placed under the management of the University of Rangoon (Yin Aung, 1999).

In the years after independence in 1948, more colleges were opened in Moulmein, Kyaukphyu, Yankin, Hteedan, Magwe and Bassein. These were combined to create a separate Defense Services Academy in 1954 under the guidance of the senate of Rangoon University. The University of Rangoon also introduced more departments, such as geography in 1948; anthropology in 1950; commerce, oriental history, zoology and botany in 1955; and psychology in 1956 to accommodate the growing human resource needs of the newly independent country (James, 2005, p.99). With these expansions, the University of Rangoon became one of the most prestigious universities in Southeast Asia and Asia, attracting students from all over the region (Khin Maung Kyi et al.,



2000). However, this 'golden' period ended in 1962 when the military, led by General Ne Win, staged a coup and put the education sector under military command for manipulation. At that time, there was no higher educational institution in Kachin State.

### **3.2 Higher education policies and their impact during military rule**

When the Revolutionary Council led by General Ne Win came to power in 1962, it proclaimed its political agenda of "The Burmese Way to Socialism" and nationalized all schools, including mission schools and private schools operated by Christian, Chinese and Indian communities (Thein, 2000). By exception, some Buddhist monastic schools continued to function in rural areas (James, 2005, p.102). The University Education Law of 1964 was also enacted, revoking students' choice of study and determining their subject choices according to their high school matriculation examination scores (Zobrist et al., 2013, p.9). Policies of the time also sought to regulate student intake for certain courses of study, such as medicine, by encouraging those of Burmese ethnicity and restricting students of Chinese origin (Zobrist et al., 2013).

The junta went further by enacting the Basic Education Law of 1973, the Technical and Vocational Education Law of 1973, and the University Education Law of 1973, which complicated the management of higher education in Myanmar by geographically dividing the management into Lower and Upper Myanmar. Since then, HEIs have been managed and coordinated accordingly. In addition, the University Education Law of 1973, which was amended in 1998, also stated that all ministries should cultivate individuals to be part of the nation building process and therefore should provide relevant studies in higher education institutions.

As of March 2003, there were some 153 higher education institutions in Myanmar affiliated with 13 ministries, of which, 62 HEIs were under the management of the Ministry of Education and 89 under other ministries, which include the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas, National Races and Development Affairs; the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation; the Ministry of Forestry; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Culture; and, the Ministry of Livestock Breeding and Fisheries (James, 2005, pp.101-102). The Ministry of Science and Technology administers 55 technological universities. The Ministry

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of Defense has 5 tertiary education institutions, including the Defense Services Academy, the Defense Services Institute of Medicine and the Defense Services Institute of Engineering (Thein, 2007, p.7).

Many of these universities' affiliates and branches were opened by the junta in different regions, including Kachin State, between 1962 and 2010, producing a number of graduates each year. However, scholars like Thein Lwin of the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) noted that these figures are "just quantity rather than quality" (Thein, 2007, p.7), because teaching and assessment at these HEIs are mainly based on rote-learning, memorization, and they appear not very supportive of quality teaching and learning, critical thinking, or practical knowledge transfer essential for the students' career prospects. The development of the textbooks used by these HEIs is centralized. According to Thein Lwin's critique, the contents of these textbooks are not inclusive and do not represent diverse cultures and religions, but rather are dominated by one religion, one culture, one set of values – those of the majority Burman ethnic group. The education at these HEIs neither prepares students for employability nor meets the needs of local communities. Moreover, the scarcity of resources at these HEIs engenders an extremely low quality of teaching and incapacity for practical and research exercises. For the ministries' HEIs, planning, budgeting and decision making are highly centralized, and there is little room for HEIs to be accountable, responsive and flexible to their student bodies (Zobrist et al., 2013).

The military dictatorship distorted the merit-based system of the civil service in the country by relying on patronage power relationships among civil servants. To make matters worse, the military government closed down universities for several years after students participated in the 1988 uprising and 1996 protests. Overall, the education system is characterized by outdated pedagogy, poor quality and insufficient geographic coverage, with rural and border areas like Kachin State being poorly served (Zobrist et al., 2013, p.5).

### 3.3 Higher education reforms since the 2010 political transition

After the beginnings of political transition from the military regime in 2010, the government initiated a series of higher education reforms in Myanmar. As a major development effort, the Ministry of Education undertook a three-and-a-half-year Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) between 2012 and 2014, which resulted in a policy road map called the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) for sector-wide reform to be implemented during a five-year period from 2016 to 2021. To complement the CESR and NESP, the National Education Law (NEL) was adopted by the parliament in 2014. In the NESP, the government admitted that the problems of “the traditional centralized model of governance” in higher education sector created a need for “a more corporative model that focuses on performance, accountability and autonomy” of HEIs in terms of curriculum development, research and management (The Ministry of Education, 2016). The NESP further stresses the government’s objective of strengthening the governance of HEIs by allowing universities to have their own charters and councils, while also highlighting the need to establish a higher education quality assurance agency to lead the improvement of quality and assessment standards at all HEIs (The Ministry of Education, 2016). With its aim of reforming an outdated education system, the NEL also spelled out some changes in governance, including the formation of the National Education Commission, which, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, would set guidelines and policies on curriculum, quality assurance and budgeting (National Education Law No. 41, 2014).

While some reforms were underway, from the beginning of the NEL’s drafting process, students, teachers and CSOs accused the government of not sufficiently consulting with them and of not recognizing the formation of teacher and student unions (Aung, 2014). Therefore, student unions, led by the Action Committee for Democratic Education (ACDE), protested against the NEL and demanded certain amendments to NEL bills from January to March 2015. Student unions organized mass demonstrations in Yangon and other parts of Myanmar, but unfortunately on March 10, 2015, the government cracked down on the demonstrations and more than one hundred students were imprisoned. Criticism over the NEL also led to a series of four-party dialogues between the government, parliamentarians, student unions (Action Committee for Democratic Education (ACDE)) and educational CSOs such as

the National Network for Education Reform (NNER). Three years later, critics still claim that universities lack autonomy, implying a delay in the improvement of HEIs.

### 4. Governance of HEIs in Kachin State

#### 4.1 Autonomy of HEIs is yet to come

Today the problem of centralization in the higher education sector is widely accepted as fact among political decision makers and educators in Myanmar. Moreover, the need to provide more autonomy to HEIs in terms of curriculum development, research and management are recognized and prescribed in the recently enacted laws and policies, including the National Education Law 2014 and the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016-2021. The country has less than two years left to implement the 2016-2021 NESP, and these research findings suggest the reality on the ground is far from achieving the goals outlined in the NESP. Respondents of this research note that the reform agenda has yet to be materialized on the ground, and the rhetoric of autonomy is nowhere to be found in HEIs. According to them, the most important decisions for HEIs across the country, such as planning, budgeting, staff recruitment and curriculum development, are still centralized, leaving minimal room for the universities to address their pressing needs.

As of 2018, HEIs in Kachin State are still neither able to develop their own curricula nor recruit their own staff.

*One teaching staff said, "In this school, we don't make exam questions by ourselves, and we don't hire staff by ourselves. All comes from above".*

Her remark was reinforced by the Department of Higher Education's (DHE) vacancy announcement for a low-level clerk at that HEI in late 2018, in which interviews and exams for the candidates were to be conducted in Nay Pyi Taw, reflecting the HEI's lack of authority to recruit based on its needs. All permanent administrative and academic staff at all HEIs in Kachin State are recruited, assigned and promoted directly by Nay Pyi Taw. Only temporary staff, such as daily workers for cleaning and office assistants, can be employed directly by individual HEIs after the approval of the number of positions and the budget by the DHE.

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Similarly, HEIs have no clear role and very limited administrative authority even to enforce academic regulations at their institution.

*“For example, if we want to expel a student; we have to wait for the order. It is not effective, waiting for every detail of central administrative instructions. We are simply waiting for autonomy to be granted so that we can run our school more effectively,” said one administrative staff member of a higher education institute.*

Until today, the DHE in Naypyitaw takes charge of the admission process of students in all HEIs across the country. In 2018, a new self-administration university admission procedure was introduced in eleven universities in Yangon and Mandalay as a pilot project, but so far, no HEI in Kachin State has been given such opportunities (Ei Shwe Phyu, 2018).

Following the amendment of the national education law in 2015, the government realized that having university charters and councils should be part of the NESP 2016-2021. According to U Aung Aung Min, the deputy-director general of the DHE, many universities now have charters, while some are still in the making (Ei Shwe Phyu, 2018). Many staff, including senior officials interviewed for this study, were not aware of any form of charter or council in their HEIs. This might be because HEIs in Kachin State are far behind in forming those charters and council and that most reforms and pilot projects are usually undertaken in Yangon and Mandalay. Nevertheless, critics claim that the existing bureaucracy is too top down, ineffectual, and lacking in understanding of individual HEI needs. The biggest problem of centralization, according to the interviewees for this study, is civil servants’ lack of motivation, commitment and creativity regarding development of their respective institutions. This is because they are more accountable to senior officials in the central government than to the students and HEIs they are supposed to serve. Critics warn that the current reform process is too slow and undertaken by a distant central government while some of the interviewees also opined that granting more autonomy or reforming the institutions into public-private partnerships would induce greater effectiveness of HEIs than the current centralized system does.

## 4.2 Controversial recruitment process and tests

Like any other ministry, most employees at HEIs are recruited and employed by the central government. The most ironic part of Myanmar's old practice of civil servant recruitment is perhaps that the written exam and interview questions focus on indoctrination of the old regime rather than assessing candidates' qualifications based on the job's terms of reference. For example, applicants must sit written exams, which examine general knowledge, English language proficiency, and knowledge of relevant subjects. The general knowledge questions, which seem to be one of the most important elements of the recruitment process, assess familiarities with policies, activities and political figures of the government. An ethnic woman who now works as a teaching staff at Mohnyin University said she failed the recruitment exams twice despite being one of the very few local persons holding a PhD in her profession in the region. She reasoned that her failure was due to the general knowledge questions, which assessed applicants' knowledge of the government's propaganda mechanisms.

*"They usually asked questions like how many roads and bridges are built by the government, or how long is a particular road or bridge? Where is it built? Who opened the ceremony? What message was included in his or her opening speech? These general knowledge questions reflect nothing of my profession, and who would want to study those depressing speeches," she recalled.*

Many other respondents also criticized the assessment made by the DHE and lamented its ambiguous and controversial intent, which in their view widens room for selection bias leading to appointment of professionally inappropriate individuals for the public service.

According to respondents of this study, these centralized recruitment practices remain very much the same despite some recent reforms. A sample DHE's guideline for recruiting an assistant lecturer and a demonstrator issued in 2017 showed that the selection criteria was based on 40% of competency in the subject field, and 60% on other criteria such as general knowledge, motivation

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and critical thinking skills. The selection criteria show the emphasis of the government on personal attitudes and views rather than a candidate's professional credentials in the subject he or she would teach. In a sample written test on general knowledge dated July 22, 2017, five questions asked candidates' awareness and views on senior incumbents' speeches, including that of State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Htin Kyaw and Vice President U Myint Swe, who stated their reform agenda on environmental protection and illicit drug trafficking prevention. All five questions were irrelevant to the academic subject and teaching experiences of the candidate. Moreover, how a prospective HEI employee's motivation and critical thinking skills are assessed is unknown or ambiguous at best. This research could not clarify who was involved in the formation of these questionnaires and who verified and endorsed their use. These findings demonstrate that the old mindset and practices of emphasizing personal attitudes and views, rather than professional competence, remain today.

Another ambiguous practice that seems to be important in the recruitment process is adherence to a dress code and having good manners in front of the interviewers. According to interviewees, the element of having appropriate dress and good manner are still an important consideration in today's HEIs recruitment process.

*One participant said, "I think they don't just look at your qualifications, but also your attitudes and behaviors, whether they are suitable to be a teacher or not. But no one really knows what the appropriate standards are, although Myanmar traditional dress is generally acceptable".*

For most academics, having a proper dress code is not the problem, but such a dress code should be clear and should not outweigh other more important measures such as academic qualifications.

Generally, promotions are based on three years of service, while holders of a Bachelor's degree can be promoted to Assistant Lecturer if years of service and other requirements are fulfilled. Master's degree holders can advance to a lecturer position, while PhD holders can become professors or beyond. There are, however, variations across different academic disciplines in getting promotions. For example, holders of a Bachelor of Education degree can be

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promoted to an assistant lecturer position, whereas those having only a Bachelor of Arts degree are not eligible. This variation seems to trigger some HEI employees' questioning the rationale and fairness of the human resource management of the government.

*A teacher with a PhD degree said, "Policy is changing frequently. They promote only by looking at their service, when they have to give promotion. The rules and regulations are still controversial."*

While all the teachers in other universities are entitled to get promotions, tutors teaching minor subjects, such as English at Government Technical Universities (GTUs), are not able to move forward. This has created unequal conditions for employees at the GTUs.

One of the most controversial reforms, which caused multiple protests such as the Blue-Ribbon campaign, was the change to the promotion system. In the past, it took at least 7 years to be promoted from demonstrator to assistant lecturer. In 2015, the government changed this policy to 3 years, and promoted the 2012 cohort together with previously appointed employees without providing any compensation for the latter group. Such serious flaws in human resource management are due to the lack of a merit-based system and poor performance assessment mechanisms, which are extremely important to ensure the efficiency, effectiveness and over-all quality of services. In written policy and official procedures, staff appraisal forms known as "Wa Hpa"<sup>1</sup> (Staff Performance Appraisal) and "9 Platforms with 36 points" assess incumbent staff attitudes, character, performance and skills. These assessments are conducted by supervisors – usually a professor or head of faculty. However, in practice, there is no transparency about how staff capacity is assessed and recorded. Moreover, there are no clear guidelines on performance measurement and assessments. As a result, many employees interviewed for this study had no idea what "Wa Hpa" and "9 Platforms with 36 points" are, and most could not explain how these assessments were made. This lack of transparency in turn creates room for corruption or patronage relationships in which the assessor can overuse their authority to unduly favor particular individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> ဝန်ထမ်းအကဲဖြတ်မှတ်တမ်း



*One teacher said, “policy is different from practice. The whole country applies this policy but in the end it depends on your superior.”*

The professional development programmes for HEI civil servants are also viewed by many respondents as irrelevant or ineffective in supporting staff to improve their capacity. Many interviewees said they are uninterested or unwilling to attend the professional development trainings on offer because they think they are not helpful for their work. They think those trainings are just to impart government propaganda and to ensure that employees are accountable to the central government’s agenda.

*“Until last year, you need to finish Zee Pin Gyi Training to attend a Master’s Degree program. It’s like you need to shoot 15 bullets and hit at the target right several times to get marks. They measure in many different ways such as low regular, regular, outstanding, highly outstanding. Zee Pin Gyi training was revoked in 2016”.*

Zee Pin Gyi is a public service training known for imparting a military mindset and providing basic military training for civil servants at the Central Institute of the Civil Service in a town called Zee Pin Gyi near Pyin Oo Lwin in Mandalay Region (Irrawaddy, 2018). Other similarly irrelevant training programmes are compulsory for staff to secure further studies or promotions. Those NDI interviewed see an urgent need to review the current human resource management system of HEIs.

### **4.3 Inconsistent promotion policies**

Promotion for the HEI civil servants in Myanmar is mainly based on level of educational attainment and years of service. Other official requirements include completion of compulsory trainings, mandatory transfer to different locations, and performance appraisal by supervisors. Widespread criticism of promotion management in HEIs cites a lack of consistency, integrity, and effectiveness in HRM and service delivery.

Despite a plethora of policy changes in the Higher Education sector, critics point to their inconsistency and poor implementation. Most respondents feel that recent policy changes are causing a negative impact on their lives and are

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not contributing to improvement of the Higher education sector. One critique notes how the government changed the number of years of service required for a promotion without considering remedies for those who had served the Higher education sector for a long time. In the past, the promotion of staff in HEIs was mainly based on years of service. For example, to be promoted from tutor to assistance lecturer required seven years of service. However, the government changed this policy in 2016 so that now only 3 years of service is needed to get a promotion. As a result, in 2015 two batches of appointed civil servant staff from 2009 and 2012 were promoted together.

*“For the 2009 and 2012 promotion case, the 2009 appointed staff were promoted after seven years and the 2012 appointed staff after only 3 years. The 2009 appointed staff felt this was unfair because of the gap in years of service between them, and exploded in anger” said one lecturer.*

Another problem raised is in relation to the inconsistent policies of requiring exams for promotions. In the past, universities under the Ministry of Education did not require any exam for promotions, which were purely based on years of service. Meanwhile, technology and computer universities under the Ministry of Science and Technology require promotion exams in addition to years of service. All staff in the HEIs who commenced their service in 2015 or later are now required to sit exams for promotions. This caused an outpouring of negative sentiment among affected cohorts.

*One respondent said, “We are not afraid of exams. But we want a consistent and fair policy for all. For technology and computer universities, they have to sit promotion exams and some failed four times and some still are working as a demonstrator for sixteen years without promotion. So, the problem started from an inconsistent policy.”*

To make matters worse, many teachers reported not being promoted despite many years of service—even when promotion was only based on duration of service. One respondent said, “in the past, promotions would be automatically given after 3 years of services. But after I entered this career, promotion issues were not handled properly by top leaders although we are now in the 7th year of service. Applications for promotions were submitted, but no response received. So, there are tensions among employees in the higher education sector

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in the whole Myanmar. We don't know if top leaders are working or they don't want to promote people. Some people got transfers and some got both transfers and promotions. But I remain in the same place since I first entered this career. So, it is difficult for me to understand". Such cases seem to be common amongst many colleagues in English departments of technology universities in Kachin State and across the country who face unequal opportunities for promotions. For example, English is considered a minor subject in technology universities, and based on that, English teachers in those institutions will not be promoted beyond their current roles despite having the same education levels as those in other universities. This illustrates the odd policy of the Ministry of Education and the negative consequences to HEI employees being in the 'wrong' institutions.

In a rare event in July 2017, a 'Blue Ribbon Campaign' was launched among teachers from technology and computer universities across the country to protest against the unfair promotion policy of the Ministry of Education. Protesters felt the promotion policy was unfair, biased and inconsistent, and demanded that the ministry address their concerns (Ei Shwe Phyu and Kyaw Ko Ko, 2017). The campaign was carried out on the same day by lecturers and professors from technology universities in many parts of the country, including Yangon, Mandalay, Taunggyi, Patheingyi and Mawlamyine (Ei Shwe Phyu and Kyaw Ko Ko, 2017). In video footage and photos released on social media, teachers are seen sticking blue ribbons on the uniform of fellow teachers while others explained the reasons for their campaign to spectators. In Kachin State, even though the protest was not formally launched, staff from technology universities closely watched and shared the news of campaigns in lower Myanmar because they experienced the same unfortunate situation – they were left out of promotions while their peers with the same level of education at other higher education institutes were promoted into to higher positions.

The campaign was in response to the promotion policy change, which occurred after the integration of technology universities (TUs), government technological institutes (GTI) and the government technological colleges, which used to be under the Ministry of Science and Technology, into the Ministry of Education.

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*“In GTI and other schools, both B.E and Diploma degree holders can be promoted to assistant lecturer from tutor after three years. Three more years after that, you can become lecturer. However, in Technology University, only those with a B.E plus a Master’s degree can get promoted to an assistant lecturer position. Because of this policy difference, the Blue-Ribbon Campaign happened”, said one assistant lecturer.*

*“At first, we could get promoted after 2 years with a B.E degree, and that policy was practiced from 2009 to 2012, at the time of Minister U Taung. Later, under Minister U Win Myint, the promotion policy was changed to require a B.E with 10 years’ work. The criterion changed from 2 to 10 years! So, during the change, we were left without promotions. Now the promotion policy has changed again to B.E with 3 years. I have 8 years working experience and some friends with the same level of experience are still just tutors. Some got promoted to assistant lecturer with 3 years of work experience,” he added.*

He and many other teachers stressed that their wishes were nothing more than a fair and consistent policy for all staff working under the Ministry of Education.

The campaigners demanded that officials of the Ministry of Education respond to their calls and threatened to organize street demonstrations otherwise (Ei Shwe Phyu and Kyaw Ko Ko, 2017). The campaign ended successfully after the officials promised to equalize the promotion policies of technology universities with that of other HEIs. Now these policies are changing, and new promotion practices based on three years of service and exams are applied to most civil staff in the higher education sector. However, critics warn that policy changes are being increasingly hurried without sufficient consideration as to how new policies would harm certain cohorts, such as that of 2009. Others point out that new policies still lack meaningful impact on the situation on the ground. Many consider the credibility of promotion exams and the quality of their assessment still problematic.

#### 4.4 Transfer to remote areas as punishment or promotion

As a general rule, civil servants in Myanmar are required to serve in different locations. They can apply to work in a specific location of their choice after a year or two of service. This rule also applies to staff in the higher education sector. There are several reasons for transferring staff. The logic of the government is to disperse its employees across the country in order to make its service effective. For staff, they are transferred to another place as a promotion, punishment, or simply because they have remained in one place for a very long time. Usually Myanmar civil servants are transferred to remote areas for two reasons: promotion and punishment. A government official may get promoted if she or he agrees to serve in a school in a remote area such as Kachin State. In some cases, however, incumbent staff may be sent to remote areas as punishment for wrongdoing or under-performance. Sometimes employees are sent away because the university she is servicing is “over resourced”. Usually the principal of the university recommends to the Ministry of Education who should leave. Sometimes incumbents themselves can apply for a transfer with a list of places of their choice and the transfer will be eventually decided by the Ministry.

Generally, incumbents do not want to go to border regions, particularly small towns such as Mohnyin, Bhamo and Putao, due to their remoteness, their distance from family and poor living conditions. Therefore, concerns and questions for clear reasons as to why someone is being sent to a border area are often raised. Criticism and complaints over unclear criteria for the transfer process, be it for promotion or for punishment, are also reported.

*One respondent said, “there is unfairness in these transfer processes. In order to address unfairness, we need clear and basic criteria specifying what degrees are needed for appointments, how many years of services are needed for promotions, how promotions can be pursued on performance basis, and what degree of punishment will be given for particular kind of wrongdoing. If I’m being sent because of long years of service, they should send all those with similar circumstances. All should be treated equally, but sometimes some remain because of being older. What are the reasons for not sending some?”*

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Critics claim that the transfer policy and process has been marginalizing higher education institutions in remote regions like Kachin State. Firstly, unqualified staff are being sent out to remote schools as either promotion or punishment. Secondly, the short-term nature of transferred employees, who are later re-transferred to urban areas after only one or two years, has a negative impact on the human resource management of schools in remote areas. Local incumbent staff claim that those transferred or short-term peers lack commitment or a sense of belonging to their schools and are thus not interested in the overall development of the school. This problem usually arises when the transferred incumbents hold senior positions and come merely to complete their period of service, rather than to contribute to any long-term development of the schools. This has created worse conditions and contributed to the poor quality of education in schools in remote regions like Mohnyin, Bhamo and Putao.

### **4.5 Staff development and training opportunities**

Educational level and years of service are the basic criteria for HEI employees to get promoted. Therefore, pursuing further studies leads to higher positions and a higher salary. However, HEI staff are facing financial difficulties to pursue further studies, especially because not all graduate or postgraduate studies are available in Kachin State. HEI employees wanting to advance their education often have to go to Mandalay or Yangon. The problem, they said, is that the low salary they earn as civil servants make such pursuit unaffordable.

*“If you want a higher position than demonstrator, you are required to have a master’s degree or a PhD. When I was 28 years old, I considered going for a PhD. However, at that time my salary was only 48,000 Kyat per month and that made it impossible to study for a PhD for four years in Yangon.” said one assistant lecturer.*

Regardless of rank, the salary of HEI employees is low. Therefore, most people who want to pursue a master’s degrees or a PhD need financial support from family or other sources. Because of these financial difficulties, most interviewees believe every state should have universities that offer education at least to a Master’s degree level so that teachers do not have to travel to other regions to advance their education. They believe this would reduce the costs of pursuing further studies significantly.

Another challenge to pursuing graduate studies is the poor academic resources and supervision for graduate students working on their thesis in remote areas. For instance, libraries at HEIs in those areas are poorly equipped. Modern technology such as an e-library and the internet are still not available in most HEIs in Kachin State, demonstrating students' lack of access to electronic academic materials, including peer-reviewed articles. Because of the distance, supervision services for thesis students is also weak – putting students in remote areas in a more disadvantaged position, while teachers are busy with other teaching responsibilities. Some teachers even complain that they are overwhelmed with their workload, teaching responsibilities and extra-curricular activities, such as sports events and administrative tasks such as gate and phone duties. Because HEIs in remote areas usually have insufficient human resources, interviewees said these staff usually overwork and their overtime comes without any compensation.

In recent years, especially since former President U Thein Sein's administration, opportunities to pursue further studies abroad have been increasing. Scholarships for these studies can be obtained either through government arrangement or independently through direct individual application to programmes offered at institutions in Russia, Germany and Japan. Those who directly apply and secure scholarships from foreign institutes need to then apply for permission from the Myanmar government to study abroad. All government-arranged scholarships are distributed across HEIs in different states and divisions by the Ministry of Planning. In order to secure a scholarship, applicants have to submit forms together with recommendations from department heads or principals in their respective college or university and have to pass internal interviews. However, there are reports of irregularities, bias and weak transparency in the selection process.

*An ethnic lecturer at the Myitkyina Education College shared that, "according to government policy, all are equal, but there are people who are close to the high ranking officials and they are getting greater advantage."*

Because of all these irregularities, this research indicated that there is an urgent need for a review of the existing system of human resource management and student development in the higher education sector.

## 4.6 Working conditions, welfare and benefits

There has been a noticeable improvement in the infrastructure development of HEIs in Kachin State after the transition from the military to quasi-democratic government. Construction of new buildings has been taking place in almost all HEIs in the state. More buildings could mean more convenient classrooms for students, and offices and housing for staff in HEIs. However, the new development has yet to meet the needs of HEIs. There are also mixed perceptions among civil servants over their living conditions. Although many teaching staff expressed their satisfaction with the housing provided, many remain on a waiting list for housing.

*“When I arrived in Bhamo, there was not enough housing for staff, so I had to live in a classroom. For example, if there are one hundred staff, there is housing for fifty staff only. So, the rest have to rent outside,” said one administrative staff member of a higher education institute.*

Many staff also complain that the income of civil servants makes them one of the poorest classes in Myanmar society. They said they cannot afford to rent a house or an apartment; therefore, they are staying with friends or family. Amid the rising inflation, even high ranking incumbent staff usually cannot afford a house until they reach retirement age, as there are no appropriate increases or adjustments to their salary. In the past, the military government provided in-kind benefits, such as rice. The government occasionally also provided SIM cards and residential land to civil servants through a lottery system. At that time, telecommunication access was very limited and monopolized by the state-owned enterprise Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), which charged between 200 to 300US\$ for a SIM card in the market.

*One respondent said, “those teachers who won the lucky draw would sell the mobile SIM cards and then buy motorbikes and houses with the money”.*

These initiatives were random and unsystematic, and although they may have pleased some individuals, they do not address the hardship of civil servants' living conditions in the country. Today there are no such arrangements. Recent



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progress in the reform of HEIs has also induced an increase in salaries. Yet, salary levels are still ineffective in relieving the hardship of HEI employees, according to some interviewees. All respondents spoke of their financial difficulties and poor living conditions.

*“The government salary is not much, barely enough for subsistence, but not for clothing and meeting other needs. Also, for healthcare and child raising, of course, you need to earn more outside. Because of policy, it affects our social status, community and living standards,” one respondent said, adding that, “other people get a house or an apartment. But I get nothing except my salary, even though I have been working for 34 years now. I have to pay rent for this house.” Another teacher shared her experience: “My salary is 250,000 Kyat per month. There is no other benefit for teaching staff. They once mentioned providing housing, but we haven’t received any yet.”*

Because of the poor income and low pay scales, staff complain of no improvement in their living conditions despite changes in their ranks at HEIs. The situation has pushed many civil servants to depend on their family, or on spouses if married. Many nevertheless mentioned that they would continue their career until they get their pension, for social status, rather than the material or monetary benefits they gain as HEI employees.

*“I am proud to be a teacher. So, I entered this teaching profession. I don’t have to worry much about living. Or with the kind of salary I earn from teaching, even if I do not work it is ok because my husband supports me and my family for everything”, said an associate professor at Mohnyin University. However, not all staff have good support from their family and spouses. The same respondent added, “one of my friends, she is married and did not receive a government housing. She was therefore very uncomfortable and decided to leave the job to settle her debt”.*

The issue of poor salary is one of the factors behind the poor teaching quality in HEIs and the unresolved issue of HEI academic staff offering illegal outside tuition for additional income.

*“The salary is not enough for living, especially for married incumbents. That is why teachers here make their living by teaching tuition in the morning and evening outside office hours,” said one interviewee.*

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Due to all of these unfortunate conditions, teachers complain that HEIs are facing problems of insufficient human resources and therefore often have to work overtime and take on extra duties such as security duties, reception, and organizing some events.

*“Teachers have to share the daytime gate duties between 6 AM in the morning and 6 PM in the afternoon. After 2011, some universities stopped requiring these duties, but some continue doing them”, said one respondent.*

Last but not least, one of the issues many staff have concerns about is the hierarchical relationship between senior and junior staff in HEIs.

*“The culture of employees in the education sector in Myanmar is that we have to please superior officials such as heads of departments. Junior staff have to do cleaning, make tea and cook rice for seniors. These are not included in the duties, but we have to do them in order to have a smooth relationship with supervisors,” said a demonstrator.*

However, respondents also noted that all these depend on individual leadership and the working style of supervisors. The variation in experiences is reflected by some other interviewees who experienced both good and poor relationships with their supervisors or department heads. Nevertheless, they express the importance and need for changing the mindset and the management culture in HEIs.

### **4.7 Marginal effects on improvement in the quality of education**

Myanmar is now in the fourth year of its National Education Strategic Plan 2016-2021, meaning a presumably major education sector reform is underway across the country. As such, understanding what the reform actually looks like on the ground is vitally important to measure its effectiveness and to address any shortcomings. Our findings suggest that the reform has not yet taken root in practice, at least in Kachin State. Although physical infrastructure development, such as the erection of new buildings, is obvious in most HEIs in Kachin State, the functional and internal development in terms of academic and

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administrative management remains almost the same as before. Inside the buildings, teaching facilities such as libraries and laboratory equipment are still inadequate, according to interviews.

Training for teachers of different disciplines is not yet adequate to meet the challenges of modern education, and therefore, teachers remain incompetent and poorly equipped to effectively facilitate learning in the classrooms.

*“During our university age, we did not have practical sessions that much because of insufficient resources. So, we were not good at practical work. After becoming lecturers, we did not get any training and guidelines. Sometimes we even have to teach without a textbook so we cannot work effectively,” an assistant lecturer explained.*

In some HEIs, poor human resources have forced teachers to deal with classrooms that they are not trained for, indicating the competency and quality of teaching as striking problems.

*As one lecturer pointed out that, “when one of the teachers resigned and handed over her job, we had to take over all the subjects she had taught and carry on the teaching without proper training. I cannot remember what I taught because there were so many subjects.”*

As discussed earlier, teachers are sometimes required to do many other extra-curricular activities, which diverts their focus away from academic affairs. One of the main challenges yet to be resolved is the practice of rote learning, memorization and monologue teaching, which is still widespread across HEIs, despite the encouragement of discussion and dialogue in the classes outlined in new policy. The problems lie in the hands of both teachers and students, as the latter are not familiar with learning by means of discussion or dialogue in classes, and the former are not well trained for such interactive teaching methods, according to interviews. Another challenge is that inadequate salaries have forced teachers to teach tuition to students outside school hours. This situation creates extremely ineffective teaching at universities because teachers do not have the motivation to teach at school and they would prefer to teach off-duty tuition to generate extra income.

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Additionally, in the respondents' view universities and colleges in Kachin State conduct less research and hold fewer seminars and conferences, which are important for both academics and students to generate new knowledge and apply learning to real world contexts. Similarly, collaboration and networking among and between HEIs and the private sector are still limited as there is no clear policy for how HEIs can cooperate with other institutions. For instance, government technology colleges have neither resource for practical work nor links to partner with potentially resourceful companies. Therefore, graduates cannot find employment opportunities and lack competent skills after graduation.

Moreover, the very high ratio of students to teachers remains a big problem and is the cause of poor supervision and lack of interactive learning in class. Frequent changes of teachers, who are transferred from one place to another for short-term postings in order to fulfil the government policy to get promoted, also have negative impacts on human resource management and quality assurance in the higher education sector. The government policy requires approximately only one year of service for new postings, and inexperienced teachers usually come to remote HEIs to get experience to be promoted to bigger universities in central Myanmar, such as Mandalay University and Yangon University, where resource allocation is already concentrated by the government. All these problems of HEIs remain pressing in Kachin State, putting the education standards of the state among the worst in Myanmar, and in the world.

### **4.8 Routine bias, corruption and personal favors**

Similar to other sectors in the government, partiality, corruption and personal favors have plagued HEIs for decades. Giving favors to someone who is close or who has brought presents is common practice, and it has even become a culture, according to interviewees. Having personal connections seems to be a must to get promoted or favored by superior officials. Several mentioned failing the recruitment exams several times due to not bribing or not trying to please relevant senior officials. A daily worker in a government technological college in Kachin State explains how she got the position through a connection with an existing staff member who lives next door.

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*“When I applied for the part-time position there were three applicants, but I got the job. I asked HR why I got the job, they told me that the application forms of the other two were not presented to the main office because someone told the staff not to,” she said, without elaborating who that someone was.*

Nowadays many teachers want to teach first-year students because they can gain bribes from students who approach them to transfer to other universities.

The incentives for teaching first year students are so substantial that some departments in some HEIs organise a lucky draw to decide who can teach the first-year students and who will do office work. The practice of giving presents to teachers by students is considered by teachers as a culture rather than bribery or corruption. This study could not investigate to what extent corruption impacts HEIs, as most interviewees were reluctant to provide evidence-based information on the issue.

*“Because a poor relationship with superior officers affects everybody, people don’t raise the issue,” said a clerk in an HEI in Kachin State.*

### **4.9 Daily workers or part-time staff in HEIs**

Since late 2015, the government has delegated some authority to HEIs and allowed them to employ part-time administrative staff, such as cleaners, clerks and office assistants, based on their needs. This has relieved the burdens of overtime and extra-curricular work. However, employing part-time or daily workers has also raised other concerns, as they work for the government HEIs equally as other permanent civil servant colleagues, but receive different welfare and benefits. Some part-time workers become permanent civil servants after a period of time, but for some, their status remains unchanged regardless of how many years they work.

*“Some staff who started working when the school opened have already become permanent employees. They only applied once, and they got permanent positions. Some departments, staff only need to wait about six months to get a permanent position. But this department takes so long. I have been working here for two years now and I am still not able to get a*

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*permanent position. You see, those gardeners have already been here for 3 years, but they are still temporary laborers. I feel depressed and wonder why this department takes so long to change," said a daily worker in a Kachin State HEI.*

Some daily workers feel that they are in a lower class compared to their colleagues who are working in the same office in HEIs. In Myanmar, pensions and welfare are not adequate, but they mean something valuable to daily workers, considering that basic salaries for all staff are insufficient even for subsistence. Given the fact that many HEIs have pressing needs for human resources and there is a relatively high rate of unemployment among university graduates in the region, employing daily workers could somewhat alleviate human resource shortages while also creating job opportunities for the community. However, the issue raised by daily workers is worth discussion. In addition to payment and the nature of the work, the role and career prospects of those part-time workers in HEIs should be more clearly set and made transparent.

## 5. Experience of Inequalities in Kachin State HEIs

### 5.1 Regional disparities

In general, there is an assumption that the centralization efforts of successive Myanmar governments have concentrated resources in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay, and the development in ethnic regions has been left behind. Yangon and Mandalay serve as centers of education where well-off families across the country send their children for education. Looking back, there was no HEI in Kachin State until the 1960s, when the University of Rangoon and Mandalay University were reputed as two of the most prestigious universities in Asia. Only from the 1970s onwards were HEIs established in ethnic regions under the centralized management of two departments of higher education (one for Lower Myanmar and one for Upper Myanmar). HEIs in Kachin State were placed under the management of the DHE Upper Myanmar with its headquarters in Mandalay. Under this centralization policy, the most career promising studies, such as medical science, engineering, and business were only available at Yangon University, Mandalay University and Monywa University, which are all located in central and lower Myanmar. The annual enrollment in those programmes is also strictly controlled by the central government. More study options have been added to HEIs in Kachin State in recent years. However, because not all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are available in Kachin State, students have to go to Mandalay and Yangon for advanced studies, which intensifies the financial burden on students from ethnic regions.

Some postgraduate students take distance correspondent courses from Yangon and Mandalay universities, but they face problems with facilities and resources.

*An assistant lecturer at Bhamo University explained his challenges while doing PhD thesis: “facilities are not the same in urban and rural schools. For instance, we have to go to Mandalay to borrow books for research. And to borrow books, we need a reference letter with the signature of the rector. There is also no internet connection in our university.”*

Besides all these poor facilities, staff who take distance courses also complain that thesis supervisions are inadequate, reflecting another disadvantageous condition of those in remote areas.

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The challenges in pursuing further studies seem to have an impact on human resource development in Kachin State. It was observed that HEIs in Kachin State have more incumbents from central Myanmar than from Kachin. Similarly, more Burmese staff are in higher positions as well, according to some interviewees.

*One lecturer at the Government Technology Institute in Mohnyin described the staff composition at her school, “out of 90 employees, more local staff are in administration. But in teaching, we have more staff coming from lower Myanmar. There are only about 10 local staff in teaching.”*

This study could not verify the figures claimed by interviewees because data collectors were not able to access official data, despite several attempts at various HEIs in Kachin State. An associate professor who used to teach in a university in Mandalay and is now teaching at a university in Kachin State compared her experiences this way:

*“in Mandalay, I have to do research and usually go and supervise seminars in addition to teaching. But for state colleges, I don’t have many things to do other than teaching and attending meetings. Here nobody is working that hard”.*

Because of the centralization agenda of the former military government and the regional disparities in human capital and resources, successive ministers of education have been sending staff from central and lower Myanmar to serve HEIs in Kachin State. After a year or two, they return to their native urban cities. According to interviewees, the least desirable places for transfer are Chin, Rakhine and Kachin states due to their geographical remoteness and high expense of travel. Although not all teachers return to mainland Myanmar so quickly, respondents claim that this kind of short-term posting, the unbalanced ratio of non-local to local staff and the mostly non-local leadership has negative effects on the overall operation of HEIs in Kachin State. Interviewees said, staff who temporarily come from lower Myanmar to HEIs in Kachin State lack a basic understanding of the local context. They also lack commitment, motivation and interest in the development of the local HEIs.



## 5.2 Gender inequalities

In Myanmar, female representation is relatively high among civil servants. Almost two thirds of employees in the Ministry of Education are female (Paul, 2016, p.8). In a closer look at a particular institution, only 14 out of 90 staff members at Mohnyin University are male, according to interviewees. However, it is important to note that this figure might not actually represent gender equality in terms of career opportunities and decision-making status. Despite the unusually high representation of females, there have only been two female Ministers of Education – out of fifteen since Independence. Recent gender studies also report that women are almost entirely absent from the most senior civil service positions, such as director general and deputy director general (DDG), positions that are almost all filled by former military officers (David et al., 2015). In one of the most powerful ministries in the country, the Ministry of Home Affairs, which dominates important governance from central to township and village levels in planning, revenue collection, dispersal of funds, and coordination of other state actors, there are no female township level administrators anywhere in Myanmar (Paul, 2014). But in HEIs, there are high numbers of female staff in “senior positions” at all levels, including professors, department heads and above. This is because jobs in HEIs are one of the lowest paying among government entities and the least incentive-driven in the bureaucracy, meaning that HEIs staff, though not corruption free, have fewer opportunities to collect bribes compared to other ministries, such as Commerce, Mining, or Municipal, where officials deal more with the business community and therefore can generate significant income from bribes, perks and backhanders.

It is important to note that having a high number of women in HEIs does not mean there is gender equality in HEIs. Our respondents reported various forms of gender inequality and discrimination against female staff in workplace and professional training opportunities. An obvious discriminatory practice in education, which has existed for a long time, is that women require higher grades than men in order to pursue specific courses of study, such as medical science and engineering. Over the past few decades, men were unreasonably favored for further study in foreign countries such as Russia and Germany. In a recent reform move, the previous government realized that civil servants in senior positions at HEIs in Myanmar appeared to be older than in neighboring

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countries and decided to recruit younger professionals. According to interviewees, the new move allows men, but not women, under 25 with honors degrees to apply for instructor positions. The move is reportedly an attempt by the government to increase the number of male employees who are disproportionately low in HEIs.

*However, many female interviewees claim that this practice is unfair: “the government might recruit male teachers with fewer requirements according to their needs, but they should consider how to create fair competition and equal opportunities for both genders.” An interviewee in Mohnyin University also pointed out that, “the convention of HEIs that sets higher recruitment and promotion criteria for females is totally discriminatory.”*

### 5.3 Ethnic prejudices and discrimination

In a country such as Myanmar, where the world longest military regime ruled for several decades, ethnic segregation in the civil service is particularly severe. In the higher education sector, this issue seems less visible, but our interviewees did report their experience of workplace inequalities. According to interviews, such segregation began from schooling. For instance, only one third of staff at Mohnyin University are local natives. Interviewees said, “the high disproportion of non-local to local staff in HEIs in the region is the result of centralization and government’s hidden agenda of segregation.” Religious and ethnic minorities are also subject to tighter screening processes in seeking study opportunities both inside and outside the country. For instance, to pursue a Master or PhD degree requires the applicants’ department heads to send a confidential recommendation to the Ministry of Education, which usually includes an assessment of performance. Because most supervisors are Burmese Buddhists, interviewees attributed their failure to their different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

A Kachin academic who requested anonymity said she had faced racial discrimination throughout her civil servant career. Despite the fact that she is one of the very few overseas PhD holders in her profession, she was unable to get a promotion. She said because of her ethnic background, she was left behind

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by many of her colleagues, including her PhD students. A Shan-ni ethnic woman who is now working as an assistant professor in a university in Kachin State, claimed that she failed her recruitment exams twice despite being one of the very few people in her profession in the region who holds a PhD. She attributed her failure to the general knowledge portion of the recruitment exam, which as discussed previously, is controversial and ambiguous since the questions are mostly political. The general knowledge questions often relate to the political agenda and policies of the previous military regime and the assessment is made by the Ministry of Education. Another interviewee reasoned that fewer ethnic professionals are in higher positions because of the Burmese language test, which she thinks ethnic people score lower in compared to their Burmese peers.

There is no clear policy outlining the appropriate level of Myanmar language, reflecting inconsistencies in assessing language proficiency. A former head of a Myanmar language department at a university, who is Burmese and originally from central Myanmar, concluded that the reason for fewer ethnic employees in her university is the lazy attitudes and lack of interest in the civil service on the part of local peoples. Local staff said such stereotypes are unfair to ethnic people. They said the lack of interest in civil service is not only the result of personal interests, but of the system itself, in which ethnic people are subjected to discrimination, particularly during the military rule era in Myanmar. They said ethnic people were disfavored and discriminated against in civil service, particularly in terms of career advancement. This has discouraged ethnic minorities from joining the civil service. According to interviewees, there have been some changes by the government giving equal opportunities to local and ethnic incumbents. Observers note that more people with native ethnic backgrounds, such as Kachin, Shan and Shan-ni, have been increasingly employed at HEIs in Kachin State in recent years, but a clearer policy against ethnic discrimination and stereotypes should be developed.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored important issues and challenges regarding the advancement of HEIs based on the professional experiences of the staff in higher education institutions in Kachin State. According to this research, most of the important decisions in HEIs are still centralized. HEIs in Kachin State still do not have authority to develop their own curricula, recruit staff, or manage admissions, and they have limited administrative authority to enforce student academic regulations at their institution. Although there have been some recent reforms in the staff recruitment system, recruitment practices remain centralized. Exam and interview questions are not usually designed to assess candidates' qualifications based on the job's terms of reference. Problems also remain in the system of promotions; there are no clear guidelines to measure performance, or proper assessments that can lead to professional development of the institutions.

Promotion policies and procedures should be transparent. The research findings show that current performance assessment practices, the promotion system and transfer postings cause negative impacts on some employees. HEIs employees are transferred to different locations as a promotion, a punishment, or if they stay in one place for a long time. Many of the participants perceived that the transfer system is neither clear nor fair. For example, some are transferred to other institutions due to long years of service, but some remain at the same place although they have been living there for long time. Such practices of promotion and transferring affects individuals, communities, and the larger society in the respective regions. For instance, unqualified staff who have a low commitment or less interest in institutional development are being sent to HEIs in remote areas such Kachin State, while most of the qualified employees are kept in the HEIs of major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay.

Improving the quality of education of higher education institutions is directly related to staff development and training opportunities. Yet it is difficult for HEI employees from Kachin State to obtain further study opportunities compared to staff in other education institutions in Yangon and Mandalay. In addition, due to insufficient human resources, teaching staff become burdened with other administrative tasks such as gate keeping, phone duties, security duties, reception and organizing some sports events.

Another big challenge in the reform process is that there is insufficient benefits for those working at higher education institutions. Especially, when the salary of the HEI employees is insufficient to support individual families, the HEI employees have to find other means to support their respective families, which demotivates them to perform their main responsibilities in HEIs. Therefore, adequate benefits and welfare of HEI employees are still needed so that they can focus more on doing research, academic seminars and conferences, which contribute to quality education, rather than seeking extra income to survive.

To promote a culture of federal democracy in Myanmar, local and ethnic incumbents in Kachin State should be more encouraged and given opportunities to work in higher education sectors with high commitment in Kachin State.

These recommendations refer to the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions in Kachin State. Major policy actions to strengthen governance and management of HEIs are as follows:

1. Review existing laws and policies to reduce centralization and to decentralize the Ministry of Education and Department of Higher Education (DHE).
2. Clearly distinguish between national and subnational levels of authority within the Ministry of Education to respect and practice a federal system of governance.
3. Legalize charters and councils of HEIs to enable essential autonomy of HEIs over both academic and administrative matters. Form quality assurance bodies to ensure quality of education. Review and revise policies, procedures and regulations pertaining to staff performance and assessment tools.
4. Review and amend existing policies on recruitment, transfers and promotion to allow HEIs to effectively manage their institutions in line with local needs and job markets. Allow freedom of HEIs to engage and

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coordinate with partners, such as local and international academic institutions, and cooperate to improve the quality and relevance of education.

5. Grant autonomy to individual HEIs in recruiting required employees based on their own needs.
6. Allow HEIs to carry out their own need-based trainings to improve the capacity of their human resources, and support required resources, facilities and teaching aids to improve effective teaching and learning outcomes. Formulate incentive-driven approaches to encourage HEIs employees to improve their performance.
7. Allow HEIs to introduce their own need-based programmes and administer entrance and admission processes.
8. Eliminate any form of bias, prejudice and discrimination, particularly based on religion, ethnicity, gender and disabilities, skin color and appearance. Recruit more respective local people to work at HEIs to improve motivation and high commitment.

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