

Exploring Students Engagement in Education Reforms

Inclusion, Equality and Diversity in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

It is not difficult to understand the reason why student engagement has become the latest focus of attention of today's Asian academia: many scholars have found significant correlations between the students' involvement in shaping academic paths and their success and growth both as learners and as active citizens. Against this backdrop, this poster contributes to the enhancement of student engagement in the country which has joined this table of discussion only for the last years: Myanmar. Myanmar is currently going through an unprecedented reform process (see box on the right) and for the first time, in the new national guidelines on education, Myanmar is considering the idea that students can be active actors in planning and managing their own University life. In order to gather students perspectives around this debate, between December 2018 and January 2019, the presenter has carried out an extensive qualitative study by interviewing 160 Myanmar university students of all levels (from BA to PhD) from four different universities (both in Lower and in Upper Myanmar). These semi-structured interviews aimed at gathering the Myanmar students' inputs and identifying the kind of engagement that they wish the reform would put in place. What has emerged is the clear request by Myanmar students to obtain a higher degree of involvement in the learning processes with particular reference to learning activities in the classroom, curricula relevance, and extra-curriculum activities design. On the basis of the evidence gathered, some policy recommendation are formulated with the aim to support policy makers and teachers in playing their role in ensuring that students' requests for inclusiveness in educational paths became practices.



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: A DEFINITION

A definition for 'student engagement' is the ways in which national policy makers, University governance, teachers, and other educators manage to include students in two critical aspects: on the one hand, the teaching and learning process and, on the other, the governance and decision-making process in Universities. Therefore, student engagement may appear under different forms in different contexts and may concern various aspects, including, but not restricted to, student approaches to learning, student feedbacks or institutionalized paths of students' quality assurance, student representation, institutional organisation, learning spaces and architectural design. Moreover, the concept of student engagement is closely related to the concept of student voice. Generally, student voice can be seen as an alternative to more traditional forms of governance or instruction in which administrators and teachers make unilateral decisions with little or no input from students. Student voice can take different forms: the most common channels for students to share their opinions and points of view are student's associations, students unions, formal committee established in the Universities governance bodies, among others.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

If 'student engagement' may be defined as the ways in which national policy makers, University governance, and teachers manage to include students in learning and institutional governance processes, it is clear that the reform ongoing in Myanmar represents an unprecedented opportunity to achieve this goal. To be effective, this reform should acknowledge the students' perspective on their engagement and the requests that students have been making to all the actors mentioned, in the first place to teachers. The students' requests emerged in the qualitative survey carried out are presented in the table below and are divided in "short term" - indicating the priorities identified by the students - and "long term" - indicating the actions not pointed out by students but the direct consequences (on a more structured scale) of the "short term" ones. If these requests for action were fostered by the ongoing reform, students engagement would find a new space in Myanmar academia.

Short term

- Review of University enrollment procedures;
- Revision of curriculum relevance based on the students' feedbacks and the changed national social and economic context;
- Offering of more elective courses in the students' study plan;
- Classroom learning activities focused on "deep learning" and critical thinking;
- Creation of multiple channels of interaction between students and teachers (i.e. teachers office hours);
- Freedom to establish students' associations;
- Creation of safe space for students to express their opinions to University leadership.

Long term

- Review of the national curriculum structures according to a "student-centered" approach;
- Establishment of a structured system for the students' quality assurance applicable to all Universities' degree courses;
- Review of the students' performance assessment procedures valorizing the students' critical thinking;
- Involvement of "blended professionals" in the University teaching staff;
- Students' representatives in all University governance bodies.



There are 174 HEIs in Myanmar, 134 HEIs under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, 39 HEIs fragmented among 7 different ministries. In the academic year 2017/2018, 21,157 lecturers were teaching 835,433 students, two-thirds of which studying within distance education programmes.

MYANMAR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

In the last few years, Myanmar has undergone a deep political metamorphosis that has resulted in the formulation of major structural reforms involving a wide range of issues and sectors. The reform of Myanmar's National Education System has undoubtedly become of the utmost importance, as this vital challenge needs to be addressed effectively to put the country on the path towards a lasting and sustainable development. Such a process has already taken shape in the new "National Education Law" (NEL), approved by the Parliament in 2014, amended in 2015, but still not fully effective. As regards Higher Education, the reform focuses on the first attempt of decentralizing the decisional process and giving a form of partial autonomy to universities. Since the 1960s, Myanmar's Higher Education System has been characterized by a high degree of governmental control and intervention in the day-to-day management of HEIs by different ministries. Today, this centralized structure revolves primarily around the Ministry of Education (MoE), coordinating and administering most of the country's HEIs (see map on the left side of this box). The MoE is in charge of HEIs' organizational regulations, their academic affairs (final decisions on the introduction of new programs, validation of curricula and their content, setting student intakes, etc.), staffing procedures, and the distribution of financial resources among the various institutions. The recent Myanmar educational reforms are shaped around the idea that this over-centralized system leads to different shortcomings, which can be addressed in granting more autonomy to different HEIs. The reform identifies also students as stakeholders to be empowered, however, the actualization of this principle is still at an embryonic stage, as this poster shows.

ENHANCING MYANMAR STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT

Before starting exploring the kinds of engagement that the Myanmar students would like to obtain, a premise is necessary. The debate about student engagement in Myanmar has started raising just after the current slow shift from a system aiming at controlling educational institutions pervasively and within which each process was managed vertically and students appeared to hold an ambiguous position: on the one hand, they have been playing a passive role in dealing with their learning experience whereas and, on the other, they have also represented the vanguard of political activism. Against this backdrop, it is easily understandable how, for most Myanmar students, engagement with the university experience is still considered as engaging in a battle, in a conflict. For the vast majority of Myanmar students, the university culture is mostly alienating and uninviting due to the many constrictions of the University life. The current policy changes are certainly being acknowledged by students, even though it is not possible to say that they are not fully aware of the actual content of the National Education Reform and they have a real engagement towards the reform in its entirety. At the same time, the general climate of change is affecting Myanmar students that are, more than in the past, looking to their teachers (not yet to University leadership) as the actors with whom they wish to engage in a wider discussion on their academic path. In this context, understanding how student engagement can really take a new form in the Myanmar academia means answering to the question "engagement for what?" or in other words, according to student's perspective, which are the sectors of the academic life in which students are ready to be engaged with more actively? Analyzing the data collected, the following three aspects emerge as clear priority in the student's perspective on their engagement.

ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Myanmar "teaching and learning culture" revolves around teaching methods and assessment mechanisms which have traditionally tended to discourage "deep learning" and critical thinking. To pass their exams, students are most often asked to memorize textbooks that are read aloud in repetition during classes (so-called "rote memorization"). This extremely passive "teaching and learning culture" is regarded by all students interviewed not only as the major weakness of the national education system, but also as the main reason for their sense of alienation. It is clear that students are ready to be engaged differently in the classroom by teachers with activities that can foster their critical thinking and not only their capacity to memorize facts.

MAKE CURRICULA RELEVANT FOR THE NEW GLOBAL CHALLENGES

As a wide number of interviews showed, many students were not allowed to enroll in the degree program that they wished. As a student pointed out, "it is very difficult to be engaged in your University life when you want to be a designer and you are forced to study Law". A wider degree of freedom in choosing one's academic path would be welcomed by students. Similarly, also students who managed to enroll in the degree program that they wished to attend need the opportunity to take the teaching units more relevant for them, or, as a Law student witnessed, "currently, in Myanmar there are disputes and conflicts concerning environmental questions, but environmental law is not part of our curriculum". A revision of the enrolling procedures and a broadening of the offer of elective courses is another step to perform in order to increase student engagement.

FREEDOM IN EXTRA CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES DESIGN

The third element that emerged from the interviews is represented by the students' awareness that Myanmar's market economy is growing and that they need to strengthen their preparation with practical activities. This is the reason why many University students are starting associations aiming at organizing weekly meetings and seminars hosting representatives from the labor market. This is what happened at DULSA - Dagon University Law Student Association, which aims to gather law students from Myanmar and discuss about law and legal issues through peer-to-peer discussions with the contribution of established actors of the sectors. This kind of initiatives are not always welcomed by the University academic leadership and by professor still fond of a teaching methodology based on traditional classroom activities that take place every day from morning to afternoon. Students, instead, consider students association activities as a chance to make their engagement towards their field of study emerge and to show collectively their request for a broadening of the educational offer.

In the interviews, these have emerged as clear priorities for the enhancement of Myanmar students engagement, even if other aspects linked with this concept were mentioned. Among these, "students representation" or more generally the opening of structural spaces of debate with the University leadership are seen by some students (especially students belonging to the most prestigious institutions) as tools necessary to make sure that their voice is constantly heard.

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