

KYLE DAVID ANDERSON AND KYAW MOE TUN

Liberal Education for a

Cultivating change agents at Myanmar's Parami University

PERSPECTIVES

WE HAD BEEN OUT all morning on a campus development tour through Yangon, Myanmar, and had turned down a \$10 million offer to fund the entire launch of Parami University. Afterward, Kyaw Moe Tun, a Yangon native and recently minted Yale PhD, and I, a young Asian studies professor at Centre College at the time, sat down to debrief with Kyaw Moe Tun's family over lunch.

Someone cleared a throat at the other end of the table. Someone else let a spoon clumsily bounce off the lip of a bowl full of chicken curry. They couldn't believe that we had

walked away from what sounded like a dream offer.

The problem was that the potential funders we had met with would not have supported our plans for an institution that fostered critical thinking, global engagement, civic values, or

creativity among its students. Instead, they expected our institute to operate as a for-profit business with little interest in promoting quality instruction and holistic education. The charge would have been to create certification schemas and market them for an immediate return on investment.

"We can't nurture liberal education here if we have to take orders from investors from day one," Kyaw Moe Tun told his family. "We need quality, international-standard education, not more degree factories. The investors said we

had to be a for-profit institution, or no deal—so, it was no deal."

Kyaw Moe Tun's mother, a savvy Yangon businesswoman, shook her head. "I don't understand," she said. "Why didn't you just stay in the United States and become a successful chemist?"

Other young professionals have faced similar questions as they return to Myanmar to help rebuild their communities. In recent years, Myanmar has emerged from a military dictatorship and taken important steps toward greater democratization. The new ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and its de facto head, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, are proponents of educational reform and are slowly refurbishing dilapidated campuses, supporting new education legislation and strategy, reviving student life, and encouraging collaborations with international institutions.¹

At the same time, however, the tenure of the NLD and Suu Kyi has also been fraught with violations of human rights and civil liberties—including the Rohingya refugee crisis and its attendant United Nations, International Criminal Court, and International Court of Justice investigations—and the imprisonment of journalists.² It is precisely during this troubled period of transition from a military dictatorship to a functioning democracy, though, that Kyaw Moe Tun believes the Parami University of Liberal Arts and Sciences can make its strongest contributions. In offering a liberal approach to higher education, the university promotes critical thinking and understanding of democracy and social justice, which are imperative to addressing global challenges and humanitarian crises, and supporting democratic governance, which includes helping to produce new laws and reforms.³ Indeed, in just three short years, Parami University has become the city's intellectual hub, hosting ambassadors, global business leaders, and world-renowned economists, and has taken the lead on national private education policy and legislation.

While debates continue over the proper role of liberal education abroad, it is crucial to recognize the profound effect that this type of education can have on young men and women in a fledgling, struggling democracy. We believe that liberal education is a global heritage.

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Troubled Democracy



Parami University students take a field trip to Dala as part of the Writing and Thinking Workshop, in which they learn to investigate their thought processes through writing.

The university also seeks to foster creative, critical thinkers and problem solvers who will help their country meet the demands of its new markets. With Myanmar's economy now open to foreign investors and visitors, the nation's government offices, banks, and international corporations are seeking young leaders to manage new systems and create new products. Opportunities for change abound, but the country is facing a shortage of workers with the skills necessary to innovate and govern institutions toward positions of greater equity and profitability.⁴

State-sanctioned plagiarism

Myanmar (also known as Burma) is a nation of approximately 60 million people that borders India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand. Known as the rice bowl of Asia, Myanmar was previously home to one of the continent's premier educational systems. That changed in 1962 when General Ne Win led a coup that

abolished the constitution and plummeted the nation into decades of dysfunction and violence. The military dictatorship forcefully suppressed student protests at Yangon University and then continued to dismantle the country's educational institutions, systematically destroying independent minds among the population. Rote learning and memorization became the staples of the country's education system, playing into the military's quest to mold a pliant citizenry.⁵

As a young student studying under military rule, Kyaw Moe Tun memorized his entire biology textbook word for word—without paraphrase. He used to time himself to see how quickly he could recite chapters one through five. Just under forty-five minutes! Exams required students to provide answers as they appeared verbatim in the textbook. Any variation—even in grammar and punctuation—was strictly forbidden and heavily penalized. Kyaw Moe Tun has coined this learning method “nationwide,

state-sanctioned plagiarism,” a heavily policed habit of mind that assures conformity and keeps students far away from innovative, critical thought. It was during medical school that he finally tired of this mindless instruction and decided to transfer to the United States. Through the support of the Pre-Collegiate Program in Yangon, Kyaw Moe Tun was accepted into Bard College at Simon’s Rock in Massachusetts, where he rediscovered his love for learning.

In 2011, General Thein Sein assumed the presidency and ended the dark night of military dictatorship, releasing Suu Kyi from house arrest and reinstating the NLD, which went on to win the 2012 by-elections and 2015 general election. In 2014, after earning his doctorate in chemistry at Yale University, Kyaw Moe Tun made a

life-altering choice to return to Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, to contribute to the rebuilding of the nation’s higher education system. Kyaw Moe Tun and a group of like-minded peers, who had also pursued education in the United States, formed the Parami University Founding Committee. They consulted with similar schools in the

region: Ashoka University (India), Fulbright University (Vietnam), and Yale-NUS College (Singapore). These institutions modeled possibilities for success even as they demonstrated the challenges inherent in delivering liberal education in new contexts.⁶

“It was truly inspiring to see what change private individuals could induce in a country with as many socioeconomic and ethnic challenges as Myanmar,” Kyaw Moe Tun says. “I thought, ‘If Ashoka can do it in India, why can’t we do it in Myanmar?’”

The founding committee garnered broad support, grants, and donations from international nongovernmental organizations, local government officials, business professionals, lawmakers, and educators. A deeply Buddhist nation, Myanmar citizens mostly donate to monasteries in order to secure spiritual benefit—civic philanthropy is an alien concept. Despite the growing need for creative workers who can think critically, selling the nation on the benefits of giving citizens a liberal education—with its emphasis on ethnic and religious diversity, interdisciplinary approaches, undergraduate research, close reading and analysis, student engagement, and open discussion and debate—was no simple

endeavor. The committee, however, succeeded in raising enough money to launch an institute and continues to meet the challenge of building financial support for expanding its operations.

Liberal education in Myanmar

The Parami Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the precursor to the university) opened in 2016 on the third floor of Shwe Gone Plaza near downtown, with Kyaw Moe Tun as executive director. The institute recently secured land outside the city where it has broken ground on its forthcoming four-year, residential campus. Parami University will be Myanmar’s first private, nonprofit liberal arts and sciences institution. Through Kyaw Moe Tun’s connections, Parami has partnered with the Bard College system to provide graduates with dual degrees—one from Parami and one from Bard College.

The institute currently provides a variety of evening courses that broaden access to liberal arts-style learning and develop critical-thinking skills for both professionals and students. Its core work, however, is the Parami Leadership Program, an intensive one-year residential program offering recent graduates of Myanmar’s state universities a broad-based, English-language curriculum focused on interdisciplinary inquiry, community engagement, global citizenship, critical thinking, and professional communication. The program’s advisory board includes economic and education advisors to the nation’s state counselor, as well as international business and education leaders.

In Myanmar’s public education system, students are tested in nationwide matriculation exams and then placed into different disciplines; students with top scores are fast-tracked into medical universities, while those with low scores are shuffled off to arts and sciences universities. Students then crowd into narrow channels of learning; a student majoring in chemistry cannot take courses in biology or physics. This structural barrier prohibits any possibility for interdisciplinary learning. Accustomed to this system, Parami students initially find it difficult to embrace interdisciplinary learning. But to become future leaders in government, business, the arts, and industries, they must learn to grasp complex issues from all sides and to use the analytical skills necessary to propose multifaceted solutions. The aim is for them to leave Parami better prepared as change agents and citizen leaders for a new democracy.

Instructors in the Parami Leadership Program unravel the indoctrination of state-sanctioned plagiarism by rejecting the role of lecturers and instead acting as facilitators.

To help them begin this transition, Parami students first pass through the two-week Writing and Thinking Workshop (a signature program deployed throughout the Bard College system). During the workshop, students unlearn the state-enforced habit of memorization absent inquiry and instead learn to investigate and refine their thought processes through writing. Lessons involving freewriting, focused freewriting, loop writing, process writing, and other exercises help students improve their cognitive and communication skills. The simple act of producing a piece of original writing is revolutionary for these students—they have no text to copy from and no correct answers to reflect back to a vigilant authority. As a result, students become more thoughtful and freer in their expression and more accepting of the ideas and words of nonconforming peers, discovering that designated authority figures aren't their only teachers. Peers can teach them, too.

“The one important thing I've learned at Parami is critical thinking, a crucial need for Myanmar's young students after experiencing decades of a failed education system,” says Parami graduate Myint Myat Aung Zaw. “I've gotten loads of knowledge and experience and also made talented, like-minded friends.”

New dimensions

Instructors in the Parami Leadership Program further unravel the indoctrination of state-sanctioned plagiarism by rejecting the role of lecturers and instead acting as facilitators. The institute recruits teachers from abroad who possess backgrounds in liberal education and have excellent English and academic credentials. Myanmar students have been conditioned to expect teachers only to stand in front of the classroom, write on the blackboard, and require them to repeat back written text. Trained by Kyaw Moe Tun, Parami facilitators demand the opposite: students must identify their own interests and motivations and learn to develop their own ideas and arguments, discussing and defending them in an open, communicative environment.

Instructors making themselves available to students is also an essential part of opening up access in the learning space. While teaching the integrated sciences seminar, Kyaw Moe Tun chatted one day with two students after class. They were confused—a bit concerned, in fact—about their life purpose. Their semester at Parami had led them to ask some fundamental

questions about themselves that they had never before considered. Discussion and debate surrounding previously unknown concepts—such as the nature of being in philosophy, of life in integrated sciences, of identity in anthropology and sociology, and of competition in economics—caused them to reconsider who they were and what their place in the world might be. The students were analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating their realities. This is uncharted territory in state education, in which faculty and students keep to the merry-go-round of recitation, memorization, and verbatim recall. Kyaw Moe Tun and the two students ended their chat with no firm conclusions, an outcome that was itself part of their education in accepting the integral, ongoing nature of intellectual inquiry.



The leadership program also teaches students to strictly avoid any form of copying or plagiarism—initially a mind-boggling expectation for students coming from government-run schools or even for-profit, alternative institutions. Students learn what plagiarism is and is not, how to avoid it, and how to properly credit and cite sources. Educators in other countries might see such lessons as a minor judicial matter focused on addressing student laziness or dishonesty. But the stakes are higher for Myanmar students. Learning how to avoid repeating others' words is fundamental to students' development as free, critical thinkers and writers. Pervasive state-sanctioned plagiarism blocks the way to a life of greater self-actualization, inquiry, productivity, and leadership.

“Before Parami, when I think and observe a case, there are no new dimensions to consider—it's just straightforward, one-dimensional,” says Parami graduate Aung Khant Zaw. “After Parami, one of the most important things I've learned is to think and observe a case in different dimensions.”

Parami aims to prepare its students to be citizen leaders for a new democracy.

Embracing differences

The Parami Leadership Program's graduating class of 2018 included students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Bamar, Karen, Chin, Mon, Nepali, Ta'ang, Chinese, Indian, Dawei, Lahu, Rakhine, and more. The Parami staff recruits these students onsite in their hometowns across the country. The 2019–20 cohort is made up of thirty-four students, most of whom received full or partial scholarships to attend.

"If I didn't come here, I wouldn't know people of my age from different parts of the country like Shan State, Chin State, and Bago," Parami graduate May Thant Cynn says. "I got to learn their goals, dreams, ambitions, and how they paved their way to work toward their goals."

In addition, community-campus partnerships and global service learning have become key

components of Parami's curriculum.

It is only through working alongside members of diverse communities near and far that students will acquire the proper understanding, empathy, civic knowledge, and intercultural competence to be effective, inclusive leaders. Given Myanmar's current problems with interethnic conflict, the nation

needs young leaders learning early how to work with each other. The effects of the British Empire's "divide and conquer" policy can still be felt in the ongoing strife between Myanmar's more than 135 ethnic groups. These open wounds between ethnicities make diversity a difficult goal to pursue.⁷

"I was rather uncertain about how realistic I was in creating a safe space for our students who have come from different ethnic backgrounds to openly talk about so many historical and ongoing issues of injustice, discrimination, and domination," Kyaw Moe Tun says. "I ended up being very surprised—not only are students open to one another's views, but they also are working to embrace their differences."

Throughout the leadership program, students conduct research projects that feature community engagement. These projects require students to work with community members to investigate and propose solutions to pressing issues, demonstrating the importance of relationship-building across difference to effect positive change. In state universities in Myanmar, students rarely if ever engage in service learning or conduct original research projects. The

Parami Leadership Program is the first place that students engage in either activity. Instructing students on how to conduct their own research projects poses some special challenges. First, proper research methods and skills are conveyed to each student research team. Some of the biggest obstacles they face, though, include resistance from a populace unfamiliar with and even suspicious of researchers, the scarcity of available and reliable research data, and the miles of red tape preventing them from looking into "sensitive" topics (for example, journalism, nationalism, religion, natural resource allocation, and ethnic conflict).

A recent student project entailed producing a board game involving "fake news" in Myanmar, a serious issue in a nation for which Facebook is a main news source.⁸ The game was developed in partnership with the publishing company Mote Oo Education and is being piloted with youth in Yangon. Another project involved the problem of plastic and waste management in Yangon, where every day more than three hundred metric tons of rubbish are improperly handled.⁹ The students made a video documenting the production of trash in the city, featuring interviews with workers and local residents.¹⁰ Yet another project involved the adaptation of solar panels for use on small rural farms. Students traveled to Hlegu township, northeast of the city, to work with farmers on setting up electricity-generating systems on the farms.

Halfway through the Parami Leadership Program, all students and faculty participate in an off-campus service-learning project, traveling hundreds of miles to the north to the rural village of Sin-le in Shan State, an area ethnically and historically distinct from south-central Myanmar. Divided into groups, the students live with residents and integrate themselves into village life. For some students, this involves teaching in local schools; for others, it means working in the fields. Some students take on more prominent leadership roles, helping villagers to organize and conduct public ceremonies.

Every evening before the sun sets, faculty and students gather to share and reflect upon their experiences through poetry and prose. Touched by the care, responsibility, and sincerity of the reflective pieces, Kyaw Moe Tun finds this to be one of the most rewarding moments of the program.

"I have learned that all students have different perspectives from different backgrounds and different purposes for studying at Parami Institute,"

The simple act of producing a piece of original writing is revolutionary for these students—they have no text to copy from and no correct answers to reflect back to a vigilant authority.

says Parami graduate Thuang Ahlay Mee. “But one thing in common is that everyone came to Parami to learn from each other and go back to their community as change agents.”

Power for good

Four years after the 2015 elections, the adequate funds, teacher training, and political will to implement necessary changes in public education are still extremely limited. In the meantime, Parami, as a private nonprofit, is meeting the needs of students and industry and providing the personnel, the educational models, and the administrative and faculty training that public-sector education will need as it modernizes its facilities, materials, pedagogies, and curricula.

In August 2019, Kyaw Moe Tun facilitated the creation of Myanmar’s first Private Higher Education Institutions Association. Attendees included the Minister of Education, the chair of the National Education Policy Commission, and representatives of the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee. Such an event would have been inconceivable only a few years ago, when education was still squarely a state matter under the thumb of the military. The organization is now positioned to work with the appropriate ministers and legislators to recommend law and policy for the private education sector.

While debates continue over the proper role of liberal education abroad, it is crucial to recognize the profound effect that this type of education can have on young men and women in a fledgling, struggling democracy. We believe that liberal education is a global heritage. Broad-based, interdisciplinary curricula emphasizing student engagement may be commonplace in the United States, but they are rare gems in a nation still riven by interethnic and interreligious conflict. A liberal education offers young Myanmar change agents the opportunities for growth that they need to help their nation legislate, reform, heal from decades of civil war, and manage the flood of international interest in their country’s natural resources and markets. The environment is not always hospitable to critical thinking, free expression, and inclusive problem solving, but it is precisely in these troubled contexts that we expect to witness the immense power of liberal education. ^{LE}

NOTES

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