

HESP Work in Burma:

Shaping the Role of the Universities in Opening the Society

A review of the Higher Education Support Program's portfolio of funding and operational activities in Burma (Myanmar)¹ in 2012-14

Executive Summary

HESP's initial intervention in higher education in Burma was through the country's leading governmental representatives, underscored by agreements with the Ministry of Education. This is in stark contrast to HESP's "under the radar" engagement with emerging private universities and informal academic networks in the post-communist context in the 1990s. While the connection to the government provided us with points of entry, our mandate was limited, and we were forced to expend much effort to expand the spaces of impact and shift the vectors of support.

Our first tactical priority is to use our mandate to 'unlock the system'. Yet our initial reliance on partnerships with large foreign actors rushing to put stakes in the country proved short-sighted and we needed to increase our reliance on operational work. This situational approach, however unconventional and challenging for OSF, has been key to the progress achieved. Successes have included: A consolidated conceptual base and direction for reform; the emergence of a community of local reform-minded individuals who see their positions strengthened by association with OSF; and openings for further collaboration with indigenous agents of change incipient in the sector. Curiously, our relationship with the government proved an asset for enabling the engagement of both the international partners and the "grassroots of academia"—rank-and-file academics that had no voice or representation in the development agenda previously. This has been an experience of trial and error, reflection and doubt, and, if you will, of "piecemeal social engineering". While we maintain that the progress we have made is positive in the reach, scope and sheer ability to penetrate and bring elements of positive change into an exceptionally closed system, the ultimate outcomes of our intervention remain to be seen.

Our primary reflection in this portfolio review is on two issues which are central to conceptualizing and sustaining HESP's work in Burma, its relationship with the broader OSF involvement in the country and the potential contribution of HESP in other geographies: (a) the modalities of engagement with the authorities and (b) the shifting agency in higher education reform in the context of political transition to the academic community and universities. Both of these issues bear directly on the ability of HESP, and the higher education partners it supports, to contribute and provide leadership.

Moving forward, we are preparing to operate in a more traditional grant-giving role with a number of well-selected partners and projects. We will continue our limited operational involvement in strengthening the capacity of local actors for leadership in the reform process, expanding spaces of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and more direct engagement with civil society actors.

The lessons from Burma may likely influence our approach in other contexts of political transition. We argue for the need of exploiting careful engagement with the government while actively facilitating the involvement of civil society actors, allowing sufficient time to explore the context through practical operational work, avoiding rushed commitments of support especially to large foreign actors, and maintaining a focus on building capacity for leadership. In situations when OSF can sustain only a short-term involvement, the focus should be on strengthening the competence and pressure for meaningful change within the system, with lesser investment in supporting grand reform policies which may prove unsustainable in politically volatile contexts.

¹ We do not attach any excessive significance to the use of 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' in this paper. Normally, although not necessarily consistently, we would use 'Myanmar' in reference to the government, and to the concepts, institutions and practices which have been affected in their spirit by the previous regime to the greatest extent.

Mapping the Field

HESP's Burma portfolio has advanced rapidly since 2012 in support of a fundamental need: to fashion a relevant space for engagement with the higher education community on broader issues of reform. HESP acted in response to an opening offered by the government's objective to demonstrate "quick wins." Our initial analysis of the field highlighted the following parameters and limitations for our engagement:

- The system is extremely fragmented among professional fields, while strongly centralized around the various ministries which operate their own HEIs.
- There is a complete absence of institutional autonomy and academic freedom as all curricula are centrally decided with prescribed methods.
- Academics have neither the ownership of their teaching and research agendas, nor adequate qualifications to deliver teaching in their subjects.
- The resources and methods in the social sciences and humanities are sorely dated and the limited available materials are ill-applied, with rote learning being standard.
- Students, especially the most numerous and volatile population of undergraduates, are perceived as a security threat by the state and by the university administrations; undergraduate programs are compartmentalized and dispersed throughout far-flung campuses.
- Universities are tightly insulated and controlled, with only slim avenues for mobility and external input, in particular from abroad; any relationship between the disciplines, institutions, academia and the field of practice, university and community, as well as between the content of teaching and the social issues of the day are heavily censored.
- Pockets of alternative quality on the post-secondary level surviving outside the state sector are of limited replicability or broader relevance; there are no significant civil society actors (NGOs, think-tanks) with the well-substantiated change agenda for higher education and capacity for its implementation.
- University of Yangon (UY) – once, deservedly, the flagship of the Burmese higher education – is now decimated, yet it dictates country-wide all matters of academic significance.
- Being the priority for both the government and the democratic opposition, higher education reform and the future of the University of Yangon is at the center of divisive politics.

For a more detailed analysis and illustrations of this background please see Appendix 1.

Our hopes regarding the positive presence of international partners— those sufficiently well informed, connected and capable of providing development opportunities in the local context— were dashed. This led HESP to a number of rushed projects and commitments to partners which required significant rethinking and HESP's own intervention in their implementation. This has been exacerbated by a host of local issues including significant shifts in goals, instruments and leadership of the reform process. That said, exploring the limited space and available resources on the ground through carefully selected operational projects of immediate practical value furnished HESP with a nuanced understanding of the system, access to multiple levels of actors, and partnerships based on trust and shared goals within the local university community.

Planning for Action: Premises, Strategies, Tactics and Instruments

Until 2011, HESP focused almost exclusively on the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia where it advanced the open society agenda by the building up and expansion of liberal university education. Its niche was in supporting private liberal arts institutions often standing in intellectual opposition to the post-authoritarian centralized state systems and contributing to individual and departmental development agendas leading to reform of the curricula and approaches to teaching and research methods in the humanities and social sciences. HESP's main strengths and record of success are perceived to be in advancing the renewal of intellectual culture and promoting academic freedom, critical expression, and good governance at the level of universities and smaller academic units within them. Our new strategy, the work on which has been underway since 2011, calls for global geographic exposure, and focuses on strengthening the relevance and contribution of universities to open society challenges in countries experiencing momentous political change. Our involvement in Burma has been the first experience explicitly advancing this shift in strategy and provides a testing ground for our values, concepts, and mechanisms of support.

HESP's contribution in Burma focuses on building capacity in the social sciences, especially in the subject areas that have been absent from university curricula and now are deemed essential to serving the reform process. We see our

role as ensuring that the reform of higher education is firmly in hands of the universities, the academic community and civil society.

Key Premises and Initial Strategic Ambitions

The first exploration of the local context warned of an uphill struggle in bridging the needs and capacities of the system and the kind of work OSF and HESP should pioneer. This helped us to formulate three **main premises** for the modalities of our work:

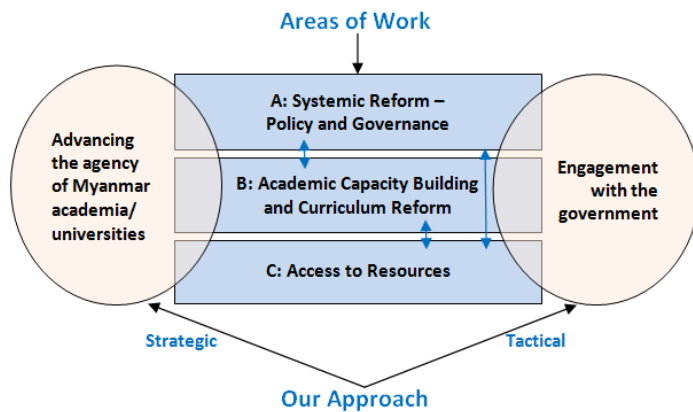
1. Our initial focus must be on **unlocking the system**. This translated into bite-sized practical exposure, training opportunities and resources for both the leadership and rank-and-file academics. We understood that the government and respective institutions would not ease their reigns of control and we would need to adapt to the speed and the spirit of the local bureaucracy. We quickly learned to rally the rank-and-file colleagues around offers that promised quick learning and improvement opportunities and to rely on them for pressing their leadership to make these opportunities a reality (at the same time, advise us on the shortcuts through the intricate web of their own bureaucracy).
2. In the absence of local capacity we would need to rely on outside actors— primarily on **foreign university partners and the international development community** for bringing alternative visions, sources, and methodologies. Our misconception in the early days was in underestimating the inadequacy of the grasp of local specifics by foreign partners (even the best connected and intentioned), the extent to which their initiatives could be dominated by their own institutional interests, and the ability of local partners to sabotage any initiative which, to them, had even the slightest whiff of the colonial². Most of the adjustments we had to make were precisely in this area: minimizing grant-giving and increasing our own operational work. Intensive direct engagement demonstrated our intentions and capabilities to our partners and reaped their enthusiastic backing. The explanation lies in the perception of OSF as clearly distinct from national/bilateral or institutional partners, all of which came to claim ‘ownership’ over initiatives, while OSF brings the best resources without an ownership agenda.
3. We have to demonstrate that our ultimate goal is to **advance our local partners’ agency and leadership for change**. We need to speak and act on their behalf and help them develop the motivation, competence and ownership in the process of institutional reform. This also implies helping them develop a clear agenda for international partnerships and technical assistance, which they can then use to assess and shape the new opportunities for collaboration they are confronted with on a daily basis. This is proving to be the tallest order of the three and will be discussed in further detail below.

We have negotiated three **areas that warrant our support** and a blend of methods that address both the need for delivery of technical improvement (quick wins) and a focus on inspiring new values and practices (the long-term vision):

- A. **Systemic Reform**: development of a new vision and sound policies; a focus on governance and management of concrete areas in specific institutions; and institutionalization of new curricula and academic practices.
- B. **Capacity Building**: teaching (course development, teaching methods, integration of new learning materials); research (new topics and areas, current methodology and resources, collaborative work across disciplines and with international scholars) in the social sciences and in the subjects of greatest relevance for the political, economic and social transformations underway in the country; and institutional and departmental management, self-governance, university autonomy in practice.
- C. **Access to Resources**: reconnecting to state of the art delivery and integration of on-line resources and traditional print materials, user training, and IT&I support.

While all three areas require significant technical assistance, we have been keen to gradually move away from technical revisions to engage in a more meaningful change of academic culture, empowering the grassroots of academia, securing direct engagement with students and strengthening linkages between the universities and the community. All of these contribute toward the broader agenda of OSF in Burma. At this stage, when through our operational work we have built relationships of trust with local stakeholders, identified international partners and are paving the way for a consolidated work on curriculum reform, we will now have the time to pursue those issues more central to our agenda.

² We can mention here the examples of our early efforts to define HESP support to Columbia University, Johns Hopkins University and Bard College for their grand initiatives in Burma, all of which have been unsuccessful. We are happy to engage in a more detailed analysis of these cases but this lies beyond the scope of the present paper. HESP’s collaboration with CEU has been a welcome exception. Our intimate knowledge and close relationship with CEU afforded us the possibility of immediate and flexible interventions that significantly boosted our operational work.



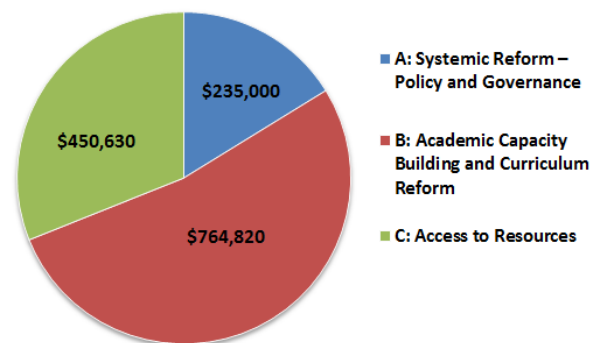
Our connection to the government proved to be essential in securing access and advancing our agenda in all three areas of work. Arguably, it allowed us to stimulate bottom-up streams of ideas and motivations for change, and to mobilize the local academic and expert community towards autonomous action. In the following section we zoom in on **three examples** of significant grants and operational activities which have been most illustrative of the approach. The cases will offer further insight on how our careful engagement with the government enabled our progress in each of these areas, and how, in turn, this progress enhances our ability to advance our strategic goals.

Our tactic of using access afforded through our governmental connections to drill into the system to get academic populations excited about the reality of their profession and motivated to change their routines paid off tremendously. Another hypothesis which we developed early and which has proven to be accurate is that despite the opening with the government, HESP should not have a permanent presence in Burma— especially not as part of a government-led entity or network. Working from the outside, relying on trusted partners without getting drawn into local politics, and limiting our physical presence to the much needed resources and events with well-defined practical value, has a clear advantage. It allows for intensive and effective interventions in comparison with other development partners who struggle through the frustrations of being exploited for political gain in exchange for an appearance of being in the center of the action.

Overview of the Progress: Case Studies from the Three Areas of Work

Given the limited space for engagement, the absence of a viable reform agenda at any level and the closed nature of national actors on both sides of the political divide, our priorities were bound to shift from the pursuit of formal policy changes to the modernization and enhancement of local capacities. This is clearly reflected in the balance of funding applied to date. Appendix 2 provides a listing of the main instruments of our work – grants, consultancies and operational projects. The chart on the right demonstrates the share and amount of spending in each of the three areas of work which, in our analysis, reflects the balance between the relative priority of each area in terms of our strategic approach and the opening for a genuine contribution towards generating new quality on the ground.

Spending according to Area of Work



Case Study One: Engineering an Effective Partnership with UNESCO for Policy Work (Area A)

At the start of our journey, UNESCO was the only one among the international development partners present in Burma who had an interest and mandate for engagement on issues of higher education reform. So it was natural that HESP sought to form an alliance with the UNESCO office in Yangon. However in our rush to forge what was seen to be a potentially useful partnership, we failed to reflect on the record of UNESCO’s engagement in other countries which shows its limited ability to take risks, engage in politically challenging debates and think critically about its traditional methodologies and circle of experts. Working through clearly defined official channels, UNESCO can secure a formal mandate from the government, but it is hardly in a position to engage as actively with non-governmental actors and representatives from the opposition.

In June 2013, HESP proceeded to formalize a grant for co-funding UNESCO’s project on Building Capacity for Higher Education Reform in Myanmar. This project sought to contribute to the high-level national deliberations on the modernization of the country’s universities and included a resident international advisory mission and a series of

national workshops and consultations in support of higher education policy development. In the early stages of project implementation it became clear that without our steering this could become a static and futile endeavor. Fortunately, UNESCO proved to be receptive to our criticisms and suggestions of shifting the focus and the methods of delivery of the project and accepted our regular interventions in shaping the events it organized, inviting experts recommended by us, and integrating more practically-focused expert work by colleagues from the CEU's Higher Education Observatory (especially in the part of the project focused on university autonomy).

Most of our effort with this project has been on re-focusing it towards more practical and immediately relevant policy interventions. These interventions have been in areas where the government was ready to make at least a tentative commitment to a specific change or improvement, such as the definition of the concept of university autonomy, the formalization of private actors in higher education, and to the most suitable formats for quality assurance, degree recognition and credit transfer. Being absolutely new themes for most of our Burmese interlocutors, the project provided venues for introducing the concepts and sharing international experience and approaches, while debating their applicability in the context of Myanmar.

The situation is even more uncertain now that the new National Education Law has been subject to much criticism from civil society, university students and some academics, in response to which President Thein Sein has urged the delay of full implementation of education reform till 2027³. In this context, the original goals and methods of the project focusing on the grand reform efforts may become quickly irrelevant. But the work on modernizing and integrating the universities within the international networks is bound to continue and the focus will have to shift toward smaller issues and specific branch improvements. **In the volatile and convoluted environment of the politics of education reform, UNESCO remains a useful partner and a channel of access to information and decision-makers, and can act as a proxy in our efforts to have an impact on the policies that affect, for example, our direct work with the universities on curriculum reform.** Withdrawing from this partnership and, thus, from formal presence on the list of supporters of the government efforts will leave us outside the network of development partners and complicate our ability to engage with the government in other areas on our terms.

However imperfect, this is still a useful investment and partnership for us. This is testified by our most recent interaction on a project to bring a truly inclusive delegation of rectors, MoE representatives, and civil society activists to the Asia Higher Education Summit and Summer Institute at Hong Kong University, where the antagonistic sides engaged directly and publicly in a heated debate over the pace and direction of higher education reform and the future of the Myanmar universities – the kind of debate which is, alas, impossible in the domestic context (*see Appendix 1 for further detail*).

Case Study Two: The Trojan Horse of Departmental Support: Initiating Curriculum Reform and Shifting Agency for Change to Local Academics (Area B)

One of the premises of HESP's global strategy is that moments of rapid political change herald an opportunity for otherwise inert universities to shift gears and assume a position of intellectual and practical leadership in their social milieu. The universities and their communities can generate ideas and visions, provide interpretations, chart policies, and spearhead new discourses and practices. The spirit of inclusive and tolerant deliberation and the competition of ideas that academic inquiry ideally implies can become a welcome alternative to ideological corruption, exclusion, and often violence that can frame the periods of major transformations.

At the time of the first planning meeting with the Ministry of Education in May 2012, the promise of reform was but a generic declaration and none of our interlocutors offered any specific detail on the direction of possible policy change. The 'table manners' at the time only permitted a gentle suggestion regarding the need for "modernization" and an opening toward international contacts. HESP was specifically asked to assist with the development of three UY departments – Law, International Relations, and Archaeology. We were not given much alternative, nor, indeed, any further indication of what such development might entail. Our suggestion of a focus on teaching, curriculum, and research – all in collaboration with foreign academic advisors – was quickly endorsed. The very practical rationale behind this request as well as the limitations it implied became quickly apparent upon further introductions to the departments. The request was clearly dictated by the immediate needs of the government and the departments were expected to serve those needs. The Department of Law had been working on redrawing significant bits of legislation

³ It is implied that the focus will remain largely on the issues of access, modernization and economic efficiency – goals stated in the 30-year reform and modernization plan advanced by the junta in 2003. At the time of writing, it is unclear how the current reversal will affect specifically the university reform; we hope to be able to gain better understanding of the shift and re-evaluate the space for our engagement in the coming weeks.

in maritime relations and intellectual property and ensuring Myanmar's compliance with the international instruments to which it wanted to be a signatory; International Relations was expected to process paperwork and provide basic orientation to the government officials on the eve and during the Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship in 2014; and the Department of Archaeology, fittingly, was tasked with preparing necessary documentation to secure Myanmar's much-dragged bids for the status of UNESCO World Heritage Sites for a number of historical areas. None of these requests and initial conversations offered openings into the issues of teaching methods or the development of critical thinking, let alone curriculum development. While such a pragmatic approach was transparent and offered at least a minimal access to academic communities and fields, it was clear that our space for engagement would be tight. It should be noted that at the time of these conversations these departments had no undergraduate teaching programs and only tiny populations of graduate students. While we succeeded in re-engineering our relationship with the Law and IR departments, the technical focus of the Archaeology colleagues and the lack of interest on their part in a broader interdisciplinary area of inquiry in cultural heritage and preservation recommended by international experts, meant that we had to curtail our engagement with this department and redeploy the resources toward efforts in other areas.

From the start of our engagement in Burma numerous international institutions came forth with proposals to contribute to the institutional reform and development of particular academic fields. Most of them implied significant funding commitments which we did not feel ready to make at such an early stage. Instead, we developed a Visiting Fellowship facility which engaged the most prominent academics from these institutions (those who have a good grasp of the Burmese context) in two-week teaching, mentoring and needs assessment visits to the host departments in Burma. They offered course models in subjects of greatest need and consulted the local faculty and graduate students on their teaching and research. They also engaged with the departments as units in discussions of their curricula, and provided HESP with comprehensive site reports and recommendations for further engagement in faculty capacity and curriculum development. We are well aware that we cannot sustain the local development through such occasional visiting schemes, nor should we support longer-term teaching appointments of foreign academics to Burma. Our imperative instead has been to prepare for a handover of the initiative and the leadership in the curriculum and faculty development to the most competent local networks that are available.

Thanks to the MoE's endorsement (however tentative) of our efforts and, to a greater degree, the enthusiastic reception of development opportunities by local academic colleagues, in the two years that followed **HESP has moved to spearhead the introduction of the formerly taboo disciplines of Political Science and Sociology as new undergraduate specializations⁴ and initiate a comprehensive revision of the curriculum in Law and Journalism⁵**. By defying the status quo and using our government connections to secure necessary bureaucratic shortcuts, we have managed to bring almost three dozen Burmese social science academics to the leading universities of the world on intensive collaborative research and teaching development fellowships. We gained the reputation as a primary and trusted partner who delivers⁶.

As a culmination of these efforts, in July 2014, HESP, jointly with the University of Yangon and a number of international partner institutions (most notably, CEU, Oxford University, Columbia University, Hong Kong University and Bard College) convened the Social Science Curriculum Working Group meeting aimed at consolidating the efforts of various international partners and building a well-coordinated, systematic approach to curriculum revision in the social sciences. The working group focuses on rethinking of the needs, re-assessment of capacities and redrawing the structures and content of areas of studies that are vital for the progressive and sustainable democratic development of Burma, as well as securing a leading role for its universities as intellectual and pragmatic leaders. This event was both a culmination of the efforts of mapping the current state of teaching and learning in a variety of subject areas at major universities, and the start of a new phase of consolidated and reflexive work of building new structures, content, and capacities for the development and delivery of curricula.

The local faculty and the heads of the Boards of Studies have shown great enthusiasm for the work on the revision of curricula and teaching methods, and a commitment and ingenuity in securing space and resources for this work (*please*

4 In December 2013 both the UY and MU reinstated undergraduate programs for top high school graduates and admitted approx. 700 and 500 freshmen respectively. No time or resources were allocated to developing new programs of study for what is known as "centers of excellence for outstanding students", with all content coming from other undergraduate and distance education programs elsewhere in the country.

5 Our focus is on the subjects of Constitutional Law, Business Law and Human Rights at the Department of Law, Political Science specialization at the Department of International Relations and expanded into Sociology and Journalism. The work on Sociology will commence through the existing programs in Social Anthropology and Social Psychology. The collaboration with the Journalism Department will entail complete revision of the curriculum away from media administration (a.k.a. censorship) towards critical media studies.

6 In the words of the Retired Rector of MU Prof. Khin Swe Myint in a "passing of the keys" ceremony introducing OSF to the new Rector Prof. Maung Thynn in May 2014, "OSF has done more to the higher education in Myanmar than all our other international partners together".

see Appendix 1 for illustrations). The much-hoped prospect for this work is in instituting a social science curriculum committee at the University of Yangon which will lead the conceptual and substantive work towards creating (the already announced) Faculty/School of Social Sciences which will allow for greater interdisciplinary collaboration. Another ambition underlying this project is the creation of a Center for Interdisciplinary Social Studies. This will hopefully be achieved by infusing a new meaning and agenda to the existing Center for Local Knowledge at UY, which will, in turn, serve as a base for developing a new graduate degree program at the Universities of Yangon and Mandalay as a laboratory of innovation for other Burmese universities.

Case Study Three: Riding on the Resources: Expanding Spaces of Autonomy and Academic Freedom with the EIFL eLibrary Project (Area C)

Re-conceptualizing and re-stocking university libraries have been among the highest priorities of our various HE partners in Burma. One of the panels at the July 2012 roundtable, organized jointly with the Myanmar Academy of Arts and Sciences, was specifically dedicated to the issue of developing academic information networks focused on electronic resources in English. The panel, led by a senior librarian from Cornell University who was invited by HESP to present on the subject, concluded by affirming the need for a comprehensive study and set of recommendations for the systematic overhaul of university libraries nationwide. At that time it was suggested that HESP would not be able to fund any specific work on improvement of the libraries, but should rather provide the government with a development plan which the government would then implement, possibly with the support of other donors. Without sufficient deliberations with those OSF programs that possess greater expertise on the subject, and gauging the needs for resources in other streams of work, HESP proceeded to hire a team from the Cornell library system to conduct a needs assessment and develop recommendations to the government. During the implementation of what turned out to be a very costly initiative, we quickly realized that the ultimate product would be of limited practical value.

By early 2013 we had brought in EIFL, a spin-off of OSF's former Library Program, to balance and complement the work performed by the Cornell grantee. As a result of the eLibrary Working Group meeting convened by HESP and University of Yangon in December 2013 and with the involvement of both Cornell and EIFL, we managed to refocus the study finalized by Cornell to provide two separate sets of recommendations – one which could be implemented immediately with minimal resource investment by the libraries of our partner universities, and the other which provided a design for greater systemic transformation of the national university library system. The set of specific technical recommendations on improving electronic infrastructure, connectivity and access proved to be the most useful part of the Cornell study and provided the university and library administration with a to-do list. EIFL's offer to negotiate access to the most comprehensive packages of resources at the most favorable rates, and OSF's commitment to provide funding for bringing these resources in the short-term, provided a tremendous incentive to universities to embark on large infrastructural projects. With our encouragement and the expert guidance from both Cornell and EIFL, universities reallocated the resources needed for these improvements from other less effective budget lines and worked hard to secure necessary government support. This was no small feat less than a year after internet censorship ceased to be enforced in the country, where internet was accessible only from the offices of Rectors and Pro-Rectors at a speed of 1 megabit per second⁷, where fiber-optic internet lines were untouched since they were damaged by cyclone Nargis in 2008, and in a system where all university computer workstations shared one IP address registered to the Ministry of Education.

The eLibrary project implemented by EIFL from January 2014 with HESP support provides access to premium on-line academic content to universities in Myanmar. Over 12,000 journal subscriptions and 150,000 e-books in the English language in all subjects covered by the university curriculum are currently available in a pilot project at the University of Yangon and Mandalay University. Access is provided through the library facilities, academic departments, research centers and campus Wi-Fi. A multi-level capacity, skills and technology building program which will ensure the widest possible integration of the e-resources in teaching and learning is underway, as well as negotiations on expanding the reach of the e-resources to other Myanmar universities. Despite its obvious focus on resource provision, the project is primarily seen as a support mechanism for our work on curriculum and faculty development. How can students develop critical thinking skills if they are unable to access different points of view? How can the curriculum be redesigned for the 21st century if faculty and students don't have access to 21st century resources? How can the faculty at Yangon and Mandalay deliver on the promise of exciting avenues for learning and debate and new quality of university experience their administrations made to the newly arriving 'outstanding

⁷ The bandwidth has now increased to 30 mbps at Yangon University and to 20 mbps at Mandalay – both unprecedented achievements throughout the government sector.

students' if a rare syllabus has a reading item published after 1988? Access to digital resources also opens up new opportunities for research.

Resource discovery is another important issue for the project - EIFL licensed the EBSCO Discovery Service, which has now been customized for both universities, and supported the development of the first independent university web sites which serve as gateways to the eLibrary and, at the same time, provide useful information about the universities' academic departments. Working with two local Project Coordinators⁸, a program of training and awareness-raising began in April 2014. There has been huge demand from librarians, faculty, and students. To date, the training sessions have attracted over 2,000 participants. The initial focus of the training was on librarians who had very limited, if any, computer experience and no experience in searching for information online. Librarians are starting to share their new knowledge and skills and are beginning to provide hands-on training to faculty and students. Previously, librarians never visited academic departments and now they are proud to be training their esteemed professors. This is a very exciting opportunity for them to make rapidly the same shift that has taken place more slowly in the rest of the world, as librarians have transitioned to research support professionals. The local Project Coordinators have not only provided training on resources and online search techniques, but also on how to set up email accounts and Facebook pages which have quickly turned into venues for students to discuss the issues of quality in their universities⁹. Plagiarism awareness-raising, which is part of the user training along with the novelty of plagiarism detection software, segues into the discussion of academic integrity among students and scholars.

The usage statistics prove that the work in licensing, network provision, resource discovery, training, and awareness-raising is paying off. During discussion of the EIFL grant proposal with the HESP Advisory Board in November 2013, we were asked to make projections for the use of the resources by the two universities and are now pleased to report that our optimistic estimates have been exceeded in both cases – four-fold, in the case of the University of Yangon. Over 5,000 searches were recorded in the EBSCO Discovery Service in July 2014, an increase of almost 3,000% per month since March 2014, and there were over 3,500 full text downloads in July 2014 compared to only 248 in March 2014.

The core positive consequences of this project are that **university administrations have been asserting their autonomy for resource management and infrastructure development in the face of the Ministry of Education, and that the available resources have opened a passage for a variety of new forms of scholarly and collegial engagement on campus and skills building**. Furthermore, IT and telecom corporations looking for projects to support, bring equipment and technologies to these universities which have the lifeblood of resources and a cause which helps ensure that their donations are put to a good use. The project attracted tremendous positive publicity in the leading media, both within and outside Burma.

We will continue to draw on EIFL's expertise in other key areas such as open access, copyright and consortium-building in 2015. EIFL is also exploring opportunities to roll out the project to other universities and hopes that four additional institutions which, following the start of negotiations engaged in similarly impressive infrastructural improvements will be able to participate by the end of the year. There is welcome news that the cost of subscriptions of commercial e-resources has been even lower than the optimistic estimates in the grant budget, so we are reallocating the saved funds towards intensifying the training of users to ensure a more effective and massive integration of resources in teaching and learning.

Looking into the Future

In the near future, HESP will work to ensure that the incipient agency for change within the system solidifies, gains further competence, and mobilizes the commitments of support and needed resources from both internal and foreign partners. In our terms, this agency lies primarily with individual academics and units within the partner institutions and networks of civil society actors with substantive stakes in the process of change in higher education. Our constructive engagement with the government will significantly aid in our efforts to mobilize the academic community for support and implementation of new policies and practices. We are ready to increase the grant-giving component in our Burma package and minimize our operational involvement by focusing on the issues and matters firmly in the core of OSF broader goals in Burma:

⁸ The eLibrary Myanmar project coordinators in Yangon and Mandalay happen to be the only two individuals in the country with western library study degrees and experience of managing large international libraries, which offers a wealth of opportunities for training the university library staff.

⁹ Yangon University Library already has over 2,000 friends - and they post regularly to promote awareness of the digital resources.

- designing a new modality of support to the departmental and institutional leaders and the most promising academics and members of civil society who need exposure, skills, support and empowerment to strengthen the local agency to carry reform forward (Academic Leadership Fellowship);
- integrating OSF Scholarships alumni into the academic community at the partner universities;
- supporting the formulation and implementation of student initiatives for causes of university reform, self-governance and inclusion;
- brokering new international institutional partnerships in line with the OSF-led curriculum reform agenda.

Based on the experience in Burma, we advance the following tentative recommendations which, upon further scrutiny, might guide HESP's interventions in other countries in transition:

- (a) in transitional environments, to secure access to the higher education system at various levels, we must be able to build a working relationship with the government and major political figures who have stakes in education reform;
- (b) in this relationship OSF should maintain its standing as an external and non-partisan actor and keep a healthy distance from any specific political factions to ensure that our contributions cannot be exploited for political gains (even if our allegiances would be obvious);
- (c) the focus of our early efforts must be less on policy change which may be highly unsustainable in volatile political environments and perceived as a questionable import, and more on universities, academics, and students— advancing their autonomy and strengthening their capacity for bringing change to the system from within;
- (d) inasmuch as local circumstances allow and demand, we must engage in breeding local expertise and autonomous capacity for action of local partners on matters of vision, policies and practice of the reform agenda and create opportunities for a handover of our operational work to such partners as they mature;
- (e) in a situation of political uncertainty and stalling systemic reform, work on curricula and methods of inquiry hold the most promise for improving the capacity for competent and relevant scholarship;
- (f) in those contexts where HESP is one of many external players, all poorly informed in local particulars and power relationships, we must be prepared to rely initially on our own operational work and engage in extensive learning by doing. This can be done by bringing small projects which offer the delivery of resources and skills much needed locally, thus affording us territory, time, and local audience for engagement;
- (g) we must bring elasticity to the principle of 'rapid action' which mandates short-term interventions with expectations of sustainable impact. Devising a viable strategy and identifying the best-placed and equipped partners who can carry forward the change agenda will demand careful reflection and adjustment. It is possible to expect that our involvement will be short-term on a broader systemic level (and may not necessarily be realistic upon first landing), but we may need to offer longer-term development scenarios to a limited number of most efficacious partners who can sustain and increase the pressure for change inside the system.

HESP in the Context of OSF's work in Burma

One issue constantly in the background and offering significant concern is the relationship between HESP's own engagement in Burma and the important record of valuable work of other OSF programs in the country. HESP is the first of OSF's thematic programs working almost exclusively with state actors and actively contributing to government-led reform efforts. Other programs have for years been supporting grassroots and marginalized actors in direct opposition to the junta as well as, on many counts, to the current quasi-civilian government despite its declarations of reform. We are well aware of the limitations and half-hearted nature of many of the government's reform projects and of the fact that this agenda is subject to constant shifts and augmentations based on political expediency. While, arguably, HESP's work has produced positive publicity to the image of OSF as a reliable and dedicated partner which delivers useful improvements in the country, we are aware of our limitations thus far to edge closer to the core of OSF's agenda in justice, rights, and active civic engagement in governance. This is partly due to the severe lack of progressive and competent capacity for action in higher education at the grassroots (referred to repeatedly in this paper), and to our original focus on 'unlocking' the system and infusing the existing higher education actors with a change agenda. We would like to believe, however, that our focus on the 'grassroots of academia', expanding the spaces of freedom, critical expression, and competent analysis on the cusp of the recently repressive state, will pay dividends and pave the way for our local partners' engagement on these issues. Our confidence is also inspired by the presence and perseverance of academic colleagues at various levels who share and express (however cautiously) commitment to the values and aspirations that distinguish OSF.