are private boarding schools for the surrounding region. These provide ninth and tenth grade pupils with full-day intensive training over a period of several months so that they attain good matriculation scores. The private schools – some of them now in foreign ownership – charge high fees, are not subject to any accreditation or quality control, devise their own curricula and are not licensed for the matriculation. Some private schools officially registered in the nearest related government high school so their students can sit for the government matriculation exam and their scores are recognized by the government. Other private schools are not registered in government high schools. Their main purpose is often to prepare pupils for study at a foreign university.

REGIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

The results of the 2014 Census reveal a very high rate of school education: nationally the proportion of the population who have received primary or more advanced education is usually more than 75%. In major parts of Shan State, however, the proportion is less than 25%, and in the peripheral parts of Kachin State and Nagaland it is less than 50%. Similar deficiencies in the completion of education (with percentages between 50 and 75%) occur in the remaining areas of Shan State, in southern Chin State and in parts of Rakhine State, Kayah State and Kachin State (MoIP 2015). A similar picture of geographical distribution emerges in relation to the absolute number of school leavers with primary and more advanced education: at township level there is a clear concentration in urban areas – especially in Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw. However, if one considers the regional distribution of the percentages of the population with primary and more advanced education categorised into four qualification levels – i.e. primary, middle and high school and other (including in particular diploma, university/college, postgraduate and vocational qualifications) – a more nuanced picture emerges. In the central lowlands, especially in Yangon and Mandalay and their wider environs, the high percentages of the population with primary school qualifications combined with the low percentages with high school and other higher (including university) qualifications indicate that there is a not insignificant bipolarity of qualification levels: the proportions of the population with on the one hand basic and on the other hand higher educational qualifications are high. By contrast, it is interesting to observe that in the minority and mountainous areas (clearly noticeable in Shan State and Chin State), alongside a comparatively high proportion of the population with primary school qualifications there is also
by comparison with the national average a relatively large proportion of the population with high school and higher educational status. As expected, an ‘urban effect’ is also apparent: within the townships of Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw the percentages of the population with higher educational qualifications are above average.

The literacy rate is very high overall for a developing country, being 89.5% for the population on average (92.6% of men, 86.9% of women; MoIP 2015). Considerable regional differences are found, however; for example, the rate in Yangon is around 96.6% compared to only 64.6% in Shan State. On national average, the rates for men are slightly above those for women; the lowest disparity between the genders amounts to 2.5% (in Yangon) while the highest is 16.6% (in Chin State) (Kraas/Spohner 2015).

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

After ten years of school education, students entering the colleges and universities are still very young. In consequence, Bachelor degree courses are at a level roughly equivalent to that of international high schools. However, the education system is currently undergoing a process of transition leading to a Kindergarten+12-year course of education prior to university entrance.

In recent years – despite all the shortcomings highlighted in the literature (Lall 2008 and 2016, Lorch 2007 and 2008) – there have been significant changes and improvements in the field of higher education. The number of higher education institutions (i.e. universities, degree colleges and colleges) in the country has risen steadily from 32 (1988) to the most recent figure of 171 (2016; MOE 2017: 35). New colleges and universities have been opened even in peripheral parts of the country (for example most recently in Hakha/Chin State). Both historically and in terms of current leading roles in research and teaching, the University of Yangon – the country’s top university – and the University of Mandalay are the peak educational institutions. In all, 653,475 students are registered at universities, degree colleges and colleges in Myanmar (2015; figures from the Ministry of Education). The University of Distance Education, with 306,987 enrolments, is the largest institution (2014/15; MNPED 2015: 119); it was formed from precursor institutions in 1992 and has two hubs, one for Lower Myanmar in Yangon (160,889 students in
2015), the other for Upper Myanmar in Mandalay (160,718 students; both figures: Ministry of Education). The country’s next-largest universities are Dagon University with 17,738 students, Yadanabon University with 16,497 and the University of Monywa with 10,390 students (2015; figures: Ministry of Education).

The country’s universities, degree colleges and colleges are widely dispersed across the regions: in each state or region there is at least one public university or college (Chin State was the last, acquiring Hakha Education College in 2017; before that it had only private colleges). Regionally, Yangon and Mandalay dominate the higher education scene: each has a number of universities, degree colleges and colleges. In addition, important trans-regional higher education locations are Monywa, Meiktila, Sagaing, Pakkoku, Taunggyi, Taungoo, Pyay, Pathein and Mawlamyine. The universities at Kalay, Myitkyina, Lashio, Dawai and Mawik provide regional Bachelor courses. There are also military training institutions, for example in Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Pyin Oo Lwin.

With regard to the range of subjects offered, the majority of universities offer subjects from the arts and sciences; at the same locations there are often also technological universities, which were under the control of the Ministry of Science and Technology before it merged with the Ministry of Education. Full universities have up to 20 departments; the majority offer a range of subjects that focuses on 12-14 disciplines. Institution-specific analysis reveals that there are also specialised universities, especially in the fields of medicine, economics and languages. These were or are often under the control of particular ministries such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Defence. Teacher training is provided via a number of education colleges that are dispersed throughout the country. Currently there are only a few universities that have close international links or stand out for their research achievements on any large scale.

EDUCATION – BEYOND THE LEARNING CONTENT

Myanmar has a developed and functioning multi-stage education system that is regionally widely dispersed and diversified and that over the decades has undoubtedly expanded and developed further. Efforts have been made to establish an education system that is accessible for all sections of the population and that is not polarised by a split between the government and private sectors and divided into ‘class societies’; during the last two decades there has also been no lack of attempts to adapt the education system to international standards (Gärtner 2011b: 16). However, since the early 1960s the education system has been increasingly eroded by political diktat, repeated restructuring and financial difficulties. It suffers as a result of little or no infrastructure replacement, the low pay of teachers and managers, limited international relationships and poor management and monitoring of quality standards. The situation is exacerbated further by the ‘no failure’ policy introduced in the mid-2000s and the preferential treatment of some groups that is inherent in the system.

However, Myanmar’s education system also has a series of structural peculiarities – which can be found in similar forms in other Asian countries. These must be taken into account in any comprehensive further development of the education sector (MOE 2017). The following are the main structural challenges that reflect the shortcomings of the system and are in need of reform (as comprehensively addressed in the new National Education Strategy Plan (MOE 2017; see also Kraas 2016a):

1 Teacher training and teachers’ pay: because of tight education budgets, the training of teachers usually takes the form of two-year intensive training programmes, for which the courses are heavily subscribed. Practical teaching experience is often gained by ‘learning by doing’. Since monthly salaries are very low in comparison to the private sector, in the vast majority of cases only women choose the teaching profession. Tuition classes that are provided outside the normal teaching
system and are paid for separately are a widespread source of additional income for school and university teachers (though one has to distinguish: not all teachers are offering tuition).

2 School accessibility and equipment: most schools are in one- or two-storey buildings with simple school benches and blackboards; in peripheral regions the pupils often sit on raffia mats. If not within walking distance, transportation to school must be organised by parents. This can mean long and difficult journeys, particularly in the rainy season. Even many universities that in the last ten years have been the subject of enormous infrastructure improvements (large, modern teaching and institute buildings, new accommodation for teaching staff and in some cases students) do not necessarily have technical equipment or an adequate electricity supply.

3 Teaching, learning and instructional methods: teacher-centred instruction involving rote learning and recitation of material are the standard practices; little time is scheduled for discussions or pupil presentations, although in recent years the Ministry has recommended and encouraged their introduction (student-centred teaching methods).

4 Costs of education: being the key to later professional success, education is valued highly – and significant amounts are spent on it. However, it is only possible to quantify the actual costs of educational success in any given instance by scrutinising them more closely: even though school attendance is free of charge, substantial costs are incurred – not just for school uniforms, books and materials (since 2016 books, material and school uniforms are free of charge in primary schools; MOE 2017: 36) but for other factors such as transport, tuition and social obligations – which many families find unaffordable. The problem of the additional costs that parents have to pay for tuition is often explained as an answer to the problem of the low salaries of teaching staff, but it is more complex than this: ‘Tuition as way of life apparently resulted from the coincidence of freedom for business in the framework of market economy and insufficient salaries, and it can be overcome only in the course of overall socio-economic development’ (Gärtner 2011b: 14). Tuition is a problem that is largely inherent in the system: many good students pay for their studies through tuition; when over the years they have acquired a good reputation as an effective tutor, many of them – attracted by the prestige, the good source of income and the freedoms of self-de-
termined teaching – set up schools of their own that become a sort of parallel learning institution in their own right. They thus become employers and legitimise themselves on the basis of their own success. As far as university education is concerned, many families are unable to afford it for their children – partly on account of the relatively high costs of enrolment but largely because of the additional amounts that must be found for accommodation, food, study materials and direct and indirect payments for supervision and examination services. The potential loss of income during the course must also be taken into account.

5 Education as a complex system of intertwined practices: families have to invest a great deal of money in (notably: good quality) education. Children are under an obligation, once they are established in successful careers, to repay these investments to their parents, either financially or in the form of care-giving (not as obligation but as practise).

6 Education merits recognition: but a different kind of currency is also in use in the education system; namely, esteem and prestige. Teachers from all levels of education are highly esteemed personalities. They are shown deep respect, not just on special occasions like the annual ‘saya gadaw pwe’ gatherings, where pupils honour their teachers and present them with gifts. For the teacher-pupil relationship is a bond that is more than merely functional: teachers give guidance over a lifetime; their advice is sought after. To the same extent that teachers demonstrate accountability for their pupils’ education, pupils are deemed to owe lifelong recognition to good teachers, who are often cared for by a fraternity of former pupils in their old age.

In future there will, in addition to the above-mentioned challenges, be a number of issues to be addressed in connection with specific training – such as vocational training and capacity development in the field of social work (Buzzi/Hayes/Mullen ca. 2012, Costello/Taik Aung 2015). Another issue requiring attention is the provision of life-long training, especially in view of the fact that training requirements and levels will change as the country develops and the system must be able to adapt promptly. International trends indicate that this calls for cooperation between the different stakeholders in the education system, namely the government, teachers, parents and pupils (Lall 2016, Metro 2016). However, platforms for such exchange are as yet few and far between. So far the focus has been on changing the mindset of teachers and students. The role of teachers is vital: they ‘have great potential to act as agents of change. Teachers are, however, as a group, highly conservative and traditionalist, and tend to resist change’ (Han Tin 2008: 115; see also Metro 2016).

One of the crucial issues concerns the basic orientation of the future education system – whether it will involve significantly improving and strengthening the public education system or place a greater emphasis on the promotion of private education. While the former can in the medium to long term promote equal access to education and fair distribution of educational opportunities, supporting ‘edu-business’ with the involvement of the private sector can lead to more rapid development and faster opening up of the international education market (Lall 2008), but does so in a manner that favours a small educational and economic middle and upper class and disadvantages or even excludes the broad majority of the population.

Educational migration is becoming increasingly important. Many parents decide to move from the countryside to the city in order to take advantage of the better facilities for education and healthcare and an anticipated wider range of employment opportunities: ‘some rural families have shifted towards urban areas because of the belief – real or imagined – that more job opportunities exist in the cities’ (Han Tin 2008: 116). International educational migration, too, is becoming more important and is no longer only for the upper classes and the growing economic middle classes. 

Frauke Kraas, Aung Kyaw and Nay Win Oo
### Higher Education: Subjects, Numbers of Students and Student-Teacher Ratio

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**Note:** The table lists universities along with their locations and subjects. The data is a snapshot and may not be complete or updated. Further research may be required for the most current information.