

Research Capacity of Myanmar Youth

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Background of Myanmar

Being one of the Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar has the population of 54 million (54,735,103) in 2020 (Department of Population, 2020a). It is among one of the lower middle income state¹ (The World Bank Group, 2015) but its poverty rate² is still 24.8 per cent in 2017 (Asian Development Bank 2020a). On the other hand, its Gross Domestic Production (GDP) is increased from 6.4 per cent in 2018 to 6.8 per cent in 2019 and annual growth rate is approximately 1.2 per cent.



Figure 1 Map of Myanmar
(Source: <http://www.operationworld.org/files/ow/maps/igmap/myan-MMAP-md.png>)

However, due to recent COVID 19 pandemic, it is expected to drop as low as 1.8 per cent in 2020 (Asian Development Bank, 2020b) (Figure 2).

Among different business sectors in Myanmar, the leading sector is service sector, 43 per cent, the second sector is industry, 32 per cent, and third is agriculture, 25 per cent of total GDP in 2018 (HKTDC Research, 2020) (Figure 3). The research industry is a part of the service sector.

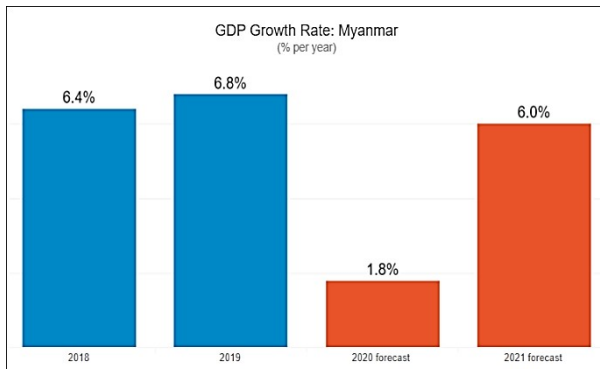


Figure 3 The GDP growth rate of Myanmar (Source: Asian Development Bank. Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2020 Supplement (June 2020))

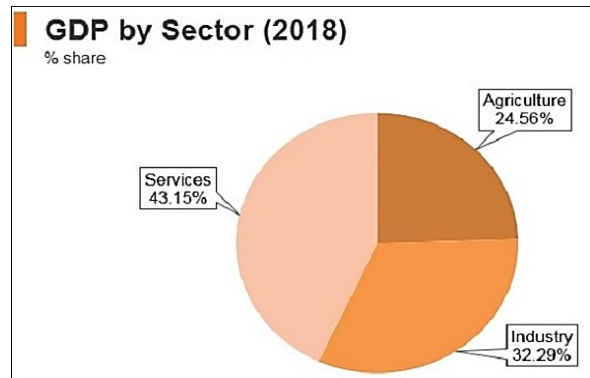


Figure 3 The GDP by sector in Myanmar (2018) (Source: HKTDC Research 2020. <https://research.hktdc.com/en/article/MzU4MDI4MzMz>)

¹ In 1 July, 2015, along with Bangladesh, Kenya, and Tajikistan, Myanmar was becoming lower-middle income countries, joining those with annual incomes of \$1,046 to \$4,125 upgraded by World Bank Group.

² Proportion of population living below the National Poverty Line (Asia Development Bank)

Based on the World Bank collection of development indicators, by compilation from officially recognized source, the research and development expenditure³ in Myanmar was reported to be less than 0.05 per cent of GDP in 2017.

Research Industry in Myanmar

Back to as early as 1980s, the research industry in Myanmar is still unknown or rarely recognized by the international audience. For an ordinary people, the research activity was assumed as only concerns of the local academia, the Colleges/Universities especially for their faculties and students from post-graduate and doctorate courses for their dissertation paper for their graduation degree. Some scholastic institutes also did some research works for their interest and needs of their institutes. Obviously, only less frequent government-led or industrial-based research work, for example, different socio-economical surveys, specific subject-wise, for example agricultural surveys, sector-wise or market surveys were reported or seen. Most of the research works did not mean for business but mainly for academic purpose and governmental departmental needs. Rarely seen was business orientated research work or services then. Its revenue and size of the service was not as huge as a recognizable industrial level. The most recognized government-led demographic population census during that period was done in 1983 (Department of population, 2020b). However, the complete publication of its results was never come out. In brief, it can say that the Myanmar Research Industry was not visibly born until late 1980s.

Slowly growing by entering of international non-governmental organizations (INGO) and booming industry under Myanmar military regimen during 1990s, the research activities among INGO and slowly growing research industry by a handful of local market research service providers dominated the field of research services. However, due to not properly and systematically documented, it is difficult to estimate the exact financial volume of the research industry in Myanmar.

Market Research

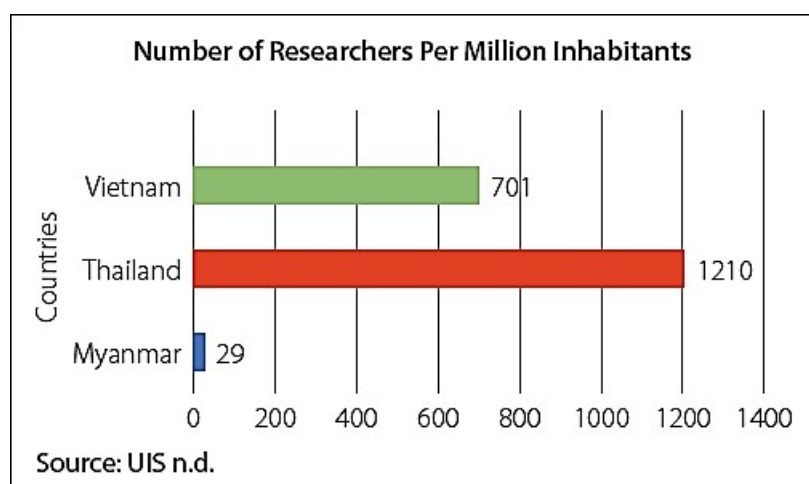
The current research industry in Myanmar is mainly composed of the private market research companies. The key players in this industry are mainly consisted of a few foreign market research companies for example, TNS, the joint venture companies, for instance, Nelson-Myanmar Market and Research Development (Nelson-MMRD), some non-profit organizations focus on research services, for example, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), some local companies, such as Myanmar Survey Research (MSR), Third Eyes, and some free-lance consultancy firms or individual consultants. Moreover, a distinctive government led or institute led research institutes or foreign institute based organizations. Different types of clients are recognized in this industry, both from local and abroad, United Nations (UN) organizations, INGO, local non-governmental organizations (LNGO), international organizations or companies, private corporates, Ministries, and government departments.

³ Gross domestic expenditures on research and development (R&D), expressed as a per cent of GDP. They include both capital and current expenditures in the four main sectors: Business enterprise, Government, Higher education and Private non-profit. R&D covers basic research, applied research, and experimental development.

Despite of no reliable data source, being as a part of service sector, the financial volume of market research is estimated to be not less than a few millions to a billion dollar in US dollar business in Myanmar.

Research Capacity

In recently released ‘Doing Research in Myanmar’ by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in June 2020, it was clear that the number of researchers per million



populations in Myanmar which was only two-digit figure, 29 was much reduced that other neighbouring countries such as Thailand, four-digit figure (40 times higher), 1210 and Vietnam, three-digit figure, 701 (24 times higher) (Figure 1).

Figure 4 The number of researchers among Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar (Source: IDRC, 2020b)

Moreover, the report highlighted some interesting findings in regards to the research capacity of

Myanmar – although international players focus on development of Myanmar, the attention on strengthening the research system is very low. Likewise, in relating to the development of the research capacity, it was reported some interesting and important issues such as research funding is low in government properties, the research funding allowed for some leading government institutes were limited, no central research policy, the public academic institutes are occupied with other activities rather than research work, female predominant researchers in government universities, poor collaboration among public research institutes and different government departments, and no peer review practice led to poor in research quality (IDRC, 2020a).

Research Ethics

Although growing in number, currently Myanmar has limited Ethical Review Committees (ERC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB). According to the international standards, before doing any research work, it should be applied for the ethical review, but due to the inadequacy of training obtained in research ethics, the essential role and responsibility of ERC in conducting research in Myanmar is still an issue of concern (Than, 2018). Most of the ERC or IRB at present are associated with Medical Institutes or Universities in Myanmar.

Myanmar Youth

According to the Human Development Report 2019 (United Nations Development Program, 2019), the Human Development Index (HDI) value of Myanmar for 2018 is 0.584, in the

medium human development category and ranked it at 145 out of 189 countries and territories).

In Myanmar, the most productive age group between 15 to 35 years old is composed of 35.58 per cent of the total population. This age group is also defined as ‘Youth’ in Myanmar (The Global New Light of Myanmar, 2018).

At present in the research industry in Myanmar, many Myanmar youth contribute in various positions. They take the role of research data collectors (enumerators/interviewers), moderators, recruiters, field supervisors, translators/interpreters, data entry staff, data analysts, research executives, report writers, research analysts, research managers, research consultants and a few as research directors. Depending on the status of the research company or institute, the capacity and position of the individuals, the salary may be varied from a few hundred to a few thousand in US dollars. Daily wage for those field staff such as data collectors, interviewers or supervisors may range from ten to twenty US dollars depending on their role and responsibility. Not only Myanmar citizen, but many expatriates are also employed in this industry, their rank and salary may be higher than those of average Myanmar youth.

Among those Myanmar youth employed in research industry, many were graduated from local Colleges/University as full-time or distance learning students. Their knowledge and skill on research field is restricted for various reasons. While a few of them are graduated from those Colleges/Universities from abroad and lately, such number is growing progressively as more open opportunities for them to study abroad and back home to be employed. Many private companies prefer to employ those youth graduated from abroad than those from local institutes because of their different learning style, concept and ways of doing work.

According to a small-scale finding of the online-enrolled youth population⁴ of 31, 15 male and 16 female, the age range between 19 and 34, done by the Thuta Nyana Co., in July 2020, the finding indicated that more than half of the respondents (18/31) could not explain properly about the question on ‘What is research?’ and more than a four fifth (28/31) were not clear on difference between the basic research and applied research, nearly half of them (13/31) though that the snowball sampling and quota sampling are some examples of probability sampling method. Only one tenth (3/31) could answer correctly that ‘Do no harm’ was the basic ethical rule of a research. More than three fourth of them (24/31) achieved the College/University level of education and one seventh of them (5/31) were in postgraduate level. About one seventh of them (5/31) were currently working in research field as data assistant, research assistant or part-time research staff. One third of the respondents (11/31) were INGO staff at present. Moreover, more than one third of the youth (12/31) had some extent of research experience in the past.

Nonetheless, the readers may argue that those youth were actually low in research knowledge and skill and that may be the reason why they would like to enroll to attend such basic

⁴ The survey was a pre-training assessment for the introductory basic research training by the Thuta Nyana Co.

research training. Interesting fact was almost all of them (29/31) were College or University level and significant portion of them were already in the research industry/businesses or development field but still had a limited knowledge in research.

Reasons and What Needed

In regard to the research capacity of Myanmar youth, some decade-old poor standard of education system is clearly recognized as one of the influencing contextual factors to be pointed out. The children of Myanmar are reported to be finished the education only up to average five years (5.0) (mean years of schooling) (7.4 among East Asia and the Pacific Region) in 2018 (United Nations Development Program, 2019) which means most of them have completed only primary school level. The poverty and inaccessible educational services may be obvious reasons of such drawback (The World Bank Group, 2017).

But more importantly, the Myanmar education system was not based on critical thinking or learning by problem solving approach for years, instead it was emphasized for the memorizing capacity the students. As a result, the Myanmar students were grown by learning by heart, not learning by thinking. Moreover, no basic research topics or subject to learn during the high school course. Even in College/University level, the research related theory and practice were taught as minimal or ineffectively learnt, not mention to the well-known international publications by the University students, which was exceptional.

The students were also motivated to complete their graduation course with any cost. Reportedly, the quality and the ethical fulfilment of those students' research paper were not very good as supposed to be. Under the military regime, people were reluctant to talk openly about any misuse or abuse of the research work in academic arena. All may contribute to the low knowledge, less interest and not focus on the quality and ethical requirements of the research work done. It seemed that the whole society, even including among those intellectuals (Teachers/students) performing the research undermined the value of the research or abuse the research work.

Gaps and Recommendations

In the early 20th Century, with the purpose of exploring and promoting art, science and literature in Myanmar and neighboring countries, the Burma Research Society was established by Eales J.S. Furnivall, J.A. Stewart and C. Duroiselle and Myanmar scholars such as U Me Oung in 1910. It published the well-known Journal of the Burma Research Society covering variety of topics in Myanmar in Myanmar and English. But after 70 years of activities, the society was unfortunately dissolved in 1980 (The Irrawaddy, 2019). It may be a cessation of some potential development of research field in Myanmar.

Since 2014, Myanmar has initiated the post-graduate one-year diploma program on Research Studies (DipRS) and another diploma course, Diploma in Statistic (DIS) by the Yangon University of Economics (Yangon University of Economics, 2020). A course of Master of Applied Statistics (MAS) has been opened since 2016. However, it is aimed for those

students holding a basic bachelor degree and available only in the Yangon University. For those who stay in various State/Regions, rather than in Yangon, unable to attend the College/University level, or only finished high school level, there are no much choices for them to get a basic research course with a reasonable cost. Even in the research industry, many research services and companies do not necessarily provide their employees on basic or advance research course during their tenure. That is the reason why many staff in research field has limited knowledge on basic research, and skill to do their work efficiently although they may have years of working experience in research field.

At present, a few INGO/LNGO focuses on research or interested institutes provide some kind of basic research and related topics, mostly free of charge, occasionally based on availability of funding sources. One challenge is they have very limited seats, or not consistently available because they are not much depended on the constant flow of funding sources, and most of them are open only in Yangon and Mandalay, rarely in other remote States/Regions. Again, a few services/institutes or individual consultants open some paid courses on basic or advance



Figure 5 The basic research training provided by MRA in 2019

research in big cities like Yangon and Mandalay. The course fee for those training costs approximate fifty to more than a hundred US dollar based on the topics of the training. Without affordability, those paid-courses are out of question for many youth among general population. Nonetheless, less frequently very small number of research courses providing free-of-charge by some individuals/firms. On the other hand, the knowledge provided by such trainings is very restricted. Very few groups in private sector research associations such as Market Research Association (MRA) or the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) provide some kinds of research based training off and on for their staff of their association members (Figure 5).

Some international institutes focus more on policy research capacity and democratic transition in Myanmar. For example, in 2017 the initiative Knowledge for Democracy in Myanmar (K4DM) project by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Global Affairs Canada aimed to developing meaningful dialogue in the democratic transition and to promote economic growth that benefits all women and men, regardless of ethnicity. It provided training in gender research, social policy, economic development policy, and public policy and political economy, targeted to train more than 150 young professionals and faculty from across Myanmar (IDRC, 2020b). Clearly, such project does not intend for those youth with low education attainment who need a very basic research knowledge and concept.

Some of the interesting suggestions from IDRC were to establish a national research centre to oversee all the research activities in Myanmar, and research evaluation system, emphasize the building capacity, foundations and budget for education institutes (IDRC, 2020a). However, the report did not mention about the youth in general population.

To improve the capacity of the Myanmar youth on research, especially who are in different States/Regions and unable to get the opportunities to learn about it, the first thing is to provide them basic research training with a reasonable cost. The purpose should be targeted on improving their basic knowledge on research such as what the research is, the basic process of a research work, sampling, role and responsibility of a data collector, and research ethics to follow and so forth. Better if the training is composed with some practical hand-on research exercise in small scale. Then let them expose to a real life research work, for example in social research or any other appropriate research field, paid or unpaid, first as a data collector, or field supervisor. Based on their interest and motivation, more advanced training on various research topics, for instance quantitative or qualitative research, data analysis, training on moderator/facilitator and basic applied statistical knowledge should be conducted. By such training, the research knowledge and skill of the youth will be improved and strengthened and able to improve the capacity of research industry in Myanmar. It may take a couple or few years to be complete. More training and increase coverage in States/Regions and include those of marginalized population, for example disabled youth is better for the youth as a whole.

No doubt that if there is no research, no development. For a country to develop, the research work is unavoidable. To be able to do so, the country should have a good basic research knowledge and skill. Without a good capacity of its research work force, we cannot expect a systematic research method and surely, the good and credible results to move on any further development project or work.

As a conclusion, the authors believe that if Myanmar would like to keep on developing in all fields, the improving of the research capacity of its youth is crucial and unavoidable to move a step further to catch up with the democratic and economic transition of the country.

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Abbreviations

DipRS	Diploma in Research Studies
DIS	Diploma in Statistics
ERC	Ethical Review Committees
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDI	Human Development Index
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
INGO	Non-governmental organization
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Action
IRB	Institutional Review Board
K4DM	Democracy in Myanmar
LNGO	Local non-governmental organization
MAS	Master of Applied Statistics
MMRD	Myanmar Marketing and Research Development
MRA	Market Research Association
MSR	Myanmar Survey Research
R&D	Research and development
UMFCCI	Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry
UN	United Nations

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