

Access to Overseas Higher Education for Karen Students from
the KNU-controlled areas: Barriers and Coping Strategies



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การเข้าถึงการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษา ในต่างประเทศของนักเรียนชาวกะเหรี่ยงจากพื้นที่ควบคุมโดย
สหภาพแห่งชาติกะเหรี่ยง: อุปสรรค และกลยุทธ์การรับมือต่อปัญหา



วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต
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การจัดบริการด้านการศึกษาในพื้นที่ควบคุมของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียง หรือ Karen National Union (KNU) นั้น มีความเกี่ยวข้องกับประเด็นการเมือง อันเนื่องมาจากการที่ประเด็นดังกล่าวมีความเกี่ยวข้องกับการพัฒนาและการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของชาติ ซึ่งการที่จะเข้าใจเรื่องการจัดบริการด้านการศึกษาในพื้นที่ควบคุมของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียง นั้น ความชอบธรรมเป็นกุญแจหลักในการเข้าใจประเด็นดังกล่าว ซึ่งตั้งแต่จุดเริ่มต้นของสงครามการเมืองในเมียนมาร์ หรือราวเจ็ดสิบปีที่ผ่านมา การจัดบริการด้านการศึกษาโดยสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียง ภายใต้กรมการศึกษาและวัฒนธรรมคะเหรียง ได้มีการพัฒนาหลักสูตรและการบริการจัดการของตนเอง ในพื้นที่ควบคุมของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียง อย่างไรก็ตาม นักเรียนไม่สามารถเข้าถึงระบบการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาในเมียนมาร์ได้ เนื่องจากระบบการศึกษาของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียงนั้นไม่ได้รับการยอมรับโดยรัฐบาลเมียนมาร์ และมีจำนวนนักศึกษาส่วนน้อยเท่านั้น ที่สามารถเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาได้ในต่างประเทศ ซึ่งการที่สหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียงนั้น เป็นผู้มีความควบคุมในพื้นที่ดังกล่าว การศึกษาชั้นนี้จึงได้แย่งให้เห็นถึงบทบาทและความรับผิดชอบของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียงในการดำเนินการเพื่อให้ได้บรรลุซึ่งสิทธิในการศึกษา เนื่องจากรัฐบาลเมียนมาร์ไม่สามารถเข้าถึงและมีอำนาจการควบคุมในพื้นที่เหล่านี้ การศึกษานี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อระบุอุปสรรคที่สำคัญของนักเรียนในการเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษา โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดบนพื้นฐานของสิทธิในการศึกษา โดยเฉพาะเกี่ยวกับความพร้อมและการเข้าถึงการศึกษา และสำรวจการรับมือของนักเรียนต่ออุปสรรคในการเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับชั้นอุดมศึกษา การศึกษานี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยใช้การศึกษาเฉพาะกรณี (case study approach) ผ่านกระบวนการวิเคราะห์แบบแก่นสาร (thematic analysis) นอกจากนี้ การศึกษานี้พบว่าอุปสรรคต่อการเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษา ของนักเรียนภายใต้การศึกษาในระบบของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียงนั้น มีอุปสรรคสำคัญสามประการในเชิงปฏิบัติ และอุปสรรคสำคัญสองประการในเชิงโครงสร้าง ซึ่งได้รับอิทธิพลโดยตรงจากรัฐบาลเมียนมาร์ โดยการรับมือกับอุปสรรคดังกล่าว นักเรียนได้ใช้เครือข่ายทางสังคม ทุนมนุษย์ และการเคลื่อนย้าย เพื่อมุ่งไปสู่การเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาในต่างประเทศ กล่าวคือ นักเรียนสามารถเข้าถึงการศึกษาได้ต่อเมื่อเดินทางมายังชายแดนไทย-เมียนมาร์ เนื่องจากประเทศไทยเป็นช่องทางแห่งโอกาส สิ่งนี้ได้ชี้ให้เห็นว่านักเรียนที่อพยพ และลี้ภัยจากชายแดนไทย-เมียนมาร์นั้น สามารถเข้าถึงการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาได้มากกว่านักเรียนที่ศึกษาอยู่ภายใต้การควบคุมของสหภาพแห่งชาติคะเหรียง

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--|
| ACU | Australian Catholic University |
| DoAE | Department of Alternative Education |
| EAOs | Ethnic Armed Organizations |
| ECCD | Early Childhood Care and Development |
| GED | General Education Development |
| HRBA | Human Rights Based Approach |
| ICRC | International Convention of the Rights of the Child |
| ICESCR | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| ICCPR | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| IDPs | Internally Displaced Persons |
| KECD | Karen Education and Cultural Department |
| KNU | Karen National Union |
| KTTC | Karen Teacher Training College |
| MBA | Market Based Approach |
| MHEP | Minmahaw Higher Education Program |
| MOE | Ministry of Education |
| NCA | National Ceasefire Agreement |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| TPC | Teacher Preparation Center |
| UDHR | Universal Declaration of Human Rights |

CHAPTER I

Background of the Study

1.1 Introduction

The provision of education is a political issue as it is key to development and national identity building. It is not only crucial for individual development but also important for fostering social inclusiveness, cohesion, and stability. Through the process of education, peace can be built and enhanced via peaceful dialogue and constructive sharing and debates as higher institutions can not only serve as venues in facilitating a wide variety of peace building activities, but it is also crucial in nurturing well-informed, intellectual, and peace-loving professionals owing to its transformative power driven by a wide range of epistemic communities. Therefore, it is little wonder that education is seen as human rights and human rights based approach to education is often deployed in order to reach education for all goals. The approach is significant because it pinpoints the responsibilities and accountabilities of governments in the provisions of education. It was Kofi Annan who famously stated, “Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy, and sustainable human development” (as cited in Humme, 2012, p.1).

Unfortunately, the right to education in Myanmar is still a far-reaching dream for many children despite of the current education reforms. Chronic inequalities in access to education are common across the country due to the prolonged underinvestment and mismanagement of the education system under successive regimes (Mears et al., 2015a). This mainstream chronic inequality is particularly more severe among ethnic areas due to conflicts that have been continuing for the past seven decades. In fact, as ethnic education systems are not recognized by the mainstream government system, access to education in ethnic controlled areas is even more challenging despite the important roles that the ethnic education systems play in providing access to education for children in hard-to-reach areas and supplementing the government system. Specifically, the Karen like many other ethnic groups have been

experiencing political marginalization as they are structurally excluded in the country while they have been experiencing the world longest ongoing civil war. In fact, the Karen has its own territorial control and governing areas like many other ethnic groups in the country. Due to the peculiar nature of the existing structural exclusion and marginalization, political marginalization does not necessarily require active conflict and violence against the Karen. Besides, there is also lack of responsibilities and accountabilities of the central government to protect the rights of children from conflict affected areas, especially regarding the right to education. This is greatly attributed by the lack of recognition of citizenships for many children in the Karen and other ethnic administrative areas. Nevertheless, the KNU, as a self-proclaimed government with its own administrative areas, has the roles and responsibilities of fulfilling the rights to education for its populations in its administrative areas because the central Burmese government does not have legitimacy and control over the education services in the KNU fully controlled areas. Through its administrative department called the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), the KNU is providing education services to the populations under its controlled areas. However, little is known about the extent to which KNU's provisions of education can fulfill the rights to education in line with international human rights norms and standards. Furthermore, as the KECD's education system is not recognized by the central government, access to mainstream higher education in the country is a major challenge for students under the Karen education system. However, little is known about barriers and coping strategies for students under the system in accessing mainstream higher education. In Myanmar, as the civil war has passed over half-century, this phenomenon of the lack of recognition of learning attainments from ethnic education systems is not particular to the Karen, as it is widespread across the country. For these children under ethnic education systems in the country like the Karen education system, access to mainstream higher education seems to be out of reach due to the lack of recognition and structural exclusion.

Specifically, this lack of recognition of learning attainments under the Karen education systems not only have enormous impacts on students' access to higher

education, but also refrain them from developing their full and future potentials. As students from the Karen education system cannot have access to mainstream higher education in the country due to the lack of recognition of their learning attainment, it is of imperative to explore the barriers and coping strategies of the students in access to overseas higher education as a handful number of these students could find their ways to access overseas higher education. Nevertheless, little is known about their struggles towards pursuing overseas higher education, as they cannot access mainstream higher education in Myanmar. While considerable attention is given to the issues of refugees and migrants in relation to accessing overseas higher education (Esses et al., 2013; Kolowich, 2014, UNESCO, 2015; Kosha et al., 2014; Johnson, 2013; Maclaren, 2010; Zeus, 2010), there is a dearth of studies focusing on the barriers and coping strategies of students from the Karen education system particularly under the KNU administrative areas in respect of their access to overseas higher education. Therefore, through the systematic study of barriers and coping strategies of students under the Karen education, this study aims to fill in this knowledge gap by applying human rights based approach because human rights based approach pinpoints the responsibilities and accountabilities of the government in fulfilling the rights to education for its respective populations.

1.2 The politics of naming the KNU education system as ‘mainstream’ versus ‘alternative’

Education systems in Myanmar are highly political because there are different contesting systems in the country between the central government and the ethnic armed groups. Particularly, the Karen education system is very controversial and political with regards to whether it can be considered as “mainstream” or “alternative” education due to its nature of administrative structure and political determination. Under the central government education system, there are five segments, which are namely: early childhood care and development (ECCD), basic education, alternative education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and higher education. In fact, the non-state actors including the Karen education system is considered as alternative

education under the Department of Alternative Education (DoAE) as the DoAE is overseas programs to enhance access to education in Myanmar by targeting students in conflict zones and migrant areas. However, the DoAE's programmes are relatively new as it only started before the end of the previous government and the DoAE has no control over the Karen education system due to the nature of the political conflicts in the country over the past seventy years. The Karen education system has independently been running under the Karen Education and Culture Department of the Karen National Union since independence in 1948. Therefore, whether the Karen education system can be considered as alternative education is highly political and debatable. By naming the Karen education system as alternative education system, it would put the KNU into political disadvantages and it could weaken the KNU's position in the political dialogue with the central government. On the other hand, this gives the central government a better position for political dialogue with the KNU. As this study is to solely explore the roles of the KNU and the Karen education system with regards to the students' access to overseas higher education in the KNU-controlled areas in which the central government has no control over the areas, the Karen education system is used as mainstream education system under the KNU. Therefore, the Karen education system is considered as "mainstream" rather than "alternative" in this study.

1.3 Research Questions

This proposed study will explore and describe the different barriers for students under Karen education system in KNU-governed areas in accessing overseas higher education and how have the barriers been coped. Moreover, it will answer the following specific questions:

1. What are the barriers for students under Karen education system in KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education?

2. How have students under Karen education system from KNU-controlled areas coped with the barriers in accessing overseas higher education?

1.4 Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of the proposed study aligned to the above-mentioned specific questions:

1. To identify the major barriers for students under Karen education system in KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education.
2. To explore the coping strategies of students under Karen education system in KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education.

1.5 Research Methodology

This section covers research methodology detailing research design, participants, and instruments as well as methodology matrix and interview strategies. Research procedure is explained in the last part of this section in relation to the three stages of this research procedure, which includes preparations and communication, data collection strategies, and data analysis.

1.5.1 Design

In order to gain insights and understanding to the research questions, the researcher applied descriptive qualitative design. The researcher conducted in-depth interview as to capture the whole picture of their experiences. More specifically, the interviews helped in determining the commonality of experiences in terms of the participants' barriers toward attaining quality higher education. It also elicited a wide-range of different opportunities, support actions and possible solutions to the identified barriers that were derived from the rich experiences of the different participants. The researcher also used key informant interviews as described in the following. In order to realize research objectives, secondary resources were also reviewed.

1.5.2 Research Participants

There were four groups of participants in this study. First, the study included students who finished high school from Karen education system in Myanmar and have

successfully entered into overseas higher education. The second group of participants were those students who recently graduated high school under Karen education system in KNU-governed Karen State. The areas of the study were based on in Karen State and the recruitment of the participants was subjected to snowball sampling method due to the limited available information about the number of the study targets, especially for the first groups. Each group had 4 participants except the expert which had 3 participants. Regarding key informants from the education organizations, the researcher interviewed four participants who are senior members of the Karen Education and Cultural Department, the Australian Catholic University and the Minmahaw Higher Education Program.

Lastly, the researcher also interviewed three key experts in the field in order to deepen insights and understandings of the barriers and coping strategies of students. In fact, comments and suggestions of the experts were very important for the discussions and analyses of the findings. One of the experts was a scholar who has written extensively about politics, ethnic conflicts and ethnic education systems in Myanmar including the issues related Karen education system. The other expert was a former director of Thabyay Foundation and he has extensive experiences in directing alternative education for students both under the mainstream systems and ethnic education system. He also has been supporting and working with ethnic education organizations for several years. Lastly, the other key expert was a senior member of the National Network for Education Reform (MNER) and a leading education reform activist in Myanmar.

Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD)

Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), until recently known as Karen Education Department is administered by Karen National Union (KNU) and it is a non-profit which supports more 1500 schools across Southeast Myanmar. Its education system focuses on integrating Karen language, history and ethnic identity into school curriculum to promote the right to mother tongue education and the right to education for Karen people since 1947. Over 1,000 schools, from primary to post-secondary

school level, its system has adopted its curriculum and system with Karen majority refugee camps around Thai-Burma borders and Karen State. Approximately, there are 32 high schools that are purely using KECD curriculum in KNU-controlled areas. In 2019, the KECD started its GED pilot program aiming to bridge students from KECD to overseas higher education. As KECD is our main study target, key informants from the organization are crucial for the study so that the study invited two key informants from KECD.

Minmahaw Higher Education Program (MHEP)

Founded in 2009, the MHEP is considered to be the best one-year bridging program that serves 24 students through preparing them to sit for the American GED exam. It is located in Mae Sot, Tak Province, Thailand and a well-known program around Thai-Burma border among students from refugee camps and migrant areas. With an aim to promote, support, and increase access to internationally recognized education for migrant and refugee students, the majority of the students who have entered international universities have studied at the MHEP for their GED preparations due to the lack of recognition of their learning attainments from migrant and refugee schools. Normally, students who have finished their higher educations and post-ten level education run by NGOs and KECD around Thailand-Burma border, for some with working experiences in CBOs and NGOs join the MHEP in order to get the American GED certificate for their university admission at international universities around the world. Many of the study population also have experienced the MHEP for their GED certificates before entering universities; therefore, key information from the MHEP is very crucial for the study taking their rich experiences in bridging students from unrecognized education systems to universities around the world for the past two decades. The experiences from the MHEP will not only be useful for the study but also for ethnic education systems in addressing issues related to the lack of recognition of learning attainments.

Australian Catholic University (ACU)

The ACU has been involving in the provision of higher education for migrant and refugee students since 2003 and it is a one and half year program diploma program. It is also a pretty popular program for students and staff of NGOs and CBOs around Thai-Burma border. Providing diploma in liberal studies, the diploma is taught in mixed mode; online and face-to-face teaching. As some of the universities in Hong Kong and Thailand recognize this diploma, some students use it for university admission; however, it is very useful for job application for the majority of the students as the ACU aims to provide tertiary education for young members from migrant areas and refugee camps. Apart from the MHEP, the ACU is also a popular bridging program for some students to get into mainstream higher education. Therefore, the ACU is selected, as one of the key informants for the study and experiences and information from the ACU is significant in reaching the study objectives.

1.5.3 Methodology Matrix and Interview Strategies

| Main Research Questions | Sub-Research Questions | Data Needed | Information Sources & Interviewees | Potential List of Interviewees | Tools/ Methods of Data Collection |
|--|---|---|--|--|---|
| What are the barriers for students under Karen education system from KNU-controlled areas in access to overseas higher education and how have they been coped? | What are the barriers for students under the Karen education system from KNU-controlled areas in access to overseas higher education? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available programs and opportunities the government is providing as for students to get a college degree (bridging programs) - Available options in acquiring further education/ taking a college degree? - Factors inhibiting students' access to overseas higher education (barriers) - Factors maintaining these barriers - Family expectation (from students) - The necessity of day-to-day living in Karen State - Student's day-to-day living - Institutional structures (KECD's policy/ political will) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document Reviews; - Ethnic education leaders; - Education NGOs workers, - Overseas university students - Current high school students or recently graduated high school students - Experts in the field | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 college students 4 current or recently graduate high school students 4 key informants 3 experts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Documentary research analysis - In-depth interview with participants - key informant interviews - In depth interviews with experts |

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|---|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student's aspirations to higher education - Student's perceptions towards the barriers - External factors influencing or inhibiting students' access to overseas higher education - Myanmar education system (laws, policies, education inequality both secondary and higher education) - Education related articles and issues under NCA | | | |
| | How have students under Karen education system from KNU-controlled areas coped with the barriers to access overseas higher education? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Factors trying to change or reduce these barriers - Institutional shift (KECD's policy changes) - Available programs and opportunities for accessing overseas higher education - External factors influencing change or reduction of the barriers (NCA, 2015 education reforms) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document Reviews; - Ethnic education leaders; - Education NGOs workers, - Overseas university students - Experts in the field higher education | 4 college students 4 key informants 3 experts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Documentary research analysis - In-depth interview with participants - key informant interviews - In depth interviews with experts |

Table 1 Methodology Matrix and Interview Strategies

1.5.4 Research Procedure

| Preparation & Communication (Stage-1) |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generate Research Proposal, Interview Protocol, and consent form Countercheck with academic supervisor Obtain ethical review approval and proposal approval by thesis committee and department Set appointment with the interviewees |
| Data Collection (interviews) (Stage-2) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain research summary to the interviewees (in local language) Obtain prior consent from the interviews Conduct interview (Online) |
| Data Analysis (Stage-3) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce a complete transcription of the voice recorded interviews into English (if needed) Utilize multiple codes to analyse the responses (Thematic analysis) Generate emerging themes Draw conclusion |

Table 2 Research Procedure

The research procedure consists of three phases. The first phase was related to the processes of preparation and communications for potential participants for the study. In the preparations, the researcher generated the thesis proposal under the supervision of the academic supervisor and this included the detailed preparations of the interview protocol and identifying potential participants for effective interviews.

1.5.4.1 Data Collections

The Second Phase of the study relates to data collections, consisting of in-depth interviews and secondary document reviews. For the in-depth interviews, Burmese and Karen was used as a medium of language based on the participants' preference; however, the interviews with experts were conducted in English and Burmese. Firstly, the researcher explained the conduct of the 50-minute interview to each participant and distributed consent forms prior from the agreed schedule of the interviews. It was audio-recorded and the researcher followed the questions listed in the approved interview protocol. A more detail of in-depth interviews is discussed below.

1.5.4.2 In-depth Interviews

The significance of the study lies in the nature of the study. Since the study is to identify the barriers of students from Karen education system in access to mainstream higher education and how the identified barriers are overcome, it is essential to maintain the quality of the research findings. Moreover, as the study is also to explore the relationships between higher education and human capital development and peace in the context of protracted conflicts in Myanmar, insightful understandings of experiences of the students who have accessed to mainstream higher education are essential for the quality of the study. Therefore, in-depth interviews are important to maintain the quality of the study as in-depth interviews have several advantages over quantitative means of gathering information as quantitative methods have high potential to limit the scopes of responses from the participants. For instance, responses from the in-depth interviews may provide a more holistic and in-depth perspectives and explanation on a certain experience, idea, or issue. Furthermore, there are some

constructs or variables that cannot be really measured through structured or constrained questions so that in-depth interviews are significant to this study.

1.5.4.3 Documentary Review

The use of secondary documents from government, non-governmental organizations, and independent researchers were utilized in order to gather more information on Myanmar education systems, Karen education system, and ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Through the use of policy documents and theoretical papers, the researcher deepened understandings of key concepts of the study; rights to education, social network, and human capital as well as social capital as a whole.

1.5.4.4 Data Analysis

First, the researcher produced a complete transcription of the voice-recorded interviews into English for data analysis and for coding of the results of these responses. All sets of information collected from the interviews and data mining were subjected to thematic analysis as to identify the barriers in accessing quality higher education as perceived and experienced by the different groups of participants, as well as, to offer solutions to the said problem derived from this study. The themes of the study were identified through the commonality of the responses of the participants from data mining and they were guided by the 2As of the rights to education utilized in the conceptual framework as the questions of the study derived from the different elements of the 2As under the conceptual framework of the study. Thematic analyses are important as they produced and presented the data more effectively and reflected the reality of the data elicited from the responses of the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2014; Hayes, 1997). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis also provides rich, detailed and complex data, while Blacker (2009) also pointed out that researchers and readers could be benefited from a rich thematic description of the entire data in grad a sense of “the predominant and important themes” from the data (p.83). The study data analysis strategy was chiefly based on the models of Miles and Huberman (1994). Specifically, coding was an integral part of the analysis as themes are developed from it. In this study, the design and structure of the coding

strategy deployed the strategy developed by Gibbs (2002, p. 192) since it is simple and effective. Additionally, this study also utilized a variety of quotations elicited from the responses of the participants in order to support the emerging themes that were observed with evidences. The use of quotations was explained as providing evidence, support, and validates interpretations (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Gibbs, 2002). Thus, presenting different quotations was also significant to the validation of the interpretations of themes as well as the observations.

1.6 Scope of the Research

In order to understand the experiences and coping strategies of students under Karen education system, the scope of the research focuses on participants who are current or recently graduated high school students and had graduated from Karen secondary education system in KNU-controlled areas in Myanmar and make their way to overseas higher education. Data collections are limited to key informants from the point of views of ethnic and non-governmental organizations in respect of difficulties and time constraint of research procedure in Myanmar. Normally, the request process takes considerable time to get approval from the government only if the research is perceived as appropriate by the government.

1.7 Limitations of the Research

Three limitation were encountered during the fieldwork research. Firstly, due to the difficulties of accessing students who recently graduated from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas during the present global pandemic crisis, the researcher depended on the members of the K-GED program for the participants of the recently graduated high school students. As the researcher could not travel to the KNU-controlled areas because of the restrictions and measures of the COVID-19, the researcher could only recruited students who recently graduated from high school in the KNU-controlled areas and could join the K-GED program in the Thai-Myanmar border and the proportions of the interviews were based on the K-GED's accessibility for the first group of the student participants. This may not be able to represent the whole

population of the students from the KNU-controlled areas; however, the interviews could represent some of the most privileged groups of the students in the KNU-controlled areas as these recently graduated students could enter the K-GED program. Secondly, due to the lack of data and information about the students who have access to overseas higher education, the researcher experienced a great challenge for the recruitment of the college students; however, the researcher could only identify four participants who met the criteria of the college students through members of education organizations in the Thai-Myanmar border and Karen college students who are recently studying at overseas universities. It has to be noted that it was extremely difficult to determine how representative these four case studies were for the college students who have access to overseas higher education from the KNU-control owing to the lack of information available. These four case studies were exceptional cases and the best practices from the KNU-controlled areas. Therefore, their insights and experiences were very significant for this study. Thirdly, there were four organizations that the researcher originally planned to interview; nevertheless, only three organizations could be reached and interviewed in person. Though the researcher tried to reach the other organization via online, there were no responses from the organization which is based in Myanmar.

1.8 Ethical Considerations

Proper ethical considerations were observed utmost by the researcher in conducting data mining procedure. The researcher distributed consent forms prior from the agreed schedule of the online interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher used the questions listed in the approved interview protocol. All of the participants' responses are kept confidential and documents and data collected related to this study were subjected to the use of passwords. Information dissemination of the results of the study would only be used for the thesis purposes. Apart from the thesis purposes, the researcher also attained prior approvals from the participants for further dissemination of the results of the study. In order to validate the authenticity of the

participants' response, the researcher asked the participants to countercheck the transcriptions of the interview a week after the agreed schedule and obtained their approval on the content of the said document.

1.9 Significance of the Research

The research enriches the understanding of challenges and opportunities of Karen youth under the Karen education system. The identification of barriers has helped design plausible intervention programs for Karen youth in accessing overseas higher education. This may have huge impacts the future students under the Karen education system in KNU-controlled areas to access overseas higher education. If youth from Karen education system have more access to overseas higher education, this will alleviate the generational gap of highly educated human capital development for the Karen people. As minority ethnic groups in Myanmar have similar struggles in relation to access to higher education, similar intervention programs can be replicated in other ethnic areas. This will have a gradual impact on creating a more prospect, intellectual, and peaceful society under federal system, where the fundamental human rights of all can be protected and enjoyed. This study will serve as a good reference for educational and curriculum experts, community leaders and developers in designing educational intervention programs. It can also be used as policy suggestions or recommendations for policy makers as issues of this study lie at the heart of policy implications. Last but not least, this study can certainly benefit future researchers as a reference and encourage them for further studies of the proposed study area because the area is not only a new field of academics but also a uniquely important area for more attentions to be paid.

CHAPTER II

Literature Reviews and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Literature Review

This section reviews Myanmar education system and Karen education system as well as inequality in access to mainstream higher education in Myanmar based on region and type of community in order to enrich understanding of the education systems in Myanmar. They can be referred to section 2.1.1, 2.1.2 and 2.1.3. It also covers key concepts that are important in strengthening understanding of barriers and coping strategies of the students from Karen education system in access to mainstream higher education and enhancing comprehension of accessing higher education. The key concept also includes human rights based approach to higher education in section 2.1.4. In the last part of this section, it outlines details of conceptual framework in the section 2.2.

2.1.1 Myanmar Education System

Under the Myanmar National Education Law, the Chapter-6 outlines the types of schools in the country as below: (a) Government schools; (b) Government supported schools; (c) Schools owned by regional organizations; (d) Private or Independent schools; (e) Monastery schools; (f) Charity schools; (g) Special education programme schools; and (h) Mobile and emergency schools (as cited in ILO, 2014). As described, schools under ethnic education systems are not included. Despite ethnic education systems supplementing the government mainstream system and providing education to children in conflict affected areas, usually in ethnic areas, the national education law does not recognize the ethnic education system and disregard the roles of the ethnic education systems. Among these abovementioned types of schools in the country, only those schools that use the government curriculum can transfer to mainstream lower-level education at government schools and have access to higher education in the country. Even private or independent schools using international curriculums cannot transfer their students to government schools and access to mainstream higher education in the

country though students from these schools are eligible to apply for university abroad and existing international universities in the country if they can afford it. In fact, access to international university inside the country is almost exclusive to those students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, there is a huge gap in access to higher education between rural and urban areas as well as between major cities and ethnic areas. In addition, the lack of decades of underinvestment and mismanagement of the education systems has not only affect children' access to education but also the quality of education provided by the government. In a recent study, the state education system is described as a very weak education system by any standard (Mears et al., 2016). This corresponds to a previous study that examined "the educational cost of army rule in Burma" as the author described that the state education systems "prevent children from learning how to think" by "invok[ing] ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens" (Lwin, 2000, 15-16).

Apart from the low quality of education provided by the government, education inequality is particular to higher education because it is also widespread at elementary and secondary levels across the country. Particularly, dropout rate at secondary is very high across the country though secondary education is also considered to be the most significant level of education for fostering economic development, particularly in developing countries (Lee & Kim, 2009). This may partly be attributed by the lack of recognition of education systems apart from the government systems. It has also been highlighted that more than half of global poverty could be reduced by the fulfillment of universal secondary education in developing nations (UNESCO, 2017). In Myanmar, following the national education reform in 2015, the Ministry of Education (2016) established that it is necessary to fulfill universal primary and secondary education in order to nurture human capital for the promoting of national development. Nevertheless, only 16.5 percent completed secondary education out of 62.8 percent enrolment rate in 2017 despite the 83.2 percent out of 97.7 percent enrolment rate at primary education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). As global completion rates of primary

education, lower secondary and upper secondary are 83 percent, 69 percent, and 45 percent respectively in 2018 (UNESCO 2018), the 16.5 percent completion rate of secondary education in Myanmar is comparatively very low. In the study of enrolment status disparity of secondary education in government schools in the urban areas of Yangon, based on different socio-economic backgrounds, Yoshida (2019) found that students from low socio-economic group shows the worst enrolment rate and there is a significant disparity in secondary enrolment based socio-economic backgrounds. This educational inequality must be significantly higher in rural and ethnic areas due to the nature of chronic marginalization and under investments towards rural and ethnic populations. However, little is known about the education disparities due to the nature of marginalization and conflicts, especially in contested ethnic areas.

Regarding education systems in contested ethnic areas, there are two underlying documents that require careful attentions. First, the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the government and some of the ethnic armed groups, signed on October 15, 2015, is critically significant for ethnic education systems across the country because the prospects of the integrations of different education systems and the recognitions of the ethnic education systems will greatly be determined by the peace progresses and processes in the country. The fighting between the government and the NCA signatories could resume at any time and it is worth attention that the peace process is currently undergoing deadlocks (Myint, 2015). Under the NCA, education is mentioned four times (as cited in United Nations, 2015);

Article 9 (a): “Both parties agree to jointly strive to provide necessary development assistance to improve the livelihoods of civilians in the fields of health, education, nutrition and housing, and regional development;”

Article 9 (h): “In accordance with the laws, no educational opportunities shall be prohibited; there shall be no destruction of schools or training facilities; and no disturbances to school staff or student;”

Article 9 (k): “There shall be no destruction of public facilities such as hospitals, religious buildings, schools, and medical clinics without credible

reason. No stationing of military bases shall be permitted in such public facilities;” and

Article 25 (a -1): “Both parties agree to carry out projects concerning the health, education and socio-economic development of civilians in coordination with each other.”

In spite of the agreements under the NCA, little progress has been made and little can be expected. In relation to NCA, a recent study described that there is still lack of access to quality education with affordability and safety for children in Southeast Myanmar despite the NCA and increasing national education expenditures for all citizens in the country (KTWG, 2018). In a recent review of NCA in Myanmar, Ashley South (2016) highlights that peace process must go beyond political dialogue, as there is a structural gap in the provision of public services in the fields of education and health between the state and those ethnic armed groups demonstrating state-like governance in their controlled areas like KNU. He also stressed that the provisions of these public services such as education is a key point to negotiate in order to manage the issues of legitimacy and displacement of the existing local arrangement of public services that could hamper trust and understanding between the state and the EAOs. However, there is not only little progress in peace negotiation, but the KNU, the major actor of the EAOs in the NCA, also temporarily withdrew from political dialogue, indicating backward progress of peace negotiation in the country. In addition to the NCA, another important document is National Education Law, which is central to the current debates over mother tongue based education and the decentralization of education in the country. The National Education Law is contested, as it is believed to be highly centralized, resulting in huge protests by the students (as cited in South 2016). There seems to be little changes under the new law regarding government control over the education systems as a previous study found that government education systems in Myanmar are highly centralized (Zobrist & McCormick, 2013). Though the new law does not prohibit the teaching of minority languages in addition to Burmese as the medium of instruction at primary level, there is lack of resources and support provided

for the teaching of minority languages by the government in ethnic areas (Décobert, 2016a). This may be attributed to the fact that the language of teaching is highly political and this relates to the issue of legitimacy. In fact, “[i]ssues of legitimacy are key to understanding current education systems in Myanmar as well as how education can feed into the dynamics of conflict or peace building” (Décobert, 2016, p.4b). A number of scholars in recent studies of education systems in Myanmar highlight that ethnic health and education providers under the administration of EAGs are perceived to be more legitimate than those providers under the state by the locals (Jolliffe, 2014; Décobert, 2016). There is a recent trend of competing legitimacy between departments of EAGs and those counterparts from the government especially after the 2015 national ceasefire. In Karen State, the expansion of government education systems into contested ethnic areas has become a major concern for local actors and communities due to the lack of considerations of existing ethnic education systems and the preferences of local communities for the education of their children (KED, 2016). All the above mentioned statements and studies are greatly important for this thesis, because students from Karen education system are victims of competing systems and the barriers that they face lie at the heart of the NCA and the National Education Law as well as suppressions from successive governments. Apart from education inequalities and low quality of education discussed in the studies, it is also crucial to understand how students from ethnic education systems in the KNU controlled areas manage to overcome the barriers in furthering their education overseas.

2.1.2 Karen Education System

In order to understand Karen education system, it is important to comprehend existing systems in Karen State. Education systems in Karen State are complex because the provision of education is significantly political. As a result of prolonged conflicts, there are a wide variety of school types and parallel education systems that are often linked with competing political and administrative structures. According to Lenkova (2015) the provision of education services include the state, ethnic armed groups, religious organizations, and community-based schools with or without affiliation with

the state, or ethnic armed groups in a recent study of education in Karen State. As one of the main education service providers in Karen State, the Karen Education & Culture Department (KECD), previously known as Karen Education Department (KED), was founded since the beginning of the Karen National Union (KNU) armed revolution in 1947 before independence in order to preserve and protect Karen language, culture and identity. Understanding KECD is particularly significant to this thesis as the main purpose of this thesis is to comprehend barriers of students under KECD in access to overseas higher education since the government does not recognize KECD. Under the KNU, a self-claimed Karen government, KECD has its own curriculum using Karen as the medium of instruction and its own administrative structures. In KECD curriculum, Burmese is only taught as a subject while there is a significant difference in History taught in the KECD and government curriculums. In Karen State, the KECD currently supports over 1,500 schools in which “285 schools use only the KED curriculum; 553 schools use mixed KECD and Myanmar MoE curricula; and 666 use only the Myanmar MoE curriculum” respectively (Décobert, 2016, p.10). KECD-administered schools refer to schools that are managed by the KECD under the KECD’s policy and administrative structures and the Myanmar government does not officially recognize these schools while government schools are under the mainstream system administrations and structures, using official Myanmar MoE curriculum and Burmese as the medium of instruction. For “mixed schools”, they are defined as schools using a mix of curriculums from the KECD and the government. The teachers of the “mixed schools” are both community teachers supported by the KECD and government teachers supported by the government education system. It is important to note that not every “mixed schools” will have the recognitions to transfer their students to government school after completing Grade -4 because most of these schools have only till Grade -4. The dropout rate after Grade-4 in these schools is significantly high due to the lack of recognition or official transferred certificates. It is apparent that recognition of learning attainments matters not only for joining mainstream higher education, but also for transferring to mainstream system at primary and secondary levels.

In a study analyzing education services in contested areas of Myanmar, “ethnic education providers offer good complementary education – but the government does not take advantage of and support what already exists, instead it seems to be undermining it” (Mears et al, 2015, p.35). Moreover, they also identified that there is chronic inequality in access to education and poor quality and provision of education across the country due to decades of prolonged mismanagement and underinvestment in education by the successive governments. Highlighting the importance of continuous support for ethnic education providers, the study notes that it is understandable for the government to not grant official recognitions of learning attainments from ethnic education providers because they are listed as illegal organizations under Article 19 of the national constitution. This provides a clear indication of the position of the government towards ethnic education systems in which the Karen education system is included. It is critically important to question what the lack of recognition of education to the Karen people and other minorities in the country could mean to the ethnic groups in a few decades. It is no wonder that the lack of access to higher education will have tremendous consequences on human capital development for the Karen people as well as other ethnic minorities. Thus, social marginalization of ethnic groups is not a new phenomenon in Myanmar as ethnic minority groups have been experiencing forced assimilations into Burman through the process of “Burmanization,” such as the suppression of minority languages in the state school system (Houtman, 1999). In the review of national policy, Aye and Sercombe (2014) point out that there is an overarching national policy of a single national identity despite being vastly diverse. Lall and South (2013) also pinpoints that one of the underlying grievances of the ethnic armed groups is the suppression of ethnic languages under forced assimilation of the Burman only national culture. The denial of ethnic language and rights is argued to be the cause of Intergenerational social inequalities, including education and economic development for disadvantaged ethnic minorities across the country (Lall & South 2014). A number of scholars have also highlighted the significance of providing free and high-quality education for all, especially in ethnic languages as it promotes more

understanding and tolerance among diverse ethnic groups as well as human capital accumulations for national development socially, economically, and politically (Lall & South 2013; Jolliffe & Mears, 2016). The debate over the use of mother-tongue and ethnic rights is particularly significant to not only the discussion of the Karen education, but also the application of human rights based approach education as HRBA to education stresses on the important of respect for minority languages and the quality of education for the best interests of children under the 4As Framework. Again, all these studies fail to include how students from ethnic education systems overcome persisting barriers in access to overseas higher education and little is known how these students manage to attain access to overseas higher education. As the study's is in KNU controlled areas, it can be assumed that fulfilling the HRBA to education is the KNU government's roles and responsibility; however, there seems to be lack of studies placing the KNU, the self-proclaimed government, as the government with responsibilities and accountabilities in meeting HRBA to education.

2.1.3 Inequality in Access to Mainstream Higher Education

Inequality in access to mainstream higher education is highly widespread across Myanmar. Though the gap may seem subtle, it could impede peace, social, and political developments in Myanmar since social and economic mobility might potentially be hampered while social and economic disparity can also be encouraged. As one of the poorest states in Myanmar, Karen state is a vivid illustration of socio-economic disparity in the country because many of the areas in Karen State have experienced civil war and its development has been stagnated. The majority of the populations are ethnic Karen who mostly live in rural remote areas and are living in the lower level of socio-economic status. This clearly reflect poverty situation in Myanmar in which poverty rate is substantially higher among ethnic groups. As the majority of the populations in Karen State are poor and residing in rural areas, access to higher education is also limited. In Myanmar, accesses to higher education between urban and rural areas are hugely different while the state you reside also matters in accessing higher education.

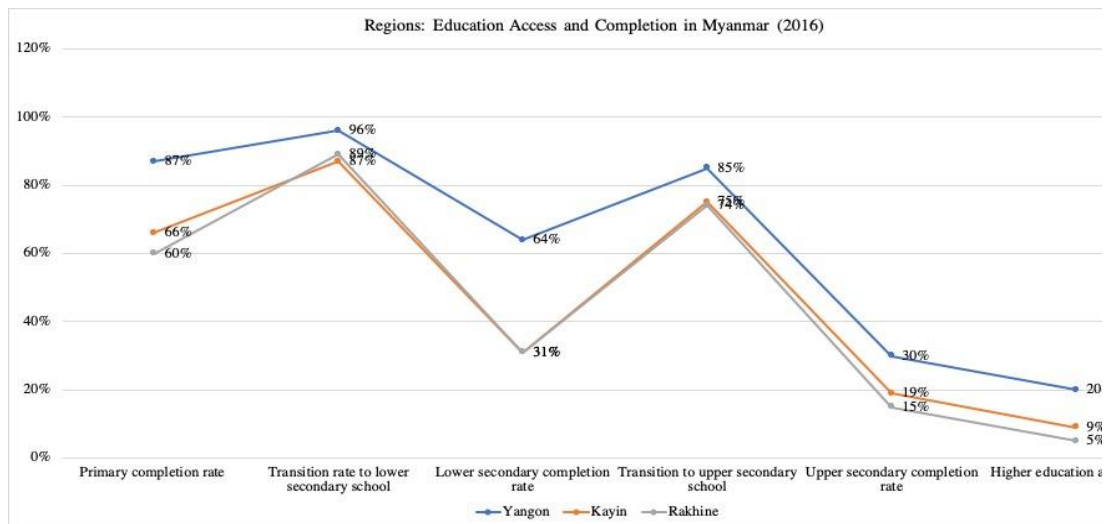


Figure 1 Education access and completion in Myanmar by region – 2016

(Source: UNESCO, 2019)

Figure 1 and Table 1 are generated from the available education information about Myanmar through UNESCO data. Through available information about education access and completion in Myanmar, the number of higher education attendance is calculated. They illustrated the disparity of education access and completion among different regions. From Table 1, it can be observed that while approximately 2 and 1 out of 1000 students at primary level will be able to attend higher education in Karen State and Rakhine respectively compared to approximately 27 students in Yangon. Therefore, this clearly shows the substantial disparity of higher education access between major cities and ethnic areas, which are conflict-affected. Also, it is crucial to investigate the barriers in accessing quality higher education and of projecting feasible solutions on these barriers. In fact, Karen state is a suitable study as it is neither the poorest state nor the richest state among ethnic areas and may be able to provide better baseline information for higher education access and challenges encountered by the communities across the country.

| Rate by Region | Primary Completion rate | Transition rate to lower secondary school | Lower secondary completion rate | Transition to upper secondary school | Upper secondary completion rate | Higher education attendance |
|----------------|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Yangon | | | | | | |
| Rate % | 87% | 96% | 64% | 85% | 30% | 20% |
| 1000 | 870 | 835.2 | 534.5 | 454.3 | 136.3 | 27.2 |
| Karen | | | | | | |
| Rate % | 66% | 89% | 31% | 75% | 19% | 9% |
| 1000 | 660 | 587.4 | 182 | 136.5 | 25.9 | 2.3 |
| Rakhine | | | | | | |
| Rate % | 60% | 87% | 31% | 74% | 15% | 5% |
| 1000 | 600 | 522 | 161.8 | 119.7 | 17.9 | 0.89 |

Table 3 Percentage of education access and completion in Myanmar by region – 2016

(Source: UNESCO, 2019)

In Karen State, it is interesting to observe that most of youth empowerment and post-ten level educational programs are led by youths from middle and lower middle classes. Sadly, no high-level quality educational programs, which can prepare and equip students with required qualifications for university study abroad and professional development, have been initiated for youths from any socio-economic backgrounds as those programs are only present in major cities in the country. Although this might seem insignificant in the short run, it could impose great challenges to those lower middle-class and grassroots level generations because they, without good and adequate resources, almost never can compete with those youths from upper middle-class with plenty of high-quality resources for preparations in order to obtain the scholarships and professional development opportunities. In fact, as the youths from upper middle-class and the rich are most well equipped with high quality education and financial supports, they are the groups who are likely to become the leaders of the country in the future. When they become leaders, similar social and political challenges most people in Myanmar are encountering may continue if they lack understandings of lower middle-class and grassroots level situations, especially ethnic related issues. In short, the gap seems to be disregarded and undermined.

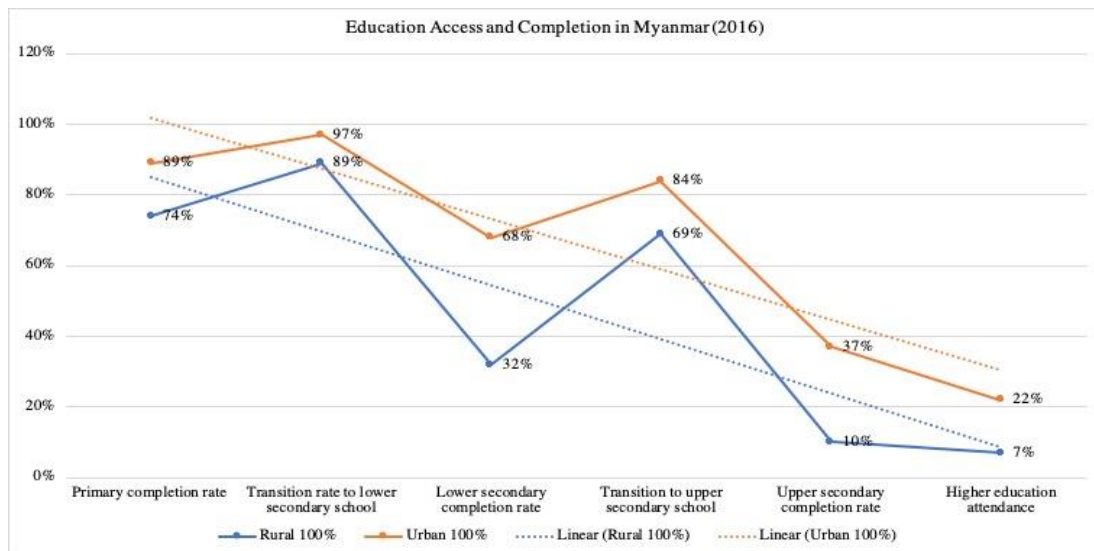


Figure 2 Education access and completion in Myanmar by type of community – 2016
(Source: UNESCO, 2019)

Table 2 unveiled that approximately 1 out of 1000 students at primary level will be able to attend higher education in rural areas compared to approximately 40 in urban areas. It indicates that students from rural areas have around 39 % lower chances of higher education attendance compared to those students in urban areas in Myanmar. Therefore, the gap of higher education attendance between urban rural areas is highly substantial, reflecting the disparity of higher education access among different social groups. Despite the widespread recognition of the important roles of providing equal higher education opportunities in enhancing social justice, the phenomenon of inequalities in higher education access is worldwide (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). With regards to access to higher education, Pilkinton (2007) described the unequal access as “a luxury leading towards “elitism.” Also, IIEP (2007) found that higher education has a tendency to serve the elite. As it could be observed in the figures above, there is a similar pattern for those in rural and ethnic regions in access to education.

| Rate by type of community | Primary Completion rate | Transition rate to lower secondary school | Lower secondary completion rate | Transition to upper secondary school | Upper secondary completion rate | Higher education attendance |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Urban | | | | | | |
| Rate % | 89% | 97% | 68% | 84% | 37% | 22% |
| 1000 | 890 | 863.3 | 587.04% | 493.11 | 182.45 | 40.13 |
| Rural | | | | | | |
| Rate % | 74% | 89% | 32% | 69% | 10% | 7% |
| 1000 | 740 | 658.6 | 211 | 146 | 15 | 1.05 |

Table 4 Percentage of education access and completion in Myanmar by type of community – 2016

(Source: UNESCO, 2019)

2.1.4 Human Rights-Based Approach to Higher Education

Under the discourses of access to education, rights based approach is often emphasized. It may be even over stated as it is incredibly challenging to achieve. However, rights-based approach to education is significant in ensuring access and accountability because it is universal and inalienable based on the provisions of human rights. According to the United Nations (2019, p.1), “Education is not only a basic human right, it is an engine for poverty eradication, and a force for peace. It is at the heart of the sustainable development goals.” Particularly, higher education is uniquely crucial in order to achieve the sustainable development goals. In fact, the right to education is vividly enshrined in the Article (26) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Article 26 stipulates that “everyone has the right to education... and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (United Nations, 1948). In applying rights-based approach to education, Katarina Tomasevski’s 4As Framework is one of the most important guidelines to ensure access to education. In fact, it also is viewed as most appropriate framework of human right approach to education (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007a). The 4As Framework which pinpoints government’s obligations of right to education through availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of education is useful to assess education access of a particular society. The 4As

framework of the rights-based approach to education is generally informed by human rights principles and norms. Its key features are elaborated in the followings. Availability refers to the government's grantees of free and compulsory education for all children with emphasis on key requirements of international human rights laws and norms. It is also concerned with governments' respect of parental choice of education. For accessibility, it focuses on the elimination of discriminations and exclusions in line with international laws. Acceptability relates to the quality of education, the status of teachers, and the process of learning that underpins the global human rights standards on language, minority and indigenous groups. This concentrates on the elimination of barriers such as poverty-induced obstacles, language of instruction, ability/disability. Lastly, adaptability focuses on the key principles of child rights and the concerns of education's response and adaptation to the best interests of each child in line with international human rights laws.

First, the integration and mainstreaming of human rights norms is central to rights-based approach to education. This is significant as it protects the universality and inalienability of the rights of all human beings as stipulated in UDHR, which is "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The second feature is *accountability*, which is concerned with the rule of law. According to Tomasevski (2006), at the core of the rights-based approach to education is the universal human rights law. Third, the principles of non-discrimination and equality are key to right based approach to education. Thus, these principles are well expressed and enshrined in many international conventions including ICCECR, specifically, article 2(1) and International Convention of the Rights of the Child. Likewise, participation is another important feature for rights-based approach to education as it is set out as virtue of a number of provisions in the ICESCR and ICCPR and it is identified as an expressed principle of a human right based approach (Tobn, 2015). Lastly, it is the respect for the dignity of all human beings, that is a defining feature of the rights-based approach. These key features are essential for the fulfillments of rights to education. It is little wonder that human

rights approach to education is seen as an ongoing process like the fights for education for all (EFA) (Tomasevski, 2004). In fact, the application of rights-based approach to education is not just confined to the fulfillments of education for all which chiefly emphasize on basic and secondary levels of education. It is also applied in the context of access to higher education.

Advocates of HRBA claim that HRBA to higher education is essential in ensuring the enjoyment of human right to higher education and the integration of human rights into the higher education systems. HRBA to higher education is concerned with ensuring equal access for all transcending financial obstacles to access because it is also to overcome social and environmental challenges in access to higher education (Rious & Pinto, 2010). According to UNICEF and UNESCO (2007b), adopting HRBA has a wide variety of contributions such as the promotion of social cohesion, integration, positive social transformation and stability, nurturing capacity, and respect for peace and non-violent conflict resolution and producing better outcomes for economic development. It is also viewed as a more cost-effective and sustainable approach to education. In terms of cost-effectiveness and sustainability, some, however, have opposite views. In the discussion of the growth of Brazil's private tertiary education, MaCowan (2004) posits that market-based approach to higher education is more equitable than HRBA as the institutional efficiency and quality can better be maintained. However, market-based approach is detrimental to social equity and justice for critics of neo-liberalism in education because it is driven by economic incentives (Tooley, 2004). With critiques on the focus of economic aspects of higher education, Kotzmann (2018) contends that market-based approach ignores the non-economic dimensions of higher education such as underrepresentation of the poor and underprivileged. Kotzmann's critique of market-based approach is important for Karen students as the majority of them will not able to afford higher education even if they finally could manage to get recognized certification of their learning attainments. This is particular common for Karen students, a very handful number of them, who could obtain recognized certifications such as General Education Development (GED)

American high school equivalent certificate and other recognized diplomas. It would not be possible for them to access mainstream higher education if they do not have scholarship, as they cannot afford market based mainstream higher education.

This market-based approach to education is also linked to the concept of “human capital” and “human resource development” which is essential for economic development since investment in human capital through education is often seen as the key to development. In economic pointed of views, education is viewed as “the efficient production of human capital” while the purpose of education is for the supply of qualified people to meet economic demands (Mingat and Tan, 1996, p.699). Unlike economic points of views, HRBA to education sees education as “an end in itself rather than merely a means for achieving other ends” according to Katarina Tomasevski, the founder of the 4As framework (2004). She also argues that the economic interpretation of human capital is confined to an expansion of commodity production and we need to have a broader view that is based on the enhancement of human lives and freedom towards it profoundest ends. Therefore, HRBA to education go beyond the scope of economic development as basic human rights such as freedom, equality, and peace are within education. Additionally, the concept of development as freedom is explicitly human rights based approach as it focuses on removing the barriers preventing individuals from developing their full potentials (Sen, 199). In fact, to remove the barriers is to fulfill the rights to education. This is particularly relevant to this study. As the KNU is a self-proclaimed government and the main authority in the areas, it has the roles and responsibilities to follow and meet human HRBA to education including higher education. Moreover, proponent’s views of HRBA to education is significant to the right to education for students from Karen education system in KNU-controlled areas as the lack of recognition of their learning attainments refrain them from furthering their education in order to develop their full potentials. Moreover, the KNU government has the roles and responsibilities in the provision of education for the people in line with international human rights norms and standard. If the KNU

government is not removing the barriers or fulfilling HRBA to education, it must be held accountable. Therefore, it is essential to explore to what extent the KNU is fulfilling HRBA to education and removing the barriers for individuals for the enhancement of their full potentials.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

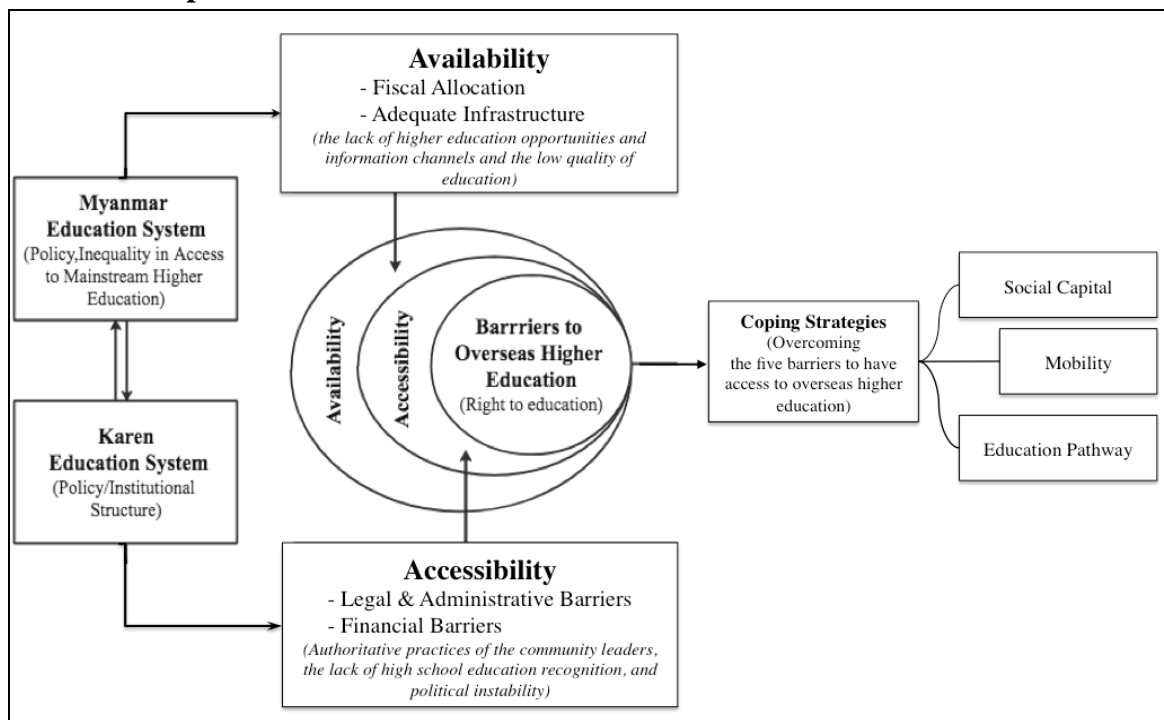


Figure 3 Conceptual framework

The underlying concepts to this study emerge through the issues of the right to education for students under the Karen education system, as the Karen education system is not recognized by the mainstream education systems, the Burmese system. In this study, the researcher uses the standard framework of Katarian Tomasevskis's 4As as a guideline framework, since it is widely used by educators, development related non-governmental organizations and policy makers in assessing and evaluating the degrees of the fulfillment of the right to education. The Tomasevskis's outlines the government's obligations and accountability of the rights to education through the availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of educations to the rights holders and highlights that the fulfillment of the rights to education must be in line with the

international human rights laws and principles. In this study, the KNU, therefore, has the roles and responsibilities to follow and meet human HRBA to education as a self-proclaimed government and the main authority in the areas. However, the framework needs modifications of the elements in the respective 4As in order to fit the specific context of the proposed study, as the provision of education in KNU-controlled areas is quite complex with limited data available. In this study, the quality of education will not be access as it is concerned with rights in education than rights to education. Thus, in line with the objectives of this study, only two elements of the 4As will be deployed in this study as they mostly relevant to this study of the students' barriers towards pursuing overseas higher education. These are availability and accessibility that are further detailed in the section 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 respectively. As Tomasevskis' 4As Framework is the standard tool in assessing and evaluating the fulfillment of the right to education in a broad context, the researcher makes specific modifications of the respective components of the framework to be more relevant and beneficial to the local context.

Related to the first research question, the researcher looks at the availability and accessibility of education for students under Karen education system in order to understand their barriers toward pursuing overseas higher education. The availability and accessibility of education is developed through a systematic study of Myanmar Education System and Karen Education System with a specific focus on institutional structures, policies, and laws as well as inequality in education so as to comprehend the barriers of students under the Karen Education System in access to overseas higher education. To answer the second research question, the researcher explores the coping strategies or actions in overcoming the barriers to overseas higher education through the experiences of the success stories, and actions taken to remove the barriers. Perhaps, the key concept used in understanding the barriers and coping strategies of students from Karen Education System is rights based approach to higher education.

2.2.1 Availability

Availability refers to the government's grantees of free and compulsory education for all children with emphasis on key requirements of international human rights laws and norms. In this specific proposed study area, the government is the Karen National Union (KNU) as it not only proclaims itself as a government and the area is under its administrative control. As a government in this area, the KNU has its obligation to fulfill the rights to education for the population under its control and administration. Moreover, availability here is also concerned with governments' respect of parental choice of education. The modified availability suggests that there must be policies in place in KNU controlled areas to provide all children with free, compulsory education for education to be available. In order to meet the needs of the marginalized groups, different options of schooling including non-formal education must be made available and coordinated by the government for all children regardless of their ethnicity or socio-economic backgrounds. The government must ensure equitable education budgets without any discrimination. This is especially relevant in ethnic areas as there is often the lack of budgetary allocations from the KNU government as well as from the central government so that limited school options are available. This will affect the education children get in this particular study area. Furthermore, the government must ensure that schools have adequate and appropriate resources and equipment as well as enough qualified teachers. It is also the government responsibility to provide adequate information and guidance for educational and vocational opportunities, particularly overseas higher education opportunities in this context.

2.2.2 Accessibility

For accessibility, it focuses on the elimination of discriminations and exclusions in line with international laws. This element concerns practical issues and challenges in access to education such as the distance of schools and affordability as well as barriers in language. This is particularly significant to students under Karen education system, especially for their secondary and higher education because there may be limited

numbers of these schools available in the areas. In order for education to be accessible, there must be schools within close distance of children to commute and transportation must be made available if schools are far to reach by walking. The safety of the children must be utmost priority for parents to feel comfortable with, as the proposed study area is in conflict sensitive locations. The government and community leaders must ensure the safety of the children at any circumstances. Furthermore, the government must ensure that tuition is free and other costs must be kept at minimum so that underprivileged children from different backgrounds and lower socio-economic backgrounds can afford them in relation to uniforms, books, and school meals. In case of needs, the government must ensure that financial assistance is available in order to increase the accessibility of education, particularly for most disadvantaged groups. Discriminations of any forms can be a great factor for children to enroll in the schools so that the government must ensure the elimination of any form of discriminations against minorities and students with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

2.2.3 Coping Strategies

The term ‘coping strategy’ has entered into academic for decades in the social and medical sciences. Coping is a basic process integral to adaption and survivals and how individuals deal with it (Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). According to WHO, coping strategies or mechanisms are defined as “remedial actions undertaken by people whose survival and livelihood are compromised or threatened” (WHO, 1999, p.5). The term implies one’s little control of the situation in which one’s ability ‘to cope’ has less control over a situation than ‘to manage’. Simply put, “if one knows how and has resources to manage, one does not need to cope” (WHO, 1999, p.4). Coping strategies are “consciously chosen, intentional behaviors and cognitions that can flexibly respond to environmental demands” (Aldwin and Yancura, 2004, p.507). For Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping strategy is based on its function which is problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping refers to one’s strategies that acts on the environment or the self, for instance, seeking support from others as to

solve the problem), whilst the emotion-focused coping is one's strategies in regulating emotions as generated by the appraisal or challenge. Even though there are extensive studies on theoretical aspect of coping strategies, the application of such concept is essential to comprehend students' coping strategies on their pathways to overseas higher education as inhibited by major barriers. Understanding students' coping strategies is important for students from Karen education system on their endeavors to universities since a small number of the students could find their ways to university. Under several barriers, little is known about how students overcome under such environment in which it requires more examination on how students deploy coping strategies towards accessing overseas higher education.

2.2.3.1 Social Capital

There is no universal definition and measurement of social capital, and the term only became evidently in academic during the last decade. According to the OECD, the social capital is defined as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (OECD, 2007). Such term, as put by Bhandari and Yasunobu, is "centered on social relationships and its major elements include social networks, civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and generalized trust" (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009, p.480). Put together, it is defined as a collective asset in the form of shared norms, values, networks, institutions, or understandings that engender trust and facilitate cooperation for mutual benefits. The complexity of its multidimensional concept is subject to various criticisms from its inability to quantify effects, and to set common measurement indicators. However, the literature indicates that social capital plays a significant role in economic progress and sustainable development in which it provides "access to more information, increasing social cohesion, better civic engagement, reducing opportunistic behavior, boosting political participation, government responsiveness and efficiency, reducing transaction costs, providing insurance against risk and uncertainties, and solving collective actions problems" (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009, p.484). In this study, social capital is an important aspect to examine in order to understand how the college students cope with

the barriers and challenges emerged throughout their education pathway to overseas higher education.

2.2.3.2 Mobility

For mobility, it concerns with the challenges and factors either hinders or supports their movement from the KNU-controlled areas to the Thai-Burma border. It looks at how the students mobile from place to place and one education program to another education program. This is to investigate on what the elements that help them to mobile. As there are limited education programs in the KNU-controlled areas, it is important to look at the student's mobility in order to understand their coping strategies. Theoretically, the term 'mobility' and 'migration' are sometimes used interchangeably, and the difference is somehow related to a period of geographical movement where mobility indicates a shorted period of movement than migration (Adu, 2019). According to UNDP report, mobility denotes "the freedom to seek opportunities to improve living standards, and health and education outcomes, and/or to live in safer, more responsive communities (UNDP, 2010, p.1). The term is an integral to human freedom that it is about increasing one's freedom and widening opportunities that one is free to pursue one's own path (Davidson and Howard, 2015). In addition, such term also linked to the idea of modernity as progress in which it allows one to break from tradition and to become civilized (Davidson and Howard, 2015). By becoming free, "the freedom to move allows the subordinate a chance to escape from domination, to evade control or to subvert the social order. Controlling mobility is controlling people" Davidson and Howard, 2015, p.10). The term also illustrates mobility as a necessary means to achieve social stability where it provides one with benefits which one's economy and society have to offer (Miller, 1955). From his work, he argued that changes in occupational position are likely denoting mobility since occupation plays an important role in one's life. Benefits of mobility are that it provides higher income, skill benefits, and increased social prestige from such economic and skill benefits. Taking the benefits of mobility into account, the concept is relevant to how the students from the KNU-controlled areas

cope with the issues of the lack of higher education opportunities in the areas. Therefore, the concept of mobility is significant to understand the coping strategies of the students in this study in accessing overseas higher education as Thailand is seen as a widow of opportunities for the students.

2.2.3.3 Education Pathways

For education pathways, it focuses on program pathways and education system. This looks the students' education experiences and the systems they have gone through. This includes the higher education opportunities available in the KNU-controlled areas. In the Thai-Myanmar border, there are also different levels of education available for the migrant and refugee students. There are a wide variety of education programs available in the areas so that it is important to understand the students' education pathways. Therefore, the education program and education system that they have experienced will be a big factor for their gap years from high school to overseas higher education. By documenting their education pathways, this will enrich our understanding of the students' coping strategies in accessing overseas higher education.

CHAPTER III

Accessing and barriers of students from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas towards overseas higher education

3.1 Introduction

The chapter primarily aims to provide a macro picture of the interviews from all of the participant groups and seeks to explore the barriers for students under the Karen education system from the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education. More specifically, it probes to comprehend the major challenges and difficulties that inhibit the students from accessing overseas higher education. The researcher was able to identify emerging factors from the transcripts of the interviews and analyzed the participants' responses thematically by using codes as to describe the said themes. Firstly, a summary of the study findings is provided in this chapter while each factor of the findings is further discussed in details. Following these sections, the researcher presents a critical and systematic analysis of the study results based on structural challenges and practical challenges for the KNU in fulfilling rights based approach to education.

3.2 Findings

In this study, there was an overlap of participants' views in the barriers of students in accessing overseas higher education among the different groups of the participants; the recent graduated students, the college students, the three groups of key informants from different educational organizations, and the experts. The Table 3.2.1 provides a summary of the findings. Data culled from the different groups of participants were categorized into five emerging themes and they are the five major factors that the participants experienced and identified as the major barriers for the students in accessing overseas higher education. The factors that hindered students' access to overseas higher education include;

1. Authoritative practices of local community leaders,
2. Limited bridging programs and information channels available in the areas,

3. Low quality of education,
4. Lack of high school education recognition, and
5. Political instability.

The five emerging themes were further subdivided into sixteen emerging themes experienced and identified by the participants and details are described in the following table. The first two factors were experienced and chiefly described by the recently graduated high school students and the college students though the other factors are identified by all of the different groups of participants. For these three factors, there are contrasting perspectives of the key informants and the experts in spite of the general views of the participants that all of these factors impose huge challenges and barriers for students in their access to overseas higher education.

Table 5 Emerging themes from the responses

| <i>Authoritative practices of local community leaders</i> | |
|---|---|
| Factor 1 | Impose challenges or difficulties for pursuing higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas |
| | Expect them of working for the KNU or KNU related organization after high school |
| | Control their freedom of movement for higher education |
| <i>The availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels</i> | |
| Factor 2 | Limited options of higher education in the areas |
| | Lack higher educational information and guidance |
| | Lack of support and opportunities for higher education after high school |
| <i>Low quality of education</i> | |
| Factor 3 | Inadequacy of qualified of teachers |
| | Insufficient resources and learning materials |
| | Lack of options of schooling within the areas |
| | Lack of measures or financial assistance provided by the government in case of need |
| <i>Lack of high school education recognition</i> | |
| Factor 4 | Impose challenges or difficulties for pursuing overseas higher education by the lack of recognition |
| | Uncertainty for higher education (Lack of HE opportunities) |
| | Feeling violation of the rights to education |
| | <i>Political instability</i> |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| | Impose challenges and difficulties for setting up higher education programs |
| Factor 5 | Cause students' displacement and disruptions of schooling |
| | Trigger security challenges for the students, teachers, and education administration |

3.2.1 Authoritative practices of the local community leaders as a major barrier

Number distribution of the emerging themes describing the authoritative practices of local community leaders as a major barrier (RG-HS=Recently Graduated High School Student; CS=College Student)

| Sub-emerging themes | N (%) | | Sample excerpt |
|--|-------------|-------------|--|
| | RG-HS | CS | |
| Impose challenges or difficulties for pursuing higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas | 3 (75%) | 4 (100%) | "I had bad experience. My principal, he did not want me to come to Thailand and he did block me not to come to Thailand. He was the chief of education in the district. It was very challenging for me. Maybe, the leaders were worried that we would not come back to work and volunteer there." (Participant-D, Interview, 17 July 2020) |
| Expect them of working for the KNU or KNU related organization after high school | 4 (100%) | 4 (100%) | |
| Control their freedom of movement for higher education | 3 (75%) | 4 (100%) | |

Table 6 Describing the authoritative practices of local community leaders as a major barrier

The authoritative practice of local community leaders is commonly described by both of the student participants as one of the major barriers for them in accessing overseas higher education. Under this factor, there are three sub-emerging themes namely: (1) impose challenges or difficulties for pursuing higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas; (2) expect them of working for the KNU or KNU related organization after high school; and (3) control their freedom of movement for higher education. The above table reveals that the "expect them of working for the KNU or KNU related organization after high school" had the highest number (n=8, 100%) while the other categories had similarly lower number (n=7, 87.5%). This is significant as it would be very challenging to address it if authoritative practices are rooted in the institution. Table 1 reveals that all of the college students described that the majority of

the local leaders were not supportive of them in pursuing higher education outside their areas after completing their high school as the community leaders expected them of working for the KNU or KNU or KNU related organizations after high school. As they all finished high school before 2013 when the junior colleges were started to set up, the only highest higher education available at the time in the KNU controlled areas was the Karen Teacher Training College in Mutraw District, in Karen State, Myanmar. Nevertheless, the highest education available in some districts which some of the college students are from was high school. Besides, all of the students from both groups describe that they needed to have informal commitments that they would return back to their respective areas in the KNU-controlled areas to work for the KNU or KNU related organizations. The majority of the students, particularly the college students, articulated how challenging and difficult it was for them to get permissions and recommendation letter from the local leaders or authority in order for them to leave the areas to go to Thailand for higher education as coming to refugee camps or migrant schools in the Thai-Burma border was the most feasible option for them to get higher education and to further their higher education abroad. Also, the majority of the recently graduated high school students expressed their dislike of the local leaders using too much authority to control them with their education and access to higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas.

Particularly, all of the college students expressed their strong disapproval of the majority of local leaders being too narrowed minded and controlling of them with what they should do after high school and access to higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas. For them, these authoritative practices of power imposed challenges and difficulties for pursuing higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas in paving their ways towards overseas higher education. For the college students, they even feel like they are not free yet even though they are now at overseas universities respectively because there is a sense of commitments and expectations of them that they should return to the community. In fact, they are refrained to the informal commitment they made with their local leaders as the local leaders asked them before they received assistances from the local leaders with regards to transportation, recommendation letter

for schools in the refugee camp or migrant learning centers, and permission to go to Thailand. Likewise, the majority of the other group of students also shared similar experiences; however, there is a strong sense of responsibilities to go back and contribute to communities, meaning working for the KNU, among the recently graduated high school students after their current program in Thailand. It could be observed that there seems to be a strong indoctrination of community services and working for the KNU during their high school years. The control of student's freedom of movement in access to better education opportunities and the use of power for informal commitments from the students to work for the KNU or KNU related organizations are not only a reflection of the authoritative practices of the local leaders but they are also violating the principals of rights based approach to education, particularly regarding the availability and accessibility. In fact, it would be much more difficult to get the permission and supports from the leaders for an ordinary students compared to the students who are relatives of the leaders and members of the KNU-related organizations. The above-mentioned results are clearly manifested on the following excerpts of the interviews transcripts as presented below. One of the student participants described the situation and system in the KNU-controlled areas as "Local Community Dictatorship System". Another student also shared that the education system in the KNU controlled areas is "very organizational oriented" towards that the KNU as they were expected to work for the KNU after high school. The following excerpts culled from the students' participants vividly describe the circumstance.

"Some of the local leaders are very narrow minded. They do not want us to go outside and get higher education although they always said education is important... They said to us that having high school education is enough to teach at Karen schools and work for the KNU. I think they are afraid that when we went out and become highly educated, they may lose their power. Maybe this is why they try to control us and exercise their power a lot. Well, some of them do not even finish high schools but they have worked for the KNU for a long time and became the leaders". (Participant-D, Interview, 17 July 2020)

“Even after I graduated from TPC, they wanted me to stop there. They didn’t want me to continue anymore. They said that it is enough and you can come back. They do not know that there are still many things and so much more to learn, but they do not know see that. They told me that it’s enough and even though you are educated, it is no use if you do not use it for your country or your people. They told me to go back and work for the KNU after TPC, but I did not listen to them and applied for the Minmahaw Post-Ten Program and then I applied for university. I just kept going and I feel like they do not want me anymore. Many of my friends have also faced the same things like me. For those who are not lucky like me, their lives end there. Most of my friends who were studying together with me (at high school), they all now work for them and organizations like KECD. Almost all of them, they also do not feel good about it and when I go back, they would tell me “I am so happy for you and I also want to go for university. I also want to study at university like you”. I can see from their eyes and from their expressions that they themselves are not happy with the situations they are in because they are not allowed to go further.” (Participant-B, Interview, 23 June 2020)

This factor of the authoritative practice of the local community leaders is particularly unique and significant as it is chiefly revealed and highlighted by the students’ participants in this study whereas none of the organization key informants and experts mentioned about this factor as a barrier for the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas. Therefore, this indicates that not only is our understanding of the challenges and barriers of accessing overseas higher education for the students in the areas limited but also are the insights and experiences of the students themselves are crucial for our understanding of the issues in addition to the perspectives of education providers and experts in the fields. This also suggests that there requires much attentions and studies of students’ experiences in the Karen education system under the KNU-controlled areas.

3.2.2 Limited bridging programs and information channels as a major barrier

Number distribution of the emerging themes describing the availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels as a major barrier (RG-HS=Recently Graduated High School Student; CS=College Student)

| Sub-emerging themes | N (%) | | Sample excerpt |
|--|-------------|-------------|--|
| | RG-HS | CS | |
| Limited options of higher education in the areas | 4 (100%) | 4 (100%) | <i>“I feel like there was no further higher education in my areas. There are some opportunities in Myanmar but it is out of my control, at least, I should be able to speak Burmese. Plus, our education is not recognized recognition. I felt hopeless.”</i> <i>(Participant-B, Interview, 23 June 2020)</i> |
| Lack of higher educational information and guidance | 4 (100%) | 4 (100%) | |
| Lack of support and opportunities for higher education after high school | 4 (100%) | 4 (100%) | |

Table 7 Describing the availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels as a major barrier

Participants described that there are extremely limited bridging programs and information channels in the areas and this stands as one of the major barriers for them in accessing overseas higher education as bridging programs and information channels are key to further studies. There are three sub-emerging themes under this factor and they are (1) limited options of higher education in the areas; (2) lack of higher educational information and guidance; and (3) lack of support and opportunities for higher education after higher school. Notwithstanding the significance of bridging programs and information channels for overseas higher education, all of the student participants indicate that there are no bridging programs and higher education information and guidance available in their communities in the KNU-controlled areas. Besides, there is a lack of support and opportunities for higher education after their completion of high school as the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC) is the only highest education available in the areas. In order to be able to have access to bridging programs and higher education opportunities for overseas study, all of the students mentioned that coming to refugee camps and migrant schools in Thailand is the only option for them. This suggests that Burmese refugee students in Thailand have much more options of higher

education and opportunities for overseas study than they have in the KNU-controlled areas. This is particularly alarming for the future development of youths in the KNU-controlled areas as access to higher education is found to be a major challenge for students in the refugee camps in Thailand (Zeus, 2010). Particularly, the lack of higher education information and guidance is paramount to overseas studies because it is not only an important element of the rights based approach to education but it also raises a question how the students would be able to uncover the options and opportunities of higher education without available information and guidance. In fact, all of the participants disclosed that they were not given information and guidance about higher education from the education administration in the areas. For the recently graduated high school students, though they mentioned that they were not given information and guidance for higher education, it has to be acknowledged that the GED program that they are currently attending in the Thai-Burma border is run and facilitated by the KECD. Thus, this seems to suggest that they were given better information and guidance, and more options for higher education opportunities than those college students when they were attending high school in the KNU-controlled areas. Moreover, the majority of the key informants and experts also shared the experiences of the students in regards to the availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels. The following excerpt from the students is a vivid summary of the situations in the KNU-controlled areas.

“In Mae Sot or migrant areas, there would be presentations about different programs and higher education opportunities for students. When I was in my areas, there was no such a thing and no information and guidance for students. Every time when the leaders visited us, they would only talk about political situation in Myanmar between the Karen people and the Burmese people. I feel like they even brainwashed us. It is like propaganda. After coming to Mae Sot, my mind-set completely changed.” (Participant-B, Interview, 13 July 2020)

Perhaps, the KNU-controlled areas are often very isolated from the townships and leaving the areas may have some implications with security issues, as the KNU is an

insurgent ethnic armed group in the country. There are very limited opportunities and information flow in the areas. Comparing the situations in the KNU-controlled areas and the Thai-Burma border, particularly the Mutraw District, one of the expert explained that;

“People in the Thai-Burma border and refugee camps will have better access to overseas higher education simply because they have the proximity and the transportation access, and the exposure they have with international communities and Thailand, people who just go in and out. But people in Mutraw or inside the KNU-controlled areas, it is difficult for them to either have the motivation or get access to overseas higher education because they don't even know what the overseas system look like and so they don't even know how to prepare themselves to be ready for education system outside of Kawtholei (the KNU).” (Expert-A, Interview, 4 July 2020)

3.2.3 Low Quality of education as a major barrier

Emerging themes describing the low quality of education as a major barrier

| Sub-emerging themes | Sample excerpt |
|---|---|
| Inadequacy of qualified teachers | “We did not have enough teachers and teachers are very young and not experienced. In terms of teaching, students don't learn as much as they are supposed to learn. In fact, there were not enough school materials and resources. For instance, there were no computers and we did not even have computer class.” (Participant-A, Interview, 23 June 2020) |
| Insufficiency of resources and learning materials | |
| Lack of options of schooling within the areas | |
| Lack of measures or financial assistance provided by the government in case of need | |

Table 8 Describing the low quality of education as a major barrier

Besides the availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels, all of the student participants explained the low quality of education as shown in the Table.3. Under this factor, there are four sub-emerging themes namely; inadequacy of qualified teachers, insufficiency of resources and learning materials, the lack of options of schooling within the areas, and the lack of measures or financial assistance provided by the KNU government in case of need. In fact, all of these themes are different elements of the rights based approach to education. However, there is a

huge gap in the rights to education and the reality of the situations in the provision of education in the KNU-controlled areas. From the interviews, all of the students' participants explained that the majority of the teachers are not qualified for teaching high school level education as they themselves only finished high school when they were recruited to teach in high school due to teacher shortages in the KNU-controlled areas. Some of them finished the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC); however, they do not have teaching degree and certifications to teach at the secondary education schools. In fact, they explained that many of the teachers might not have wanted to teach after their high school if they had different options of schooling or work available in the areas. The student participants also explained that the teachers in the KNU-controlled areas were not given proper salary as they often only received a small amount of stipend or pocket money annually. These abovementioned factors greatly influence the quality of education the students received. In fact, although the quality of education is generally concerned and viewed by all the key informants and experts as a major barrier for students in accessing overseas higher education, there is a slight division in the quality of education the KECD has been providing in the KNU-controlled areas among the key informants and experts. Some of them perceived that the quality of education under the KECD is better than the education provided by the central government; however, some of the key informants and experts highlighted that the quality of education in the KNU-controlled areas is greatly compromised by the availability of the financial supports and budget allocation of the KNU. Thus, having access to overseas higher education for the students in the areas necessitate the enhancement and upgrade of the quality of education to a huge extent in order for the education in the areas to be recognized by the international communities. All of the said factors; the quality of teachers; resources and materials; financial assistance; options of schooling and higher education opportunities; and the provision of higher education information and guidance are related to the elements of the availability and accessibility of education under the rights based approach to education. In fact, the authority government must ensure to remove these barriers if they are to fulfill the rights to

education. Perhaps, it has to be acknowledged that the KECD, a department of the KNU, has been providing education for the students in the KNU-controlled areas at its best performance and capacities due to the limited external funding it receives from international organizations and non-governmental organizations which often accompanied with restrictions and prioritized educational activities since their financial sources are chiefly dependent on external donors and organizations. Taking the geographical difficulties and sensitive security challenges into deliberate account as it is operating in the insurgent areas with extremely limited resources and funding, the KECD is striving at its best capacity. Expert-B, who has been conducting extensive researches in the field for the past few decades, commented that:

“the KECD is doing an impressive job in the provision of education in the KNU-controlled areas with its limited funding available” and he further explained that “it has to be noted that overseas higher education is not for the majority of the students and usually for a small group of the elites” (Expert-B, Interview, 14 July 2020).

Sharing the views of Expert-B, Expert-A, however, posited that the quality of education is a major barrier for students in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education by the following elaboration in addition to his first view on political instability as a major challenge.

“Second challenge is the quality of teachers and schools. When I say teachers, sometimes, we have teacher quality, but as we do not have enough teachers, one teacher has to teach Physics, Burmese, and English. A single teacher has to teach four subjects. That cannot be. You cannot provide quality education when a teacher has to teach four subjects in an education system. So, not having enough resources and political stability are the two major challenges that the Karen education system is currently facing, which is compromising the quality of education they can provide.” (Expert-A, Interview, 4 July 2020)

Therefore, these above-mentioned clearly show that there is an enormity of challenges in order for the KECD to be able to provide quality education.

3.2.4 Lack of high school education recognition as a major barrier

Emerging themes describing the lack of high school education recognition as a major barrier

| Sub-emerging themes | Sample excerpts |
|---|--|
| Impose challenges or difficulties for pursuing overseas higher education by the lack of recognition | <i>“As you know, there is no recognition. It is not fair for us and I feel like we also finished high school, but we cannot enter university. I think the KNU, as the government, has responsibility to ensure that we get the rights. They finish high school, and they can enter university for them”. (Student-A, Interview, 4 July 2020)</i> |
| Uncertainty for higher education (Lack of HE opportunities) | |
| Feeling violation of their rights to education | |

Table 9 Describing the lack of high school education recognition as a major barrier

All the participants in this study including all the key informants and experts identify the lack of recognition of learning attainments as a major barrier for accessing overseas higher education. Table-3 shows that all of the student participants described that the lack of recognition not only imposes challenges or difficulties for them in pursuing overseas higher education while it creates uncertainty for higher education as there is a lack of higher education opportunities available in the KNU-controlled areas. Besides, all of the college students believe that their rights to education are violated by the central government and the local authority, the KNU, because they spent similar times in education with other students outside the Karen education system and their education is not recognized so that they cannot use their attained certificates to enter both the mainstream higher education run by the central government in the country and overseas higher education. This is described as the biggest barrier for them in accessing overseas higher education. Likewise, the majority of the high school students share the experiences and feelings of the college students as the lack of recognition is viewed as a clear violation of their rights to education. In fact, the rights to recognition of the students' learning attainment is also embedded in the elements of the accessibility under the 4As framework of the rights based approach to education.

It is little wonder that this would be a major obstacle for the students in accessing higher education as the recognition of the Karen education system as well as other ethnic education systems in the country is extremely political. Despite the current

education reforms in the country, there is little room for the recognition of the ethnic education systems in Myanmar as the newly reformed National Education Law in 2015 is still highly centralized. Considering the lack of recognition as a major barrier for the students in accessing overseas higher education, Expert-C, a well-known and leading education reform activist, explained that “no significant changes have been made in the reformed national education law, but what has changed is only the words” (Expert-C, Interview, 9 July 2020). He further pointed out that the education system in Myanmar still remains highly centralized like the system under the military rule in 1988. In the new law, ethnic education systems are placed under informal education, which is unacceptable for the ethnic groups as they claimed to be recognized as a part of the mainstream education system. The challenge of recognition of the Karen education system is coincided with the two faces of education in ethnic conflicts as the authors highlight that segregated education is used as a means of ensuring inequality, inferiority, and stereotypes in ethnic conflicts (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). Therefore, it is little wonder that the majority of the key informants and all of the experts pinpointed the importance of strengthening the quality of education and self-recognition through the formation of Ethnic Education Recognition and Quality Assurance Committee for recognition. According to one expert, “the KNU should form the Karen National Education Committee or Council, which includes different stakeholders to overseas and control the quality education and advocate for recognition”. This indicates that the recognition of the Karen education system will necessitate enormous political will and changes from the central government and it remains a far reaching dream for students under the Karen education system as well as for those students under other ethnic education systems in order to their learning attainments to be recognized.

3.2.5 Political instability as a major barrier

Emerging themes describing political instability as a major barrier

| Sub-emerging themes | Sample excerpts |
|--|---|
| Impose challenges and difficulties for setting up higher education programs | “As you can see, only after ceasefire, you can see that there are a lot of improvements that the KECD can run with educational activities in the KNU controlled areas. Within five years, they could develop and build quite a number of schools. So, peace gives them opportunities and time for them, but international communities need to support them”. (Key Informant-B, Interview, 30 June 2020) |
| Cause students’ displacement and disruptions of schooling | |
| Trigger security challenges for the students, teachers, and education administration | |

Table 10 Describing political instability as a major barrier

In addition to issues of the above-mentioned barriers, one of the most important aspects of the provision of higher education in the KNU-controlled areas is the instability and security of the areas as it was listed in the red zones. The key informants and the experts chiefly identify this aspect of the barriers though a few college students briefly mentioned about it. The key informant and experts elaborated that the political instability imposes major challenges and difficulties for setting up higher education programs while it also causes students’ displacement and disruptions of schooling. Furthermore, they also described that this also trigger a major security challenge for the students, teachers and education administrations. In fact, security and stability are of imperative in the provision of education and this is a fundamentally important aspect of rights to education. Without stable and peaceful environment, it is little wonder that there are a wide variety of challenges for the KECD in the provision of education in the KNU-controlled areas. It is inevitable that the students would experience limited opportunities to acquire higher education due to political and armed conflicts. Most importantly, it also endangered the students and educators’ safety that is completely incompatible with rights to education as security and peaceful learning environment is the major priority in the rights based approach to education. If learning environment is not stable, it not only causes disruption of students’ education, but also generates

enormous challenges for education providers. With all any measure or standards, schools must be peacekeeping zones. However, it is still a far-reaching dream for the ethnic minority due to the nature of the political conflicts in Myanmar. The reality of the situation in the KNU-controlled areas and the challenges for education providers are described in the following excerpts. According to Key Informant-B, who has been working in higher education sector under the Karen education system, explains;

“In the KNU controlled areas, our main challenges to set up higher education is security for the students and instability as educational facilities were often targeted by the Burmese Army. There were many instances that the students and teachers had to run and were displaced due to the attacks. Perhaps, funding is another challenge to set up higher education in the KNU-controlled areas.....For our Junior College (JC), we could only start to set up them in late 2013 after the National Ceasefire Agreement”. (Key Informant-A, Interview, 2 July 2020)

“I think first and foremost, the first major challenge for the KNU or KECD is that the areas do not have political stability where they provide education. Even if the KNU can provide teachers, and the teachers can stay, villagers have to run and move around due to instability in political situations. For an education, you cannot only have a stable school or teachers, you also have to have stable students so I think if I have to leave or drop out for one year and come back, it would be really difficult for me. My education is disrupted. I think that becomes a major challenge. So first and foremost, the stability of the system is a huge challenge.” (Expert-A, Interview, 4 July 2020)

Issues of instability and disruption of education are not only highlighted by the key informants and experts but the students, particularly the college students, also experienced them. It must be acknowledged that the KNU does not have direct control over these issues as they are influenced by political externalities. They would be out of the KNU's control unless the political conflict in Myanmar is resolved. However, this is very unlikely given the deterioration of the deadlocks of the current political and peace processes in the country. One of the college students explained the situation in the following excerpt.

“The KNU has full responsibility to fulfil rights to education. However, I understand that it is very hard for the KNU to do it because of the conflicts. Sometimes, we had to run and displace. Some students even need to hold guns. Sometimes, we had to stop school for months when the fighting became very intense”. (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

In short, it is apparent that stability and peace are vital for the initiations of higher education in the KNU-controlled areas as well as the provision of basic education. Therefore, political stability is an essential aspect to be taken into account in understanding issues of the fulfillments of the rights to education in the KNU-controlled areas.

3.3 Discussion and analysis

The enormity of the challenges for the students from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education is apparently quite substantial. The findings of the first study question from this study suggest that the students from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas encounter five barriers in order to access overseas higher education. As presented in the previous section of the findings of the barriers, the students faced the authoritative practices of the local community leaders; the lack of higher education opportunities, information, and guidance; the low quality of education; the lack of high school education recognition; and political instability in accessing overseas higher education. In fact, these factors are both practical and structural challenges. Moreover, all of the findings are not only key to our understanding of the barriers that the students have to encounter in order to have access to overseas higher education, but also significant to rights based approach to higher education because these students do not have access to mainstream higher education in Myanmar. Under the two As, Availability and Accessibility of the 4As Framework, presented in the conceptual framework in the chapter 2, the findings of the study are quite profound as the authoritarian practices of the local community leaders, one of the findings of the study, raises a question of whether rights to education based on the 4As Framework can be applied in any situation. Moreover, as rights based approach to education is rooted in the economic

aspects of the availability and accessibility, the findings also highlight that issues of availability and accessibility of higher education go beyond social and economic obstacles.

3.3.1 Availability

First and foremost, issues of availability regarding rights to education for the students under the KNU education system in the KNU-controlled areas is quite substantial compared to those students under the mainstream education system. As presented in the conceptual framework, there are two major elements of the availability of rights to education, which are fiscal allocations in line with human rights obligations and adequate infrastructure available for all.

3.3.1.1 Fiscal allocations in line with human rights obligations and adequate infrastructure

These two elements of the availability of the rights to education are correlated. Firstly, issues of fiscal allocations are key to understanding the barriers of the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education since they are quite political. There are many implications with fiscal allocations to the availability of education in the KNU-controlled areas. This is directly related the findings of this study as the availability of education and the quality of education for the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas are greatly compromised by the available financial supports. Firstly, the fiscal allocation element of the availability in rights to education is central to the obligations of the government and it is concerned with rights to education as a social and economic rights. For the students in the KNU-controlled areas, one of the major issues is that who is responsible for the fiscal allocations for the availability of education for them. It is a question of whether the KNU government or the state government of the Union of Myanmar has the central responsibilities to allocate revenues for the education in the areas. It is apparent that the KNU government has the obligation to provide the fiscal allocations for the availability of education for the students in its controlled areas, as it is the central authority in the areas. However, as the KNU is not the state government

and it is an insurgent group in the country, fiscal allocation for education in its controlled areas is a huge challenge for the KNU. On the other hand, there is also no fiscal allocation for the education under the Karen education system from the state government since the state government does not have control over the education system and access to the areas under the KNU's control. As presented in the literature reviews, issues of legitimacy are central to the dynamics of the conflicts and education systems in Myanmar (Decobert, 2016). Therefore, it is little wonder that one of the barriers of the students encountered is the low quality of education, which is influenced by the available fiscal allocation to the education infrastructures such as options of schools, adequate resources and equipment, and qualified teachers.

It is well documented that the KECD is mainly dependent on external financial sources and there is a very little contribution from the KNU government to the KECD in the provision of education in the areas whereas the financial supports from the central government for the KECD in order to make education available to the population in the areas. For an education system to be available in line with the international standards, it is a matter of public expenditure into the system. The fragility of the Karen education system is clear, as there are no proper public investments from the respective governments. According to the recommendation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there is a benchmark of at least 26% of total public expenditure to education in developing countries in order to fulfill rights to education for all (UNESCO, 2017). A recent study in Nigeria found that there is strong and positive relationship between education expenditure and access to all levels of education in the country (Ebi and Ubi, 2017). They also found that if Nigeria spend 26 percent of its total public expenditure in education as prescribed by the UNESCO, this would have had "19-times impact on access to primary school enrolment, more than 2-times impact on secondary school enrollment and 9-times impact on access to tertiary education, and on average 10-times access to all levels of education in Nigeria". This is a clear indication of the criticality of the government public expenditure to education in making education available for all. It is crucial and rudimentary for the KNU

government to re-examine the fiscal allocation to its education department, as it is insufficient and unsustainable for the KECD to chiefly be dependent on external funding and supports in the provision of education in KNU-controlled areas. In order to fulfill rights to education, the KNU needs to provide sufficient fiscal allocations to the KECD as the authority government in line with the availability of the 4As framework of rights to education. The fragility and unsustainability of the education system can be reflected through the recent announcement of the Karen Teacher Working Groups, which is a main partner of the KECD for teacher training and the provision of teachers' stipend as it announced that the recent funding cut from a key donor, the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) by 80%, not only compromises the education of over 160,000 children in ethnic areas but also risks the collapse of the Karen education system (as cited in Weng, 2020). Moreover, it is obvious that the contribution of the KNU government compromises not only the availability of education in its controlled areas but also the quality of education in the areas. In consistence with the study findings on the issue of teacher shortage and low quality of education, recent studies also show that the shortage of teachers is the most difficult challenge encountered in the community schools under the KNU-controlled areas as a single teacher is required to teacher several grades while the lack of trained teachers compromises the quality of education provided in these schools (Syrota, 2015, KTWG, 2019). Therefore, as the government in the areas, the KNU must ensure responsibility and accountability at least through the allocation of revenue to its education department. In fact, the KNU is mainly prioritizing in political aspects and peace process with little or no investments in the education system under its administration. This may have long-term implications as the provision of education is key to issues of legitimacy and the duration of peace building in the country is unpredictable. Therefore, between the two competing governments, it is the students who face chronic underinvestment for their education, which greatly compromise their future potentials.

In order to make education available, it is paramount for the leaderships to see education as a rights rather than a political tool. In line with rights to education, the low

quality of education influenced by the failures of both the KNU government and the central government in the fiscal allocations to the Karen education system in this study is very important for the KNU leadership to review its current policies. The finding is a clear reflection of not only the overarching national policy of a single national identity in Myanmar (Aye and Sercombe, 2014) as discussed in the literature review sections under the Myanmar education system but also the failure of the KNU's leadership to see education as a right. Under the availability in the rights to education, the governments are also required to permit the establishment of educational institutions by non-state actors as a civil and political right in addition to the obligations to fulfill rights to education as a social and economic right. This means that the central government not only has the obligation to give permission and recognize the Karen education system as a non-state actor, but also funds it in line with rights to human rights standards. Based on the rights based approach, the central Myanmar government has the responsibility to provide enough education for the population in the KNU areas or any place in the country. However, in this situation, the right to education is in conflict with the political desire of the KNU leadership as it is rights to self-determination. In education, it means that the KNU wants to decide what the students learn at schools; what language will be used; and who will teach the students. This refers to decentralization of the education system in the country; however, the reality is more complex as education is seen as a political tool rather than a right. The finding on the authoritative practices of the local community leaders in the KNU-controlled areas as a barrier for the students in accessing overseas higher education indicates that education is not perceived as a right by the KNU institution. Rather, this also affirms that education is political given the lack of the KNU's government investments in the provision of education for the students in its controlled areas. At least, if education were seen as a right, the KNU government would allocate appropriate budgets to the KECD, its education department despite any enormity of the challenges it faces regarding peace and political instability as the main authority in the areas. Likewise, the mainstream education system would be more decentralized through the equitable allocation of the

education budget to its population regardless of ethnicity, religion, and political beliefs. Moreover, the finding of the authoritative practices of the local community leaders as a barrier is significant to the availability of education as it is not only a mere manifestation of the lack of the availability of the physical education infrastructure, but also a sign of the oppressive practices in the system in respect of the control of higher education information and guidance. This is alarming if these practices are rooted in the KNU's institution and not urgently addressed as it is apparently a major barrier for the students in accessing higher education including overseas higher education and it will have a huge implication for the future students not only in the respect of the rights to education, but also regarding their future employability and the leaderships of the communities as the current leaders would not live forever. This obstacle reminds me of the work of Paulo Freire when he discussed about the importance of higher education for Brazilian people and how the oppressed people tend to become oppressors in his landmark book of "the pedagogy of the oppressed". According to Paulo Freire (1970), "the oppressed unveil the world of oppression" (p. 54). He also warned us that the oppressed must be very careful not to become the oppressors themselves, as the oppressed people tend not to seek to be liberated, but to be the opposite of what they are now. In fact, as many of the local leaders have long been structurally oppressed by the central government and the level of education they received are often very limited as a result of more than half a century of the insurgent movements, some of them may unintentionally become the oppressed due to the isolation and the lack of exposure to the outside world. Notwithstanding any challenges they may have experienced, this finding is a good reminder for all the leadership around the world that education should be seen as a right rather than a tool for political purpose as well as a place for oppressions.

3.3.2 Accessibility

Issues of accessibility to overseas higher education for the students in the KNU-controlled areas is monumental since the barriers are chiefly influenced by structural challenges or externalities beyond the controls of the KNU's authority in the areas. The elements of accessibility to education encompass the elimination of obstacles with

regards to legal, administrative, and financial facets of barriers on non-discrimination bases. Corresponding to the elements of the accessibility to education, the two of the study findings; the lack of high school education recognition and political instability, are crucial in understanding the fragility of the Karen education systems in facilitating the students under the system to access higher education both in Myanmar and other countries. At the heart of accessibility of education is the non-discrimination basis rooted under the legal and administrative barriers and the financial barriers.

3.3.2.1 Legal and Administrative Barriers

The findings of this study clearly pinpointed that the students under the Karen education systems in the KNU-controlled areas experience a double legal and administrative barriers compared to the students under the mainstream government system. In fact, the legal and administrative barriers for the students in accessing higher education are related to the structural issues and the accessibility of higher education under the rights to education is important to understand the barriers of the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing higher education. In Myanmar, there is no recognition of non-state education systems in the National Education Law unless it uses the mainstream curriculum and guidelines. As aforementioned in the literature reviews, the education system in Myanmar is highly centralized because it excludes the whole group of non-state education systems, which are not using the mainstream curriculum and guidelines. The Karen education system is one of them so that the central Myanmar government does not recognize the certification provided by the Karen education department under the KNU government while it also undermines the roles of the Karen education system in the KNU controlled areas. Thus, it relates to the issue of the structural challenges and it is key to understanding the factors influencing the access to overseas higher education for the students in the KNU-controlled areas. These structural challenges include the lack of high school education recognition and the political instability while they are the external influences from the central government compromising the KNU's abilities in fulfilling rights to education. It would be utterly unfair for the KNU if the roles and

responsibility of the central government were disregarded because there exist structural issues influencing the students' access to higher education in the KNU-controlled areas as well as overseas higher education. The finding of the lack of high school education recognition is significant to issues related to the accessibility of education under the rights to education. Without the formal recognition of the prior learning attainments of the students from the KNU-controlled areas, they not only cannot have access to higher education institutions in Myanmar but also are not able to enter overseas higher education without attaining additional formal accredited education certification.

First and foremost, the issue of accreditation is extremely political and controversial as there are different competing education systems in Myanmar between the state and non-state actors. For the non-state actors like the KNU, the issue of accreditation is paramount in access to formal higher education. This is consistent with a recent study that pointed out that accreditation is a key issue for the students attending KECD's schools in the KNU controlled areas (South, 2012). Perhaps, it is, the non-discriminatory principal in the recognition of the students' learning attainments regardless of their formal status, ethnicity, and gender, at the heart of the rights based approach to education. This finding is also in line with the study of World Bank Group in higher education for development in developing countries. Under the theme of higher education for development, World Bank Group (2017, p. 10) explored "Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education" and the study concludes that the secondary education qualification as an entry requirement for higher education institutions is the most obvious and major barrier for students in access to higher education. Very often, the discourses over issues of accreditations and certifications of the students' learning attainments regarding the accessibility of higher education as a right are surrounded in migrant and refugee contexts and the issues of higher educational opportunities for migrants and refugees have gained more attention within of policy making, media and academics (Esses et al., 2013; Kolowich, 2014, UNESCO, 2015; Kosha et al., 2014; Johnson, 2013). Like the failure of the central government to recognize the learning attainments of students from the ethnic education systems in Myanmar, a recent study

also found that there is the failure of the host governments in accrediting the recognition of learning attainments of the migrants and refugees (Kirk, 2008). Moreover, it also highlighted the lack of accreditation is a barrier for the migrant and refugee students in access to higher education in the host countries. In order to alleviate the adverse challenges and difficulties of migrants and refugees for higher education due to the lack of recognitions, Sawade proposed, “an international certificate available globally would give IDPs, refugees, and migrants the ability to be mobile with their education but also to be legitimate” (2007, p.75). Therefore, the finding of the lack of recognition of prior learning attainment as a barrier shows that the issue is not just the failure of the central government in Myanmar in ensuring that higher education is equally accessible to everyone, but it is also a matter of the obligations of all of the governments in the world to ensure that the education systems will not discriminate students due to the lack of recognition of their prior learning attainments in the admission process. This raises a question of whether rights to education equal human rights because rights to education tends to classify different groups of people in accessing higher education. It is little wonder that the issues of education recognition are prevalent in the migrant and refugee contexts as well as IDPs. This is particularly important when we are talking about the accessibility to overseas higher education, as the admission requirement of the higher education institution would mostly be whether the student attained formal education certification from the central government or have an accredited equivalency certification. In order to ensure equal access to higher education, rights to education must equal human rights to education which is inalienable to any human being without classifications because the issue is much more complex and there are many individuals who are not from the mainstream education as well IDPs, migrant, and refugee contexts and still face issues of the lack of recognition of their learning attainments. Therefore, this situation of the students from the KNU-controlled areas in Myanmar shows that rights to education should go beyond groups of different individuals, it must equal human rights. UNESCO (2009) pinpoints this issue of certification as an important policy and research gap while the issue of recognition vividly shows a significant gap in international educational policy and practice (Talbot, 2006).

Besides, the structural exclusion of the learning attainments of the students in the conflict-affected areas is directly linked to political conflicts and instability in the country. On average, the duration of political conflicts lasts for one decade and internally displaced persons have to spend 20 years in the camps (Ferris and Winthrop, 2010); however, the political conflict has been active for over seven decades in Myanmar. Still, the provision of higher education is quite controversial in the protracted conflicts. One implication is that the disregard for the provision of higher education has long-term consequences and “the failure to prioritize education in general – and higher education in particular – leaves entire generations uneducated, developmentally disadvantaged, and unprepared to contribute to their society’s recovery” (Geneva Summer Schools, 2020). It is evident that the Basic Education for All has been a predominant discourse in the context of protracted conflicts, whereas access to higher education still remains exclusive to the privileged groups as a luxury (Saint, 2009). Nevertheless, the issues of the lack of access to higher education for the students from the ethnic education systems in Myanmar should not be overlooked since they have been trapped under prolonged conflicts for their whole lives in the country. In fact, it also has to be acknowledged that the ethnic education systems also have been striving hard in fulfilling the rights to education for children and youths in conflict affected areas for the past decades despite structural exclusions and lack of supports and funding from the national government. Therefore, the struggles of the students from the KNU-controlled areas will remain very challenging and it would require a huge political reforms and willingness from both the central government and the KNU authority.

3.3.2.2 Financial Obstacles

The elimination of financial obstacles is essential for ensuring the accessibilities of higher education for the students under the KNU-controlled areas in addition to the lack of education recognition. The equal access to higher education as a right is not a new phenomenon as it is explicitly enshrined in the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE). Under the article 4 of the CADE, the state government must make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of

individual capacity. This is of great relevance to the discussion of inequalities in access to mainstream higher education in Myanmar. Given the discrimination based on the lack of recognition of education attainments from the non-state education systems, including the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas, the accessibility of higher education in Myanmar is apparently unequal throughout the successive regimes. The mainstream chronic inequality in access to higher education is particularly more severe among ethnic areas due to protracted conflicts for the past seventy decades. This chronic inequality in access to education can be described by the words of George Orwell, “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (as cited in Wicker, 2011, p.156). Financial obstacles for higher education is not an issue as the vast majority of the students from the Karen education system would not be able to apply for universities or colleges in Myanmar and overseas at the first place due to the lack of recognized certifications. This indicates how accessible higher education for the students under the Karen education system whether it is in Myanmar or overseas.

For those students who could pave their ways to attain a recognized certificate for university admission such as the General Education Development (GED), financial obstacles are huge challenges for them. It must be noted that these are a very handful number of the students under the Karen education system given the barriers presented in the findings. There are two major models in access to higher education. Perhaps, for them, it is a question of whether the market based approach to higher education or rights based approach to higher education will create better accessibility for them for higher education. Apparently, as presented in the literature reviews, HRBA is more suitable for them as they will require scholarships in order to be able to access overseas higher education. According to Rious and Pinto (2010), the HRBA to higher education is concerned with ensuring equal access for all transcending financial obstacles to access because it is also to overcome social and environmental challenges in access to higher education. For proponents of market based approach to higher education, education is seen as “the efficient production of human capital” while the purpose of education is for the supply of qualified people to meet economic demands (Mingat and Tan, 1996, p.699)

and there is better institutional efficiency and quality of tertiary education under MBA to higher education. On the other hand, the proponents of HRBA to higher education asserts that the MBA to higher education is detrimental to social equity and justice as it is driven by economic incentives (Tooley, 2004) and it disregards the non-economic dimensions of higher education such as the underrepresentation of the poor and underprivileged. However, both of these approaches are concerned with economic dimensions of the accessibility of higher educations. If HRBA is to remove the barriers preventing individuals from developing their full potentials through accessing higher education, it cannot be rooted in the economic aspects of the barriers, as there are non-economic obstacles that hinder students' access to higher education. For the students in the KNU-controlled areas to have access to higher education in Myanmar or tertiary education overseas, there are other factors that cannot be disregarded such as the lack of education recognition even if the financial obstacles are removed. Thus the findings of this study suggests that HRBA must go beyond financial obstacles in order for a higher education system to be equally accessible in line with rights to education.

3.4 Conclusion

As explored above, the barriers of the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education were discussed in the Chapter. There are five barriers that the students face in accessing overseas higher education and these barriers include the roles of the community leaders, the lack of higher education opportunities and information, the low quality of education, the lack of recognition, and the political situation in the areas. Also, by analyzing the elements of the availability and accessibility of rights to education under the 4As framework, issues of fiscal allocation of the government, the physical infrastructure of the schools, legal and administrative barriers, and financial barriers hindered the students' access to overseas higher education.

CHAPTER IV

Coping strategies of students from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the second question of the study on coping strategies of the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education. It provides a micro picture through selective case study of the interviews of those students who have access to overseas higher education. Specifically, the study unpacks and looks for different experience and education pathways of the four case studies of the participants who met the criteria of the college student list. In this chapter, a summary of the findings is provided in the section 4.2 while the study also shows how each of the barriers found in the Chapter III was coped by the college students in order for them to have access to overseas higher education. The last section offers an informative and insightful discussion and analysis of the results based on social capital, mobility, and education pathway.

4.2 Summary of the findings

The basic findings of this study show that coping strategies of the college students are related to their social networks, human capital, and mobility. The study indicates that the social networks of the college students were integral to their access to different education opportunities and programs towards accessing overseas higher education while they were also important in addressing the financial challenges they had throughout their education pathway. These social networks consisted of the establishments of strong relationships and connection with members of the KECD, teachers, and senior friends as well as organizations like INGOs and NGOs. In order for the students to be able to enter education programs, the students must have had the necessary English communication skills and knowledge about Math and Social Studies; thus, it was vital for the college students constantly to ensure that they had the necessary human capital. Lastly, mobility was another crucial coping strategy the college students used due to the lack of higher education opportunities and political instability in the

KNU-controlled areas. Mobility was key to accessing different education programs in the Thai-Myanmar border, as Thailand was a widow of opportunities for them. Without the ability to move to Thailand, the students would not have had opportunities to enter different education programs in order to pave their ways to overseas higher education. This study also finds that all of the three coping strategies must be satisfied in order for the college students to have access to overseas higher education as social networks, human capital, and mobility were the three prerequisites for the college students from the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education. If any of the coping strategies were not met, the students would not be able to have access to overseas higher education. The coping strategies of an individual student are elaborated more in the following sections.

4.2.1 Exploring social networks and expanding internal democracy inside organization

In the KNU-controlled areas, according to interview with the college students, the authoritative practice of the local community leaders was a major barrier for the majority of the college students in paving their ways to overseas higher education during their studies in the areas. In addressing this barrier, the results of the study indicate that social network and avoidance were crucial for the college students as they determined whether individuals would have access to higher education program in the Thai-Myanmar border. Therefore, the college students established a strong social network with volunteer teachers from outside and a handful member of the KECD and the community leaders who were supportive of the college students in accessing higher education opportunities outside the KNU-controlled areas. Though the majority of the community leaders suppressed the college students' freedom of movements for higher education opportunity, there were a handful number of the community leaders who encouraged the students to pursue higher education and promoted higher education in the areas. Among the four case studies, the majority of the college students shared similar experiences as they were from the same post-secondary school, namely the New Generations Post-Ten School in the Mutraw District under the KNU-controlled areas.

Under one of the policies of the school, the students must work for the KNU-related organizations for at least two years after completion of the program. This is in a complete contrary to the principals of the rights based approach to education. For the college students, this policy limited their freedom of pursuing higher education and was a major obstacle for them to have accesses to higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas because the majority of the community leaders were extremely protective of the policy and coercing the students to work after the school. In fact, the college students usually needed the recommendation from the community leaders in order for them to be able to join higher education program in the Thai-Myanmar border. As the college students did not have power to change the policy, some of them aligned themselves with the community leaders, who tried to promote higher education for youths in the areas so as to fight against the policy. Participant-D's experiences were a good manifestation of how the college students explored social network and expanded internal supports from the organizations as he tried to develop his closed relation with teachers who came to volunteer at the school and a few community leaders and fought for his rights and freedom for higher education with some of his fellow classmates. Regarding his advocacy and revolutionary acts against the local leaders, he elaborated that;

“Opportunities to pursuing higher education started to open up in 2013 as we fought the local notions glued by the local leaders. We rejected the notions and policy that we cannot go outside and further our education as many of us would like to continue further education in Thai-Burma border. For that, we had to go to the district government office and present our appeal to them for the approval of allowing us to pursue our further study, particularly in the refugee camps and migrant schools in Thai-Burma border. The issue was that one of the policies of the New Generation Post-Ten School was that the students have to work for the KNU or KNU related organizations after the school. We had to attend four meetings with the district KNU leader committee in order to get the approval. We were like the revolutionary student group and before our batch; students were not allowed to go to study outside and in Thailand. Perhaps, some students who came to Thailand usually had relatives or family members in the refugee camps. We were lucky that we have a few

leaders who supported us with our actions.” (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020).

With supports of some community leaders, the policy became more flexible and it became easier for future students in pursuing of higher education in the Thai-Myanmar border. For the Participant-B, though there were from the same school in the Mutraw District, there were much more flexibility with the policy as a junior compared to Participant-C and Participant-D; however, the authoritarian practices of the local community leaders was still a great barrier for her in accessing overseas higher education as the community leaders still remained unsupportive of them pursuing higher education out of their control and they expected her of going back to work as a teacher in the KNU-controlled areas. Nevertheless, as one of the top students at the New Generation Post Ten School and the only two female students in the school, they both were selected for the TPC to come to Thailand with the arrangement of the community leaders after the completion of the school without needing to work right away. After TPC, they were expected to go back to work for the KECD as a teacher; however, she decided to ignore the community leaders' expectation and disapproval of her to further her education as she really wanted to continue her education in the Thai-Myanmar border. For her, she tried to cope with this barrier through avoiding the local leaders although they initially tried to pressure her to go back and work as a teacher. According to her,

“After New Generation Post Ten school, I was selected to come to TPC. I didn't even know about TPC before I got there. In New Generation School, there were only two girls in the school and both of us were selected. My friend who came with me is still working with KECD since she finished TPC. I knew that I had to go back to work with KECD and teach so I was not really excited to come to TPC. After TPC, my female friend went back and she had to work with KECD and teach. She was not allowed to go for further education. For me, I knew that I would not have a chance to continue my education if I went back so I tried to avoid them and I decided not to go back. I was worried that I would never be able to further my education. I kept staying in Mae Sot. At first, I felt a lot of pressure, but the only way for me is to avoid them if I wanted to further my education. So, I decided not to go back and looked for information

*about education program in the borderline through my friends and brothers”
(Participant-B, Interview, 13 July 2020)*

Despite the pressures from the community leaders in the KNU-controlled areas and their disapprovals of her to continue her education, Participant-B coped with this barrier by avoiding them and not going back to her home town in order to her to pave her way to overseas higher education. Therefore, the college students forged a strong social network with teachers and some leaders within the organization to cope with this barrier while Participant-B used avoidance so as to address the issues of the authoritarian practices of the community leaders.

4.2.2 Exploring different channels of information and practicing education mobility

In order to cope with the limited bridging programs and information channels for higher education opportunities, there was an overlap among the college students that they tried to explore different channels of information through the establishment of social networks to get information about higher education opportunities. They also practiced education mobility to cope with the limited bridging programs available in their areas as the only highest education was the KTTC. In fact, social networks determined whether the college students would have access to information about education programs and opportunities to join the program. As having access to information was vital, the college students established a strong social network with their friends, family members, teachers, and a handful member of the KECD who were supportive of them in accessing higher education opportunities outside the KNU-controlled areas. The following excerpts are clear manifestations of how they coped with this barrier.

“After high school, I was devastated because I did not know another options to pursue further education. As I stayed at the KECD office, I would always seek for suggestions and connections from them. I would repeatedly ask them about education opportunities and at first, they told me that you can go to KTTC, but I was not interested in teaching and I did not want to be a teacher.

I inquired them about other options. They told me that there are some schools in the Thai-Burma Border. I even forgot about the challenges and difficulties to go there as I heard that. I was really happy and I later address my earnest request for accompanying them, as I knew that they sometimes went to the Thai-Burma border for meetings. I wanted to go there and I gave them my name. I would tell them please take me with you. They agreed to take me with them and took me to the Kaw Thablay Learning Center in the Thai-Myanmar border, and this was how I got to the borderline with the connections and help of the KECD.” (Participant-A, Interview, 23 June 2020)

The lack of higher education opportunities and information channels was a major barrier for Participant-C as well. To cope with it, he used his social network to get information and have access to higher education program in the Thai-Myanmar border. With his desire to pursue further education, he attempted to seek for information from his teacher who had experiences in the Thai-Burma Border due to the lack of information in the areas. He described:

“I tried to talk to my teachers about my education. One of them told me that if you would like to continue your education, you would have to leave your place and come to the border because there are no opportunities for you in your areas. He said that there many opportunities here. At first, I reckoned a lot, as I did not have anyone who can support me and help me to get to Thailand. Luckily, my teacher helped to get to the Thai-Burma border”. (Participant-C, Interview, 24 June 2020)

For Participant-D, as he was not interested in teaching, he knew that there were no higher education opportunities for him and he would try to get information about higher education from his friends and teachers who had access to refugee education in the Thai-Myanmar border. For him, to address this barrier, he had to rely on the social networks from his friends and teachers. Regarding his experience of addressing this barrier, he explained as the following.

“We all knew that there was no university or college in the areas so we realized that there was only one way during that time though there are some changes like more higher education programs. In our time, the only way was to go outside the KNU-controlled areas because KTTC was the only and highest education available as I mentioned before. Most of the people in the

areas have friends and relatives in the refugee camps around the Thai-Myanmar border. We tried to friends in the refugee camp in order to get information about further education in the camps. Some of my friends followed their friends who were staying in the refugee camps to go to the camps. For me, I built up my social connections with my teacher because I did not have any connection in the camp. Actually, my teacher used to be in one of the refugee camps before he resettled to American and came back to teach us in the KNU-controlled areas. So, he had much experiences and knowledge about education in the camps and he had closed connections with leaders and education providers in the camp. That's how I tried to build closed relationship with my teachers and get information and support from him in order for me to cope with the lack of higher education programs and information channel in my areas.” (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

Through the supports of his teachers, Participant-D could pave his way to pursue further education in the refugee camp. Therefore, it can be observed that the college students explored different channels of information and moved to Thailand through the supports of their social network in order to cope with the limited bridging programs and information channels in the KNU-controlled areas.

4.2.3 Self-study and Working on language skills for extra-education

The low quality of education was one of the major barriers for the students in accessing overseas higher education. In order to cope with the low quality of education in the KNU-controlled areas, the study found that all of the college students focused on improving their human capital through regular self-study for extra-education with the specific focuses on English communication skills. All of the college students also believed that self-study was key for them to pursue higher education programs in the Thai-Myanmar border as they had to undergo entrance examinations in order to join the program that they aimed to attend. In fact, as the low quality of education was greatly influenced by the education system as a whole, they had no control over the quality of education provided for them and regular self-study was what they could individually control so as to elevate their skills and knowledge. As all of the college shared similar approaches to self-study to address issues of the low quality of education in the KNU-

controlled areas, some of the experiences of the college students are provided in the followings. For Participant-B, her burning desire for higher education triggered her to start doing self-study since she was in high school. For her, self-study was key to cope with the low quality of education she received back home. In order to be able to join university, she understood that she must have the human capital required. In order to overcome the barrier of the low quality of education, she explained;

“For me, I tried to buy books from outside and the cities. I also asked my brothers to bring me some learning materials from Mae Sot when they came back. I focused on self-study, especially in English. My mom hired a tutor for me during the summer break when I was in high school. I would say that I was pretty lucky. For those who cannot do self-study or buy book or have tutor, they cannot do anything. I am luckier than other students as my family was very supportive for me with my education. And I am also the youngest person in the family. All of my brothers, they worked with the KNU-related organizations. They knew how hard it would be for me to work in the KNU-controlled areas. My father, he also has many networks and friends in the Thai-Myanmar border. That’s one of the reasons it was easier for me.”
(Participant-B, Interview, 13 July 2020)

Like the other participants, Participant-C also experienced the issues of low quality of education as a barrier for him in order to have access to overseas higher education. As a student, he believed that access to good quality of education was beyond his control because it depended on the KECD. However, what he could do to overcome the low quality of education was to do regular self-study and to improve his English skills. According to him,

“Most of the students were not willing to study hard because they knew that we could not go anywhere even after we finished high school. For them, I guess they felt hopeless and they did not think higher education was important. For me, I always knew that I could not just rely on the school in the areas I had to do my own self-study. I would regularly practice my English because I wanted to speak English and I believed that English was essential skills for me. My friends and I would do self-study all the time and we would ask our friends from Thailand to copy MP3 English audio practices. That’s

*how we tried to improve ourselves and cope with the low quality of education”:
(Participant-C, Interview, 24 June 2020)*

The aforementioned experiences were a good manifestation of how the college students strived to cope with the low quality of education provided in the KNU-controlled areas. Therefore, it is apparent that regular self-study particularly on English skills were successfully deployed by the college students and very important for paving their ways to overseas higher education.

4.2.4 Acquiring Accreditation and finding new alternatives

For the college students, the lack of high school education recognition was a major barrier for them in accessing overseas higher education as their education under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas was not recognized by any government and higher education institutions. In fact, since issues of recognition was directly related to structural discriminations and exclusion, and political landscapes in Myanmar, the KNU itself had little control cover the lack of recognition of its education system. For the students, it is little wonder that this barrier was beyond their ability to address. In coping with this barrier, the study found that all of the college students strived to obtain accreditation from different bridging programs in the Thai-Myanmar border and find new alternatives for the recognized certifications. These alternative accreditations were GED certification and the diploma certification provided by the Australian Catholic University in Mae Sot. To be able to acquire these recognized certification, the result of the findings shows that the college students spent 5.5 years after their completions of high school while half of them even had to spend 6.5 years before being able to attain the recognized certification and apply for overseas higher education. In his struggles to be able to get the recognized certification, Participant-D described his journey as below.

“Actually, it is not only the lack of recognition but also language problems! We didn't have recognition and we could not speak Burmese. To cope with it, as you know, all of the certificates from KED not recognized by governments of neither Myanmar nor Thailand. To have a recognized certificate, I had to

find any school that can provide recognition. For me, I always focused on GED program or ACU because these two schools were the only two ways to provide me with recognized certification. So, to get into these programs, I had to prepare myself. English language is the key to be able to study at these schools. Thus, the only way to cope with the barrier of the lack of recognition for me was to try to join these two programs. I finally could join both of them, but I decided to choose ACU. That's how I cope with this barrier as we didn't have any other choices". (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

As described above, it is quite important for the students to know the available program and to choose the most suitable program for them so as to address this barrier as the issue of the lack of recognition is out of their control. For them, to address this barrier was to find an alternative program and try to enhance their skills in order to enter the program or school. Like the other participants, the lack of high school education recognition was a major barrier for Participant-C as overseas higher education institution required official certification of high school completion. In overcoming this barrier, she described;

"I could not use any of the certification provided by the KECD including my high school certificate and post-ten certification from the New Generation Post-Ten School and the certificate from TPC. After high school in the KNU-controlled areas, I attended two different post-ten programs, but I could not use these certifications and it took me three years. As you know, the Asian University for Women (AUW) required recognized certification of secondary education. We were lucky because the Minmahaw School created special certificate for us to apply for the AUW and AUW recognized the certificate from the school as they have good connection and AUW understood our situation." (Participant-C, Interview, 24 June 2020)

Through the certificate from the Minmahaw School, Participant-B was able to cope with the barrier of the lack of high school education recognition. However, it has to be noted that the certificate could only be used for the AUW and students are required to acquire GED certification in order to apply for other universities. Regarding the issues of recognition, she also added that;

“When I was in the Minmahaw School, some of us could pass the entrance examination like AUW. Many of us were qualified for university admission but we didn't have recognized certificate so we could not enter other university. The university entry should be based on merit, not certification. This is a big issue for us like Karen students because we cannot provide the university recognized certification of our secondary education and we went through the Karen education system. I think there should be more programs like GED because we need it to have access to overseas higher education. For the MHEP, there were very limited seats for GED preparations available each year. If there are more programs like the MHEP, it would be more helpful for students like us to have access to overseas higher education.” (Participant-B, Interview, 13 July 2020)

It is obvious that issues of education recognition are key to understanding the barriers of students in accessing overseas higher education. For the Participant-B, she could only apply for AUW since she did not have GED certificate and her previous learning attainments were not recognized and could not be used for university entry though spent years in different education programs. Therefore, alternative programs like GED and ACU are essential in alleviating the challenges that the students encountered in their struggles for accessing overseas higher education.

4.2.5 Finding better Education Environment

It is little wonder that the participants in this study identified political instability as a major barrier for the students in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education as discussed in the Chapter-III. As political instability compromised varied aspects of the provision of education in the areas and were out of the college students' controlled, there is a commonality among the college students' experiences that they all tried to find a better and safer education environment to pave their ways to overseas higher education. In this study, it was found that all of the college students viewed Thailand as a widow of opportunity for them to have a better and safer learning environment and going to Thailand was the most feasible option for them as they could not enter higher education institutions in Myanmar. Participant-D shared his experience as the following

“It is a major barrier for us to have access overseas higher education. With political instability, it was even harder for us to have access to bridging programs, not to mention about overseas higher education. After I finished my post-secondary education in Mutraw District, it is impossible to address this barrier by us as it is influenced by many different externalities. When you finished our education in the areas, you cannot cope with it. It was a given situation. The only way to cope with it is that you have to run away from it, so I came to Thailand. And, that’s how I cope with this barrier”. (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

For rights to education, political instability is critically important, as peaceful environment is a prerequisite for education to be available and accessible. As it was beyond his ability to cope with this barrier; he tried to look for an alternative way to be able to go to the refugee camp and have access to a stable study environment. What he could do was to leave the areas and joined the PTMJC in the refugee camp where there was no political instability. He further shared that:

“Even if there was no instability, we would still have to come to Thailand because we did not have any higher education opportunities. Perhaps, political instability was a major barrier that affected the system and the peaceful environment for us to study. What could we do? I think even though it stops, if the local leaders don’t change the system, nothing would be changed so I still have to come to the refugee camp in Thailand. For us, we cannot cope with these levels of barrier: It’s like push and pull factors. The political instability pushed us to go to the camp while the available opportunities in the camp attracted us to come to the camp in Thailand. That’s how I see it. If we stay there, our social position and status will be like that the majority of the leaders. We could even be like them becoming a barrier for the students in accessing higher education. For people who came to Thailand, they have a better social position and education. For me, this was the pull factor. Well, to put it simply, if something you would like to get is in Chiang Mai, you have to come to Chiang Mai. If you keep staying in Bangkok, that opportunity will not come to you and you probably will never get it. So, for me, I avoid this barrier of political instability by coming to the camp”. (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

Like Participant-D, it was the best option for Participant-A to move to Thailand in order to find better education environment and opportunities for him. Pertaining to his education adventure, he explained;

“I am really glad that I had a chance to come to Thailand. I didn’t have to worry about running from the battles between the KNU and the Burmese army. For me, I couldn’t do anything about the conflict in my areas and I think it was best for me to go to Thailand for my education. I owed a big Thanks to people in the KECD office back home. Being able to go to Thailand gave me a chance to see different options of schools so I could try my best to get into the best program in the borderline. Do it step by step! For me, this was opportunity. If I did not come to the border, I think I would have gotten married and would be struggling now.” (Participant-A, Interview, 23 June 2020)

These experiences manifest the inability of the college students to cope with political instability in the KNU-controlled areas and show that it was the most feasible options for them to go to Thailand for a better and safer learning environment.

4.3 Discussion and Analysis

In this section, it provides an insightful analysis of students from the Karen Education system in the KNU-controlled areas in adopting different coping strategies in order to access overseas higher education. The three key factors include social capital, mobility and education pathway as presented in the conceptual framework.

4.3.1 Social capital as a coping strategy

Social capital is key to understanding issues of access to overseas higher education and coping strategies among the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas as it plays a vital role in the students’ access to higher education information and opportunities. Perhaps, there is a commonality among the college students that their social capital placed them in a better position in access to higher education program after their completion of secondary education while it is an important factor for all of them in their knowledge about subsequent programs they have attended before being able to enter overseas universities. In fact, social capital is

ubiquitous in the present study of racial stratification and higher education opportunities. Rooted in Bourdieu's (1986) critiques of social stratification and class struggle over access to varied forms of capitals, social capital is the network of resources, which are useful for individuals in reaching a particular outcome. Social and personal networks are integral to social capital which individuals use for interpersonal supports (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). In a nutshell, it is assumed that social relations are useful resources in the concept of social capital. Sabatini (2006) highlighted that positive externalities can be generated for a specific group member through social capital and the group members are given competitive advantages in achieving their ends (as cited in Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009). For Bourdieu (1986), social capital is an exclusionary asset of the higher or elite groups while he also further posited that social inequality is greatly attributed by the level of social capitals individual's social class has under the current class systems.

Furthermore, Coleman (1987) highlights that social capital is significant for the advantage of individuals in maintaining their particular identity or brand. These perspectives of social capital are relevant to the experiences of the college students in this study in their accesses to information and connections for higher education opportunities and programs. The majority of them have family members who are members and leaders of the KNU in the areas while the other student stayed at the KECD office during his secondary education. This certainly gave them the competitive advantage in access to the New Generations Post-Ten Schools after their completions of secondary education over those students who had no information and connections under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas, while the Participant-A also had competitive advantage in learning about the Kaw Thablay Learning Center and having a support system (the KECD) which could introduce him and brought him to the school in the Thai-Burma Border. The importance of social capital is well described by the Participant-D as he explained;

“Social capital is very important for getting the information about schools and higher education. Without social capital, it would be very difficult for young

people in the areas to access higher education outside the areas. Well, though my family was not the main reason for me to have access to university study abroad, the fact that many of my family members were members of the KNU gave me a better chance to be able to join the New Generations Post-Ten School in the Mutraw District after my high school". (Participant-D, Interview, 13 July 2020)

The discussion about social capital as an exclusionary asset of the elite group is particularly intriguing and significant in this study because the majority of the four students who could pave their ways to overseas higher education has family members who can be considered leaders and members of the KNU in the areas while the other student had a close connection with the KECD due to the fact that he could stay at the KECD officer during his study in high school. Elaborated in the previous chapter, the availability of extremely limited bridging programs and information channels, experienced by both groups of the students, as a major barrier for them in accessing overseas higher education is relevant to the exclusionary asset of the elite group and the competitive advantage under the concept of social capital. Firstly, it could be argued that these college students were placed in better positions than those students who have no family members in the KNU as being able to study at the New Generations Post-Ten Program in the KNU-controlled areas and the Kaw Thablay Learning Center in the Thai-Burma border provided them opportunities to have a chance to work with teachers who became social capitals for them in their endeavors to access different programs in the refugee camp and migrant areas in Thailand. It could be assumed how difficult it would be for ordinary students in the KNU-controlled areas to get access to information and supports for higher education opportunities when those overseas students who have family members working for the KNU-areas pointed out that access to information and available bridging programs are extremely limited. The fact that there is an overlap of both groups of students' perspectives that there are also authoritative practices of the local leaders particular in their access to higher education opportunities besides the lack of information flow is quite concerning as this is a clear contradiction of the principals of non-discriminations under accessibility and options of higher education opportunities

under the availability of the rights based approach to higher education. Concerning the lack of information channel and flows about higher educational opportunities, the situations are well elaborated as the following excerpts.

“I feel like the organization (KNU or KECD) does not want to give me information about further education. If you want to continue your education and pursue higher education, you cannot rely on the organization information flow. Information flow usually came from the students. For instance, as I am studying at university, I can share the information. Information does not come from the organization.” (Participant-C, Interview, 24 June 2020)

The abovementioned excerpt not only shows that social capital was crucial in their access to overseas higher education but also indicates the significant roles that social relations with teachers and friends were playing in the dissemination of higher education information in the KNU-controlled areas. Regardless of family backgrounds of the students, the study also found that family background had little impacts on students' access to information and opportunities for higher education and social relations with teachers and friends who experienced higher education programs were better social capital in accessing different bridging programs towards overseas higher education. In a nutshell, this highlighted bonding, one form of social capital described by Bourdieu (1986) because individual students tied themselves with teachers and friends in order to get higher education opportunities and information. It is indisputable that social relations were a significant social capital for students in access to overseas higher education. This finding is also corresponding with previous study of migrants' access to tertiary education as students in migrant schools tie themselves with their close friends and their friends have served as social capital for them to access tertiary education since they are given higher education information and guidance in the application of higher education (MacLaren, 2010). Therefore, social capital is an important factor for students in the KNU-controlled areas in coping with the barriers encountered in access to overseas higher education

Issues of the lack of higher education information and guidance are key to our understanding of the students' coping strategies as they present major observations in

the systematic analysis of the program pathways of the overseas college students. Moreover, it has to be noted that access to higher education information and guidance is well embedded in the availability of the rights based approach to education. This study reveals that most of the overseas college students repeated a number of post-ten level programs before accessing overseas higher education. This must be greatly attributed by the lack of systematic platform for higher education information and guidance by the government, the KECD as well as by educational organizations in migrant and refugee areas. The Participant-C's program education pathway is a vivid manifestation of this lack of proper information and guidance as he attended four different post-ten level education programs in which three of them were teaching preparation programs before joining the Minmahaw Higher Education Program, a GED training program which was a benchmark for him in accessing overseas higher education as all of these education attainments including his secondary education in the KNU-controlled areas were not recognized for entering overseas university and the GED can be recognized and used for overseas university entry as an alternative certification of the secondary education. Due to the lack of proper information and guidance system, students from migrant areas and refugee camps often spend years attending different education programs which cannot address issues of recognition of their prior learning attainments. It is evident that the overseas college students from the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas did not receive a proper information and guidance channel for their access to overseas higher education as the Participant-A, B, C, and D spent the gap years of 4, 5, 6.5 and 6.5 form their completion of high school to overseas higher education respectively. Instead of having spent these gap years, they could have spent these gap years in getting their degrees or developing their professional careers given that a proper information and guidance system was provided and accessible. It is little wonder that the significance of the availability of education information and guidance is an integral part of the rights based approach to education. If the KNU is to fulfill rights to education, it cannot disregard the roles of information and guidance for higher education opportunities. Most importantly, it must

address issues of authoritative practices of the local community leaders as they are presented and experienced as key challenges and obstacles for students in accessing further and higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas.

4.3.2 mobility as a coping strategy

Thailand's geographical proximity with countries that have experienced prolonged political instability and economic challenges has placed the country as one of the most important destinations for migrants in the region. It is estimated that Thailand hosts over 3 million migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Taugratananon et al, 2019). Only the minority of these people entered the country with valid travel documents whereas the majority of them remain undocumented. Globally, there are 27 million children who are considered as out of school in conflict zones while over half of the total 6.5 million refugee children do not have access to schooling (UNHCR, 2016). Deeply embedded in a wide variety of international conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Agenda 2030, and the 1951 Refugee Convention, the enormity of the challenges to fulfill rights to education remain ubiquitous. In Thailand, a study showed that there are about 250,000-290,000 migrant children residing in Thailand (Kantayaporn et al, 2013); however, a recent estimate reported that there are still up to 200,000 migrant children who remain out of school. Despite Thailand's progressive policies for migrant children in essential education service, including the adoption of the 2005 cabinet resolution regarding rights to education for undocumented children residing in the country, there are obviously still several barriers hindering migrant children access to education. In fact, educational migrant children remain among the most vulnerable group of the migrants in Thailand as the number of migrant children out of school suggests. Concerning migrant children from Myanmar, there are a sharp increase in Migrant Learning Centers (MLC) around the Thai-Burma border and The province of Tak alone experienced a rise in the number of MLCs from 3 to 65 within 16 years, indicating that migrant parents prefer to send their children to MLCs than Thai public schools (Nawarat, 2014). Moreover, this may also partly be attributed by the increase in the number of cross-border migrant students

like students from the other side of the border, Myanmar as well as from the KNU controlled areas. However, the challenges of the MLCs are described as a vacuum situation (Tuangratananon, et al., 2019). This may partly be attributed by the lack of official recognition of the learning attainments of the migrant and refugee students who have access to education at the MLCs as well as schools in the refugee camps around the Thai-Burma border. It is worth noting that this issue of the lack of recognition is not particular to the Burmese migrant and refugee students around the Thai-Myanmar border as it is also observed in Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya (Bird, 2003 and Sommers, 2005). Due to the lack of recognition of education attainments, there are only a handful number of students from MLCs who could pave their ways and have access to overseas higher education. Despite the enormity of the challenges, it is a more desirable choice for the students in the KNU controlled areas to cross the border and attend MLCs in Thailand due to the lack of higher education opportunities in the KNU-controlled areas. The following excerpt of the interview transcript is a clear manifestation of the situation in the KNU-controlled areas as well as the students' perspectives of the MLCs in the Thai-Burma border.

“We don't have a choice. There are no other higher education opportunities in the Mutraw District except the Karen Teacher Training College. We cannot go to university in Myanmar. What should we do? Get married? We all want to come to Thailand for further higher education. There are quite many different higher education programs in the border. There is nothing back home”. (Participant-B, Interview, 13 July 2020)

For the rights based approach perspectives, it is the KNU government roles and responsibilities to fulfill rights to education for its populations in its controlled areas. Interestingly, all of the participants in this study including key informants and experts highlighted that the KNU-government has the central responsibility to create higher education opportunities and fulfill rights to education. In fact, some of the key informants and experts also stressed that the roles and responsibility of the central government, the Myanmar government, cannot be disregarded as it has indirect or direct

influences over the provision of education in the KNU-controlled areas and all the children and people who were born and living in the country are citizens of the country. Perhaps, the provision of education in the KNU-controlled areas is highly political when it comes to the roles of the central government. Due to the political conflicts and issues of legitimacy in the KNU-controlled areas, the roles and responsibility of fulfilling rights to education are central to the KNU. In fact, the central government often cannot access or have control over the areas controlled by the KNU. The issue of responsibility is highly debatable and this is not to dismiss the responsibility of the central government because it clearly has the roles and responsibilities. It is a question of whether the central government is genuinely willing to take responsibility to fulfill rights to education for children under the KNU-controlled areas as the rights of these children as well as other ethnic children under the ethnic education systems in the controlled areas of the ethnic armed groups around the country are structurally excluded in the national policies and laws. The following excerpt from the interview transcriptions manifests the participants' views of the roles and responsibility of the KNU-governments.

“The KNU definitely has responsibility to fulfil rights to education and the needs for the people there because we don't have access to the central government in our areas. If the KNU does not do or fulfil their needs, who is going to fulfil that? That's why I think the KNU has full responsibility”.
 (Participant-A, Interview, 23 June 2020)

A significant observation that emerges from the study of the college students' program pathways from the completion of their secondary education to overseas higher education is issue of gender. The issue of gender quite indispensable as not only is gender directly related to the accessibility of the rights to education but also are the women whose rights are often overlook compared to men in the conflict situations with respect to rights to education. Under the accessibility of the rights based approach to education does lie the principal of non-discrimination and this non-discriminatory principal is upheld several international laws like the CRC and the SDGs. In this study, it can be observed that only one female student out of the four overseas college students

from the KNU-controlled areas could make their ways to overseas higher education. This may be influenced by the fact that all the students have to cross the border to Thailand to have better access and higher education opportunities in the Thai-Burma border. Though it may seem understandable that more male students have more access to overseas higher education as the students from the KNU-controlled areas have to cross the border to Thailand for better education access and opportunities. Nevertheless, this seems unacceptable and the KNU government must ensure that every child has equal access and opportunities regardless of their gender. This finding is also consistent with a previous study that girls are almost 2.5 times more likely to be out of school if they live in conflict-affected areas while education outcomes for girls are the worst in the conflict areas especially when they enter adolescence (UNESCO, 2015). This clearly shows that it would be more challenging for girls to access higher education opportunities especially when it requires to cross the border into other countries. It is also unsurprising that all of the college students received little or no supports from the KNU-government as they mostly had to pave their own ways to cross the border and look for higher education opportunities in Thailand. Therefore, the KNU still has much to do in order to fulfill rights to education.

4.3.3 Education Pathway

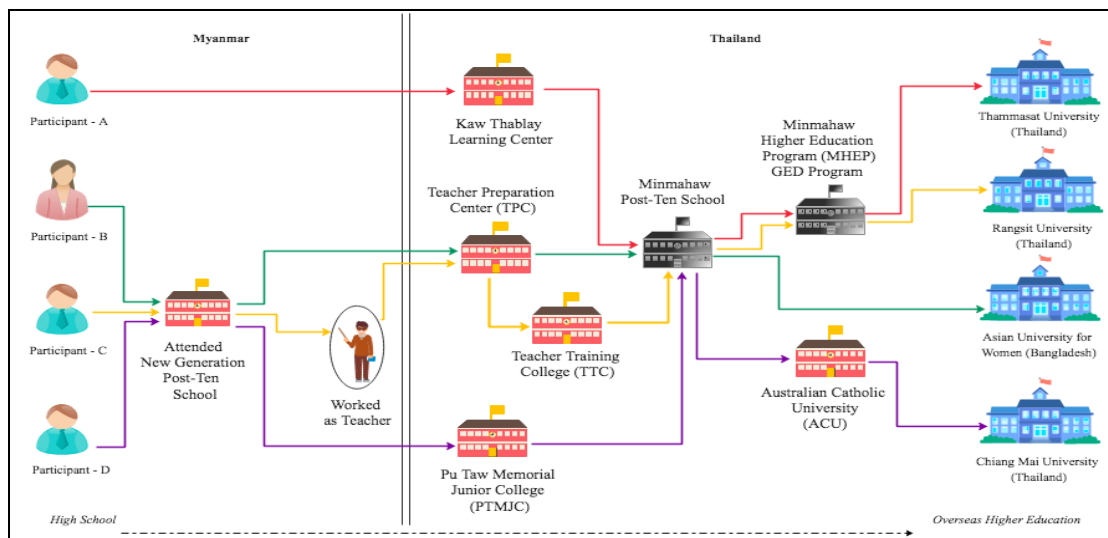


Figure 4 College students' education pathway to overseas higher education

Education pathway is important to understand coping strategies of the students from the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education. There are quite many different education programs and schools available in the refugee camps and migrant areas in the Thai-Myanmar border. It is imperative for the students to get into the right program for accessing overseas higher education in order to attain the certificate which can be used for university admission as the certifications provided by the majority of the programs and schools in the Thai-Burma border for the refugee and migrant students are not recognized and used for university admission. From the education pathways of the college students, there is a commonality that they all have joined the Minmahaw School. It is the most popular program destination for the students since it is arguably to be the most efficient and affective school in the Thai-Myanmar border for the students who wish to access overseas higher education. In the Minmahaw School, there are two major different programs; the Minmahaw Post-Ten Program (school) and the Minmahaw Higher Education Program (MHEP). In this study, there is one major commonality among the college students that they all have attended the Minmahaw Post-Ten Program and the majority of them have further joined the MHEP as present in the schematic diagram 1 of the students' different experiences and program

pathways to overseas higher education. There are quite a few reasons behind the students' decisions towards attending the Minmahaw School. Firstly, the students need to attain the certificate of the general education development (GED) in order to be able to enter overseas universities around the world due to the lack of recognition of the learning attainments from the Karen education system as well as other migrant education programs. Under one of the major requirements of university admission, the GED is used and recognized globally as the American Grade-12 equivalency certification. Without the GED certification, the majority of the overseas universities would not admit students from the Karen education system in the KNU-control areas.

Secondly, there is much higher chances to be able to enter the MHEP for GED preparation if they can manage to get into the Minmahaw Post-Ten School as the Minmahaw Post-Ten School is a pre-school for the MHEP. In fact, the MHEP has a 100 percentage of the GED passing rate and it is one of the most respected and renowned programs in the areas. Moreover, students have higher chances to get scholarship after they obtain the GED certification since they would be eligible for the applications and admissions for overseas higher education institutions. These aforementioned factors are key reasons why all of the college students in this study have attended the school. From the students' different experiences and program pathways to overseas higher education as presented in the schematic diagram 1, the finding also reveals that quite a few gap years could be eliminated if proper information system and guidance were provided for the college students because all of the interim post-ten programs after high school are not recognized and they are basically not positively contributing to issues of recognition and certification though these program may enhance the students' skills to some extent. This also shows how important proper and right information and guidance are for students in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education. Otherwise, they would have to spend years of their life in attending many different programs in order to have access to overseas higher education when they could have spent these gap years in building up their profiles for different professional careers. Another program that is also popular is that the Australian Catholic University, a program of liberal

studies for migrant and refugee's students. Despite its affiliating with the ACU from Australia, one a small number of the university in Thailand and Hong Kong admit students with this ACU certification; it has more limited opportunities for overseas higher education. However, it has advantages over the MHEP in respect of job seeking; therefore, some students join the program for job opportunities rather than accessing overseas higher education. In the Thai-Myanmar border, studies highlighted that migrant learning centers like the MHEP and the ACU serve as a bridge for Burmese migrant students for higher education (Cranitch and MacLaren, 2018 & Purkey 2012). Therefore, it is important for the students to get proper information and guidance system in order for them to determine which program suits them the best in pursuing their goals.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the study provided four case studies of the exceptional students from the KNU-controlled areas who could overcome the barriers and have access to overseas higher education. In coping with the barriers, the students used their social networks, human capital and Thailand as a widow of opportunities for them. Through social networks, the students cope with the issues of the lack of information and opportunities in the areas while they tried to development their human capital particularly English skills in order to address issues of the low quality of education and the lack of recognition through acquiring GED certificates in the Thai-Myanmar border. In order to address the lack of opportunities, the authoritarian practices of the local leaders, and the political instability, the students moved to Thailand so as to pave their ways to overseas higher education. Through the education pathway analysis, it could be observed that the students spent a number of years before being able to overcome the barriers and have access to overseas higher education.

CHAPTER V

Analysis, Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter draws a conclusion on the findings from Chapter III and IV. In the following section, the thesis first provides the link between conceptual framework on human Rights-based Approach to Education and practical cases on accessing to overseas higher education. It then follows by the barriers of the students in accessing overseas higher education, coping strategies of the college students, and the significance of higher education in development in the sections of 5.2. The last section provides the recommendations to enhance accessibility to overseas higher education for the students under the Karen education system in its controlled areas and suggested further studies that require careful attentions in providing higher education opportunities for the students in the areas.

5.1 Human Rights-based Approach to Education

Firstly, the 4-As Framework of the human right-based approach to education is very important in outlining the governmental human rights obligations in education, which is structured into availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. These features embody the rights to education, the rights in education, and the rights through education. Specifically, this study looks into the rights to education, which are concerned with the availability and accessibility. Though these features of the 4-As Framework of the human right-based approach to education are very useful when applying to assess the obligations of the state governments, the study found that there are some implications that emerges from applying the conceptual framework in the KNU government, which is the authority government in its controlled areas; however, it is not the state government of the country. Nevertheless, it is still quite useful in understandings the situations of the rights to education in the KNU-controlled areas.

The first implication of the 4-As Framework of the human right-based approach to education is concerned with issues of accessibility. The empirical findings in the Chapter 3 pointed out that the issues of the accessibility in contested contexts is very

complex and it is often extremely political so that it goes beyond the control of the KNU government. Based on the findings, one of the major factors inhibiting the students' access to overseas higher is the lack of their high school recognition. This is particularly very important for the students because it would not be possible for them to access overseas higher education without recognized certification. Taking the current political landscapes into account, the recognition of the state government for the Karen education system would not be in the near future because this would require a lot of political wills and decentralizations of the current education system. In fact, this issue of recognition is directly related to structural exclusion and discriminations while accreditation is also subjected to different perspectives including the KNU's leadership. There is a need of considerable compromises and progresses in the political and peace processes in the country. Between the two governments, it is the students who are the victims. As a result, the only available opportunity is for the students to go outside Myanmar and try to attain a recognized certification such as GED certificate in order to access overseas higher education. As the empirical findings in the chapter 4 suggested, some of the college students had to spend 6.5 years in order to get the recognized certification and have access to overseas higher education. This is significant to their human rights to education and their future development because they could develop their professional careers during these times, for instance, if they have access to higher education right after they have completed their secondary education in the KNU-controlled areas.

Secondly, the enormity of the barriers means that there is a need to reexamine the purpose and meaning of education. The empirical findings in the Chapter 3 pointed out that it is insufficient to assess the access to education through the 4As frameworks under the rights to education as the issues of access to education go beyond the mere assessment of the obligations of the government in ensuring rights to education for all in practices because the purpose and meaning of education particularly within the competing education systems in the conflict affected situations is complex and education is too often extremely political. For instance, the low quality of education and the lack of higher education opportunities as barriers for the students in accessing higher

education which are greatly compromised by the lack of fiscal allocation of both the KNU and the central Myanmar governments, are key to understanding issues of the purpose of education for the different authorities in the country. However, this transcends the scope of rights in education, which are embedded in the other 4As of the rights to education. As the purpose and meaning of education are subjected to different ideologies and political systems, education will remain very political. Therefore, the 4As of the rights to education should take the contesting systems and legitimacy between the central government and non-state actor into deliberate considerations in order for the framework to be more appropriate to assess the situations like the Karen education system. The framework should integrate some elements that can assess the obligations of the non-state actors because the case of the Karen goes beyond the control of the central government so that there should be a shared responsibility or obligations for both governments if they are to fulfill rights to education for all.

5.2 Barriers, Coping Strategies, Higher Education and Development

In this section, the study aims to summarize on what the barriers of students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education are and how the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas cope with the barriers in accessing overseas higher education.

Barriers in accessing overseas higher education

Based on the qualitative analysis of the availability and accessibility of the 4As under rights to education, it can be concluded that it is more challenging for the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas in accessing overseas higher education than the students under the mainstream system in the state controlled areas due to the central government's lack of recognition of the ethnic education systems and the nature of the political conflicts in the country. Moreover, the students in the KNU-controlled areas face double obstacles as they face both practical challenges and structural challenges compared to the students under the mainstream education system. These practical challenges are issues and difficulties emerging within the local institution and authority control while the structural challenges are externalities

influencing the local control authority's control. As explored in the Chapter 3, there are five factors affecting the students' access to overseas higher education.

First, by analyzing the institutional challenges of the Karen education system and the experiences of the students in the KNU-controlled areas, the result indicates that the authoritative practices of the local community hindered the student's access to overseas higher education. It is a combination of the existing KNU's policy and community leaders' expectation and practices in the areas. In the KNU-controlled areas, it is quite difficult for the students under the Karen education system to leave the areas in order to get access to higher education outside the KNU-controlled areas as they are expected to work for the KNU or KNU related organizations after high school. As the KNU-controlled areas are very isolated, the availability of information about higher education opportunities out of the areas is chiefly confined to the community leaders and teachers, however, the majority of the community leaders and teachers were not supportive of students in accessing higher education outside the areas. As the students needed to get information and recommendation from the local leaders in order to enter programs and schools whether it is in the refugee camps or migrant areas in the Thai-Burma border, the local leaders have much power to exercise and decide whether recommendation will be given to the students. Moreover, there is also a compulsory service for the KNU under the KNU's policy and this become a challenge for many of the students. This barrier of the authoritative practices of the local community leaders is significantly important to our understanding of access to higher education as only the students describe this barrier whereas none of the key informants from the relevant education organizations and the experts in the fields mentioned about it.

In order to understand the issues related the availability of higher education based on rights based approach, the study analyzed challenges concerning fiscal allocations and education infrastructures. There is a lack of fiscal allocations of both the KNU government and the state government's financial supports for the Karen education system and the Karen education system are mainly dependent upon external supports and findings. This greatly compromises the quality of education and the availability of

options of schooling within the areas. Moreover, the issues of the low quality of education are greatly influenced by the inadequacy of qualified teachers and in sufficiency of resources and learning material due to the limited funding it has. Therefore, this finding suggests that the low quality of education is a factor that hinders the students' access to overseas higher education. Apparently, it is challenging for an education to be available and to have a good quality without substantial financial investments from the governments. Also, it is important to note that the fiscal allocations and education infrastructure are quite political in the areas due to issues of competing legitimacy between the governments and political landscape in the country.

Taking the shortage of teacher, options of schooling and the lack of government's investment into account, the study shows that there is also the lack of higher education opportunities, information and guidance. Besides the lack of investments from the governments, it is also important note that the lack of higher education opportunities is influenced by externalities such displacements and political conflicts. Through the analysis of the accessibility aspect of rights to education, the thesis indicated that political instability is not only a barrier for the students in accessing overseas tertiary education, but also an underlying challenge for the higher education opportunities to be set up in the KNU-controlled areas. Under the human rights to education, peaceful environment is a fundamental foundation for the enjoyment of rights to education; however, the reality of the situations in the KNU-controlled areas is fragile in terms of conflicts as the KNU government is an insurgent group in the country. Besides political instability, the lack of high school education is found to be a major challenge for the students in accessing overseas higher education. The issue of recognition is quite political, as it not only inhibits the students from acquiring higher education in Myanmar but also constraints the students from accessing overseas higher education. In fact, the long-term consequences of the lack of access to higher education for a particular community are substantially detrimental to social, political, and economic development. Therefore, the obligations of the government in the elimination of discriminative legal and administrative obstacles in line with the non-discrimination

principles of the accessibility of higher education under rights to education should not be constrained to the national government. Rather, it also should be international so that the students would at least be able to enter universities abroad with scholarship without having to spend years in acquiring accredited high school equivalency certification like GED when the central government in the country disregards the right to education in respect of certifications.

Coping strategies in accessing overseas higher education

In order to understand the coping strategies of the students under the Karen education systems in accessing overseas higher education, the study used the four selective case studies of the college students based on the qualitative analysis of the social capital, mobility, and education pathways. To cope with the five barriers, the college students applied social networks, human capital building, and mobility as their coping strategies. First, the college students used social connections to cope with the authoritarian practices of the community leaders while they also practiced avoidance of the pressures and disapproval of the leaders when they got into the Thai-Myanmar border. Secondly, in addressing the issues of the limited bridging programs and information channels, the students chiefly relied on social networks from teachers, family members, and senior friends. Thirdly, regular self-study with a particular emphasis on English language enhancement was practiced in order to cope with the challenges of the low quality of education for the students. For the fourth barrier of the lack of recognition, the college students targeted to attend bridging programs, which could provide them a recognized certification in order for them to have access to overseas higher education. Lastly, since political instability was beyond the ability to address the college students explored better and safer education environment for them and moved to Thailand as the schools in the Thai-Myanmar border provided them with a better and safer alternative learning environment.

Through the analysis of their social capitals, the study draws a conclusion that social networks are essential to get into post-ten-education program in the KNU-areas and the Thai-Myanmar border. In fact, most of the students have family members working for the KNU in quite high-ranking positions. This social connection put them

in a better position in order to get into the post-ten programs and get access to education program in the Thai-Burma border. Moreover, as the students' had to cross the border to Thailand, economic capital is another aspect of the social capital and mobility. For the students who do not have social networks whether it is from the KECD or leaders of the community or external volunteers from the Thai-Myanmar, it is more unlikely for them to get to be able to get the higher information and guidance as well as recommendation for entering schools and programs in the Thai-Myanmar border. Through the analysis of education pathways, the study shows that human capital such as English communication skills is essential for them to be able to enter bridging programs before accessing overseas higher education. As accessing education program in Thailand require mobility, whether the students have financial supports is a major challenge. Through social networks, the students were able to cope with the financial challenges. Even if there were higher education pathways in the Thai-Myanmar border, it would not be possible for them to come to Thailand if they do not have money and get supports from their social networks. Therefore, the students not only have to be able to mobile from the KNU-areas to Thailand, but they also need to have social network and human capital. In order for them to have access to overseas higher education, the study draws a conclusion that the students must satisfy all the three coping strategies, the social networks, human capital, and mobility. If one strategy is not met, the students will not be able to have access to overseas higher education as all of these three strategies vital for access to different bridging programs and information and guidance, and the ability to come to Thailand as a widow of opportunities for the students under the KNU-controlled areas. This empirical evidence shows that it is important for the government to comply and implement rights based approach to education in order to create equal opportunities and access for all.

By analyzing the students' education pathways, it can be concluded that it is important for the students to be able join the right program that can facilitate them in acquiring recognized certification as a major part of university admission requirements. In order to get into the right program, it is crucial for the students to get information

about the program through their social connection from teachers. The level of social connections and the information flows and guidance they received in their programs in the Thai-Myanmar border also determined the gap years needed for them to get into university after high school depending on the number of the programs that they joined. Perhaps, the periods of the gap years they have to spend are greatly attributed by the lack of recognition of their secondary education back in the KNU-controlled areas. Therefore, the principals of non-discriminations under the accessibility of rights to education are important for the students. In the contested situations like the students in the KNU-controlled areas, the human rights based approach to education should go beyond the obligations of the national government, as the students often became the victims of the conflicts of between the different leaderships of the state government and non-state actor. If human rights based approach to education is to protect the rights of the vulnerable, there should be special considerations for recognitions of non-state education systems like the Karen education system; otherwise, the HRBA to education itself would be exclusive and discriminative as it is excluding those students who are not under the control of the state government.

Accessing to Higher education and Development

There is no country in the world that has attained social, political, and economic developments with poor access to education, particularly higher education, and poor quality of education at every level. Education, particularly higher education is indispensable to a wide variety of developments whether it is social and political development or economic development. In fact, no individual nation would be able to achieve sustainable development without considerable investments in education, which is fundamental to human capital for the productivity of a society as well as an economy. It is little wonder that the rights to higher education is embedded in the SDGs target 4.3 that is to ensure equal access for all to affordable and quality higher education. It is apparent that access to higher and quality education have positive influences on individual's productivity, incomes, and creativity while it promotes technological advances and entrepreneurship, which are vital in this rapidly changing global economy.

In addition to economic perspectives of development, access to higher education enhances social cohesion, respects for human rights, and peace contributing to the quality of individual live as well as the quality of society as a whole. Therefore, to prevent access to higher education for a community is to stop the prospects and development of that community.

In this study, the lack of access to higher education for the students under the Karen education system in the KNU-controlled areas is a clear manifestation of the prevention of growth, prosperity, and development among the Karen communities. Given the rapidly changing global economy and the challenges of political instability in the country, the access to higher education is more important than any period in history in order for the Karen community to thrive because it not only will affect the development of the communities, it will affect individual opportunities to productively participant in the development processes in the country. In fact, to prevent access to higher education for the students in the KNU-controlled areas is to stop the productivity and prospects of the whole society whether the KNU government or the central Myanmar government prevents it. It would be utterly impossible to meet sustainable development goals and build a peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable society with the younger generation having no access to higher education. Thus, education is an integral part of human rights due to the issues of rights to education. In this context, as the Myanmar mainstream education system structurally is excluding them in accessing higher education in the country, the barriers of the students in accessing overseas higher education limit the human rights of these students. It is vital that a right to education is equal to human rights. In the context of political conflicts and struggles, and the education system that no one recognized, the barriers in this study represent their human rights so that the prevention of access to higher education for them is to limit their human rights. It is crucial that education is not seen as a political tool by both the central state government and the KNU government. For the central state government, there is a great need to decentralized the national education systems so as to accommodate the different needs of different communities in access to education at all levels if it is to respect the human rights of the people in the ethnic controlled areas like the students

from the KNU-controlled areas. Likewise, the KNU government must protect the human rights of the students in its controlled areas by eliminating the existing barriers they face in accessing higher education as well as overseas higher education. Therefore, understanding the barriers of the students under the Karen education system in accessing overseas higher education system is not only important for the protection of the human rights of the students but also significant for the social, political, and economic development for the communities under the Karen education system. Moreover, it contributes to our understanding of the existing practical and structural challenges for the students under the non-state education system in the country in access to higher education and raises concerns over the policy implications over the protection of the human rights to higher education for all. Thus, this study serves as a dot of the international development studies for those individuals who wish to understand more about the challenges of access to higher education especially in the contested context.

5.3 Recommendations and Future Research

Based on the study results, there are some practical actions the education provider could take in order to alleviate the challenges and barriers for the students in accessing overseas higher education and to strengthen the students' coping mechanisms in order for the students to have better access to overseas higher education. Below are the recommendations evolved from the study's results.

1. Develop higher education information and guidance systems for all on non-discrimination basis.
2. Integrate and strengthen English skills and knowledge required for the students in the curriculum at the secondary education level as a part of the mainstream system in order to be able to equip the students with the necessitated skills for GED preparations.
3. Implement more GED programs in the KNU-controlled areas in order for the students to shorten their gap years in accessing overseas higher education. (This should be seen as interim arrangements or interventions for the students and there should be a fair and strict policy for the student recruitment)

Further research

Generally, there is still a great need of studies on the Karen education and opportunities for higher education. This study could only look at one aspect of the rights based approach that is right to education under the availability and accessibility of the 4As Framework. Therefore, it enriches our understanding of the current challenges of HRBA in education in the KNU-areas if there are further studies on;

1. Rights in education (look at the KECD curriculum and how it is in line with rights in education under the HRBA to education
2. Gender aspects of the HRBA in education, particularly higher education whether it is in Myanmar or overseas.



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