

Prior to the 1962 military regime's coup d'état, Myanmar (Burma) was home to one of Asia's most celebrated university systems. But universities were shut down under military rule, and education turned into rote memorization from textbooks. It reached the point where being a "good student" meant being able to recite memorized pages of facts and writings. When the military regime ended in 2011, a fully realized democratic government and a renewed availability of higher education appeared to be on the horizon. Talented young people, entrepreneurs, educators, and investors rushed into Myanmar to build the foundations of an emerging liberal democracy—that is, until February 2021 when yet another military coup took place, and access to liberal education came under full assault once more. This was a tremendous blow for both institutions of higher learning and their students, who seek to learn and promote critical thinking, social and political understanding, and self-understanding and self-actualization—all crucial to a thriving, progressive society.

EDUCATION FOR GOOD

Challenges in Myanmar

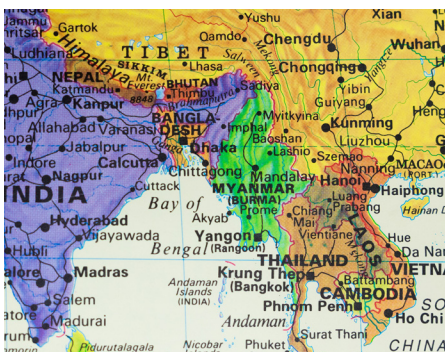
by Hanna J. Muhlestein (Interdisciplinary Humanities '23)

Parami University was founded in 2017 in Yangon, Myanmar, as a private, residential liberal arts education institution during the democratic window as a response to the lack of liberal education in the country. The university mission statement reads, "Parami University is committed to educating underserved students in developing countries so that they will become effective change agents and contributing members of the global community. Parami accomplishes this by nurturing critical thinking, inspired leadership, and compassionate service through globally competitive liberal arts and sciences education." Since the 2021 coup, educators operate remotely out of the United States, Europe, and Asia. According to BYU College of Humanities alumnus and friend of Parami University Kyle Anderson (Comparative Literature '05), they "deliver their entire curriculum virtually, thereby protecting students' identities and conversations and increasing opportunities for growth."

The university offers a bachelor of arts in philosophy, politics, and economics and a bachelor of arts in statistics and data science. Overall accreditation is forthcoming, but the university programs are licensed under the Higher Education Licensure Commission (HELC) of the District of Columbia in the United States, which is what allows the university to continue to pursue its mission.

Anderson spent the first part of his career as a humanities, Asian studies, and Chinese professor and a global education administrator. Now he primarily works behind the scenes supporting universities, experiential learning, and liberal arts programs as the vice president of strategic programming at Academic Programs International. He played a key role helping Parami University President Dr. Kyaw Moe Tun get the school up and running when it was just an institute.

Myanmar (formerly Burma) is a Southeast Asian nation of more than 100 ethnic groups, bordering India, Bangladesh, China, Laos and Thailand.





Old Bagan, Mandalay Region, Myanmar (Burma).

Every spring, Anderson teaches a Western humanities class at Parami with a focus on hospitality, where “students are challenged to compare Western classical ways of welcoming strangers to classical and contemporary ways in Myanmar.” Anderson encourages his students to fight through assignments that challenge and stretch their minds, just as they fight through the challenges of daily life, and to take the opportunity to reflect on life around them. In the current crisis though, learning and internet service can be spotty. “You get used to interruption, and you fight through it,” Anderson says. Sometimes education must be fought for, be it against poor infrastructure, poor care, or poor governance. Fighting through by virtual means is what Anderson and Parami University are calling their “crisis curriculum.”

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Anderson says, “In recent decades in the US, we’ve been bombarded by the notion of ‘education in crisis’ or the ‘curriculum in crisis.’ By that we generally mean a loss of faith in and agreement upon what is being taught in American universities, what its purpose is, and why it is valuable. A ‘crisis curriculum,’ particularly in Myanmar, means exactly the opposite; it is the increase of faith in and sharpening of the content, purpose, value, and delivery of education in the context of dire political and social crises.

“Real threats to our pursuit of learning only strengthen the importance of liberal education,” Anderson continues. “At Parami, we adopt a student-centered approach that helps young men and women cultivate critical thinking, creativity, articulate communication, and

complex problem-solving skills that increase their autonomy and capacity to address challenges at home and abroad. There are few, if any, places in Myanmar where they can do that at present.”

Currently, all classwork occurs online and will for the foreseeable future; nevertheless, the university keeps class sizes small and prioritizes group collaboration and discussions, independent projects, and field studies. Parami University courses look very much like what one might find at BYU, including classes like Community Based Filmmaking, Human Rights Theory, and Science and the Universe. Parami University even promotes experiential learning opportunities in the students’ local communities.

President Russell M. Nelson said in a 1990 BYU devotional, “The critical difference between your just hoping for good things for mankind and your being able to do good things for mankind is education.”¹ As these Myanmar students advance their minds and reflect on the world around them, they “are deeply concerned about the state of their nation,” Anderson says.

“Some choose to be directly involved in public movements to combat injustices, while others choose to express themselves more privately.” Anderson explains that Parami University’s primary responsibility is to educate and support students so they can make informed decisions to help lead to a democratic future, a mission that became ever more important following the February 2021 coup. Anderson says that in the current political climate, “Parami University delivers a flexible, virtual curriculum based upon critical thinking and empathy that nurtures individuals’ hope and growth, preserves civil society, and develops change agents for a brighter, democratic future.” 

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Reflection and Resolution” (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 7, 1990), 7, speeches.byu.edu.