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## **A Critical Policy Analysis of Equity in Higher Education Before and After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I critically analyse how 'equity' has been conceptualised within higher education policy reforms before and after the 2021 military coup. Drawing upon Fraser's three-dimensional model, I focus on the discursive shifts to unveil the ideological assumptions of these reforms as well as the changing power dynamics in higher education governance. The preliminary findings suggest how the redistribution dimension of equity, especially under the junta, is foregrounded even at the expense of trivialising and neglecting other dimensions. Moreover, the power dynamics embedded within the policy discourses appear to impede both governments from fully realising equity in higher education.

### **Full paper**

#### ***Introduction***

Following the 2021 military coup, Myanmar's higher education system is enmeshed in the political unrest. The military junta has implemented several policy reforms which signal a move towards an educational governance marked by centralised control and increased surveillance. Despite such policy shifts, educational equity remains at the forefront of the junta's policy agenda, aligning their policy rhetoric to reflect the global and regional education targets, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This begs the question: does the conceptualisation of 'equity' remain the same? Or has it been re-imagined and even co-opted under the current regime? Given Myanmar's long history with governmental control and interference in higher education, there is also a need to understand how power is legitimised, preserved, and reinforced through the policy of 'equity'.

#### ***Literature Review and Conceptual Framework***

Easton (1954) regards policies as "authoritative allocation of values" (as cited in Rizvi, 2009, p. 4), revealing how policies are decisions made by those in power to reflect their interests

and ideological commitments. This suggests policymaking is neither neutral nor value-free. Rather, it prioritises the values, voices and needs of certain individuals and groups over others. Ball (1994) concurs, adding how policies are “a product of compromises between multiple agendas and influences” (p. 16). Here, Ball points out how the meanings of policy texts are being negotiated and re-negotiated through a discourse with different actors at different times.

Rizvi (2006) further points out the reciprocal relationship between policy and authority. Hence, it is imperative to find out the source of authority issuing a particular policy because this policy is used to legitimise that very authority. Together, these perspectives call for an exploration of the policy content as well as its effects – whose values and voices are included and whose are excluded.

To explore ‘equity’, I draw on Nancy Fraser’s (1997, 2010) conceptual framework of social justice, which is composed of redistribution, recognition and representation. In this paper, I analyse the policy reforms through the lens of these dimensions as follows:

- redistribution, how access to materials and opportunities such as scholarships, learning resources and university accommodation is equally distributed;
- recognition, how diverse cultures and identities are reaffirmed and respected through the use of ethnic languages at the universities and the availability of appropriate resources for disabled students;
- representation, how students, especially those who are traditionally underrepresented and marginalised, are included in decision-making processes.

This framework is well-suited to examine systemic and structural inequalities in Myanmar’s higher education because of its equal emphasis on recognition and representation – dimensions of equity which have historically been overlooked within the country’s educational policy discourse (Lall, 2020).

### ***Research Questions***

Main research question: “How has ‘equity’ been conceptualised within the higher education policy reforms before and after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar?”

Sub-questions:

- Which groups of students are benefiting from the enactment of such policies, and which groups are not?
- What do conceptualisations of ‘equity’ under different political systems reveal about the power relations in higher education governance?

### ***Methodology***

I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA), focusing on seven policy documents (see Table 1) that arguably affect equity in higher education. Two criteria guide this selection: first, the policy text signals Fraser's (1997, 2010) equity dimensions in higher education. Second, I examine official policies implemented between 2014 and 2025.

Table 1: Policy Documents

	<b>Policy Documents</b>	<b>Year Released</b>
Civilian Government	1. National Education Law	2014 (amended 2015)
	2. National Educational Strategic Plan 2016-21	2015
	3. Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2018-2030	2018
Military Government	4. National Educational Strategic Plan 2021-30	2021
	5. National Education Law Amendments	2022
	6. Private Education Law National Service Law 2010	2023
	7. National Service Law 2010	2024

In addition, I provide a historical overview of several policy documents and reports since 1964 to understand how the conceptualisation of equity has evolved over time.

For my analysis, I use Fairclough's (1993, 2015) Three-Dimensional Framework, where discourse analysis is carried out in three stages: description, interpretation and explanation. In doing so, I unveil discursive shifts in the three dimensions of equity as well as the power relations embedded within higher education governance under two different governments.

### ***Significance***

This paper provides a timely critical analysis of the conceptualisations of 'equity' within higher education policy discourse during two contrasting and opposite political systems in Myanmar. This is essential to unveil the ideological stances and power dynamics since policies are contingent upon the social context in which they operate (Mergner et al., 2019). Moreover, the findings can provide pro-democracy educators and grassroots movements in Myanmar with tools to see through the underlying assumptions of equity language in military-led policy rhetoric, informing their efforts towards building a more inclusive and equitable alternative higher education system.