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Strengthening higher education for displaced students from Burma in Thailand: identifying collective interest and expanding value across diverse stakeholders

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Strengthening Higher Education for Displaced Students from Burma in Thailand
Identifying Collective Interest and Expanding Value across Diverse Stakeholders

Claire C. Holba

Graduate Thesis Project

M.S. Refugee and Forced Migration Studies

June 13, 2023

**Strengthening Higher Education for Displaced Students from Burma in Thailand:
Identifying Collective Interest and Expanding Value across Diverse Stakeholders**

By

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Author's Note

This thesis has been five years in the making. Five years ago, my life was changed by over 200 Karen students and school faculty from Burma when I lived and taught in one of the temporary shelters in northern Thailand. My students' dream of pursuing a Higher Education as part of their bigger dreams to help their community and improve our world has never left me. My own dreams have become bound up in theirs. They have inspired every step of my journey to pursue a Master's degree that would equip me to do my part in supporting them to achieve their dreams and to make our world a welcoming place to those who have been displaced.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to all my students, colleagues, and the entire community at Mae Ra Moe. It is because of you that I started this journey. I also want to thank every student and graduate who I have met since, including the students and graduates I interviewed as part of this thesis project. Your stories inspire me beyond words, and I hope this shines through over the coming pages.

I have so many people to thank for making this thesis project a reality. I want to especially thank the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at DePaul University for granting me not one, but two Graduate Research Fund awards to pursue original research for this project in Thailand. I want to thank my Faculty Research Sponsor and my Thesis Committee for providing such valuable suggestions and comments throughout my research and thesis-writing journey. They know how deeply personal this project is to me, and they have given their incredible support.

I want to thank all those who met with me in cafes and offices in the beautiful country of Thailand, and virtually as participants in my research. You could have easily turned my requests for interviews down, but instead gave me so much time, energy, expertise, and meaningful conversation. I also want to thank everyone who helped to connect me with people who would be interested in participating in my research, and who went out of their way to give me space to work and helped arrange interviews. Truly, the generosity and hospitality I received have made Thailand a second home to me.

Everyone who came together to make this research possible, across nationalities, sectors, professions, and experiences, is an example of the best part of our humanity, the part filled with compassion, hospitality, and the desire to serve beyond ourselves.

Abstract

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) lists three “durable” pathways for displaced persons to address global displacement: “voluntary repatriation,” “local integration” into the initial host community, or third-country “resettlement.”¹ At present, 78% of refugees displaced worldwide remain in a protracted refugee situation, indicating shortcomings in these three pathways. As global displacement surges and the current refugee protection regime fails to offer timely pathways out of displacement, alternative solutions via complementary pathways are critical. Higher Education (HE) pathways, such as scholarships to study at universities, can be one option, and the UNHCR has committed to expanding complementary HE pathways as part of its Refugee Education 2030 strategy.²

As of 2021, only five percent of refugee students globally attended a Higher Education (HE) institution compared to a thirty-nine percent global average.³ This statistic is sobering because HE is a “critical link between learning and earning, allowing young people to thrive and transition to the pursuit of sustainable futures.”⁴ In Thailand, displaced communities have developed education systems in camps, urban areas, and elsewhere along the border. In 2018, I taught 200 secondary-level Karen students in one of the camps in northern Thailand who expressed dreams of continuing their studies outside of the camp at universities. In this thesis project, I will explore how Higher Education (HE) pathways for displaced students can be utilized as one solution for protracted refugee situations (PRS)

¹ “Complementary Pathways for Admission to Third Countries.” *UNHCR USA*, UNHCR USA, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/complementary-pathways.html>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

² “Education Pathways.” n.d. UNHCR. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/education/tertiary-education/education-pathways>.

³ *Tertiary Education*. (n.d.). UNHCR; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

⁴ *Tertiary Education*. (n.d.). UNHCR; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

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because it unites displaced communities and host nations based on common interests. I conducted my research in Thailand, the first country of asylum for many displaced persons from Burma/Myanmar.

I designed my research using a pragmatic approach driven by my hypothesis that HE can satisfy concrete interests across diverse stakeholder groups. Viable solutions for global displacement must stem from the aligned and complementary interests of key stakeholders in a particular displacement situation, such as the protracted displacement situation of communities from Burma in Thailand. During my research, I sought to understand stakeholders' beliefs, needs, and concerns, which I label as their “interests,” to account for the social, political, and cultural dynamics at play.

In Thailand, there are strong and organized efforts from displaced community leadership, governing bodies, religious leaders, and ethnic education entities to develop a robust education system for students in the camps and those displaced students living outside the camps. There are also NGOs and foundations supporting the education system. These include systems of education within the camps run by entities such as the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) along the border outside of the camps, and a variety of other programs such as General Education Development (GED) programs and religiously-affiliated schools. The curriculum varies, and students desiring to go on to HE navigate this wide-ranging education system, often through winding paths, to pursue their education goals.

Thailand, a long-time host nation to displaced communities, has demonstrated a willingness and commitment to increasing access to HE for displaced students. However, their programs should be improved and expanded upon. In Thailand, as in any host country for displaced peoples, various stakeholders exist, including the host and displaced community governments and citizenry, NGOs, education institutions, the business and economic development sector, international agencies, and foreign aid departments. Therefore, I conducted research to understand stakeholder interests and analyzed their interests for existing synergy to ascertain the viability of HE as a solution for protracted displacement in Thailand.

My research methodology was primarily qualitative. I first examined what interests define the purpose and utility of HE for displaced students from Burma (Myanmar) residing in Thailand. I identified ten stakeholder groups as relevant to the Thailand-Burma protracted displacement context. Using a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling, I recruited representatives from each stakeholder group. During three months of field research in Thailand, I conducted thirty-four formal interviews with representatives across seven stakeholder groups to identify interests. Finally, I employed a combination

of informal discussions, fieldwork, and secondary research to conclude some of the remaining three stakeholders' interests.⁵

Second, I examined the perceived value-add of HE programs for displaced students from Burma (Myanmar) in Thailand. During three months of field research in Thailand, I used a snowball sampling method to interview fourteen students who had completed a HE program in Thailand about their academic and post-graduation experiences. In addition, I used a combined approach of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to interview other closely connected stakeholders, such as professors, employers, and community leaders, to understand the value of a HE.

Together, the results demonstrate that within Thailand, diverse stakeholders have a collective interest in increasing and improving higher education (HE) opportunities for displaced students from Burma (Myanmar). HE has contributed value to the lives of displaced students, their community, and the host country, but students face challenges that prevent the full value potential from being realized. Both an understanding of where stakeholder interests align and policy solutions are needed to realize the full value potential of higher education across diverse stakeholder groups. The remaining sections of my thesis will provide evidence for this stance and suggest several policy enhancements.

Introduction

Education in Protracted Displacement: a Global Reality in Need of Solutions

At the beginning of 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded that nearly 16 million people, 78 percent of all refugees displaced worldwide, were in a protracted refugee situation.⁶ UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation (PRS) as one “in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years.”⁷ Alarming, the current global refugee protection regime fails to address the protracted nature of

⁵ See appendix for table of interviews.

⁶ “Protracted Refugee Situations Explained.” *How to Help Refugees — Aid, Relief and Donations* | USA for UNHCR, USA for UNHCR, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/#How%20many%20refugees%20are%20living%20in%20protracted%20situations>

⁷ “Protracted Refugee Situations Explained.” *How to Help Refugees — Aid, Relief and Donations* | USA for UNHCR, USA for UNHCR, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/#How%20many%20refugees%20are%20living%20in%20protracted%20situations>

displacement during a time when increasingly more refugees are displaced for more extended periods. The scope of my thesis focuses explicitly on the protracted state of conflict and displacement of communities from Burma/Myanmar living in Thailand. For this paper, I will use Burma and Myanmar interchangeably in recognition that both are used depending on various factors. I will also avoid using “Burmese/Myanmarese” as an adjective to describe the people of Burma/Myanmar because Burma/Myanmar is home to many different ethnic groups who refer to themselves accordingly.

In Thailand, over 90,000 refugees, verified by the Thai Ministry of Interior and UNHCR, live in nine temporary shelters along the Thai-Burma border.⁸ The overwhelming majority of those living in the camps are ethnic Karen with a significant Karenni population, and smaller Burman, Mon, and other communities from Burma.⁹ The communities largely fled persecution and ethnic cleansing that escalated in the 1980s.¹⁰ This number does not include those living unregistered in the camps or outside of the camps in communities along the border or in urban settings, so the actual number of displaced persons in Thailand is higher. The February 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar has brought additional waves of displaced persons to Thailand. As of February 2023, estimates declare that 22,400 refugees have sought safety in Thailand since the coup.¹¹ The ethnic groups comprising the displaced Burma communities in Thailand are varied, including Shan, Kachin, Chin, Rohingya, Mon, Karen, Karenni, and Burman amongst other ethnic groups.

Since gaining independence from the British in the 1940s, Burma has been in the world's longest ongoing civil war. The Burmese military junta has committed grave crimes against humanity on the people of Burma including genocide against the Rohingya (a Muslim minority group), political and religious persecution, and ethnic cleansing.¹² In February 2021, the Burmese military junta, which has been the primary perpetrator of gross human rights violations in Myanmar, overthrew the civilian government in a coup d'état. People all over Myanmar participated in peaceful protests in what has been called the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

These peaceful protests were met with violent crackdowns by the junta's illegally established governing body, the State Administration Council (SAC) and conflict has escalated throughout the

⁸ “Camp Populations|.” theborderconsortium.org|, The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023.

⁹ “Refugee Camp Population: May 2023.” *The Border Consortium*, May 2023, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-05-May-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf>.

¹⁰ See source for information about the history of violence in Burma and the camps in Thailand: *Twenty Years on the Border*. Burmese Border Consortium (now known as The Border Consortium), 2004, p. Chapter 1.

¹¹ “Myanmar Situation - Inter-Agency Operational Update - 6 February 2023 - Thailand | ReliefWeb.” 2023. ReliefWeb. February 23, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/thailand/myanmar-situation-inter-agency-operational-update-6-february-2023#:~:text=Since%20February%202021%2C%20the%20RTG,in%20Thailand%20during%20several%20movements.>

¹² See Appendix B for a list of sources to learn more about the history of conflict and crimes against humanity human in Myanmar (Burma).

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country as ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the new People's Defense Forces (PDF) defend themselves against the junta's violence.¹³ The situation has resulted in new waves of refugees fleeing towards Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, in addition to the communities that have been there for decades from previous conflict and persecution. Yet, amidst such grave mass atrocity, the SAC continues to be weaponized with fighter jets and arms by countries such as China, Russia, India, and Serbia.¹⁴ Deep prejudices, historical marginalization, and war crimes and crimes against humanity from the SAC that continue to be aided and abetted by foreign powers point to a conflict that will not be easily resolved soon.

The UNHCR lists three “durable” pathways for displaced persons: “voluntary repatriation,” “local integration” into the initial host community, or third-country “resettlement.”¹⁵ The fact that 78% of refugees displaced worldwide remain in a protracted refugee situation indicates shortcomings in these three pathways. In this thesis project, I will argue that solutions in the form of complementary pathways out of protracted displacement, such as education, are needed. My thesis examines the complementary pathway of Higher Education (HE) in Thailand, the first country of asylum for many displaced persons from Burma/Myanmar.

Higher Education for Displaced Students

Amidst protracted conflict and displacement, communities seek ways of rebuilding their lives and striving for sustainable futures. I have been deeply inspired by the fierce commitment of the many communities from Burma to pursue education amidst ongoing conflict and displacement. Since 2018, I have worked with displaced communities from Myanmar first as a teacher in a refugee camp in Thailand with Karen students, then through several different NGOs working in Karen State (Myanmar), Indianapolis, Indiana with the Chin community in the United States, and Chicago, Illinois with the Rohingya community in the United States. Whenever I have conversations with students, families, and leaders about what can improve the situation, education is almost always the first response I receive. From my relationships and conversations over the years, I have gathered how much hope is placed in education for a better future.

¹³ “Myanmar: Coup Leads to Crimes Against Humanity | Human Rights Watch.” *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.facebook.com/HumanRightsWatch>, 31 July 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/31/myanmar-coup-leads-crimes-against-humanity>.

¹⁴ “Enabling Atrocities: UN Member States’ Arms Transfers to the Myanmar Military .” *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, 22 Feb. 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc49crp1-conference-room-paper-special-rapporteur-enabling-atrocities> .

¹⁵ “Complementary Pathways for Admission to Third Countries.” *UNHCR USA*, UNHCR USA, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/complementary-pathways.html>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

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During my three months of field research in Thailand, I have been equally inspired by the receptiveness of Thai HE leadership to increasing education pathways for displaced students.¹⁶ Current Thai policies also reflect an intentionality to expand HE access for displaced students, as do responses I have received from Thai NGOs and even the business sector.¹⁷

While international law and policy recognize the importance of education through instruments such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, in practice, most refugee young adults remain without access to Higher Education (HE): today, only six percent of refugee students across the globe attend a Higher Education (HE) institution as compared to a forty percent global average.¹⁸ This is a sobering statistic because HE can be a “critical link between learning and earning, allowing young people to thrive and transition to the pursuit of sustainable futures.”¹⁹ Higher education can also be a bridge to additional complementary pathways that can fill critical needs in a host country. For example, higher education can develop desirable workforce skills that lead to employment pathways, thus addressing current labor shortages in a country.

The UNHCR has praised Thailand as a “good practice” model for displaced student education access.²⁰ For example, in 1999, Thailand adopted the Education for All (EFA) policy which states that all children have the right to 15 years of free basic education, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, or legal status.²¹ Thailand is also a regional leader, developing the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth which was adopted by the Heads of State and Governments of ASEAN in 2016. Remarkably, this was the first time migrant and stateless children were included in a joint commitment to meet the needs of out-of-school children in Southeast Asia.²² Thailand’s HE landscape for displaced students has been developing in significant ways, and there is room for expansion and enhancement of current policy to promote further development.

¹⁶ Note: In April 2022 a grant from the Graduate Research Fund at DePaul University’s School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences to conduct two months of field research in Thailand from July 2022 through September 2022. In October 2022, I received an additional grant to continue my research in Thailand for five weeks from November through December 2022.

¹⁷ See Appendix A for table of interviews.

¹⁸ *Tertiary Education*. (n.d.). UNHCR; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

¹⁹ *Tertiary Education*. (n.d.). UNHCR; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/tertiary-education.html>

²⁰ “Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Refugee Inclusion.” *UNHCR USA*, UNHCR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/education/5d651da88d7/education-2030-strategy-refugee-education.html>.

²¹ *Pathways to a Better Future: A Review of Education for Migrant Children in Thailand*. World Education, Save the Children, 2014, <https://thailand.worlded.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/MESR-Policy-Brief.pdf>

²² “ASEAN Summit: Landmark Declaration to Address Needs of Out-of-School Children | UNESCO Bangkok.” *UNESCO Bangkok, UNESCO Bangkok - Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education*, 2016, <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/asean-summit-landmark-declaration-address-needs-out-school-children#:~:text=The%20declaration%20was%20approved%20by%20ASEAN%20education%20ministers.>

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Much of the current discourse on HE access for displaced students in Thailand is predicated on the moral argument for HE as a human right. The human rights-based approach, while legitimate, is one-dimensional and fails to engage other compelling reasons and interests for promoting HE in a protracted displacement situation. For example, one interest Thailand might have to promote HE for the significant displaced population living within its borders is to develop a skilled labor force in fields important to national development interests. Higher Education is important to the Thailand 4.0 economic development model the Royal Thai Government put forth. Yet, Thailand faces an aging population and challenges with English proficiency in its workforce that limit economic growth.²³ The RTG, and Thai businesses, could benefit from granting better access to HE (and employment opportunities afterwards) for displaced students, who have often completed secondary school and/or post-secondary school in English and who have spent significant formative years in Thailand with an interest to stay and contribute meaningfully. In turn, supporting HE pathways would satisfy the desire of displaced students to have more opportunities for Higher Education access and employment in different fields, as well as security to stay and live freely in Thailand.

The above example demonstrates a multi-dimensional argument for improving HE access and experiences for displaced students. Various interests of different stakeholder groups in this scenario (the government, businesses, and displaced students in Thailand) are identified, analyzed, and explored for collaborative potential. Uncovering the collaborative potential of each stakeholder group's interests 1.) builds a more compelling argument because you now have a broader multi-stakeholder support base and 2.) allows us to see a pathway (higher education) for creating mutual benefit. These are the types of complementary interests I sought to uncover in my research. To do this, I sought to interview a diversified body of stakeholders relevant for promoting HE in a protracted displacement situation.

My thesis asserts that within Thailand, diverse stakeholders have a collective interest to increase and improve higher education (HE) opportunities for displaced students from Burma (Myanmar). HE has contributed value to the lives of displaced students, their community, and host country, but students still face significant challenges. These challenges prevent the full value potential of HE from being realized not only for students, but for other stakeholders across the social, political and economic spectrum. Stakeholders should work collaboratively to address these challenges because it is in their collective interest. The way to expand value by overcoming challenges is twofold.

First, we should look at the complementary interests existing amongst stakeholder groups. By doing so, we can identify “opportunities for collaboration” and “mutually acceptable solutions” to the

²³ Buasuwan, Prompilai. *Rethinking Thai Higher Education for Thailand 4.0*. 2017.

posed challenges.²⁴ Secondly, policy solutions can be implemented by HE programs and institutions and within the Royal Thai Government as a host government to overcome existing barriers. The remaining sections of my thesis will provide evidence for this stance and suggest several policy enhancements.

Research Methodology

Most of the evidence for my thesis was obtained through original research conducted between July 2022 and December 2022. I visited Thailand (“the field”) twice during this time period, first from July through September, and again from November through December. In total, I spent just over three months in the field. In between field visits I completed virtual interviews and supplementary research, and recruited additional participants. The majority of my field research was conducted in one of three general locations: the cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and various locations throughout Tak Province including the town of Mae Sot. I also included informants from several other spots along the Thai-Burma border, including Mae Hong Son Province and Kanchanaburi province.

I utilize the terms *migrant*, *refugee*, and *displaced person* fluidly to reflect the colloquial variations used within Thailand and more specifically, along the Thai-Burma border. During my research, I quickly discovered that different stakeholder groups, and even representatives within stakeholder groups, blurred the boundaries of each term’s definition. I received varying responses when asking informants how they define migrant as compared to a refugee. For example, one graduated student (Stakeholder Group 1) said a migrant “can cross and stay legally in Thailand” while a refugee must “go through the registration process” with the UNHCR.²⁵ Another informant from the same stakeholder group acknowledged the complicated nature of clearly defining “migrant” and “refugee” and said they generally refer to a migrant as someone who came to Thailand “for education and for work” while a refugee is someone “who is affected by war.”²⁶

A professor at a Thai University (Stakeholder Group 4) answered, “this is a difficult question” and that the definition can be complicated. For purposes of their academic research, which focuses on population and migration within Thailand, the informant had created a “simplified definition.” They defined migrants as “those who migrate to Thailand for any reason and do not live in the temporary shelters. They may have documentation, and they may not. In reality, we cannot deny that some can be

²⁴Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

²⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.3, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

defined as a refugee or a displaced person. Some migrants are those who have moved outside the temporary shelters and work on the outside.”²⁷ A member of a women’s organization (Stakeholder Group 3) said a migrant is “someone who seeks better opportunity for their life, living, and education as well as their work.” A refugee is “someone we should protect and provide help for their safety and basic needs. This also applies to migrants.”²⁸ Both quotes exemplify the complex living definition of “migrant” and “refugee” in Thailand, a definition that is fluid and lacks clear cut boundaries as well as a legal definition. A “migrant” may at once be a “refugee” and vice versa.

An informant from the business community (Stakeholder Group 7) said the business definition is more concerned with whether a person has a valid work permit or lives in Thailand without a permit. The emphasis was not so much on “migrant” verse “refugee” but on the legal immigration status of someone in Thailand.²⁹ For purposes of my research and this thesis project, I most often choose the term “displaced person(s)” to account for the complexity of 1.) how people define/self define 2.) why people from Burma forcibly left for Thailand and 3.) the interplay of international and domestic legal definitions of “refugee” in Thailand.

Persons from Burma living in Thailand may have “multiple reasons for flight” or may not fully reveal the violence and conflict they were subjected to.³⁰ The International Organization for Migration’s *Glossary on Migration* defines a displaced person as:

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either across an international border or within a State, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.³¹

Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention or the 1967 Protocol. Notably, in 2019, the government established the Regulation of the Office of the Prime Minister on the Screening of Aliens who Enter in the Kingdom and are Unable to Return to the Country of Origin B.E. 2562. This regulation created the National Screening Mechanism (NSM), which defines persecution and puts forth criteria that would distinguish an economic migrant from someone requiring protection by the Royal

²⁷ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

²⁸ Interview with Burma community leader, interview SG3.1, virtual interview with Claire Holba. Thailand, January 11, 2023.

²⁹ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

³⁰ Margaret, Green, et al. “Invisible in Thailand: Documenting the Need for Protection.” *Forced Migration Review*, University of Oxford, 2008.

³¹ *Glossary on Migration*. UN IOM, 2019, p. 55.

Thai Government (RTG).³² However, the NSM does not define “refugee” and uses “protracted persons” instead of refugee.³³ Accordingly, the term “refugee” still lacks official legal recognition in Thailand. Considering all of the above factors, I only use “migrant” or “refugee” while directly quoting research subjects or relaying current government and institutional policies. I use “displaced person” in all other instances.

My research methodology was primarily qualitative. I first examined what interests define the purpose and utility of HE for displaced students from Burma residing in Thailand. A wide variety of stakeholder groups are relevant in any displacement context, such as NGOs, the host country government, the government of the displaced community’s country of origin, international institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), human rights organizations, the foreign aid wings of third-countries, and of course displaced communities themselves. I include the business and economic development sector because it is important in human rights issues and forced displacement, though it is not often included in the conversation. Because my research focused on higher education for displaced students from Burma in Thailand, I needed to account for stakeholders relevant to both displacement and higher education. In my research, I define a higher education stakeholder group as:

A group of civilians, professionals, government personnel and/or other categories of persons who have an interest in Higher Education pathways and outcomes for displaced students from Burma in Thailand.

I choose to use the term “stakeholder” for several reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to be inclusive of a broad spectrum of social and political sectors. The “multistakeholder network framework” is one useful approach to addressing the global refugee crisis, a “problem that draws stakeholders from multiple social sectors” and is “not confined to national borders.”³⁴ Sun et. al pull from Roloff’s work that states “multistakeholder issue networks result from the formation of form when institutions such as governments, corporations, INGOs (international governmental organizations), and NGOs connect

³² Jittiang, Bhanubhatra. “Policy Entrepreneurship and the Drafting of Refugee Law in a Non-Signatory Country: The Case of Thailand’s National Screening Mechanism.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, June 2022.

³³ *Join Submission Universal Periodic Review of Thailand*. Refugee Rights Network in Thailand, https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Refugee-Rights-Network-in-Thailand_en.pdf#:~:text=At%20present%2C%20Thailand%20does%20not%20conduct%20Refugee%20Status,2562%2C%20which%20created%20a%20National%20Screening%20Mechanism%20%28NSM%29. Accessed 10 June 2023.

³⁴ Sun, Jingyi, et al. *Evolving Crisis and Changing Networks: NGOs’ Stakeholder Engagement on the Global Refugee Crisis*. 2021, <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/doi/full/10.1177/08997640211057407#bibr32-08997640211057407>.

through information exchange, project collaboration, and joint membership in advocacy coalitions around an issue.”³⁵

Secondly, I was also influenced by common business and economic development terminology as I believe businesses have a critical role to play in issues of forced migration and human rights at large. Additionally, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG), which supports the implementation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), recognizes that “broad ownership of the SDGs must translate into a strong commitment by all stakeholders.”³⁶

Lastly, one goal of my research was to identify policy solutions that could be implemented at the local and national level in Thailand. “Stakeholder analysis” is a “practical tool to assess the positions and engagement of actors relevant to policy” and, using this framework can offer critical insights into how “complex concepts of power, interest and position” are interacting and might interact to “operationalize” policy solutions.³⁷ I identified ten stakeholder groups (SGs) relevant to the Thailand-Burma protracted displacement context and interviewed several representatives from each SG. I describe each SG and their interests in Chapter 1. The table below provides a summary of each of the ten SGs I identified.

Table of Stakeholder Groups (SGs)

<i>Stakeholder Group 1</i>	Displaced Students/Graduates from Burma (Myanmar)
<i>Stakeholder Group 2</i>	Burma (Myanmar) Community Education Personnel
<i>Stakeholder Group 3</i>	Non-education leadership from Burma (Myanmar) Communities
<i>Stakeholder Group 4</i>	Thai Higher Education Institutions
<i>Stakeholder Group 5</i>	Local Thai Leadership
<i>Stakeholder Group 6</i>	Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)
<i>Stakeholder Group 7</i>	Business and Economic Development Sector
<i>Stakeholder Group 8</i>	State and National Government Representatives
<i>Stakeholder Group 9</i>	International Migration, Refugee, and Human Rights Institutions
<i>Stakeholder Group 10</i>	International Government Aid Groups/Institutions

³⁵ Sun, Jingyi, et al. *Evolving Crisis and Changing Networks: NGOs’ Stakeholder Engagement on the Global Refugee Crisis*. 2021, <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/doi/full/10.1177/08997640211057407#bibr32-08997640211057407>.

³⁶ “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development.” *Home | Sustainable Development*, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. Accessed 10 June 2023.

³⁷ Balane, Marysol Astrea, et al. “Enhancing the Use of Stakeholder Analysis for Policy Implementation Research: Towards a Novel Framing and Operationalised Measures - PMC.” *PubMed Central (PMC)*, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7651378/>.

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In my research, I conducted thirty-four formal interviews with representatives across seven of my ten identified SGs to identify their interests. I could not secure formal interviews with representatives from three SGs (SG5, SG9, and SG10), so I conducted secondary research and informal interviews to gather information about their interests. In the interviews, I asked questions such as:

- *What do you believe is the purpose of HE and why?*
- *What value does HE provide for a displaced student from Burma?*
- *What value does HE provide for the student's native community?*
- *What value does HE provide for the larger Thai society?*
- *What types of majors should students pursue?*
- *How should a student use their degree after graduation?*
- *What opportunities should be available to a student after graduating?*
- *What problems do you see with the current protracted displacement situation for Burma communities in Thailand and how might HE contribute to solutions?*

I could not conduct formal interviews with three SGs, including SG5: Thai Leadership (local leadership), SG9: International Migration and Human Rights Agencies, and SG10: International Foreign Aid Institutions. I gleaned insights into the interests of these SGs during my fieldwork through formal interviews with other SGs, informal conversations, anonymous/off-the-record conversations, and secondary research. Sources for secondary research included policy documents, reports, and other publications from stakeholders within these three groups.

After identifying each respective SG's interests, I compared and analyzed them to see where interests aligned (complementary interests) or stood in opposition (opposing interests). Even if interests were different, I analyzed them for possible synergies to see if the interests were "complementary." I define synergy as the potential for interests to be matched/combined to create greater value and mutual benefit for stakeholder groups than achievable alone.

Second, I researched the perceived value-add of HE programs for displaced students from Burma/Myanmar in Thailand. I interviewed fourteen students who had completed a bachelor's program or were actively enrolled in one and asked them about their academic and post-graduation experiences. I also interviewed closely connected stakeholders such as educators, employers, and community leaders for examples and testimony of the value HE for displaced students is creating from their standpoint. Interviews included questions such as:

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- *What program did you graduate from and what was your major? Why did you choose this program and major?*
- *Do you believe the program met your expectations? If yes, why? If no, why not?*
- *What opportunities did the program create for you?*
- *What successes have you had and how do you define success?*
- *What challenges have you faced since graduating?*
- *Do you feel like your beliefs about the purpose and utility of HE changed from the beginning of your program to the end?*
- *How could the HE program have better served your hopes, desires, and interests?*

Finally, during the interviews and subsequent data analysis, I identified some challenges and barriers preventing the full potential value of HE from being realized. From these identified challenges, I developed a set of suggestions, including policy solutions, that can address these barriers. HE for displaced students meets many diverse stakeholders' interests, and because it creates value, I believe the effort to make these policy changes is worthwhile.

Research limitations

It is important to note several limitations in my research. The most significant limitation is the diversity of ethnicities, religions, nationalities, and types of institutions represented by research participants within each Stakeholder Group (SG). This diversity especially applied to SGs 1, 2, and 3, representing various stakeholders from displaced Burma communities, such as students, education personnel, and leadership. Communities from Burma in Thailand are ethnically and religiously diverse. While each has faced displacement at the hands of the Burmese military regime, they have had different experiences navigating displacement in Thailand. There is collaboration amongst ethnic education institutions, but to assume that the beliefs of one group can be projected onto another would fail to respect these differences.

Most Burma community students, education personnel, and leadership I interviewed were Karen people. I included the perspectives of some Shan, Kachin, and Burman representatives. I wish I could have had more time to interview a broader range of representatives from the different Burma communities in Thailand. I will expand my research in this regard in the future.

Within SGs such as SG4 (Thai Higher Education Institutions) and SG6 (NGOs), there are diverse types of programs, roles, and missions. I interviewed a mixture of professors, deans, and

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directors within SG4, and also education personnel from different universities and academic departments. However, increasing the sample size and types of universities, such as community colleges along the border area, would benefit future research. The NGO landscape in Thailand is also incredibly varied, with differences in governing authorities/staff (international versus Thai national), size, geographic and demographic scopes, and programming. I interviewed smaller NGOs, mid-size NGOs, and larger INGOs but mainly focused on those supporting education for displaced students in some capacity. I did diversify my representatives from this group by interviewing one Thai foundation working primarily with another marginalized community in Thailand: persons with disabilities.

Another area for improvement of the research is that for three SGs (SG5, SG9, SG10), I could not directly speak with or on the record with representatives. While I did spend several months in the field talking informally with some informants from SG9 and SG10, conducted secondary research of policies, publications, and a variety of other sources, and heard some compelling examples of interests from stakeholders in other SGs, future research should directly engage representatives from these three groups in a formal interview capacity.

I would especially have liked to include remarks from SG5 which included local Thai leadership, such as at the district and city/village levels. Leaders at the local level have a considerable influence on the atmosphere and opportunities available to displaced persons from Burma, and some regions, like Tak province, are more known for their open policies. Hearing firsthand from such leadership about their interests, concerns, and ideas would be valuable; I hope future research can pursue this.

Chapter 1: Identifying Interests of Diverse Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group Interests

Defining a Stakeholder Group

As mentioned, in my research I define a higher education stakeholder group as:

A group of civilians, professionals, government personnel and/or other categories of persons who have an interest in Higher Education pathways and outcomes for displaced students from Burma in Thailand.

My first goal was to identify and understand the “interests” of each stakeholder group around supporting higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. I define “interest” below.

Defining an “interest”

The core objective of my research was to identify the interests of the various stakeholder groups (SGs) so that I could analyze them for alignment and potential synergies. I first needed to define the term “interest” to formulate questions for interviewees that would allow them to express their underlying interests and permit me to perceive them most accurately.

I approached my thesis project through a mediator lens and with a spirit of identifying collective interests. Christopher Moore defines interests as the “desires, concerns, or wishes that people...want to have addressed and satisfied.”³⁸ Moore identifies three types of interests: “substantive,” “procedural,” and “psychological/relational.” I focused more on the psychological/relational interests of SGs, which are how parties want “to feel about themselves, their counterpart, and how relationships are valued...the

³⁸Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

desire to be trusted, respected, heard, and have feelings and experiences acknowledged.”³⁹ I also identified the “substantive interests” of SGs: the “tangible outcomes or benefits that a party wants to have satisfied, receive, or be exchanged.”⁴⁰

Fisher and Ury write, “the most powerful interests are basic human needs” such as security, economic well-being, a sense of belonging, recognition, and control over one’s life.”⁴¹ In my research, I understood interests in their most pure form as the “needs, hopes, fears, or desires” of an SG.⁴²

To identify interests, I asked many “why” questions and focused on three types of questions: 1.) What purpose does Higher Education (HE) serve for a displaced student from Burma residing in Thailand? 2.) What is the utility of higher education for a displaced student from Burma in Thailand? That is, what does/should an HE allow a student to do on a practical level? and 3.) What is the value of an HE for a displaced student from Burma in Thailand? I examined value at three levels: value created for an individual student, the student’s community, and broader Thai society. The answers to these questions revealed themes about stakeholder beliefs and underlying interests. Interviewees also provided examples and testimony of the value an HE provided for a student, the student’s community, and Thai society. I will discuss value in Chapter 2.

My intention for identifying the interests of diverse stakeholder groups (SGs) was to analyze and pinpoint complementary interests that could lead to new ideas and collaborative possibilities for supporting HE for displaced students. Moore states that identifying interests that are “compatible, complementary, and non-competitive” can create “opportunities for collaboration” and that the discovery of common interests can help parties to “construct mutually acceptable solutions to their problems.”⁴³ My research revealed a collective interest shared by stakeholder groups to support HE pathways for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. I hope that by highlighting these “compatible” and “complementary” interests, stakeholders can work together to develop solutions that will allow the full value potential of HE to be realized by displaced students and their native and host communities alike.

Stakeholder Group 1: Displaced Students from Burma

The first stakeholder group (SG1) was students from displaced Burma communities residing in Thailand. Informants from this group included future prospective higher education (HE) students (i.e.,

³⁹ Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

⁴⁰ Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

⁴¹ Fisher, Roger and William L. Ury. *Getting to Yes*. p 48.

⁴² Fisher, Roger and William L. Ury. *Getting to Yes*. p 44

⁴³ Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

those who had not yet attended a higher education program), students currently enrolled in a HE program, and students who had completed and graduated from a HE program. In my research, I found that the types of HE four-year degree programs students pursue can be categorized into one of two types.

The first type includes HE institutions (HEIs) accredited within the Thai higher education system and, therefore, internationally recognized. These were programs accredited by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the Royal Thai Government (RTG), such as Chiang Mai University, Thammasat University, Chulalongkorn University, and Asia-Pacific International University. Some HEIs, like Asia-Pacific International University or Christian University, are religiously affiliated and part of broader global networks. For example, Asia-Pacific International University is accredited internationally by the Adventist Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities based in Maryland (United States) and the Commission of Education at the Southern Asia-Pacific Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in the Philippines.⁴⁴

The second type of four-year HE programs included those not accredited within Thailand and therefore, most often not accredited internationally. These HEIs are primarily run by and/or for the various ethnic groups from Burma who have experienced forced displacement and are living in Thailand. Some are known as Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs). An example of one of these HEIs is Thoo Mweh Khee, which offers a Bachelor in Liberal Arts (BLA) degree. Most students that attend the Thoo Mweh Khee BLA program are ethnic Karen from Burma as well as some ethnic Karenni students and ethnic Burman students from migrant families.⁴⁵

Myanmar ethnic state government entities from Burma, such as the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) under the Karen National Union (KNU) or the Karenni Education Department (KnED) operating under the Karenni National Political Party (KNPP), have established four-year HE programs. Various HE programs have been established along the Thai-Burma border by the governing bodies named above and others like them. Their HE programs provide degrees in liberal arts, education, social science, and political science, amongst other topics. Still, again, these are most often unaccredited or unrecognized outside the governing body's jurisdiction.

The key takeaway is that graduates from a displaced background from Burma who complete a four-year HE program in Thailand pursue degrees at one (or both) of these two types of HEIs: non-accredited programs developed by Burma ethnic institutions, or accredited programs registered within the Thai/international higher education system. Students could pursue some available certificate programs—some accredited, some not—but for four-year degree options, these are the two tracks

⁴⁴ "Accreditation | Asia-Pacific International University." n.d. Asia-Pacific International University | Asia-Pacific International University. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.apiu.edu/accreditation/>.

⁴⁵ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

available. I interviewed fourteen students who had completed a four-year degree program.⁴⁶ Nine of these students had graduated from an accredited four-year Thai HEI, and four had completed a degree program at one of the Burma ethnic-led and/or aligned HEIs. I also interviewed a student currently enrolled in a Thai HEI and two prospective students who had completed their secondary education and desired to go to a four-year HE program but had not yet been able to do so.

During my interviews, I found that students and graduates recognized the value of their education. They possessed several key interests around the purpose, utility, and value of a Higher Education (HE). One interest was for HE to create time for a student to self-explore, be empowered, find their passions, and develop a vision of what can be possible in the future. As one stakeholder said, “we stayed in the camps for over twenty years, nothing developed, people don’t think outside the box. In the past, leaders did not know about their human rights. When young people get an education, they know about their rights.” The graduate then expressed their belief that HE equips people to solve issues through reading and research.⁴⁷ Other students remarked:

With a higher education, you can see more of what you can do.⁴⁸
In higher education, we learn to fulfill our dreams.⁴⁹
Higher education is about personal growth and self-transformation.⁵⁰

HE also provides time to explore and try different experiences that give a student a chance to make up their mind about what they want to do professionally and to achieve their goals.⁵¹ This space is critical and highly desired by students: one graduate spoke about finding their passion for teaching and education while in the HE program at Minmahaw. They taught English at a migrant school during the summer, a program built into the curriculum.⁵² SG1 informants believed HE also should support students in building confidence. One graduate said HE helped them develop from someone who was shy to someone able to speak in front of others.⁵³

Students and graduates also expressed the interest that HE should help students to be recognized and respected as leaders within the community. Said one stakeholder: “According to my experience, not my belief...HE serves a purpose to get a title. If you get a title, you have more work opportunities.

⁴⁶ Interviews took place over the course of three months of field work in Thailand in 2022. See Appendix A for additional information about interviews that were conducted.

⁴⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.10, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

⁴⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

⁴⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁵⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

⁵¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

⁵² Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

⁵³ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

People see you higher in the community.”⁵⁴ Another graduate highlighted HE as being necessary to be an effective leader:

The point is what you will do. If you are a teacher and have a lower level of education, you cannot help the people. To be a pastor or a psychologist, you should have higher education; other people will believe and accept what you say, and trust in you. If you want to work [in manual labor or certain vocational fields] then you don't need to continue to study. That's okay. Education will create a person's credibility and trustworthiness.⁵⁵

Another graduate echoed this sentiment: “Students learn how to lead, how to be a leader, and how to understand themselves. It helps to transform and change things and to make them better, it is about transformation.”⁵⁶

Every student I interviewed expressed an interest in using their education to serve their community. One stakeholder, a student who had completed a GED program and was looking for an opportunity to attend a four-year accredited HEI program in IT said, “For me the purpose is sharing, helping. If you have HE you can help more.”⁵⁷ A graduate of a Karen Bible college said “Happiness comes from helping people... We have to love others. I learned this from seminary.”⁵⁸ Graduates said they desire HE as a crucial step toward their goal to serve their community further. A current student attending a certificate program in government administration, who has completed programs at two different junior colleges in two different camps, and who desired to participate in an accredited four-year program said the priority of HE is to, “First support our Karen people. Find a way for our Karen people. After that, we can do other jobs.”⁵⁹

A graduate of an accredited four-year program living in Bangkok said they want to continue their studies to pursue an M.A. in Psychology to train people to help others. They are currently working at a Thai foundation and want to build other foundations and counseling centers to assist persons with special needs and disabilities in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos. They believe, “Every hand that comes to me, I will give that back to other people.”⁶⁰

Students, especially those born in the camps or who have spent significant formative years in the camps, must decide whether to return to the camp or pursue job opportunities outside of it. A graduate of

⁵⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.14, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 23, 2022.

⁵⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

⁵⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁵⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.15, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 25, 2022.

⁵⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁵⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.11, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁶⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

a four-year accredited HEI who is now working for a large international NGO explained their thought process behind the decision not to return, “If I use it inside the camp though, I cannot share it wider. If I work with an NGO, I can help the refugees and not lose my papers. I can at least give back to the community in some way. You don’t need to go back into that community and suffer again. Now I work with an NGO in teacher training, so I have a chance to work with teachers and staff. If I go back to Tham Hin camp, I can help only one camp. Now I can help nine camps.”⁶¹ Another graduate of the same accredited HEI said, “We cannot force students to work at a place or not to go to a third country, however, we want them to contribute to their community. To help their people.”⁶²

Students' goals, dreams, and actions are not defined by clear-cut country lines dividing Myanmar and Thailand. Students and graduates are interested in giving back to the community on both sides of the border, including a willingness to help improve a student’s native community and the Thai community. As a graduate from an accredited Thai HEI now working for a Karen organization said:

Thailand has many issues including migrant issues, and graduates can help solve these issues. There are also many indigenous Thais without rights. Graduates can help other vulnerable Thai people. Higher education can create opportunities for migrant school children, and when graduating, some go back to the border and stay on the Thai side. They can contribute to many positive things regarding social issues such as migrant rights.⁶³

Stakeholders gave examples of how displaced Burma students use their HE to serve and improve communities in Thailand. One graduate from Nu Po camp said the camp is surrounded by Thai-Karen villages and is largely underdeveloped. There are good relations between the Karen inside and outside the camp; sometimes, “people outside the camp want those inside the camp to teach English” because their English skills are strong.⁶⁴ A graduate of the Thoo Mweh Khee Bachelor in Liberal Arts (BLA) program echoed this sentiment. They said if given the chance to study and become doctors, nurses, and teachers, “Those outside the camp in surrounding areas can benefit.”⁶⁵ They gave an example of how students do this by going into the surrounding villages and teaching in the summer between terms.

Students and graduates are willing to engage in this exchange between native and host cultures. One graduate of a non-accredited HE program said:

⁶¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.14, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 23, 2022.

⁶² Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

⁶³ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

⁶⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

⁶⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

We would know their background, history; most of Thai people, they are different, not the same, diverse within themselves. We can learn about all of them. We can share our background and experiences with them. They will know and understand us. For example, you and us [the student paused and cited their connection with me, someone from another country and culture, as an example]. If I have a chance to continue in Bangkok I will share my background. My experience is so interesting. My parents are from Myanmar, but I am from here.⁶⁶

This graduate desired to go to an accredited program in Thailand, and within this desire was an eagerness to build reciprocal relationships with Thai people that would lead to deeper understanding, acceptance, and appreciation. Within this statement, the interviewee also states “I am from here,” exemplifying how they identify home as being “here,” in Thailand, while being proud of their Myanmar heritage. They find value in their story of growing up as a refugee in one of the camps, a value that can be shared with Thai people, who are also multi-faceted and “diverse within themselves.”

A graduate of an accredited university in Bangkok spoke about the network-oriented support students can provide if given a chance at HE: “If only people in Thailand work and share their knowledge and their education, it is not enough for Thai people. They need connections and relations with non-Thais.” The student, a living example as they work at a Thai Foundation, said when students from Myanmar work in Thailand, they communicate with Thai leaders and citizens, which can improve relations between countries.⁶⁷

Another common interest was that HE should be a bridge to more opportunities, especially job opportunities after graduation. HE should be a bridge to achieve goals and to more opportunities. “When we graduate in grade twelve this is not enough for students. Higher Education is really needed. To equip their story and knowledge. To experience their professional career. Higher Education serves as something practical.”⁶⁸ According to one stakeholder, around the town of Mae Sot, there are many job openings in IT, logistics, math, economics, and positions requiring expertise in lab microscopes. There is a need for certain skills and employment opportunities in these sectors, and the student wished there were more opportunities for scholarships to study in these fields.⁶⁹

One student said that HE creates opportunities for a better job other than the “three D’s—dirty, dangerous, disgusting.”⁷⁰ A graduate said that they pursued HE because of the access it would bring to

⁶⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁶⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

⁶⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁶⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.3, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

more jobs. When they were looking at job postings on social media, the requirements often included needing a bachelor's degree.⁷¹

Students expressed needing to have access to better salaries after graduation to be able to support themselves and their families while serving their community. A student currently enrolled in an accredited bachelor's program said, "Many students are willing to help their people, but they also have financial problems and family problems."⁷² Particularly for jobs that serve border communities, some stakeholders expressed the need for increased salaries. A graduate of a four-year accredited program in Bangkok expressed frustration with expectations placed on students by leaders wanting them to return to work for their community after graduation, but who cannot necessarily offer decent salaries: "I have dedicated myself for 20 years, what do I get from it? Of course you want to help other people, but you're vulnerable."⁷³

Students expressed the need for their autonomy to be respected as they graduate and decide how to use their degree best. As mentioned, the desire to serve the community is strong, but students balance serving the community, the family, and the self. HE should allow them to do each. One student said, "My community needs me, but my family needs me too. I have younger siblings; they have to go to school too. My parents are getting old and cannot work. I have to help pay for my younger sibling's school."⁷⁴ Another interviewee said, "Many students are willing to help their people, but they also have financial problems and family problems."⁷⁵ This student's desire to serve their people tied into the desire to have HE lead to jobs that have higher salaries.

A significant aspect of serving the community was learning to think critically and problem-solve the complex issues and "conflict at home" that students have had to live through, and that have been responsible for the situation students come from. One student of a Karen HEI said of their master's program:

This program helps students, and equips them to make solid change. This program is to prepare the new generation academically and practically. Any people can just talk. This program is serious about providing students to be able to understand the root cause of anything based on research and based on the facts. This program is preparing students to go upstream. After you graduate the program you understand history, politics, economics, so that you can go beyond the past.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

⁷² Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁷³ Interview with student, interview SG1.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 1, 2022.

⁷⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 1, 2022.

⁷⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁷⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.8, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

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Another master's student who finished their bachelor's at a Karen Bible college spoke about the desire to learn English to access more research and materials because this helps you know how to solve issues. "If you want to create something, you need to have a degree."⁷⁷

Current students and graduates want to pursue HE because they believe it is needed to address problems. One student spoke about the problem of their Karen community's ethnic education system not being recognized, and how an HE can equip graduates to solve this problem. "After graduation, students can find the way for the next generation, for their education to be recognized. Students can help to answer questions like 'why do other countries not recognize our education?' and they can give opportunities for students to continue to a recognized university."⁷⁸ This student wants to build a university in Karen State one day.

Students and graduates from this Stakeholder Group (SG) expressed a common interest in certain degree fields, some of which are available and others that they said should be more available to them. Commonly available degrees included social science, political science, social policy, development, and economics. They viewed education as widely important. "If we want to have change, we have to develop our education system."⁷⁹

Medical degrees are also a priority. Even though some medical programs are available, they are mostly certificate programs. Students cannot readily attend medical school because of documentation and finances. Interviewees from SG1 expressed wanting more access to diverse degree opportunities such as business, IT, and engineering programs. Some students are very interested in computers but have not been able to find scholarships that support this major, despite there being many job opportunities available in this field in Thailand.

One stakeholder expressed frustration: "You only become a teacher, a nurse, or a soldier." Another student told me about their desire to study IT so that they can work in cybersecurity for their nation. They had finished a GED program so their secondary education was recognized, and they were therefore eligible to attend Thai HEIs. The student had not entered a program yet because scholarships offered by NGOs and various HEI departments were limited to degrees outside the student's desired field of IT. They said a friend is in a similar situation—unable to find HE opportunities to study IT, despite both students wanting to use their degree to develop the IT infrastructure and future cybersecurity capabilities in Myanmar. The student remarked, "Each country has this [IT infrastructure]" and they believe theirs should too. They want to use their degree to develop this for their country.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

⁷⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.11, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁷⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

⁸⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.15, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 25, 2022.

Another graduate of an accredited HEI shared the story of a student who wanted to go into tourism, but the scholarships they were eligible for did not support this degree path. The stakeholder explained that commonly used scholarship programs often view this field as a pathway that would only help the individual versus the community. “But one day we will need tourism in Karen state,” they said and told me that this is an important field for the future of their country.⁸¹

Several student/graduate stakeholders emphasized their desire to have more business degree opportunities available. One student said their cultural community is “weak in business” and that it is important for their people to develop an understanding in this field that applies to their situation. “When students finish, they can't apply their learning. We can do our own businesses – not rely on outsiders.” They asked that those in charge of developing the curriculum in the camps update their curriculum to incorporate more business programs and motivate students to pursue a business degree. “They need to update the curriculum so it can be applicable to after graduation. We cannot do the same way as from the past.”⁸² One stakeholder shared their passion for wanting to study finance so they can work in the Karen Finance department to educate their people on revenue benefits and create more transparency in the government. “I want to change the current policy.”⁸³

Another interest was that HE should provide the opportunity to grow relationships and networks both within one's own community and with individuals from other groups. Some interviewees desire to “join NGOs, the government, and work with and in other countries.”⁸⁴ Stakeholders said with HE they “can work in other countries, make connections, make relationships” and one interviewee gave an example of using an HE to work and to bring U.S. companies to Thailand.⁸⁵ A prospective HE student said they want to work with NGOs outside of their ethnic group to build bridges between their community and other groups.⁸⁶

A graduated student of an accredited program now working in the education ministry of their government said, “Graduates bring networks with them,” specifically speaking about the limited networks students have in the camps and how graduates can help grow their networks.⁸⁷ A graduate of Thoo Mweh Khee said, “After we graduate HE, we want to help our next generation. With education, we will pass on those same opportunities. After graduation, we will go back and present, so those in the

⁸¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

⁸² Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

⁸³ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁸⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.11, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁸⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.15, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 25, 2022.

⁸⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

camps will know more about the school opportunities. We will help direct and guide and navigate.”⁸⁸

Another graduate who spent significant years in a camp before having the chance to go on to an accredited university said, “The refugee community is a narrow scope, the network is not broad. Now getting a higher education, I have a network more than my community, but not as much as others.”⁸⁹

Another graduated student from a non-accredited HEI said:

“Higher education helps guide the way, the way I have to go. Without higher education, I could not go here. I got more opportunities; the teachers provided me the way to come here. Teachers helped me even though I didn’t have an ID. I have confidence to ask teachers to help guide me. Now I am able to ask, “how will you help find the way for me? Before, my friends said I was too silent. I have relationships with teachers and leaders now.”⁹⁰

A current student at an accredited HEI said, “If one person graduates from HE, this gives more access to others. For example, I can write a proposal and help others to apply and get into schools.”⁹¹ A graduate said networking with community members who had successfully pursued an HE was a huge part of their HE journey. “Through my journey, my network has gotten me places, and connections. For me, that is an important part.” The graduate first became inspired and interested to pursue HE through a friend who had gone on to a learning center from the camp. Teachers at the learning center, such as volunteer teachers, helped support them financially at times.⁹²

Another interest identified during my interviews with informants from SG1 was HE’s link to physical mobility. By studying in an HE program, students have the opportunity to leave the confines of a camp, or more generally, travel to spaces when their physical mobility has been previously limited. Students expressed wanting to travel to learn and grow through new experiences. One student said that if possible, after finishing international university, they will pursue a doctorate so they can travel to “any country.”⁹³ A graduate shared how HE opened up the opportunity for them to travel to India to do a workshop and that this also had other benefits, such as changing their parents’ vision about the possibilities of education.⁹⁴ HE sparks initiative for students “to go out.” Especially for those in the camps, HE is an opportunity “to go out.”⁹⁵ One student who lived in Tham Hin camp for years after their

⁸⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁸⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.14, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 23, 2022.

⁹⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.11, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁹¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

⁹² Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

⁹³ Interview with student, interview SG1.12, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 21, 2022.

⁹⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

⁹⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

family was forced to flee Myanmar from political persecution said: “That [HE] was my way to explore the world. The only way I could get out and explore the world.”⁹⁶

In summary, students and graduates have several key interests in pursuing a Higher Education (HE). These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 1 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 1 (SG1) that were discussed above.

Figure 1 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<i>Stakeholder Group 1: Displaced Students from Burma/Myanmar</i>	HE should create time for self-exploration, empowerment, and pursuit of one's passion, and help students develop a vision for their future.
	HE should develop leaders and foster respect and recognition from the community.
	He should create more opportunities for jobs and financial stability.
	The autonomy of the student to use their degree in the way they feel is best should be supported and respected. Students balance a strong desire to serve their community with the practical need to provide for themselves and their families.
	HE should be used to serve the community.
	HE should develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills to address the problems relevant to students' lives and communities.
	Certain degrees such as social science, political studies, social policy, development, education, and economics are important and should continue to be supported. There should be more support and opportunities for other degrees such as IT, business, engineering, the arts, and tourism.
	HE should help a student to grow their network and relationships.
	HE leads to opportunities for physical mobility and provides the chance to travel and experience new places.

Stakeholder Group 2: Burma Community Education Personnel

The second stakeholder group (SG2) included education personnel from the Burma migrant and displaced communities in Thailand. SG2 encompasses camp and Migrant Learning Center (MLC) school officials such as principals and teachers, representatives from displaced community-led entities, and organizations working in education development. I interviewed four representatives from SG2, including a former principal from a HE program in one of the refugee camps, two directors of HE programs at different Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs), and a representative of one of the ethnic-led education entities that is responsible for the educational systems in some of the camps in Thailand.

Several themes emerged from SG2 participant responses. The most prominent interest that participants in SG2 expressed was the desire for HE to develop students into desirable leaders who can return to the community and lift up the community around them. One stakeholder believed that the purpose of HE is to “nurture future leaders” and establish more “human resources” that are locals from

⁹⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.14, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 23, 2022.

the displaced community.⁹⁷ Another leader of an MLC said their program focuses on guiding students to help the next generation and to be mindful, “not just to take care of yourself. We never know who will do what in the future. Who knows what problem they will solve.”⁹⁸ The same informant said their school has a student mentoring program that teaches students to know themselves, who they will work for, and ethical values. “We teach the students to have ethical values, and we encourage students to finish because it will affect the opportunity for the students who come after.”⁹⁹ Still, another leader of an MLC with a bachelor’s program shared, “My favorite thing is when students go back to their home village and assume leadership positions.”¹⁰⁰

Ethical values and “character” were emphasized as desirable and valuable in a leader, along with problem-solving skills and critical thinking. Speaking on the protracted nature of the conflict and displacement in Burma, one stakeholder said, “Aside from the ongoing war, the biggest deficit is people in leadership positions who have critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and character that you want leaders to have. Many of our students are children of generals and have leadership positions waiting for them. Academics and practical skills are important, but character and leadership are needed.”¹⁰¹

In addition to ethical values, another important characteristic of a desirable leader is confidence, which informants believe HE serves a critical purpose to build.

When you ask our students what their communities need, they say ‘We need people with the skills and confidence to go out and do all of these things. That’s my big thing, confidence. A lot of people out there have the education, but not the confidence, and they just don’t do anything. Most of the time, the stuff you are doing isn’t what you learned in school but the ability to do it comes from the training you received. Academics is a core part. Leadership development is important.’¹⁰²

Another interest that emerged was the hope that HE would develop student potential for the workplace by connecting them with a wider network and variety of opportunities. According to one interviewee, HE serves a purpose to “enhance connectivity” and “prepares a student for real life and the

⁹⁷ Interview with leader of displaced community camp education entity, interview SG2.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 25, 2022.

⁹⁸ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

⁹⁹ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022

¹⁰¹ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022

¹⁰² Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022

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workplace.”¹⁰³ Another interviewee echoed that HE serves a purpose to “connect your potential with the workforce” and connects students with “other talented minds.”¹⁰⁴ Many displaced students’ secondary school education is not recognized, and so their job opportunities are limited.¹⁰⁵ Stakeholders acknowledged students’ difficulties securing a well-paying job, especially along the border, and said better salaries should be available.¹⁰⁶ Stakeholders also pointed to the need for policy changes that remove barriers to meaningful employment, such as documentation challenges.

An aspect of network creation that several stakeholders discussed was building connections with Thai nationals that allow students to nurture mutual understanding and contribute to Thai society. One informant spoke of their educational experience, which allowed them to understand the Thai mindset further.¹⁰⁷ This informant said as a student who had spent formative years in Thailand in a camp, they did not want to go back to Burma, but wanted to become a contributing resident of Thailand.¹⁰⁸

A concern that emerged from the interviews was the waste of human potential due to the host country’s lack of continuing education opportunities and recognition as contributing members of society with equal rights. Stakeholders said large amounts of talent in the camps go to waste.¹⁰⁹ The leader of an MLC said:

Young people, this is what we believe, they should get the same opportunity as other young people around the world. It is their right as the same as others. We don’t want to omit them from that opportunity. They should not waste their time as they get older and do not get recognized by any country. This will create problems in the future. They can help CBOs, NGOs, and education programs, and be able to fulfill their dream, their desire, to help their family, in the future.¹¹⁰

Stakeholders spoke about how students receiving an HE can benefit not only themselves and their native community, but their host country, Thailand, as well. The value that graduates add in this regard will be further discussed in a later section.

¹⁰³ Interview with leader of displaced community camp education entity, interview SG2.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 25, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with former camp school principal, interview SG2.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with leader of displaced community camp education entity, interview SG2.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 25, 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with leader of displaced community camp education entity, interview SG2.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 25, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with leader of displaced community camp education entity, interview SG2.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 25, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with former camp school principal, interview SG2.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 24, 2022.

¹¹⁰ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

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Informants in SG2 shared beliefs about what types of degrees students should pursue. Informants prefaced their response with the belief that students should have a personal choice and autonomy to pursue what they want but emphasized certain degrees as being more of a priority. They shared that fields such as political science, policymaking, education, public health, environmental studies, and conflict resolution are important areas of study that address critical needs. Accordingly, students are generally very interested in these majors. The leaders of an MLC said, “Most of our students study education, social science, and PPE (politics, philosophy, economics).¹¹¹ One informant spoke of their bachelor’s program that offered a major in social science and covered topics such as community development, economics, sociology, psychology, and research skills.¹¹²

Stakeholders said they would like increased opportunities for infrastructure development, engineering, technology/IT, media, and business programs. An MLC leader shared, “The world is getting more and more technological” and said, “pushing into this realm” can be useful and help update the technology systems in their community.¹¹³ While medical certificates have been emphasized, one informant said they would like to see opportunities for students to go into full medical programs to become doctors.¹¹⁴

Another said they want to see more “entrepreneurial mindedness” and that producing students who are more business-minded could help the community to financially thrive where they have not previously done so.¹¹⁵ In the past, students who completed business degrees were not able to get jobs and had to go work for NGOs and in other non-related roles, so the perceived usefulness of this degree diminished overtime.¹¹⁶

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 2 (SG2) have several key interests in supporting increased access to higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 2 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 2 (SG2) that were discussed above.

¹¹¹ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹¹² Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

¹¹³ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

¹¹⁵ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

Figure 2 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<p><i>Stakeholder Group 2: Burma/Myanmar Community Education Personnel</i></p>	<p>HE should develop students into desirable leaders that can return to the community and lift up the community around them.</p>
	<p>HE should develop student potential for the workplace by connecting students with a wider network and a variety of opportunities.</p>
	<p>HE opportunities should be expanded to help harness the rich and plentiful human potential in displaced communities.</p>
	<p>Certain degrees such as political science, policymaking, education, public health, environmental studies, and conflict resolution are important and should continue to be supported.</p>
	<p>There should be more support and opportunities for students to study engineering, IT, media, business, and infrastructure development.</p>
	<p>HE should emphasize research skills.</p>

Stakeholder Group 3: Non-education leadership from Burma/Myanmar Communities

Stakeholder group three (SG3) was leadership from the Burma migrant and displaced community, on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. This included ethnic women’s groups, religious leadership, military leadership, and other organizations and persons deemed within the culture to be in a leadership position. This group is important because they play an essential role in supporting current and prospective students, whether that be by helping them to navigate the higher education landscape, or supporting other necessary aspects of a student’s personal development and needs.

I interviewed one representative of a leading women’s organization in Thailand, representing one of the ethnic groups from Burma. Recently, this organization has run a program assisting students in navigating the HE process. This organization has built a network with scholarship organizations to connect students from their community to HE opportunities. They also helped connect students with GED programs, often a necessary first step for students accessing HE. This program has largely ceased due to funding issues, but the organization still assists students as situations arise.¹¹⁷

The interviewee expressed several beliefs about the purpose, utility, and value of Higher Education (HE) for displaced Myanmar students in Thailand. When I asked what degrees/majors students should pursue, they emphasized three types. The first was for students to pursue business majors, which is very popular in Thailand because economic opportunities and opportunities to work in business areas are good. The informant gave an example of a student who pursued an MBA and now works in the coffee business in Bangkok. This student spoke both Thai and English well.

Secondly, the interviewee emphasized the importance of community development majors. The third emphasis included political science and human rights majors. They referenced parallels between

¹¹⁷ Interview with Burma community leader, interview SG3.1, virtual interview with Claire Holba. Thailand, January 11, 2023.

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Thai military-government linkages and stated that knowledge gained in Thailand in the above fields would be valuable because of its relevancy to the context of Myanmar. They added that IT is a “good opportunity here in Thailand because IT is advanced here in Thailand,” and students in this field can develop software and participate in this industry. The interviewee referenced a friend who studied IT in school.

As a leader of an established organization representing women from one of the Myanmar ethnic groups in Thailand, the interviewee said other countries and institutions should ease the requirements for HE access for now and that other Asian countries, specifically, should provide more HE opportunities to displaced students. They said, “It is very important to create that space for Myanmar students in the current situation.” The stakeholder spoke specifically of other countries within Asia needing to step forward to provide such opportunities.¹¹⁸

During our interview, the informant believed one of the purposes of HE for displaced students from Myanmar in Thailand is to adapt and be accepted into Thai culture. Tied to this belief was the desire for recognition by the Thai people and government as a present and contributing community, especially for displaced communities who have been in Thailand for a long time. The Myanmar ethnic community this organization serves and represents has been present in Thailand since the 1988 uprising in Myanmar. Early community members had settled in a rural village in Thailand, a village that the Thai King recognized over time.

HE should equip displaced students to become contributing members of society within the host country, and in turn, the host country and populace should recognize and accept the displaced community. The interviewee spoke of their education journey, where Thai teachers and students had treated them with bias. “Having HE will bring value to the...community [the informant’s ethnic community] as this community already exists in Thailand. They will provide their input in working for the Thai community and government.” The informant believed, “For most of the migrant students, they will stay here in Thailand, if they have a chance they will work for the Thai community in Thailand. If they will be citizens here in Thailand, they will impact Thai society. Maybe there will be some leaders who will rise.”¹¹⁹ The overall interest expressed was that HE should link the community with the Thai government and Thai society,

I only completed one formal interview with a representative from SG3, so I conducted secondary research on several women’s organizations, such as the Shan Women’s Association Network (SWAN), Karen Women’s Organization (KWO), the Karenni National Women’s Organization (KNWO), and the

¹¹⁸ Interview with Burma community leader, interview SG3.1, virtual interview with Claire Holba. Thailand, January 11, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Burma community leader, interview SG3.1, virtual interview with Claire Holba. Thailand, January 11, 2023.

Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (KWAT). Accordingly, I identified another interest: HE should develop future leaders. The websites of these organizations above demonstrate a common belief that education is important to develop women leaders who can serve their communities and actively participate in politics and decision-making processes.

For example, SWAN has a scholarship program offering tertiary students travel, lodging, food, and fee support.¹²⁰ Other examples can be seen from the KWO and KNWO, who have active education programs in the refugee camps in Thailand. The KNWO says, "Education is the foundation for progress" and they collaborate with various partners to provide opportunities for women and girls in the refugee camps in Thailand to advance in their education.¹²¹ The KWO has a Karen Young Women's Leadership School (KYWLS), which offers a one-year leadership course for young women and aims to empower them to serve their community and have a voice in the decision-making processes.¹²² The Political Empowerment Program through KWAT promotes women's participation in decision-making bodies.¹²³

Through my interviews with other stakeholder groups, testimonies indicated that religious and military leaders also have a demonstrated interest in displaced students accessing HE. One student I spoke with from SG1 shared that their HE was funded by the military with the expectation that this student would return after graduation to serve. This student had been recruited by a military leader who saw their potential and offered to support their HE.¹²⁴ An SG2 stakeholder said that many of their students are the children of generals who will return with leadership positions waiting for them.¹²⁵ This support has been long-standing. In 2020 I traveled with military leaders to Karen State as part of an education humanitarian support mission. One general I met argued that it was significant that education serves as a pathway to a better future and spoke of the desire to build a recognized university in Karen state.

There is also a strong desire to support highly educated future religious leaders with a commitment to transform their communities. Karen Hope Theological Seminary is situated along the Thai-Myanmar border and has a mission to provide higher education to empower displaced students

¹²⁰"Education." n.d. SWAN. Shan Women's Action Network. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://shanwomen.org/education>.

¹²¹"Education – Karenni National Women's Organization." 2017. Karenni National Women's Organization. <https://www.facebook.com/WordPresscom>. March 6, 2017. <https://knwo.wordpress.com/education/>.

¹²²"Karen Young Women's Leadership School Project - Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)." 2021. Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) - The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) Is a Leading Indigenous Women's Organisation Formed in 1949. <https://www.facebook.com/karenwomenorganization>. September 19, 2021. <https://karenwomen.org/education-program/karen-young-womens-leadership-school-project/>.

¹²³"Political Empowerment Program | Kachin Women's Association Thailand." n.d. Kachin Women's Association Thailand | Kachin Women. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://kachinwomen.com/political-empowerment-program/>.

¹²⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 1, 2022.

¹²⁵ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

living as refugees in Thailand from Myanmar. One of their main goals is to “impart quality education that will bring transformation to our churches and society.”¹²⁶

They offer a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Socio-political transformation. Many schools in the camps are religiously affiliated, such as Eden Valley Academy, a 7th Day Adventist mission school in Mae La camp that has helped support students to go on to accredited HE programs in Thailand.

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 3 (SG3) have several key interests in supporting increased access to (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 3 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 3 (SG3) that were discussed above.

Figure 3 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<p><i>Stakeholder Group 3: Non-education leadership from Burma/Myanmar Communities</i></p>	<p>Certain degrees such as business, community development, political science, human rights, and IT are important and should be supported.</p>
	<p>Other countries and Thai higher education institutions should ease certain requirements, within reason, for HE access to be more available to students from a displaced background.</p>
	<p>HE should lead to recognition by a host country, such as Thailand, that displaced students are present and contributing community members.</p>
	<p>HE should help develop women leaders who can serve their communities and actively participate in politics and decision-making processes.</p>
	<p>HE should develop future leaders across a spectrum of roles such as politics, military, and religious institutions. These leaders should be equipped to problem-solve and transform the current situation.</p>

Stakeholder Group 4: Thai Education Institutions, Entities, Personnel

Stakeholder Group 4 (SG4) constitutes Thai Higher Education Institutions, including universities and colleges accredited within Thailand such as Chiang Mai University, Asia-Pacific International University (AIU), Thammasat University, Chulalongkorn, and Mahidol. I conducted five official interviews with representatives of Thai universities, and also spoke informally in the field with various personnel working at vocational schools and other prominent universities. Interviews with other stakeholder groups provided additional insight into the interests of community colleges.

¹²⁶“Vision and Mission - KHTS.” n.d. KHTS. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.khts.education/vision-and-mission.html>.

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A primary interest of SG4 was to produce research. I spoke to a representative of a graduate program at a prominent Thai university who said there is a big emphasis on research.¹²⁷ Another stakeholder from a department focusing on population and migration studies shared, “Our curriculum is focused on research” and that they “want to provide more ability for graduates to conduct research.” A stakeholder from a human rights institute at a prominent Thai HEI said that the emphasis on building the capacity of students to do research is widespread through HEIs in Thailand.¹²⁸

Understandably, another goal was to propel Thailand, as a nation, forward. One stakeholder, a faculty member of a prominent Thai university graduate program, spoke about how the university funding structure incentivizes a university to support national interests as established by the Royal Thai Government. University funding for many universities in Thailand comes primarily from either tuition or government funding. So, the university has a responsibility to answer to the priorities that the government establishes.¹²⁹ This informant shared that urgent priority fields include cybersecurity, data analytics, robotics, biotechnology, medical, consulting, and psychology. After COVID, there has been an increased demand for more public health professionals. In some cases, the government provides funding to universities, so they will work to develop programs in these areas.¹³⁰

In addition to propelling Thailand forward as a leading nation amongst other nations, this dedication to national development is rooted in the desire to support the internal development and improvement of one’s country, specifically, areas often considered marginalized and underdeveloped. Education opportunities should be expanded to students from a lower economic standing. One informant explained how their role as a dean was to provide a certain number of scholarships for poorer students who are unable to afford tuition: “Every semester I declare these scholarships,” meaning scholarships for poorer students who cannot afford tuition.¹³¹

SG4 stakeholders expressed the desire that HE opportunities result in students going back to their community to serve. An interviewee shared:

For our students, we try to have them develop some sort of a plan to go back and help their community. When parents see you return home with a college degree, it helps motivate and uplift the community. They think, ‘Oh my neighbor’s kid was able to get a

¹²⁷ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022

¹²⁸ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 5, 2022

¹²⁹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022.

¹³⁰ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022.

¹³¹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022

college degree.’ This opens the possibility for them. The idea goes from impossible to possible.¹³²

Another director of an HE institute, a Thai national, also said universities should serve the purpose of “creating that space that you can see the role model.” They also added that for displaced students, attending a university can help with integration into the host country by increasing opportunities and help a student to see what is possible:

At a university, you can see how you can step up, and what’s next. While in the camp, sometimes you cannot see that. Maybe the only thing you see is to get resettled in third countries, but not the chance of how, with a degree from Thailand, perhaps you can also have the same life that you can have in the US or elsewhere here also.¹³³

The same interviewee said HE for displaced students benefits Thailand as a host country and can also help reduce tensions within Thailand: “What if Thailand can turn them to support their own community? For example, if they become a doctor for their own community. That would lessen the tensions that Thailand has to provide for the community. By having them provide for themselves.”¹³⁴

Similar to the desire to propel Thailand forward as a nation and to be competitive globally, SG4 interviewees stated that there is a strong interest in establishing themselves as prestigious institutions of higher learning amongst HEIs in other countries.¹³⁵ For example, the Thammasat University Business School has pursued Triple Crown accreditation, which is recognized globally. They are the first and only business school in Thailand to receive this prestigious accreditation that less than 1% of business schools worldwide receive.¹³⁶ This desire to receive international accreditation and compete globally is linked to another interest expressed by SG4 informants: increasing the diversity of the student body. There is a strong interest amongst universities to admit more diverse students. On a very practical level, student diversity is needed for some highly desirable accreditations.¹³⁷

HE personnel also believe that “international students” can contribute to the host country.¹³⁸ This interest was most often expressed through the value placed on international and cross-border

¹³² Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 21, 2022.

¹³³ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 12, 2022

¹³⁴ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institute representative, interview SG4.5, in-person interview with Claire Holba, Thailand, December 12, 2022.

¹³⁵ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 21, 2022.

¹³⁶ “TBS Accredited - Thammasat Business School.” n.d. Thammasat Business School. <https://www.facebook.com/tbs.thammasat>. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.tbs.tu.ac.th/en/aboutus/aacsb-efmd-equis-amba-accredited/>.

¹³⁷ Conversation with a faculty member of a Thai HEI business school.

¹³⁸ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022

relationships developed while in an HE program. Stakeholders believed that these relationships lead to better understanding and collaborative opportunities to work together to impact the community and country at large positively. One Thai SG4 informant recalled their own MA and Ph.D. education abroad in the U.S., saying they stay in touch decades later with personal connections made abroad.¹³⁹ These long-lasting relationships create opportunities for transnational research and intercultural exchange.

Another stakeholder shared that their university intentionally recruits students from Myanmar because the “expectation is that it will benefit their country and benefit us because we can keep working together. We believe they can keep that connection.”¹⁴⁰ Graduates become their alumni, and this helps the university by increasing the university’s network between countries.¹⁴¹ The informant said they have focused more on students living in Myanmar, not necessarily those in Thailand already, but when I asked about displaced students living in Thailand, the informant said there should be a special focus on this student body. The reason was that it is of tangible benefit, and because many displaced students have been in Thailand for a long time (many since birth). The informant stated, “It is not easy for them to go back. They have not been there ever.”¹⁴²

The same informant cited an example from their work with the Mae Tao Clinic, a clinic along the Thai-Myanmar border that has worked for decades supporting those in need of health services from Myanmar. The informant said their research findings demonstrated that students from the Mae Tao Clinic school who had the chance to pursue HE in Thailand and other countries come back and work for the community as well as international organizations.

As the informant shared, “In the border area, CSOs can play a very important role” in public health issues affecting both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, drug resistance, and Tuberculosis. “Along the border we may have many spaces where collaboration on both sides of the border is needed. These graduates can be [part of] this jigsaw puzzle.”¹⁴³ The stakeholder said graduates have worked building collaboration between Thai hospitals and the Mae Tao Clinic and that “they are very smart, they speak Thai, Burmese, Karenni...It was very functional. If they have a chance at HE, they can bring many benefits.”¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

¹⁴² Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

¹⁴³ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

Strengthening Higher Education for Displaced Students

Increasing the diversity of the student body helps develop understanding and mutual enrichment. As one stakeholder stated, “It is a two-way street; when we have them with us we learn a lot about their lives, and they enrich us.”¹⁴⁵ This was expressed as especially helpful for shifting views toward displaced communities. The informant stated, “The attitude of negativity toward refugees lasts only as long as you haven’t met one.”¹⁴⁶ This informant said that universities need to be a “fully participating power” in this process of breaking down stigma and forming understanding relationships.

During interviews with SG4 stakeholders, some interviewees expressed concerns about HE access for displaced students. One concern that arose was the fear of facing repercussions by admitting students who do not have the proper paperwork/documentation or secondary school accreditation. One informant said that as a dean, they face serious repercussions, and “can go to jail” if they admit a student without the proper paperwork.¹⁴⁷ Students in Thailand need to have an accredited secondary school diploma to be accepted into a bachelor’s program, and they need to have an accredited bachelor’s degree to be accepted into a Master’s program.

From my other stakeholder group interviews, I learned of ways that universities are choosing to and able to navigate their concern with admitting students lacking traditional paperwork. For example, Thoo Mweh Khee, a Migrant Learning Center, has worked to develop understandings with a couple of colleges that accept their Bachelor’s in Liberal Arts (BLA) degree, such as Northern College and the Rangsit University branch in Tak province which even offers discounted rates for Thoo Mweh Khee BLA graduates.

Another concern is the pressure on HEI administration to maintain certain academic standards within its student body. An informant said that as a leader of a top university, they must meet a specific bar of academic performance. The stakeholder said students can and will be accepted “if they are good enough.” Financial limitations on the university also arose as a concern. One informant said the university has a mission to support students from a displaced background in ways that don’t “hurt” their finances too much.¹⁴⁸

Another concern by faculty of programs focusing on working with students from a displaced background is caution about contributing to the brain drain. An educator said their program has had

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 21, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 5, 2022

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 8, 2022

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 21, 2022.

experience with some students getting accepted into the program and halfway through leaving the program because an opportunity to resettle or go to another country arises.¹⁴⁹

The interest of HE to develop student ability to enter the labor force was expressed. This interest touched on the conflicted nature of displaced students' identity formation. One stakeholder said, "If we can provide education for them and they can enter the labor force, it will be beneficial for the country regardless." Stakeholders said HE graduates are needed to enter the labor force because Thailand is "an aging society. We will have a smaller size of the labor force in the future." The concept of "replacement migration" was explained by one informant who said the displaced student population "can be a potential workforce for Thailand in the future."¹⁵⁰ Another interviewee spoke about how refugees should not just be considered to fill unskilled-labor gaps but can be valuable and integrate into Thai society and other jobs. They said, "Maybe they perform better. There is a lot of human capital, especially from Myanmar."¹⁵¹

Mahidol University has a research cluster focused on the benefits of replacement migration. Despite significant support for HE linkages to the labor market and economic development, a stakeholder expressed worry that students should not get caught in the current discourse about education's economic purpose. The interviewee said, "Education in the end is about helping students to learn to grow, to learn in life."¹⁵²

Overall, Thai universities have expressed collective support for expanding HE opportunities. One representative from a Master's program said their institution ran a project to meet with colleges across Thailand to gauge and garner their support for increasing HE opportunities for displaced and migrant students in Thailand. The interviewee said their project included a significant number of conversations and discussions, and "universities were really interested." Notably, business schools were "some of the most excited" and there is an opportunity for alignment with their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) teachings. The informant said business schools remarked that this type of programming for refugee/displaced students can be "a good advertisement for us." However, "no one has been able to put this together." The project died largely due to complications with the current policy, but the informant said that the conversation is "always going on" amongst universities and colleges.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 5, 2022

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 12, 2022

¹⁵² Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 21, 2022.

¹⁵³ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 5, 2022

Strengthening Higher Education for Displaced Students

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 4 (SG4) have several key interests in supporting increased access to a higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 4 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 4 (SG4) that were discussed above.

Figure 4 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

Stakeholder Group 4: Thai Higher Education Institutions	HE serves a national interest and should help propel Thailand forward on a global scale.
	HE should help promote the internal development of Thailand and improve marginalized and underdeveloped areas of the country.
	HE should produce research
	Thai HEIs want to compete globally and stand out as strong institutions of learning amongst global competitors.
	Thai HEIs want to recruit and engage more diverse student bodies. This can help with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Accreditation o Support social and public health issues in Thailand. o Foster cross-border collaboration and strengthen international relations. o Create intercultural understanding and tolerance
	Thai HEIs need to be protected against legal repercussions when choosing to accept students without documentation and accreditation paperwork.
	Thai HEIs must maintain strong academic standards within their student body.
	HEIs do not want to contribute to the "brain drain" nor lose students during an academic program.
	HE should develop a student to enter and contribute to the workforce
	Business schools at universities have been some of the most enthusiastic supporters of expanding opportunities.

Stakeholder Group 6: Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Stakeholder Group 6 (SG6) included representatives from the NGO sector in Thailand. These included NGOs supporting displaced persons' education, livelihoods, and other social services. In the protracted displacement context in Thailand and displaced student access to HE, NGOs play various important roles, such as helping students navigate the system to gain access to HE and advocating with the Thai Ministry of Education. Some organizations like BEAM, which has an online GED program, help students get secondary education accreditation so that they can go to accredited Thai HEIs. Other NGOs, like Child's Dream and Prospect Burma, support students financially by offering scholarships to HE programs. I interviewed representatives from five different NGOs including one Thai foundation.

The predominant concern these interviewees expressed was in graduates returning to support their community, most often the displaced and migrant communities along the Thai-Burma border. An informant said HE serves a purpose "to develop skills so that students can help themselves, their family,

and lift up society to create a better world than the one we have. HE provides better opportunities.”¹⁵⁴ Another believed, “I think they can bring their skills to support the community. This depends on the program they are interested in. For example, if they study to be a teacher, they will come back and teach and give opportunities to the students or maybe from personal experiences.”¹⁵⁵ By being socially conscious and politically informed, graduates use their HE to serve the community. “Some local NGOs are being started by young people.”¹⁵⁶ An informant from a scholarship-providing NGO said that during the application process, a student has to “signal your will to go back to Burma when the situation allows.”¹⁵⁷

Despite the desire for students to come back, a stakeholder said it can be difficult to measure a student’s commitment to coming back and that students should be allowed to pursue their own path, and not be limited by the expectations of others. “As students grow on their journey, their passion will be their driving force for them to come back.”¹⁵⁸

Certain fields of study were generally more prioritized by SG6 because they are deemed beneficial to the community. These most often included majors in education, politics, law, human rights, media, health/medical, and environmental studies. An informant of Thai nationality working at a foundation said, “I go back to education again, maybe it’s my personal belief. To be a teacher. I am linking to my own group too [in reference to working with persons with developmental needs and disabilities]. There are so many students who don’t have proper education, they are still at the border.” The informant also said that corruption in government is a big issue that makes politics an important field to study: “For me, there are problems everywhere, including government corruption. Maybe politics...maybe it can be powerful enough for refugee children to study and be part of their government team.”¹⁵⁹

Another informant said if students pursue media degrees, “graduates can tell their own story instead of having others tell their story for them” and that lawyers “can challenge the system.”¹⁶⁰ IT was viewed as a need to address national security issues and as a way for students to diversify the types of development communities receive.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.3, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 31, 2022.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 2, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.3, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

¹⁶¹ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 2, 2022.

There were mixed feelings by the NGOs interviewed about specific fields like business and engineering. Some viewed these fields as more likely to serve the individual above the community. Though personal cases and applications are taken into consideration, one informant said, “Our organization does not really fund business degrees, this is not viewed as creating the value for the community, it is more of a personal value creation.”¹⁶²

There was a dispute here as others said these fields are needed for community development and that opportunities should be expanded upon. Some informants expressed understanding that students should be able to take any route they want:

Our students are so passionate, why don't we try to find funding for their specific passions? Yes, we want them to contribute to society but if they don't love what they do it doesn't make sense. More opportunities will bring diverse change to the community. We need students who come back and give IT and business knowledge. Every [type of] knowledge helps. What if someone comes back and builds a tech center in a migrant community, or starts a social enterprise?¹⁶³

Another interest was focused solely on HE for the purpose of empowering students. “These students feel small, like they can't do anything. Our goal is to broaden their perspective of who they are and what they can do.”¹⁶⁴ The same informant said there is no belief that majors or how a student uses their degree should be restricted. They said they “wish for students to bring back their education to the community, but if they think they need to support themselves and family first, then okay.” We should be supporting them to act in the way they feel is best for them, we have been empowering them all along in this way.”¹⁶⁵

Another informant said HE provides a “wider view of the world, beyond ethnic groups and nationality.” By opening the minds of young people, they can see other possibilities for their future and be empowered.¹⁶⁶ Part of this empowerment was linked to the hope that students can develop the confidence to advocate for themselves for better job opportunities. One informant stated, “It is competitive and you have to advocate for yourself and speak up for yourself the whole time. This is difficult when refugees and migrants are pushed down their whole life. It is hard to change this mentality. Those skills and that confidence is what needs to be taught.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 31, 2022.

¹⁶³ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 2, 2022.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 2, 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 2, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

The hope that HE can lead to more mobility and opportunities, especially job opportunities, was expressed by interviewees. They believed that HE should serve a very practical purpose—“sustaining yourself.”¹⁶⁸ “Typically, refugees and migrants are thought to get caught in the three D’s jobs—dirty, dangerous, and difficult. HE is a way forward to advance beyond this.”¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, Thailand has an opportunity in the labor market for employment in professions like IT and tourism. To tap into the market interest for tech workers, this NGO has developed its own program that equips students with digital skills and prepares graduates to work in network security, software development, graphic design, and website design. The program incorporates paid internships in Singapore and accepts 70 students out of 300 applicants each year.¹⁷⁰

This goal that HE should lead to mobility and job opportunities was closely linked to the desire for policies allowing students to access citizenship and work visa opportunities.¹⁷¹ As one stakeholder said, “Those in the camps can only grow if they are allowed to.”¹⁷² A Thai informant from a foundation spoke about the limited opportunities for mobility for displaced persons and believed displaced persons should be able to work. They shared an example of one of their staff members from a displaced background. They offered the student a job at their foundation after graduating from a university in Bangkok. “His heart really wanted to work. We needed a staff member to help with the project working with the older community we serve.” At the time, the organization wanted to set up the foundation and needed help registering it. “He was very active. His heart, he was willing to support.”¹⁷³

HE should also lead to networking opportunities which are important for gaining access to jobs post-graduation, and universities should do a better job at supporting students from a displaced background to be able to network. One NGO representative said, “You are really on your own for a lot of it. It is about networking and knowing the right people.”¹⁷⁴

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 6 (SG6) have several key interests in supporting increased access to a higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 5 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 6 (SG6) that were discussed above.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

¹⁷¹ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

¹⁷² Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

¹⁷³ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.3, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 5, 2022.

Figure 5 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<i>Stakeholder Group 6: Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)</i>	HE should produce graduates who return to their community to serve and help improve them.
	Certain fields of study such as education, politics, law, human rights, media, public health and medicine, and environmental studies are important and should continue to be supported.
	Some believe certain fields such as business, engineering, and IT should have expanded opportunities for study. Others expressed caution that these serve the individual over the community.
	HE creates an opportunity for physical mobility.
	HE should lead to more opportunities for employment, which is tied to the need for citizenship and work visas.
	HE should lead to networking opportunities and relationship building.

Stakeholder Group 7: Business and Economic Development Sector

Stakeholder Group 7 (SG7) included representatives from the business and economic development sector in Thailand, such as academics and professionals with expertise in this sector, local businesses, and large Thai and Multinational Corporations (MNCs). I could only secure one formal interview with a representative of this stakeholder sector, but I also held multiple other informal conversations while in the field. I also spoke with several university faculty who have extensive experience in the business and economic sector. Finally, I pull from some case studies found in the literature.

My formal interview was with an informant who works as an advisor for the human resource (HR) function of various companies in Thailand. They have 25 years of HR experience in various positions, including as a full-time employee with MNCs and in the real estate industry in Thailand. The stakeholder believed that HE has a purpose to “get a high-level job.”¹⁷⁵ The stakeholder also said, “But in my own opinion, HE makes us improve ourselves in thinking and working, and in relationships with other persons.”¹⁷⁶

During the interview, two main interests related to displaced student employability after graduation emerged. The informant said from a business perspective, “Today, you need two criteria to be able to work in Thailand. The first is the legal status.” For me, if they can break down some of the laws, I think Thailand has some opportunity.” The interviewee acknowledged that “some people’s skills may be higher than Thai people.” However, the current laws prevent businesses from providing employment

¹⁷⁵ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

opportunities. Before someone can legally work at a company in Thailand, they need someone to sign for them.¹⁷⁷ Hiring students without documentation causes the employer to conduct more paperwork.¹⁷⁸

Another interest was that education for displaced students should focus on “wider education, not higher.” The interviewee provided examples of what they classify as “wider education” including knowledge of copyright laws and policies, being a content creator, videography and video editing skills, IT, graphic design, AI, presentation skills, coding, social media marketing, and building a YouTube presence. Companies in Thailand are hiring people with these skills. For example, the interviewee stated they know companies hiring people from Sri Lanka and Pakistan with strong coding skills. The informant said that businesses might be interested in sponsoring students to pursue HE if they went into these types of programs and developed these skills. “We need it.” Education can “create a very good opportunity for them.” They also said soft skills are desirable, such as presenting and building a platform on YouTube. “With skills like this, they can get a job.”¹⁷⁹

Other industries in the Thai economic sector need employees, including the hospitality and tourism industry, mechanics field (including automotive maintenance), and greentech. There will also be a large future need for service and care for the aging population.¹⁸⁰ Another business interest is rooted in a company’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).¹⁸¹ Companies with large CSR reserves have reached out to vocational schools because they want to support migrant students.¹⁸²

The interviewed representative of a human resources consulting company said businesses in Thailand have a strong interest in hiring multilingual employees. English skills are also viewed as highly valuable, and the stakeholder said, “Their English skills might be better than Thai people.” In addition to speaking English, a strong interest was expressed in students needing to be able to speak Thai if they want to be employable.¹⁸³ This sentiment of multilingual capabilities was expressed by other business professionals during my time in the field. Some professionals feel that large companies, like SGM that do business across Southeast Asia, would be interested in hiring students from a displaced background because they are good candidates for cross-border work and can speak the language.¹⁸⁴ Companies would benefit by increasing the number of employees with these capabilities.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁸² Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁸³ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Phone call with anonymous informant #1, informal interview SG7.Inf.1, with Claire Holba, Thailand, August 13, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Phone call with anonymous informant #1, informal interview SG7.Inf.1, with Claire Holba, Thailand, August 13, 2022.

One interviewee raised several concerns about hiring students from displaced backgrounds after graduating from HE. They said it is difficult to grow in a company position and be promoted in Thailand if you are from Myanmar because of the “mentality of Thai people.” The interviewee said that even if a superior wanted to promote someone from another country like Myanmar, they might not because they would feel that the subordinates would not respect this person as a manager due to their background. “This is not fair, but it is the real world.”¹⁸⁶

Along with discrimination, employment opportunities can be very network-based in Thailand. Recruiters might differentiate candidates during the hiring process based on what university they attended, not necessarily based on their extracurricular involvements.¹⁸⁷ Employment opportunities can stem from a recruiter being an alum of a prospective hire’s school.¹⁸⁸

There were also concerns that students from a displaced or migrant background might not stay in this position long enough to be a worthwhile investment by the company. The informant said there is a fear that hiring workers from other countries, who might go back home, would become an unsustainable source of human resources for employers. “If they can come to Thailand with a work permit and the intention to stay, this can be a win-win situation.”¹⁸⁹ As can be seen from this statement, potential employers at companies in Thailand (SG7) want students from a displaced background to express a commitment to stay at a company for a designated amount of time if the company is going to hire them after graduation.

There is a big interest by Thai companies (and the need) to recruit foreign talent because of Thailand’s aging population and the need for human resources. The informant said that the aging population is a big concern for businesses. They also spoke about the changing desires of the young workforce: “The new generation sees no need to work in employment in the same conditions as five or ten years ago.” The new generation is freelancing or becoming entrepreneurs. The informant said that about fifty percent are going to work for traditional employers. This changing mentality of the graduates combined with the aging population has created a serious employment gap. Many people are switching to alternative methods of income generation, such as being a Grab driver. “They get money faster, quicker this way.”¹⁹⁰ Employers in Thailand might have trouble hiring Thai natives who want to enter

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁸⁷ Phone call with anonymous informant #1, informal interview SG7.Inf.1, with Claire Holba, Thailand, August 13, 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Phone call with anonymous informant #1, informal interview SG7.Inf.1, with Claire Holba, Thailand, August 13, 2022.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁹⁰ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

straightaway into management positions.¹⁹¹ Displaced student youth are resilient and willing to be trained, making them desirable to employers.¹⁹²

The informant who has consulted on the HR functions of various Thai companies referenced a survey they conducted on students graduating from a Thai university to assess their employment preferences. Out of 200 students interviewed, 30% of those interviewed said they wanted to go to traditional employers so they could gain experience and then go run their family business or another business. 70% did not want to go work for traditional employers. They wanted to start their own businesses or freelance or make money through other avenues such as YouTube and social media influence.¹⁹³

The informant said they are strategically trying to recruit long-term employees from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, because of the need. “In the future, maybe 50% (of employees) will need to come from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, etc.” They said 70 to 80 percent of hires at the worker level are from Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia because Thailand does not have willing workers or enough workers. Thai companies are adjusting by building foreign recruitment into their strategic business plan. The informant said, “We recently made a plan to recruit more workers from Myanmar” to address the skilled-labor gap.

There was also an interest in developing university-industry linkages through programs specifically for displaced students. According to the interviewee, no such programs exist, but they shared an example of an initiative that might serve as a model: the interviewee had previously worked on a project developing an economic university for Thai workers to enter the automotive industry. The interviewee said Thailand should have a program like this for displaced students in the future to address industry and labor needs. They suggested a program with management courses as “Thai people are not interested in doing this with even highly skilled workers.”¹⁹⁴

The business sector has already supported “corporate universities” in areas such as management: the Panyapiwat Institute of Management (PIM) was founded by CP All Public Company, formed by “Thailand’s largest business conglomerate, the Charoen Pokphand Group.”¹⁹⁵ Another example of corporate investment in Thai higher education that could meet the interests of displaced students wanting to go into IT is the Vidyasirimedhi Institute of Science and Technology (VISTEC), which was created by the PTT-Group to promote research and development in various science fields.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁹² Phone call with anonymous informant #3, informal interview SG7.Inf.12 with Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022.

¹⁹³ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

¹⁹⁵ Crocco, Oliver S. 2018. “Thai Higher Education: Privatization and Massification | SpringerLink.” SpringerLink. Springer Singapore. 2018. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-7857-6_9.

¹⁹⁶ Crocco, Oliver S. 2018. “Thai Higher Education: Privatization and Massification | SpringerLink.” SpringerLink. Springer Singapore. 2018. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-7857-6_9.

In addition to the aforementioned interests, businesses in Thailand have demonstrated their general support for displaced student education. While mostly targeted at the primary and secondary levels, it is worthwhile highlighting the interests of local businesses in supporting education. In Samut Sakhon near Bangkok, an area that largely depends on migrant workers in the fishing industry, a local company built the Child Preparatory Centre inside Wat Srisutham school, with 202 migrant students mostly of the Myanmar Mon ethnic group. MOUs with the private sector company allowed the Labour Protection Network (LPN) to establish three other Child Preparatory Centres at three schools in Samut Sakhon and other parts of Thailand.¹⁹⁷

Another example of business support for migrant and displaced student education is at Wat Pa Pao School in Chiang Mai where many Shan students attend. The school has a partnership with a local company that offers internships to students.¹⁹⁸ Pracharath School has received support from various corporations such as CP Group and True Corporation and partners with local businesses to conduct skills training for students. Banks have taught financial literacy.¹⁹⁹ In their report, UNICEF Thailand says that partnerships with local businesses and NGOs are necessary to maximize opportunities for students.²⁰⁰

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 7 (SG7) have several key interests in supporting increased access to higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 6 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 6 (SG6) that were discussed above.

Figure 6 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<p>Stakeholder Group 7: Business and Economic Development Sector</p>	<p>HE for displaced students should focus on "wider skills" such as IT, graphic design, AI, coding, social media marketing, content creation, and video editing. There is a strong demand for these skills.</p>
	<p>Graduates need to have proper documentation/legal status to be employable.</p>
	<p>Multilingual employees are highly valued. Employees with strong English and Thai skills are needed.</p>
	<p>Thai companies fear that graduates, if hired, will not stay with a company and that hiring them will be unsustainable.</p>
	<p>Thai companies need and want to recruit foreign talent to address Thailand's aging population and human resources gap.</p>

¹⁹⁷"Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations." theborderconsortium.org], The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. Page 48-49

¹⁹⁸"Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations." theborderconsortium.org], The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P 37

¹⁹⁹"Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations." theborderconsortium.org], The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P44

²⁰⁰"Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations." theborderconsortium.org], The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P 34

Stakeholder Group 8: State and National Government Representatives

Stakeholder Group 8 included state and national government representatives. The obvious national government entity to be accounted for as a primary stakeholder is the Royal Thai Government. Discerning the legitimate national government of Myanmar poses a more complex situation. In February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power from the democratically elected government in a coup d'état. Following the coup, the military asserted its governing authority over Myanmar by establishing the State Authority Council (SAC). The democratically elected government has also claimed legitimacy and established a government in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG receives varying levels of recognition not only by other nations but by the diverse peoples of Myanmar and various internal state governing bodies and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). Myanmar is divided into seven ethnic states and seven districts. For the purposes of my research, I focused on state government leadership bordering Thailand, and I was able to interview representatives from Karen State and Karenni State.

One of the shared interests was in using HE to develop human resources to come back and serve the community. There is a big need for local human resources with the cultural context, and “local people have the knowledge, the experience, to effectively work with the local community.”²⁰¹ Government leaders have seen many volunteers come over the years, which is desirable and useful, but not necessarily sustainable as a volunteer “understandably might leave after some time to further their own studies, personal lives, have families, etc.”²⁰² The exchange is viewed as good, but there is a need to balance local volunteers with outside volunteers.

Representatives from SG8 also expressed the understanding that giving back to the community does not always mean a student returns to live in the community. One informant said there are graduates who have given back in a myriad of other ways, such as through donations, coming back and volunteering, conducting training, and offering their networks.²⁰³ A representative from the Karenni government expressed a belief that the purpose of HE is “to equip students with the knowledge and skills to improve our human resources to improve our community.”²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰² Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰³ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰⁴ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

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Interviewees held beliefs about what types of degrees students should study that would be most useful to the community. While informants were generally understanding and supportive of students following their dreams, certain fields are deemed important and a priority, including community management, social work/social sciences, public health, and education. An informant said there is a shortage of teachers and that this creates a vicious cycle for the development of institutes of higher education. “It is almost a cycle, in order to build strong programs you need strong teachers, without strong programs how do you create strong teachers?”²⁰⁵ Community management is also viewed as important because they need students with the ability to work with CBOs and community members. The informant emphasized the need for graduates to work with their community both in camps in Thailand and in Karen State.²⁰⁶

There is also the need for forestry, environmental studies, and computer science graduates. The Karen Education and Cultural Department (KECD) is developing programs in these areas to develop human resources to manage the many natural resources in the Karen State. The Karenni Education Department (KnED) currently runs HE programs teaching students about the social sciences, community development, medicine, education, and computer science. “Most graduates work as medics, youth teachers, and in CBOs. This fills the gaps. Even though we are not recognized, we do our best... We need a lot of health workers to treat the patients, we cannot wait until after the conflict to educate because we never know when the situation will be over. So we must do what we can and we need developed staff.”²⁰⁷

A common concern expressed by representatives of ethnic government bodies is the preservation of culture, identity, and pride. One informant said, “For the Karen, education is more than just gaining knowledge, more than a job. It is about preserving culture, our identity.”²⁰⁸

SG8 interviewees also believe HE students should have legal protection during their studies. One representative from the Karen government said, “HE must be matched with protective documentation. We don't need the Thai government to bear the burden, we can provide the funding and the scholarships, we have been doing this. We need them to grant documentation for students to be able to study and travel safely.”²⁰⁹ Adding to this sentiment, another stakeholder said identification is a barrier and can pose challenges to local relationships within Thailand.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰⁶ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰⁷ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²⁰⁸ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁰⁹ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

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If officials also accept this it would be very beneficial to both sides. Even when we come up to the village, we have to be afraid. Identity is a barrier. Even if local Karenni want to accept Karenni from Myanmar they are also afraid of the law and official procedures. But in the case of authorities understanding the need and having a good relationship, it works well. They do not interrupt and interfere with the relationship between Karenni from Myanmar and from Thailand. This needs to be strengthened.²¹⁰

Interviewees stated that HE should lead to increased access to meaningful careers and livelihoods that will allow a graduate to sustain themselves. An informant said they have met with the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of the Interior (MOI), who wanted to “sit down and discuss the situation.” One of the three main recommendations was increased access to livelihoods.²¹¹ One stakeholder said, “Sometimes we see students who graduate from reputable universities who don’t have the opportunity to use their skills.”²¹² NGOs must be attentive to their role in assisting or preventing students from having meaningful positions. The stakeholder said students with degrees have gone to work with NGOs and are given positions below their education level, with limited growth opportunities. “NGOs and international workers should consider empowering them and involve them in the decision-making process to be able to get higher positions...So if an NGO leaves one day, the community can be self-reliant.”²¹³

SG8 informants were concerned that access to HE might lead to a brain drain when educated community members can move overseas because of their education status and networks. An interviewee spoke about how their community has experienced this and shared how professors and professionals, including those who had taught at universities like Rangoon University, were resettled from the refugee camps to overseas.²¹⁴

There is also a strong desire for secondary school education to be recognized and accredited, as a lack of accreditation poses barriers to students going on to HEIs. The KECD has helped establish a Karen GED program and the KnED wants to start one of their own and is already running a pre-GED program. Interviewees also believed that Thai universities should innovate and expand opportunities for students from a displaced background by accounting for the unique barriers and challenges they face during HE. One informant said, “After the pandemic, more universities opened and gave out more free

²¹⁰ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²¹¹ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²¹² Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²¹³ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²¹⁴ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

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courses for students regardless of their political and religious backgrounds. This is a good opportunity and I hope to see more universities consider this education opportunity.”²¹⁵

One interviewee shared that no formal partnerships exist between their government ministry and Thai HEIs, but that several informal agreements do. The informal nature of these relationships poses challenges for the government ministry when supporting their students to attend a Thai HEI because the relationships are unstable. For example, one Burma state education ministry sponsored a master’s student to attend Chiang Mai University (CMU). The student was accepted into CMU by the department and was near completion of her thesis, when the president finally read her admissions documents and said she could not continue and obtain her master’s degree. The department had been welcoming to the student, but the president made the ultimate decision against the department’s will. The interviewee shared how this inconsistency within a university can be devastating to a student and troubling to the community leaders supporting them.

Following the above scenario, there was a discussion between the government education ministry leadership and the university leadership about possibly opening a university branch in Mae Sot, closer to where students live and easier for displaced students from Burma to access. There were concerns that a repeat of the situation would happen if the community sent students to the local university branch. More formalized relationships could create trust and opportunities. Informal connections do exist, however, and the stakeholder has worked over the years with Thai HEIs to send students to Thai HEIs largely through their GED programs, which are recognized.

Through my interviews, people expressed an interest in working cooperatively with the local Thai community and expanding upon current relationships to uplift Thai communities along the border. A large part of this is to develop peaceful relationships. One stakeholder said:

While in Thailand, graduates can help negotiate with Thai officials, build good relationships with local authorities and the community and to have them be welcomed. HE plays a big role to helping maintain a peaceful society since they have an understanding of the situation and can contribute.²¹⁶

Another aspect is the practical one. “Thailand needs a lot of human resources as well, especially in rural areas.” Some of these identified needs were labor, education, and social services. “We share ethnicity, there are Karenni villages on the Thai side of the border. We can help each other a lot more to develop the villages on this side of the border.” An example stems from the high dropout rate of children

²¹⁵ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²¹⁶ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

in rural villages. “It is very common in the villages where we live. In this situation, our students conduct awareness training and social support to local villages. Many rural Thai villages also work in agriculture to generate income. “Migrants and refugees can help because they come from a background like this.”²¹⁷

In summary, representatives from Stakeholder Group 8 (SG8) have several key interests in supporting increased access to a higher education (HE) for displaced students from Burma in Thailand. These interests are tied to their beliefs about the purpose of a HE, the utility of an HE, and the value HE creates. Figure 7 summarizes the interests of Stakeholder Group 8 (SG8) that were discussed above.

Figure 7 Key Interests that were Identified from Interviews

<i>Stakeholder Group 8: State and National Government Representatives</i>	HE develops human resources and graduates should use their degrees to support their community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o This includes physically returning. o This also could include volunteering, offering networks, and donating/sending remittances.
	Certain degrees were considered more of a priority including community management, social work/social sciences, public health, education, environmental sciences, forestry, and computer science/IT.
	HE serves to preserve culture and identity, and foster community and national pride.
	Students should be given legal protection during their studies.
	HE should increase access to meaningful livelihoods.
	There is a fear that HE access might contribute to the “brain drain” of human resources.
	Governments serving the displaced community want to work with Thai HEIs to expand opportunities.
	HE should help grow relationships between governments and communities and allow displaced communities to contribute to their respective community and communities in Thailand.

Other Stakeholder Groups Considered

In addition to the stakeholder groups discussed, three other stakeholder groups are very relevant in the protracted displacement context in Thailand and, therefore, when considering HE access for displaced students from Myanmar.

Stakeholder Group 5 (SG5) is local Thai leadership and includes village and town leaders, employees, city leaders, and district and province leaders. I did not have the chance to interview anyone from SG5 formally, and I would have liked to. I did learn of indications of possible SG5 interest in supporting HE through interviews with other SGs.

I heard of several claims of local Thai leadership and employees wanting to send their students to migrant schools because they viewed the education as strong and wanted their children to learn English, which is taught in most MLCs. A graduated student now working with an NGO said:

²¹⁷ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

In our office, we have one HR who is Thai. She said one police officer told her he wanted to send his children to a refugee camp to study English. He thought refugees were good at English and said, 'I want my children to be able to speak like them.' I heard that four or five months ago. Also, HR approached us. She has two or three daughters who finished high school, and university too, and are still looking for jobs. So she wants her children to study English, IELTS, and show it to companies to get a job.²¹⁸

I also heard about Thai locals wanting to send their children to schools and hire graduates to teach English. "Near here is an agency that works for five Thai high schools in Mae Sot. They have some job vacancies; they need English teachers. So many of our friends who graduated from universities got jobs."²¹⁹

A UNICEF report highlighted how local authorities have worked cooperatively with local NGOs and international agencies to provide "identity documents to eligible students to help broaden opportunities and employment possibilities."²²⁰ The emphasis has largely been on primary and secondary schools, but local leadership's demonstrated willingness to support displaced and migrant student education could be expanded to HE. Some leaders in Mae Hong Song province near the two camps with primarily ethnic Karenni from Myanmar have been understanding and supportive of the refugee communities.²²¹

Another Stakeholder Group is International Migration and Human Rights agencies (SG9) and includes groups like the UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF. In their recent publication, UNICEF Thailand expressed an interest in developing partnerships with local businesses, NGOs, and HEIs, including vocational schools.²²² UNICEF deems such partnerships necessary to "maximize opportunities for students." Ways that these groups could help would be to give career talks, and professional development workshops, and offer scholarships and internship programs that lead to employment opportunities.²²³

The final stakeholder group I identified included international governmental foreign aid institutions (SG10) like USAID, Australian AID, and Japan. One Thai HEI informant said that the

²¹⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

²¹⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

²²⁰ "Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations|." theborderconsortium.org|, The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P 52

²²¹ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²²² "Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations|." theborderconsortium.org|, The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P 52

²²³ "Education Knows No Border: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand." *UNICEF Thailand*, UNICEF Thailand, 2019, "Camp Populations|." theborderconsortium.org|, The Border Consortium, <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023. P 52

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Embassy of Norway had provided scholarships to ethnic minority students from Myanmar and students from various African countries to attend HE.²²⁴

In a stakeholder meeting on September 6, 2022, USAID said that donors are interested in funding scholarships for students in need from Burma. USAID has posted a Request for Information (RFI) for a USAID/Burma Education Scholarship Program that would “support current and future community leaders of Burma, particularly those from vulnerable groups, to gain access to quality HE learning opportunities by offering regional and local scholarships and a variety of higher education opportunities via multi-modalities that strengthen the HE landscape.”²²⁵ USAID in the draft RFI acknowledged that students from Burma face barriers such as “lack of access to documents (e.g., passports and educational transcripts); misplacement or loss of educational documents in transit or on the run; lack of financial resources.”²²⁶ Another example of the interest of foreign aid institutions in supporting displaced student HEI is the Japanese government pledging \$2.1 million USD to support refugee education along the Thai-Myanmar border, recognizing that students are fleeing violence.²²⁷

An anonymous informant from a foreign aid entity said money is not the issue. International funding is readily available from international donors wanting to support displaced students in their HE.²²⁸ The challenge has been that students without passports and documentation need to be granted some sort of leeway by the Royal Thai Government and universities. A special education visa might waive the passport requirement and protect students while they study. The RTG and universities would not have to bear the financial burden.

Chapter 1 Summary

The research points to a collective interest in supporting HE access for displaced students in Thailand. Multiple examples of aligned interests emerged while analyzing the respective interests of each stakeholder group. These included interests that HE should be used to support one’s community,

²²⁴ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

²²⁵“Search Grants | GRANTS.GOV.” *Home* | GRANTS.GOV, <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/search-grants.html?keywords=RFI-EOI-USAID-BURMA-HESP>. Accessed 10 June 2023.

²²⁶“RFI:Draft SOW and Pre-Solicitation Conference_USAID-Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program Activity.” n.d. US Agency for International Development Burma. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://govtribe.com/file/government-file/rfi-draft-sow-and-pre-solicitation-conference-usaid-diversity-and-inclusion-scholarship-program-activity-dot-pdf>.

²²⁷“UNESCO and Japan Announce Education in Emergencies Project for Migrant Children Fleeing Violence along the Thailand-Myanmar Border | Multisectoral Regional Office in Bangkok.” *UNESCO Bangkok*, <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/unesco-japan-announce-education-emergencies-project-migrant-children-fleeing-violence-thailand-myanmar-border>. Accessed 10 June 2023.

²²⁸Informal conversation with anonymous informant from foreign aid institution, in-person interview with Claire Holba. September 2, 2022.

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develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, develop leaders, grow networks and build relationships, and open opportunities for meaningful employment and financial sustainability.

The research also revealed complementary interests, those that did not precisely match but, when put together, can synergize to increase the value to each respective stakeholder. Chapter 2 will include an analysis of these complementary interests.

Chapter 2: Expanding the Value of HE for Displaced Students

Value created by a Higher Education for Displaced Students

Increasing HE opportunities for displaced students is in the collective interest of diverse stakeholders. This chapter will discuss ways in which the HE experiences of displaced students are already creating value within a graduate's life and their surrounding community. I will then look at ways to expand value amongst stakeholders by pursuing complementary interests and implementing policy changes that address the challenges and barriers preventing the full realization of HE's value.

I interviewed sixteen students—thirteen of whom had completed bachelor's degree programs—to understand the value that an HE created after completing their course of study. Nine of these students had completed programs from HEIs accredited within the Thai system. Four attended programs at HEIs run by Burma ethnic institutions. These were non-accredited.

I also interviewed one student currently enrolled in an accredited university in Thailand, and two prospective students seeking entry into an accredited program but had not been accepted yet. One of the prospective students did not have an accredited degree, despite having attended two different junior colleges in two camps in Thailand and completing a certificate program in government administration. The student faced two barriers to studying at an accredited Thai HEI: 1.) no Myanmar ID card or passport that would have allowed the student to apply for an education visa in Thailand and 2.) their secondary school degree was not accredited and therefore, not accepted by Thai universities.

Another prospective student had documentation and completed a GED program along the border but was trying to find an opportunity to study IT. As previously discussed, scholarships are limited for this field of study. Accordingly, the student, with aspirations to study IT to benefit their country, struggled to find funding outside traditional scholarship programs focusing on other types of degrees.

Of the thirteen graduates and one current student I interviewed, most students felt that, overall, their HE program met their expectations but expressed particular challenges they faced and shortcomings of the program. HE is undoubtedly creating value as perceived by students, but there are also significant gaps to be filled for them to attain their goals and fulfill expectations fully.

In addition to the responses of students, I also drew from the responses of other stakeholder groups to surmise the value-add of an HE. Other stakeholders, such as MLC leaders, Thai HEI professors, and NGOs, gave examples of the impact HE has on the students they support and statistics of

what their graduates go on to do. I highlight five key value areas before discussing some of the surmountable challenges that must be addressed to capitalize on HE's value potential.

Value: Students use their degree to serve the community on both sides of the border

Several informants from SG6 shared that the majority of their students who graduate serve their community in some capacity. One organization, an MLC that provides a GED program for students to be able to enter a university, said, "Most of our students who graduate from university go back to their community and work in organizations."²²⁹ School leadership says some of their graduates have already created a significant change in their community through actions like building schools and donating. One in every three graduates of this MLC is estimated to be in Thailand working, and many of the graduates return to the Mae Sot area. Students who completed the college preparatory program and secured scholarships through an organization called Prospect Burma, often return as NGO workers.²³⁰

One director of a human rights master's program said about one-third of graduates go into academia, becoming lecturers and teachers in developing countries. Another third will go into CSOs and NGOs. The director relayed about ten percent will be running a shop, their own business, or something else independently, noting, "They still have the knowledge of Human Rights."

Students are contributing in ways that benefit not only their respective ethnic communities but also the local Thai communities. One graduate spoke about an agency working for Thai high schools in the Mae Sot area that recruited graduates to teach English.²³¹ Value extends beyond just the Thai side of the border as graduates have built learning centers in Myanmar and created teams to help underserved students such as those with special needs and learning disabilities. For those who do not physically return to Myanmar, the remittances they send benefit their families and community.²³²

Another organization that funds university scholarships said they had conducted surveys on post-graduation students who return to their community. The majority are working in NGOs and human rights education.²³³

SG8 stakeholders echoed the value that graduates create in their community, regardless of whether they are from an accredited or non-accredited HEI. "Our community relies on our own

²²⁹ Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

²³⁰ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 31, 2022.

²³¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.10, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

²³² Interview with leaders of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.4, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, September 1, 2022.

²³³ Interview with NGO representative, interview SG6.4, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 31, 2022.

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graduates, in all aspects and departments. We cannot get human resources from outside to come into our remote area. 95% of our graduates return to our community to work in different departments.”²³⁴

Many of the leadership from different ethnic communities from Burma, including education personnel, NGO and CBO workers, and government personnel I spoke to, are examples of getting an HE and returning to serve the community. Some pursued HE in India, others in the United States, where they stayed for a while before eventually returning.

Of the 13 students I interviewed who had graduated from a bachelor’s level program, 13 worked or had recently worked (before continuing their studies) as teachers in a Burma ethnic government ministry or NGO. One of these students worked in Bangkok at a Thai foundation serving persons with special needs and disabilities.

Several students, primarily those who finished bachelor programs that were not internationally accredited, continue their studies through specialized master’s and certificate programs to further their knowledge and skills and secure jobs in their desired fields. They possess strong intentions to serve their Burma community.

Students’ post-graduation journeys are as winding as their journeys to get to an HE program, but one consistency is the commitment to use their degree to do good and to help others. The story of two graduates who started a learning center provides a compelling example. After graduating, the two students returned to Burma to create a center where students could study and receive help to apply for academic programs in the U.S. They partnered with a U.S. embassy program, the Myanmar Youth Leadership Program. The learning center also helped students to study in Yangon, which was inaccessible to many students because of the costs. The learning center implemented an installment payment plan, assisting the students to be able to overcome the financial barriers to accessing continuing education.²³⁵ These two graduates are now back in Thailand. One works at a CBO developing the capacity of migrant teachers to provide quality education for displaced students from Myanmar and the other works at a large INGO supporting and protecting youth. Their story exemplifies the cross-border nature of service and work after graduating from an HE program.

Value: HE helps transform a communities’ mindset and creates vision for what is possible

One SG1 informant’s post-graduation work helped to expand the community's view of possibilities for their children. “My tribe, they live in a hilly region, most end up getting married,

²³⁴ Interview with Karenni government representative, interview SG8.2, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 18, 2022

²³⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

working in their betal plantation after they finish middle school. After I finished my degree, I went back to my hometown, and started [name left out for confidentiality purposes] learning center.” The graduate relayed that community acceptance did not come easy at first, but equipped with the skills and knowledge, they built a trusted program in the community.

An SG2 stakeholder said graduates are helping to increase familial investment. “They see our students are active, they want to send their kids.” “Active” has a special meaning within their cultural context and is used to describe highly engaged students.²³⁶ By seeing students from their community obtain a college degree and return with the confidence, skills, determination, and energy to create social impact, they positively influence the community. More parents want to send their children to school, and community pride grows. Displaced and host-community relations are also nurtured. For example, Thai villagers have expressed the desire to send their children to some MLCs and recruit MLC graduates as teachers in Thai public schools. Another example is a Thai community college that has developed a close relationship with one MLC and accepts graduates from this MLC into their program.

By knowing graduates of HE programs, lower-level students see a vision of what is possible, and it motivates them to continue studying in primary and secondary school so that they too, can go on to HE. One graduated student said a big motivation for attending a university was their “eyes being opened by others who were going.”²³⁷ HE helps transform a community’s mindset, whether back in the country of origin or displacement. An education helps inspire students, giving them a vision of what is possible outside their current situation.

Value: HE Helps develop relations and increase tolerance

One graduate spoke about how their HE journey helped increase religious tolerance. Originally a Buddhist, the graduate attended a Christian higher education preparatory school and also studied alongside Muslim students in university. The graduate shared, “With the right mindset, and HE helps provide this, there is increased tolerance.”²³⁸ The interviewee cited an example of increased religious tolerance and inferred that HE nurtures a broader tolerance for people from different backgrounds and beliefs.

As mentioned above, graduates from non-accredited bachelor’s programs have been hired as teachers at local Thai schools because of their strong English schools. Just the presence of camp HE

²³⁶ Interview with leader of a migrant learning center, interview SG2.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 31, 2022.

²³⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²³⁸ Interview with former camp school principal, interview SG2.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 24, 2022.

programs and MLCs has been viewed as beneficial and helped to establish relations between local Thai villagers and displaced community members as one stakeholder testified to:

In our office, we have one HR [human resource employee] who is Thai. She said one police officer told her he wanted to send his children to a refugee camp to study English. He thought refugees were good at English and said, 'I want my children to be able to speak like them.' I heard that four or five months ago. Also, HR approached us. She has two or three daughters who finished highschool, and university too, and are still looking for jobs. So she wants her children to study English, IELTS, and show it to companies to get a job.²³⁹

This testimony demonstrates the mutual value created by HE opportunities incorporating English-language learning that are situated within border communities. Communities along the border may not have access to such education opportunities more commonly found in urban centers, or may not be able to afford them, and find benefit from learning institutions established by displaced communities in their village. This case provides a compelling example of how improving access for displaced students can also improve access for Thai communities.

An SG4 interviewee from a Thai university said that graduates of Thai and other foreign universities have come back and worked in the community. They cited a past project with the Mae Tao Clinic to prevent HIV/AIDs. Students returned to work and supported the project as Migrant Health Workers. "These graduates can be [part of] this jigsaw puzzle," they said, as graduates worked building collaboration between Thai hospitals and the Mae Tao Clinic. "They are very smart, they speak Thai, Burmese, Karenni..." The stakeholder said this is a good case study. "It was very functional. If they have a chance they can bring many benefits."²⁴⁰

Another SG4 informant shared a story about how one of their graduates helped report and break the news story in the Thai media about several stateless boys who were trapped in a cave in northern Thailand and were rescued. The boys were undocumented in Thailand. According to the interviewee, the news story helped to spread their story and generated so much positive publicity that the boys were granted citizenship.

Thai universities have also recognized the strong work ethic and motivation of displaced students and actively recruit them. One MLC said, "Some universities come and visit and ask what the difference is, how are you making such strong students?" Because of the high quality of this education, universities are now seeking students from this program. The interviewee said, "They look for our

²³⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

students.” Accordingly, Chiang Mai University approached this MLC about a possible fee waiver for their students due to their excellent reputation. This MLC has sent students to other universities outside of Thailand including in Hong Kong, Canada, Vietnam, and Bangladesh.

Value: HE helps develop confidence and necessary skills

One student who attended an unaccredited Bachelor’s program said the program helped with language skills.²⁴¹ Students said they felt confident to go back to their communities to teach,²⁴² conduct research,²⁴³ utilize computer skills,²⁴⁴ and felt equipped with 21st century skills.²⁴⁵ Their HE helped them to think critically.²⁴⁶ Another student said of their program, “Their teacher methods are good. Right after we finish we can apply it to our real life. We gain transferable skills.” They started a school after graduation with another graduate: “We were confident to develop our own curriculum.”²⁴⁷

A graduate of a university in Bangkok said in their program, “They really build you to be a pastor to take care of the people.” The school faculty was like a family to them, sharing life together outside of the classroom such as through cooking meals together.²⁴⁸ An Asia Pacific International University (AIU) graduate said their education equipped them to write manuals and that AIU alumni are doing well in high positions.

Value: HE helps students develop some networks but improvement is needed here

One graduate said during their program, they were exposed to various cultures and nationalities. There were 1,500 students, many from Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Philippines, and Myanmar, and also students from China, India, and Sri Lanka.²⁴⁹ Another student said the program overall met their expectations and met their hope of meeting and connecting with students from all experiences.²⁵⁰ A graduate of Christian University in Bangkok said they were able to meet and develop relationships with professors and doctors from Dallas, Texas in the United States, as well as a broader network of religious leadership throughout Thailand.²⁵¹

²⁴¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

²⁴² Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

²⁴³ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

²⁴⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

²⁴⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.7, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 7, 2022.

²⁴⁶ Interview with student, interview SG1.9, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 15, 2022.

²⁴⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.13, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 22, 2023.

²⁴⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

²⁴⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.16, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 30, 2022.

Still, another graduate interviewee said they were exposed to UN and NGO speakers during their academic program.²⁵² However, they expressed insufficient support to connect with these organizations. For example, after the presenters spoke, a student had little time to talk and get contact information. The graduate said this can be especially difficult for a quieter, more reserved student.²⁵³

Challenges faced by students after graduation

University-educated students, equipped to contribute value to their communities and highly motivated to do so, expressed challenges they faced post-graduation. Their challenges reveal limitations within the current system that block fully realizing an HE's value. One of the most prominent challenges graduates faced was underemployment. While accredited HEIs often created opportunities for students to be hired by NGOs, there were still significant barriers for students not having an accredited degree to secure an NGO job. For those who did possess an accredited degree, they faced limitations in choosing what career to pursue.

This barrier included rejection by INGOs who said they lacked prior work experience as recent graduates. More entry-level positions and internships should be created within INGOs. In other job fields, interviewees said their HE did not equip them with important technical skills in high demand in the Thai job market, restricting their employability. One graduate said certain subjects such as design, information sciences, and software would have been useful to study.²⁵⁴

One student working as a freelancer has faced difficulty obtaining a work visa and has had to enroll in a language class at a local school to maintain a student visa to be able to use their degree in Thailand. This student has been exploited by the company that hired them: the company said they would provide a work visa, but is withholding that from the student. Another challenge that students face is discrimination in hiring trends within Thailand. Students felt that because they were from Myanmar, employers treated them differently and did not offer opportunities for growth into management positions.²⁵⁵ This experience was affirmed by my interview with a representative from a human resources consulting firm, who works with businesses across Thailand: they acknowledged that, while not something to be proud of, the reality within Thai companies is that there may be a negative perception of foreign workers from certain countries such as Myanmar, which impacts their promotion to

²⁵² Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵³ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵⁴ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵⁵ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

upper-level management.²⁵⁶ Students also shared that they had faced this same discrimination when interacting with academic counselors in the past: one graduate of a Thai university in Bangkok shared that they had felt that academic advisors treated Thai students better than students like them from Myanmar.²⁵⁷

Language was identified as a barrier while attending Thai Higher Education Institutions. One student shared their experience with their academic advisor and career coach, stating they felt that the language barrier impacted what types of jobs the advisor would share with the student to apply for and their overall interaction.²⁵⁸ One student said their school had a Thai language program, but it was very elementary and impractical. They said a more intensive Thai language program would have been helpful, and would have allowed them to integrate more successfully into the Thai job market.

Students also continue to face financial hardship even after graduation. One student, for example, only received half of a scholarship and they had to come up with the other half. An older couple in the US ended up providing it. The informant's relative, who was living in the US, reached out to the couple at church to connect them, pointing to the importance of wide networks and social capital.²⁵⁹

Financial hardship does not just impact a student's ability to keep studying, but also their social life at school. One graduate said they felt unsatisfied with their social life during university, stating, "I didn't get to enjoy student life as much as I should have." They explained that this was largely due to the small budget provided for cost of living. In Bangkok, a student has to have more money to go out and do social activities because the cost of living is higher as compared to other parts of Thailand, especially those where a student from a displaced background is likely coming from. This graduate stated that they had barely enough to survive, so their social activity was limited. Notably, they shared that international students cannot work legally to support themselves during their education.²⁶⁰

Overall, the biggest issue remains access to documentation that renders a student stateless or prevents them from more fully integrating into Thai society. Graduates explained the limitations this places on their education and their ability to pursue their goals after graduation. "We don't have a country," said one stakeholder who explained the difficulties of applying what they had studied and learned at university in the real world. For example, they studied business. They remarked, "In practicality, you have to be able to register your business and get capital to start a business as well as

²⁵⁶ Interview with Thai business representative, interview SG7.1, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, December 11, 2022.

²⁵⁷ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵⁸ Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Interview with student, interview SG1.2, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 22, 2022.

²⁶⁰ Interview with student, interview SG1.5, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 1, 2022.

have the ability to buy land. We can't because we are stateless people, so we focus on doing what we can and making our life better.”²⁶¹ This example shows how graduates might feel a disconnect between the lessons taught during an academic program and the experiences they face in the real-world after graduation that prevent them from applying this hard-earned knowledge and skills. Another student said their career coach offered them limited networking and interview opportunities simply because they lacked Thai citizenship.²⁶²

Higher education for displaced students in Thailand is creating value for students and their communities, yet certain barriers prevent this value from fully realizing. The next section will examine opportunities to overcome these barriers. By addressing the challenges faced by displaced students pursuing higher education in Thailand, we can pave the way for diverse stakeholders to fully realize the value of an HE for displaced students.

The way to expand value by overcoming barriers is twofold. First, we should look at the complementary interests existing amongst stakeholder groups. By doing so, we can identify “opportunities for collaboration” and “mutually acceptable solutions” to the posed challenges.²⁶³ Secondly, policy solutions can be a driving force within HE programs and institutions, and within the Royal Thai Government as a host government, to overcome existing barriers. I will discuss both complementary interests and policy enhancements in the remaining sections.

Opportunity to Expand Value: Pursue Complementary Interests

Identifying the needs, fears, beliefs, and desires of each stakeholder group (SG) around increasing Higher Education (HE) access for displaced students reveals interests that are complementary to one another. Complementary interests have expansive potential and can create mutual benefit. Below, I discuss some of the most compelling complementary interests that emerged from my analysis, and how these interests might be combined to increase shared value.

²⁶¹ Interview with student, interview SG1.10, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, August 16, 2022.

²⁶² Interview with student, interview SG1.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 18, 2022.

²⁶³ Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

Complementary Interest: HE should be used to serve the community and national interests.

Six out of the seven Stakeholder Groups I conducted formal interviews with explicitly stated that HE plays a vital role in improving the community and in supporting national development interests.

Stakeholders believed students should use their degrees to contribute to these purposes. Even though one informant might have been referring to Thai national interests while another referred to Karen, for example, this is a complementary interest because, at its core, stakeholders have the common goal of developing human resources, leaders, research, infrastructure, education systems, and addressing social issues that will provide benefits on both sides of the Thai-Burma border.

As discussed, stakeholders from the Burma communities residing in Thailand are interested in contributing to the growth and development of communities in Thailand. The protracted nature of displacement from Myanmar has resulted in a fluid definition of home and community. Some may view Thailand as home now and desire to stay permanently. Others may choose to go back to Myanmar when possible. In contrast, others, like the two graduates who started the Learning Center in Myanmar, may move back and forth, contributing to both Myanmar and Thailand throughout the course of their post-graduate journey. Most commonly, there was an emphasis on the borderlands as being a place to which graduates returned to, a region of Thailand with development needs that graduates could help address. The collaborative potential of this interest to expand value across stakeholders is plentiful, so we can look at one example.

79% of Thailand's poor are in rural areas and most often agricultural households.²⁶⁴ Along the Thai-Myanmar border, a predominantly rural region, there is a need for educated human capital, the adoption of technology, and access to critical infrastructure such as roads, to reduce poverty by enhancing rural farming and non-farming livelihoods. Education remains a huge factor in rural communities taking advantage of structural changes and technological advancements—impacting the amount of human capital that can transition to other industries.²⁶⁵ In 2021, significant numbers of farming households had not adopted digital farm applications because they were difficult to understand and use, or lacked mobile and internet access.²⁶⁶ 40% of the total villages in Thailand are unable to access a main road year-round.

²⁶⁴Group, World Bank. 2022. "Rural Thailand Faces the Largest Poverty Challenges with High Income Inequality." World Bank. World Bank Group. October 21, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/21/rural-thailand-faces-the-largest-poverty-challenges-with-high-income-inequality>.

²⁶⁵Group, World Bank. 2022. "Rural Thailand Faces the Largest Poverty Challenges with High Income Inequality." World Bank. World Bank Group. October 21, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/21/rural-thailand-faces-the-largest-poverty-challenges-with-high-income-inequality>. P 33

²⁶⁶Group, World Bank. 2022. "Rural Thailand Faces the Largest Poverty Challenges with High Income Inequality." World Bank. World Bank Group. October 21, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/21/rural-thailand-faces-the-largest-poverty-challenges-with-high-income-inequality>.p 36-37

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Along the Myanmar border, where significant displaced communities reside, Tak province is in the top-five provinces for having the lowest main road access.²⁶⁷

The three issues could be addressed by harnessing the complementary interests of multiple stakeholder groups. One interest of SG1 (Students) was for HE to include more opportunities to pursue degrees in IT, engineering, and business, fields that could directly support the development of critical road infrastructure, and help to expand the use of digital farming applications and technology as mentioned above. SG2 (Myanmar Education Personnel), also expressed this interest in supporting such degrees, adding to the desire for degrees in infrastructure development. Such degrees were also supported by some stakeholders in SG6 (NGOs). Under SG8 (Government Authorities), the Royal Thai Government Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation also talks about the role HE plays in graduates bringing the knowledge gained back to develop their own localities for sustainable peace.²⁶⁸ Their 5-Year Government Action Plan (2023-2027) emphasizes environmentally sustainable development practices and digital innovation.

Multiple stakeholder groups have a strong interest in supporting fields such as education and environmental studies, which would help to address the rural education gap and the growing impacts of climate change on rural livelihoods such as agriculture and tourism. SG4 (Thai Higher Education Institutions) believes HE should promote the internal development of Thailand and improve underdeveloped areas of the country, so they could offer more pathways for displaced students to pursue these degrees and find meaningful employment in the related fields post-graduation. Collaborating to expand HE opportunities in this way would satisfy the collective interest to serve the community and nation.

Complementary Interest: HE should emphasize the Production of Research and Honing Research Skills

Both SG2 (Burma education personnel) and SG4 (Thai Higher Education Institutions) said one focus of HE should be on producing research and developing research skills. Some graduates were working in NGOs and CBOs starting to conduct novel research on social issues. There may be an opportunity for stakeholder groups to support one another to build a robust research culture in Thailand.

Almost every Thai HEI leader I spoke with emphasized research, as did education leaders from Burma's displaced and migrant communities. I was even invited to guest-teach at one Migrant Learning Center, which has a Research Methodology class. Students were attentive, eager, and driven to learn to

²⁶⁷ Group, World Bank. 2022. "Rural Thailand Faces the Largest Poverty Challenges with High Income Inequality." World Bank. World Bank Group. October 21, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/21/rural-thailand-faces-the-largest-poverty-challenges-with-high-income-inequality>. p 40

²⁶⁸ "5-Year Government Action Plan (2023-2027)." n.d. P 10. Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation of the Royal Thai Government. Accessed June 10, 2023. p 12

conduct research to address social issues and other problems. The structure of the Royal Thai Government's Higher Education ministry exemplifies the RTG's strong interest in developing research personnel. The ministry is called the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESRI). In its 5-Year Government Action Plan (2023-2027), the MHESRI has a goal of producing human resources in science and research to enhance the country's competitiveness, with a goal of having 30 full-time research and development "FTE" personnel per 10,000 people by the year 2027.²⁶⁹

These stakeholder groups could pursue their shared interests by collaboratively working together to expand the human capital capable of conducting robust research. This interest also complements stakeholders' interests in developing their community and nation, as research leads to innovation and creative problem-solving. Displaced students are highly motivated and passionately driven to improve conditions in their community, and they understand the given context of the border region. They can be instrumental in expanding Thailand's research scope into the Thai-Myanmar border area, benefitting both sides of the border.

Complementary Interest: Filling the skilled labor gap with diverse talent from displaced communities

SG7, the business and economic development sector, attested to businesses' grave concern with Thailand's aging population and employees' changing workforce mindset. Both factors are causing a human resources shortage and consequently, businesses are building the recruitment of foreign labor into their strategic plans. In Thailand's displaced communities, there is a willing and able-bodied pool of resilient talent who can navigate multiple cultural contexts with a fierce desire to pursue Higher Education and meaningful livelihoods.

This interest includes the need to strengthen university-industry linkages. Thai companies (SG7) need more human capital. Students (SG1) need more support transitioning to jobs after graduation. NGOs (SG6) and Myanmar Education Personnel (SG2) believe HE should lead to more employment opportunities including access to work visas, and that the human potential of displaced students should not go to waste. The Royal Thai Government's current national economic development plan, Thailand 4.0, requires more expansive learning networks and "public-private-community engagement."²⁷⁰ Strengthening university-industry linkages could help to satisfy all of these stakeholder interests while helping to create skilled workers across a variety of fields throughout Thailand.

²⁶⁹ "5-Year Government Action Plan (2023-2027)." n.d. P 10. Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation of the Royal Thai Government. Accessed June 10, 2023.

²⁷⁰ Rethinking Thai higher education for Thailand 4.0. Buasawan, Prompilai, 2017

In addition to the business industry, there is a need for professionals from other fields to enter the workforce in Thailand. Educators and professionals in the social services sector, particularly in rural communities along the border area, are already being recruited from some Migrant Learning Centers to teach languages such as English and Burmese to Thai public schools. The previous example of the Mae Tao Clinic shows the benefits that educated skilled medical personnel bring to communities on both sides of the border. Tourism and the hospitality industry are major economic sectors in Thailand and as one student interested in pursuing a degree in tourism said, “Someday we will need this in Karen State too.” Displaced community leaders have said areas such as forestry and environmental science are important, fields that have been marked as important in Thailand’s sustainable economic development as well.

Complementary Interest: Financial Security

Concerns of students (SG1) and Thai HEIs (SG) about financial security during university can be addressed by the demonstrated interest of NGOs (SG6) and foreign aid bodies (SG10) to fund scholarships. Though financial support should be diversified, possibly through an expansion of student loan availability in Thailand for students holding a special visa, students are finding available funding. Reportedly, the interest and capacity are out there to fund students of a displaced background, but significant barriers such as documentation and secondary school accreditation stand in the way.

Furthermore, ethnic state governments from Myanmar have been finding ways to support students over the years financially. As one government leader said, “We don’t need the Thai government to bear the burden; we can provide the funding and the scholarships. We have been doing this. We need them to grant documentation to be able to study and travel safely.”²⁷¹ Some entities like Zomia and the Pioneer Fund have emerged and created pay-it-forward lending models and Future Income Sharing Agreements to fund HE access. For example, the Pioneer Fund financially supports women to pursue a HE. The women do not repay the “loan” until they start working; they then only pay a certain percentage of their income into the FISA. So far, the default rate has been zero.²⁷²

In summary, the complementary interest to financially support HE can offset other stakeholders’ concerns about bearing the financial burden of students from a displaced background.

²⁷¹ Interview with Karen government representative, interview SG8.1, in-person interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, July 17, 2022

²⁷² Informal conversation with anonymous informant from foundation. Virtual meeting with Claire Holba. December 1, 2022.

Complementary Interest: Diversify Thailand's Higher Education Student Body

Diversifying the student body of Thai Higher Education Institutions can also address multiple concerns across stakeholder groups. Students (SG1) of course desire increased access to HE programs and a wider range of degrees. A conversation with university personnel (SG4) revealed an underlying interest that some university departments may have to diversify their student pool: student body diversity can assist with prestigious accreditation programs that are highly sought after and improve a program's reputation and marketability.

These are just some of the complementary interests that can expand the value of an HE for a displaced student across stakeholder groups. Other complementary interests should be explored from each stakeholder group's respective interests to foster innovation and mutually beneficial arrangements for increasing HE access. Complementary interests alone are not enough to nurture the full value potential of HE. Solutions must also come through policy.

Opportunity to increase value: policy solutions

To adequately address the challenges blocking the full value potential of HE, specific policy solutions should also be devised and implemented. The following section is not intended to be a detailed and comprehensive list of policy solutions but a starting point for future researchers and policy experts to develop comprehensive solutions. To increase the value of HE for displaced students and other stakeholders, Stakeholder Groups could work together to:

- Create a special education visa for those who do not have traditional documentation such as passports and Myanmar ID cards.
- Create a special work visa for graduates of a Thai HE system that allows students to enter the workforce.
- Work with companies to build stronger university-industry linkages so students can network during university and more readily enter the workforce.
- Promote degree programs developing IT, coding, media, content creation, engineering, business, and environmental science skills.
- Universities should employ flexible admissions for students who are displaced. One interviewee from SG4 stated, "If we convince policymakers to see the importance of replacement migration,

and this comes from the top, it can make it easier for universities to see that these students should have more flexible admissions.”²⁷³

- NGOs and INGOs should reassess their recruitment methods and understand that students will not have work experience as recent graduates. They can work to develop stronger university linkages during a student’s degree program so that students can “try out” an organization and develop relevant experience. NGOs and INGOs should also recognize the invaluable insights and knowledge these students bring from their lived experiences.
- Look at potential university-industry linkages, especially for special economic zones and rural communities along the border. One informant said, “Maybe providing education opportunities can be a benefit to businesses in these areas [special economic zones].”²⁷⁴
- Include more intensive Thai language courses at the secondary and university level. Some migrant learning centers (MLCs) and ethnic government entities are emphasizing the need for Thai language skills again after the recent coup in Myanmar, which will likely further prolong the displacement. Graduates argued that Thai language programs offered for Myanmar students at university needed to be more robust and applicable. Thai businesses affirmed that the Thai language is vital for employability. Improving primary education access to Thai language study is also important.
- Consider replacement migration in policy discussions to address skilled labor shortages. One informant from SG4 shared that the discussion of replacement migration can often target the importation of skilled labor. They are trying to convince policymakers to consider replacement migration and incorporate migrant communities in Thailand’s national goals and needs.
- Establish a bridge program within the Thai HE system, perhaps within community colleges, that a student lacking a secondary school accreditation attends for one year before transferring to a university. Students face the barrier of lacking accredited secondary school diplomas, so bridge programs could be helpful and should be done in partnership with displaced community education leaders and programs.

²⁷³ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

²⁷⁴ Interview with Thai Higher Education Institution representative, interview SG4.3, virtual interview by Claire Holba, Thailand, November 28, 2022.

Conclusion: Future Implications and Final Reflections

My research shows in Thailand, diverse stakeholders have a collective interest in increasing and improving higher education (HE) opportunities for displaced students. Identifying this collective interest is important to building a case for expanding HE opportunities for displaced students. The many civil society groups, cultural communities, NGOs, government agencies, and other stakeholder groups can work together to provide innovative solutions to protracted conflict and displacement through Higher Education pathways. I found multiple examples of aligned interests between stakeholders while analyzing the respective interests of each stakeholder group. My research also revealed complementary interests, those that did not exactly match but, when combined, can increase the value to each respective stakeholder.

I also found evidence of how HE access for displaced students creates value for the student, their community, and Thai society as a host country. Yet, certain barriers prevent this value from being fully realized and should be addressed. The way to expand value by overcoming barriers is twofold. First, we should look at the complementary interests existing amongst stakeholder groups. By doing so, we can identify “opportunities for collaboration” and “mutually acceptable solutions” to the posed challenges.²⁷⁵ Secondly, policy solutions can be a driving force within HE programs and institutions, and within the Royal Thai Government as a host government, to overcome existing barriers.

Although this thesis focused specifically on Burma communities living in Thailand in a protracted displacement situation, I believe my research findings can be adapted to the experiences of other displaced communities in Thailand. By giving voice to the aligned and complementary interests of the displaced community, host community, and third-party stakeholders alike, I hope to have built a compelling case for implementing policy changes in Thailand that could expand the value of HE. My policy recommendations are a starting point for idea generation and discussion. Future studies and efforts should engage researchers and Thai policy experts to develop comprehensive solutions.

I also hope my findings can inspire and shape initiatives to improve Higher Education access and experiences for refugee and displaced students globally. Forming solutions to global displacement is complex, and the current refugee protection regime falls far short of enacting sustainable solutions to

²⁷⁵Moore, Christopher W. 1986. *The Mediation Process*. Jossey-Bass.

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protracted conflict and displacement that go beyond meeting basic needs. I chose an interest-based approach to understand interest groups' root beliefs and needs. I believe this approach to complex challenges is how we will collectively find solutions and effectuate positive change for global displacement challenges.

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Appendix A: Table of Formal Interviews

Stakeholder Group	Interview Identifier	Date	Mode of Interview	Description
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.1	7/18/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.2	7/18/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.3	7/22/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.4	7/24/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.5	8/1/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.6	8/2/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.7	8/7/2022	In-person	currently enrolled in accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.8	8/15/2022	In-person	graduated; non-accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.9	8/15/2022	In-person	graduated; non-accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.10	8/16/2022	In-person	graduated; non-accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.11	8/21/2022	In-person	prospective Higher Education student who had completed a GED program
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.12	8/21/2022	In-person	graduated; non-accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.13	8/23/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.14	8/23/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.15	8/25/2022	In-person	prospective Higher Education student
SG1: Students (current and graduated)	SG1.16	8/30/2022	In-person	graduated student; accredited Higher Education Institution
SG2: Education personnel-Displaced Communities from Burma	SG2.1	7/24/2022	In-person	Former principal of a school in a camp
SG2: Education personnel-Displaced Communities from Burma	SG2.2	7/25/2022	In-person	representative from an ethnic education institution which operates the education system in some camps
SG2: Education personnel-Displaced Communities from Burma	SG2.3	7/31/2022	In-person	Higher Education Director of a Migrant Learning Center (MLC) with Higher Education programs

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SG2: Education personnel- Displaced Communities from Burma	SG2.4	9/1/2022	Virtual	Interview with two representatives from a Migrant Learning Center (MLC) offering Higher Education preparatory programs
SG3: Leadership from displaced communities from Burma (in Thailand and Burma/Myanmar)	SG3.1	1/12/2023	Virtual	Representative from a women's organization serving one of the ethnic communities from Myanmar in Myanmar and Thailand
SG4: Thai Education institutions, entities and personnel	SG4.1	8/8/2022	In-person	Dean of a graduate program at a Thai University and Professor in engineering
SG4: Thai Education institutions, entities and personnel	SG4.2	9/21/2022	Virtual	President of a religiously affiliated university accredited in Thailand
SG4: Thai Education institutions, entities and personnel	SG4.3	11/28/2022	Virtual	Professor of population and social sciences at a Thai University
SG4: Thai Education institutions, entities and personnel	SG4.4	12/5/2022	Virtual	Director and Professor in human rights and peace development at a Thai University
SG4: Thai Education institutions, entities and personnel	SG4.5	12/12/2022	In-person	Director and Professor in international development and international relations at a Thai University
SG6: NGOs	SG6.1	8/2/2022	In-person	representative from a foundation with higher education preparatory programs and vocational training
SG6: NGOs	SG6.2	8/5/2022	In-person	representative from NGO serving marginalized communities throughout Thailand
SG6: NGOs	SG6.3	8/30/2022	In-person	representative from a Thai foundation serving persons with disabilities
SG6: NGOs	SG6.4	8/31/2022	Virtual	representative from NGO providing scholarships to higher education institutions
SG6: NGOs	SG6.5	9/1/2022	In-person	representative from INGO focusing primarily on education for refugees
SG7: Business and Economic Development Sector Personnel	SG7.1	8/8/2022	Virtual	Human Resources consultant
SG8: State and National Government Representatives	SG8.1	7/17/2022	In-person	Representative from a state government in Burma
SG8: State and National Government Representatives	SG8.2	8/17/2022	Virtual	Representative from a state government in Burma

Appendix B: Resources to understand the history of conflict in Burma

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