Emerging from adversity:
Spring Universities in post-coup Myanmar

Marie Lall, IOE-UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London
m.lall@ucl.ac.uk

Min Aung Mann, Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University
aeroaungmann@gmail.com

Licia Proserpio, Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna
licia.proserpio@unibo.it

Abstract

Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, 'Spring Universities' have emerged as online educational platforms, offering higher education opportunities to a generation of students who have lost the benefits of the previous decade of reforms (2011-2021). Using qualitative data, this article analyses three student-led institutions: the Burma Academy (BA), Spring University Myanmar (SUM), and Irrawaddy Law School (ILS). Despite facing numerous adversities, these institutions demonstrate remarkable flexibility through innovative teaching methods, bottom-up research initiatives, horizontal management structures and the exploration of alternative educational pathways. This ensures both the continuity of learning and support for the ongoing Spring Revolution. The dedication of founders and educators highlights how students can serve as effective agents of change in times of crisis. These Spring Universities not only address immediate challenges but also lay the groundwork for Myanmar's long-term social justice and political reform.

Key Words

Myanmar/Burma, Spring Revolution, higher education, student-led education

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Introduction

The 2021 coup came as a moral shock to much of Myanmar's population, and the response ignited a sustained and extraordinary resistance movement branded as 'the Spring Revolution' (Proserpio, 2025; Jordt, *et al*., 2021; Egreteau, 2023). In response to the coup, students and faculty associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) established online educational institutions ('Spring Universities').

This paper examines the activities of three student-led institutions: the Burma Academy (BA), Spring University Myanmar (SUM), and Irrawaddy Law School (ILS)[1]. Qualitative data were gathered first as part of a wider needs assessment funded by a EU programme for Myanmar students in February 2023, with a follow-up conducted in November 2023 (the total number of respondents was 30). In October 2024, structured interview questions[2] were sent to each institution; seven founders returned their answers in written form. Follow-up questions were sent via Signal to respondents. The data were analysed to provide insights into founders'

1 These institutions are not the only ones established in post-coup Myanmar. Additional insights into the evolving higher education landscape can be found in the works of Salem-Gervais *et al*. (2024) and Proserpio (2025). This article, however, specifically focuses on student-led institutions.

2 The questions focused on the following areas: the backgrounds of the university founders and how they acquired the expertise necessary to run their institutions; the motivations behind establishing and managing the institutions; the decision-making processes regarding teaching and research (including specific examples); the management structures of the higher education institutions; how the founders perceive their institutions as distinct from 'regular' universities; the connection between the institutions and the Spring Revolution.

motivations and experiences in establishing and managing these educational entities. The educational framework of these institutions appears, from the data analysis, to stem from four principles:

1. A balance between equipping students with job market skills and the tools to understand contemporary social issues.
2. Promotion of a bottom-up research culture: a strong focus on action-research practices and community-based research.
3. Fostering the social role of universities as spaces to debate contemporary issues such as a federalist Myanmar, community-building, and peacekeeping.
4. New horizontal (i.e., less-hierarchical) management models for higher education institutions (HEIs) supported by technology.

The article details each of these before concluding that they represent some of the most transformative developments in Myanmar's modern history and contribute meaningfully to the global discourse on higher education (HE) in conflict settings.

Students as radical agents of change in Myanmar

Historically, students have played a crucial role as agents of change within HE since the establishment of universities in the medieval period. Students' unique social positioning, often characterised as liminal (Turner, 1969), facilitates their mobilisation for collective action aimed at instigating or preventing change. University life serves as a transformative period where students grapple with challenges and opportunities before entering adulthood, characterised by enthusiasm, idealism, and exposure to new ideas (Lipset and Altbach, 1967). Altbach connects this transient aspect of student life to their self-identified role as those who 'speak truth to power' (Altbach, 2007; Altbach, 1989). This notion is particularly salient in post-colonial contexts, where students are often perceived as 'spokespersons for the broader population' and the 'conscience of society' (Altbach, 2007). In Myanmar, students have protested for decades on social and economic – as well as educational – issues (Metro, 2017). Student activism has been part of Myanmar's political scene since independence, but tight controls meant that hardly any protests took place between 1990 and 2011. At the beginning of the decade of reforms (2011-2021), student organisations were able to re-organise 'overground' after decades of 'underground' activities. The decade of reform was an unprecedented moment of transformation, with better educational opportunities, political liberalisation, rapid digital development, and expanding spaces for critical thinking and freedom of speech (Lall, 2021). While the reform period yielded significant positive developments, ethnic conflicts continued to affect large segments of the country, and access to quality education remained uneven, particularly in rural areas (Howson and Lall, 2019). Additionally, conservative elements within Myanmar society resisted some of the more progressive changes, creating a complex landscape for students and activists to navigate (Proserpio, 2025; Lall, 2016).

During the decade, student organisations carried out mostly non-contentious activities – advocating for university funding and inclusive governance – focused on the idea that education should support the social transformation of Myanmar, often expressed with the terminology of resistance (Proserpio, 2025). Higgins and Lopes Cardozo argue that the Myanmar authorities continued to regard student activists as threats to security and stability, framing them as 'subversive of social and national order, needing containment through monitoring, surveillance and regulation' (Higgins and Lopes Cardozo, 2019, pp.196-197). Two key examples are how the Thein Sein government handled the 2015 student organisation-led wave of protests against the National Education Law (Metro, 2017) and the 2020 protests against the University of Yangon centenary under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government. Under both governments, student activists faced a number of challenges: the top-down creation of new student unions to weaken existing ones (especially historical ones) and excluding graduated students from joining student unions (thereby breaking the intergenerational bond among student activists that is key to sustaining mobilisation in authoritarian countries).

In 2020, student activism was seen as disruptive to the reform process; criticism of the NLD government was unwelcome. Interestingly, in the February 2021 turn of events, these same 'unwelcome' activists were among the first to take to the streets to demand State Counsellor

Aung San Suu Kyi be released from house arrest, sparking the Spring Revolution. In light of the recent conflict, the historical role of students as agents of change has evolved into an unprecedented phenomenon. Students are now leading new HE initiatives that, as this article will demonstrate, have a transformative impact.

The educational framework of the Spring Universities

Objectives and motivation of the founders

BA, ILS and SUM were all conceptualised in 2021. ILS and SUM were officially established in May 2021, BA in March 2022. Most of the faculty are CDM teachers and professors (some courses are taught by foreign academics); the founders are all CDM students. The interruption of studies inside Myanmar – a motivation for creating these universities – was not due to the closure of HEIs (as in the 1980s and 1990s); rather, students boycotted junta-controlled institutions. (Other students had to flee the country, and their universities, for fear of arrest – and worse.) The recognition of education's critical role prompted students to create their own institutions to provide educational options for all those affected by the coup (Soe San, 2021):

> 'Our goal is to address the current educational needs of students. In the future, depending on the political situation, we plan to become a full university.' (BA)

> 'SUM was established with a clear mandate: to provide interim education and support the CDM. While all our students and teachers are united by this cause, we are not a frontline political organisation. Our mandate is focused solely on education. […] Additionally, we focus on supporting individual mental health during the revolution, empowering young people to navigate these challenging times and contribute effectively to the movement.' (SUM)

Interviews conducted with the founders showed that their motivation also includes creating a post-revolution future for Myanmar characterised by an inclusive society, peaceful coexistence, and education on fundamental rights, understanding that education is vital for achieving these goals - which also surfaced in another study on higher education in post-coup Myanmar (Spring University Myanmar, 2023). Some plan to continue operating in the post-revolution period, realising that creating such a new society will take time. However when they began, they did not have the experience required to run an HEI, and faced a steep learning curve:

> 'Most of the founders do not have experience in managing educational institutions. Most of us come from student unions, where we worked for student rights and education rights. Now, we have transitioned to management roles as school administrators. We have a background in advocating for student rights and education rights, so we know how to handle student feedback effectively and understand their needs. […] We used to check and balance school administrators, but in our current role, we are the administrators. We are now learning how different this position is.' (BA)

They have learnt from each other:

> 'While we had no prior experience in academic administration, we drew on other administrative experiences. […] We also learn about student affairs from observing how other schools like SUM and BA operate.' (ILS)

Table 1. Growth of BA, ILS and SUM as of September 2024

	Students in 2022	Students in 2024	Faculty in 2022	Faculty in 2024	Courses in 2022	Courses in 2024
BA	15,000	45,000	15	60	30	90
ILS	274	94	9	8	11	4
SUM	8,956	3,292	184	143	267	108

More than three years after the military takeover, the data in Table 1 indicate that all institutions have continued to offer education to a substantial number of students. The enrolment numbers at SUM have decreased, largely due to a shift from short-term courses, offered in the year of the coup, to primarily

long-term courses. Additionally, these institutions are encountering difficulties in sustaining the demands of hybrid classrooms. BA also highlighted challenges in recruiting enough faculty, resulting in existing staff being overwhelmed with heavy workloads. Since the conscription law was enacted in 2024, the student demographic has shifted, with an increasing number of students relocating outside the country. For instance, in a specific SUM diploma programme with 45 students, 27 have relocated to Thailand. However, most students remain inside Myanmar, where ongoing internet shutdowns, conflicts, and security risks pose significant barriers to enrolment. Despite numerous challenges—financial constraints, staff shortages, lack of formal recognition, security concerns, and limited internet access within Myanmar—the Spring Universities display remarkable resilience, which this study finds arises from the four educational visions they share.

1. Setting new teaching and learning priorities

The coup aggravated Myanmar's social problems of poverty and ethnic and religious divisions. The three educational institutions are proactively structuring their curricula to address both the students' need for training and employment (offering courses in IT skills such as programming, video editing, basic principles of accounting, and foreign languages) and the critical challenges Myanmar faces today.

> 'The founders aim to drive social change and promote entrepreneurship. We believe that, in the long term, Myanmar's young people need these skills. We offer education programmes aligned with [the principle of] education as a foundation for societal transformation.' (SUM)

Several courses have a particular focus on inclusion, intersectionality and social justice to support students in their thinking as responsible citizens and empathetic human beings, while also developing survival skills crucial for navigating the ongoing struggles in Myanmar.

> 'The regular courses on our online platform, such as language training and vocational programmes, are well-defined. However, we focus more on human rights and intersectionality, which are highly relevant to the current situation in our country. For example, in the case of the Rohingya genocide, many people, including students, previously supported the perpetrators' side while standing with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Now, they have understood the situation and changed their stance.' (BA)

The fact that the crimes against the Rohingya are part of the curriculum is a shift in how students understand relations between ethnic and religious groups. The Rohingya crisis was not one of the grievances central to student politics during the decade of reform. It is part of the debate in the Spring Revolution, however, and this overall debate is gaining new language linked to human rights and federalism. This is of particular importance to ILS, which promotes inclusion by admitting students from conflict-affected areas, while addressing legal frameworks essential to protecting vulnerable populations:

> 'After the coup, we faced armed conflict and human rights abuses, which highlighted the importance of international human rights education. […] We chose International Humanitarian Law (IHL) because of the ongoing armed conflicts. While IHL is studied at universities, it hasn't been well applied in practice, which is why we introduced courses on IHL alongside the diploma in human rights.' (ILS)

Their vision is to develop a Faculty of Law and support the governance of Myanmar, starting at the State and Regional levels.

> 'If ILS can secure a permanent income, we aim to develop a faculty of law, something Myanmar did not previously have. Myanmar Nway Oo University (MNOU) [an online university founded in 2022 and affiliated with the National Unity Government] has a faculty of law, and since ILS focuses on law, we aspire to follow a similar path. Eventually, we hope to connect with local governments like Karenni and help strengthen their governance mechanisms through our graduates.' (ILS)

2. Fostering a bottom-up research culture

Research skills are fundamental to any academic endeavour. However, in traditional Myanmar universities, they were often not taught.

> 'When we were at universities, we didn't receive proper research training. At ILS, the research programme goes beyond simply teaching how to write a research paper; it focuses on how

to approach research, develop methods, and explore topics like federalism, judicial systems, and constitutions.' (ILS)

All three new HEIs see research as a key part of their mission and have included research training as well as research projects in what they offer. Often these employ action research within communities.

'We haven't done a lot of research yet, but we have conducted small-scale research with students, though not at a publishable level. […] We provide internal research training and small-scale research projects as part of in-house training for volunteers, who are also students. So far, we have completed seven small research projects, focused on the current situation, particularly post-coup. The research interests vary, with some focusing on education, the economy, health, and most showing interest in public service sectors, digital education, and technology.' (BA)

ILS fosters a research culture grounded in action-research principles:

'A research-oriented school is our dream. […] We believe we can create post-coup institutions based on critical thinking and government institutions, and this is the role we are working to fill. […] We offer a six-month certificate course in research methodology. […]The first three months are focused on learning, and the next three months are dedicated to writing a research paper. Teachers and supervisors provide feedback, and the final papers are intended for publication, though none have been published yet.' (ILS)

SUM supports the development of action-research practices through its diploma programmes in human rights and peace studies. This ensures that education remains practical, relevant, and closely tied to Myanmar's socio-political landscape.

3. Fostering the social role of universities

ILS actively engages students in debates around constitutional law, humanitarian law, and transitional justice. These discussions are crucial for understanding the legal frameworks necessary to rebuild a democratic and federal Myanmar. One of the ILS founders explained, 'People may know about federalism, but its application and essence are often unclear.' In fact, the Bamar-dominated state usually perceived federalism as a threat, understanding any form of self-rule as a pathway to secession and the disintegration of the Myanmar union. This understanding in the local context was not entirely inaccurate, as ethnic armed organisations fighting the Myanmar military could demand both federal structures and self-rule as well as independence.

'The subject of federalism is vast, and we originally designed these courses for CDM law students. However, students from other backgrounds have since joined as well. We also offer short courses that provide a basic understanding of law, such as a certificate course on key concepts of constitutional law. The academic approach to federalism covers topics like how it works and different models, such as those in the U.S., Canada, and Malaysia, with teachings categorised by geopolitical context.' (ILS)

The thorny debate around federalism, ethnic rights, and a just peace are interlinked. Although having themselves been taught by Bamar-centric institutions, the founders of the three Spring Universities understand the interdependence between these issues and want a wider Myanmar audience to engage actively with these debates. Consequently, SUM offers courses in peace studies, federalism, and human rights, creating spaces where students can explore these debates:

'One example of notable research is the collaboration between the Spring University Myanmar (SUM) and the Swiss-based Institute of Federalism (IFS), where we jointly offer a Diploma in Federalism and Peace Studies. IFS monitors the students' research as part of this programme. An example of the research conducted within this framework focuses on the federalism landscape in Myanmar. This research not only contributes to academic discussions and is published but is also presented at other workshops, where students are invited by IFS.' (SUM)

The students on this programme learn about federalism through the comparative studies of other countries' experiences, how federalism engages with state-building and governance and implications for Myanmar. Historical ethnic grievances were not resolved by the military's forced integration, leading instead to conflicts across the country; therefore SUM is advocating for a new model, contrasting

'coming together' by choice with 'holding together' by force:

> 'In the context of Myanmar's history, we recognise that "coming together" federalism is a viable option, as reflected in the 1947 Pinlon [Panglong] Agreement [creating the Union of Burma] and the demands that are always asked by ethnic groups. The centralised "holding together" approach imposed by the military has proven ineffective, and this narrative is losing its strength... Federalism, particularly the "coming together" model, is increasingly seen as more acceptable, and, there is broad consensus among various groups, is needed.' (SUM)

This approach is adopted in teaching and research as a foundational principle and addresses the issues through sector- and issue-based studies, such as resource governance, infrastructure development, social and economic identity, and culture.

> 'Our students, who come from diverse backgrounds and possess different skill sets, conduct research on these themes. We do not impose limitations on their federalism research; instead, we provide guidance through supervisors and offer the support they need to develop their work.' (SUM)

4. Leveraging technology for a more horizontal management of HE

By harnessing technology to facilitate education, these institutions enable students to persist in their learning despite formidable challenges such as internet restrictions, political instability, and security threats. As Rinehart and Tyrosvoutis (2023) assert, the educational environments emerging in post-coup Myanmar are 'designed for disruption.' These environments, with decentralised structures, function as complex adaptive systems that promote organisational resilience in teaching and learning. BA uses community centres, implements radio-based education, and partners with platforms such as Microsoft to surmount digital barriers. SUM has developed 'EduLamp' devices, which provide offline access to courses in areas with limited connectivity.

Moving to online teaching has been part of the change process that CDM teachers on these platforms have had to adapt to:

> 'Our teachers come from traditional, face-to-face teaching backgrounds, but with this online school model, they have had to adapt and learn... They receive training and resources through institutions like the National Unity Government [NUG], peer learning, and self-study, thanks to their involvement with the NUG and other institutions.' (ILS)

Technology also facilitates a more horizontal management structure with regular meetings of the founders and international supporters, even at times when people are forced to migrate. All three institutions emphasise their commitment to operating under principles that prioritise the well-being of the organisation, aligning with the values of academic freedom and the collective mission of supporting the Spring Revolution. For instance, SUM has established three distinct boards, each responsible for different facets. The Academic Board, composed primarily of faculty members, is tasked with making decisions related to academic affairs in line with the principles of academic freedom. Meanwhile, the Management Board is responsible for the daily operations, such as credit allocation, transcript issuance, partnerships, Memorandums of Understanding, collaborations with other educational institutions, communication, advocacy, social media engagement, financial management (including tuition fees and grants), and contractual agreements. Finally, the Board of Trustees oversees the institution's core values and its position on revolutionary movements, as well as the sectors it chooses to support.

Discussion and conclusion

These four educational visions described not only shape the pedagogical approaches of the student-led Spring Universities but also contribute to two critical discussions.

The first involves the broader discourse on educational reform within Myanmar's complex political landscape. The founders of all three universities agree that the reforms they lived through were incomplete. Myanmar's educational reforms improved access to quality education but also fostered a new generation of politically conscious, digitally connected, and socially active youth. These reforms empowered students to take an active

role in the ongoing journey toward democracy and social justice in Myanmar because they were better educated, more politically aware, and more socially engaged. Coupled with open forums for debate and discussion, this allowed students to actively engage with the political and social dynamics of their country in ways that had been impossible for their parents' generation.

The journey doesn't end here – all three institutions see their work reaching well beyond the scope of the revolution. Their re-imagining of how education is delivered and what it is supposed to deliver is not limited to what they are offering students now – they envision being the torch bearers of Myanmar's HE system once the resistance has ousted the military's State Administration Council from power. The founders believe the education they offer will further empower the youth who will rebuild the country. Thus, the focus of much of what they offer revolves around the social sciences and engages with the political concepts of federalism, peace, and community building. This generation of students and Gen-Z activists is likely to play a crucial role in shaping the future trajectory of Myanmar; and the NUG and ethnic education providers (who are building networks and alliances to shape federal education policies) will likely shape the future of HE in Myanmar (South *et al*., 2024).

Second, these new HEIs are effectively providing thousands of students with continued educational opportunities while establishing a framework for cooperative institutions. Although they face challenges in achieving the systematic recognition characteristic of international education platforms, this is not their primary concern. Instead, their main objective is to support the resistance of Myanmar's society during wartime, deliver education amidst the crisis, and prepare for the country's post-revolution reconstruction. The active engagement of young people in these transformative initiatives illustrates that even partial democratisation can yield benefits for future generations. It counters fears of fragmentation and balkanisation following the potential collapse of the military regime, demonstrating instead a society aspiring toward democratic values. The resilience and adaptive capacity of these institutions are particularly noteworthy as they confront multifaceted challenges, including financial constraints, technological barriers, and security threats from the ruling junta.

These institutions have exhibited remarkable flexibility through innovative teaching methods, strategic partnerships, and the exploration of alternative educational pathways, ensuring the continuity of learning. This resilience reflects the dedication of founders and educators and underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in safeguarding access to quality education in an increasingly hostile environment. They illustrate how students can serve as effective agents of change in times of need. Collectively, these efforts are cultivating a generation of informed youth equipped with critical thinking skills, research capabilities, and technological expertise essential for contributing to Myanmar's democratic future. These initiatives not only address the immediate crisis but also lay the groundwork for long-term social justice and political reform.

Author bios

Min Aung Mann is Research Fellow at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University.

Professor Marie Lall is Chair of Education and South Asia and has worked on Myanmar for 20 years.

Dr. Licia Proserpio is Research Fellow at the University of Bologna and has published on higher education as resistance and student movements in Myanmar.

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