Education opportunities are scarce in the nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, where more than 140,000 Burmese live after fleeing crackdowns on ethnic minorities by their country’s military. Yet in a makeshift classroom, a group of students are studying hard to obtain university qualifications. Caitlin Ganter spoke to lecturer Duncan MacLaren about working behind the wire.

Ghay Soe has lived in the Mae La refugee camp for four years. As a 20-year old, he was forced to quit university to help support his family when his father died. After working overseas for several years, Ghay Soe was detained on his return to Burma, interrogated, and accused of involvement with anti-government advocates.

“I was subjected to threats and told I would be placed under surveillance,” he said. “My presence back in Burma compromised the safety of my family, and I felt I had to leave for their sake.”

In 2007 Ghay Soe fled to the border camps, where he later met Duncan MacLaren, coordinator of Australian Catholic University’s Refugee Program on the Thai-Burma Border.

He is now one of the 45 students who have graduated from the Program with an internationally recognised Diploma in Liberal Studies.

Duncan MacLaren, coordinator of the Program, said ACU has had a presence in the refugee camps since 2008. Thai authorities have banned Internet access in the camp, so the University has set up a study centre outside of the camp, complete with computers, an Internet connection, and accommodation for the students. All expenses, including books and food, are funded by ACU and charitable donations.

“A lot of the students have suffered severe trauma yet they have a real will to succeed, and every single student is motivated to help their own people,” Duncan said.

“Some have witnessed the murder of family members, experienced sexual abuse, or even been used to detect landmines. Others have endured torture and beatings, or been forced to hide in the jungle to survive.”

“It’s an extremely volatile situation in both Burma and Thailand, and the political situation can always boil into violence, but even with the challenges, the program is incredibly worth it.”

Ghay Soe has now been accepted into the Bachelor of Environmental Science at ACU’s North Sydney Campus.

“The only way my country’s problems can be resolved is from within, when my people unite and prepare to compromise,” he said.

“My plan is to seek change, to make a difference toward my fellow citizens and to pursue an education so that I can play a real part in Burma’s resolutions.”