ACU’s Thai-Burma Program: Engagement with the Myanmar refugee crisis

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Introduction to ACU’s Thai-Burma Program

Introduction video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtvaXe2GYrQ
The East Myanmar-Thailand context

- Myanmar (formerly Burma)
- Approx. 6000 km northwest of Australia
- Population: Approx. 54 million
- At least 135 distinct ethnic groups
- Land borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand
Historical/Political context of the refugee crisis

- Thai-My border refugees since 1984
- Conflict dates back to at least 1949
- Longest running civil war in the world
- Multiple East Myanmar ethnic groups fleeing armed conflict and persecution for three decades: Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan, but others as well
- ‘Slow genocide’ of ethnic minorities
- Human rights violations by Burmese government
- 2011: military-regime to a military-controlled government
Approx. 100,000 refugees in 9 camps in TL

Largest camp: Mae La, c. 36,000 people

Thailand: no national asylum systems, refugees often considered illegal migrants

No organised access to Thai education system

ACU’s operations focused on two border sites

Mae Sot (services massive central East refugee community)

Ranong (services remote, smaller refugee community in southern Thailand)
The TB Program Diploma in Liberal Studies

- Community-embedded tertiary education in protracted refugee contexts
- Operating since 2009
- Diploma in Liberal Studies, in English
- 8 unit Diploma using blended, connected learning delivery
- Opportunities for refugee students to study with ACU domestic students
- Graduates return to the communities and their education has a ‘multiplier effect’, accelerating community development
- Partner organisations: Marist Asia Foundation (MAF), York University (Canada), Palms Australia
- International activities: Connected Learning Consortium (CLCC, UNHCR) and other forums
Program outcomes

- Graduated 252 students from the program
- Nearly 100% student retention rate
- Long-term average gender balance: 52% female
- Graduates employed in NGOs or private sector, in Thailand and Myanmar
- 10-20% of graduates matriculate to further University education
- Post-ACU destination Universities in Hong Kong, Germany, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar and USA
Thai-Burma Program graduates (some examples)

- Gum San Seng (class of 2014)
- Zwe Myat Chan (class of 2019)
- Shwe Zin Thin (pictured) (class of 2016)
Challenges and future

- Delivering education overseas, to refugee learners captive in a military dictatorship
- Outdated and decrepit infrastructure
- Interruptions to learning: military crackdowns, natural disasters
- Matching University systems to the lives of refugee learners
- Refugee repatriation processes
- Expensive education to deliver
- Current cohort 2019-2020: 48 students
- Pilot study of new degree program: Certificate in Teaching in Learning in Ranong (SoE)
Impact through empathy

- The TB Program is the concrete expression of ACU’s commitment to ‘impact through empathy’
- Transformational education for community development in crises contexts
- Only tertiary education opportunity for the 100,000 strong refugee community
- Recognised as exemplar model of refugee education by the UNHCR
- Over 14 years commitment on the Th-My border
- New partnerships with regional organisations to grow and ensure sustainability