

Tertiary Education For Refugees: ACU's Program On The Thai-Burma Border

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“The knowledge I acquired and the Diploma I received from ACU is the key for me to open the door of tertiary education. Tertiary education was just a dream for people like me who were brought up in the refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border. The ACU Diploma I received qualifies me to apply for the Open Universities Australia (OUA) scholarship and now I've been awarded the scholarship and I'm waiting to start studying at OUA for a full degree”.

This note from a female student called Thoo Lei is a real-life testimony to the success of the program of the Australian Catholic University to provide young refugees and migrants from Burma the chance to acquire tertiary education. As Thoo Lei says, it opened doors for her and for the other 122 graduates of the program.

The program began in 2004 as an online pilot offering a Diploma in Business since, at that time, it was one of the few online diplomas offered by ACU. Sixteen students graduated and went on to obtain employment in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) catering for the refugee population along the Thai side of the border with Burma, community-based organisations (CBOs) which are Burmese agencies usually organised along ethnic lines such as the Karen Refugee Committee-Education Entity (KRC-EE) which runs the schools in many of the camps and even UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. Others went on to study at

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universities in Europe, the US, Australia and Thailand as well as qualifying for the group of Australian universities offering online degrees through the OUA. It is a story of the triumph of the spirit over adversity.

Most stories about Burma in the media are now good news pieces about political prisoners being freed, investment flowing in and ceasefires in the civil wars between the old military regime and the various ethnic groups fighting against oppression and for some form of autonomy. The icon of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, is allowed to speak relatively freely and represent her country in international fora. The former general and now civilian President, Thein Sein, has received David Cameron of the UK and President Obama and was honoured by the Gillard government in Australia on a state visit. Burma, now even called the generals' name of Myanmar, is rushing in from the cold and many governments and businesses, keen to reap the benefits of this resource-rich nation, tend to suffer from amnesia over Burma's very recent past.

Over 150,000 refugees languish in the nine camps set up in Thailand with views of the mountains of Burma on the other side of the border. They fled there because their villages were burned down by the military or their sons were forced to act as porters, testing for landmines, for the Burmese soldiers patrolling in areas of insurgency or because of their active opposition to the regime. At least one of our graduates had seen his parents gunned down in front of him and his brother. They were saved by escaping into the jungle. The refugees live in bamboo huts (no permanent fixtures are allowed by the Thai authorities who are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention), have no access to legal work, cannot grow their own crops, are not supposed to leave the camps where some of our students in their twenties were born and are totally dependent on the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), for food and all the essentials. They are robbed of any agency over their own lives.

Education is provided in the camps up to secondary level and, considering the conditions, the education is, in my experience, astonishingly good. Beyond secondary, there are some vocational courses and a college providing 'associate degrees' but no-one recognises them outside the camp.

Since 2008, ACU has taken a community development approach to the program, interviewing refugee leaders and organisations, former students and local NGOs to capture an idea of what kind of program would be useful for the refugee and migrant population – and for the time when they might return home to a democratic and safe Burma. Having listened to the community, ACU has since that time crafted a Diploma in Liberal Studies with eight subjects that are academically rigorous but also useful for the circumstances of this particular cohort. Subjects include English language communication skills, an introduction to international development studies, leadership communication, an introduction to international human rights law and practice, global environmental change, general psychology and fundamentals of management as well as photography to stir up their creative juices.

In Mae Sot, a booming border town because of the Friendship Bridge connecting Thailand with Burma across the Moei River, there are currently thirty-seven students studying for the Diploma, all of whom have a refugee background but a quarter of whom have since started work with NGOs or CBOs. Each course (“unit” in Australian) is taught either online (especially by current partners, Fairfield University, Connecticut, USA and York University, Toronto, Canada) or face-to-face in order to maximise human contact for students who often suffer from trauma after their experiences both in war zones and in the camps. In addition, they have a full-time resident Australian tutor for constant academic English coaching and a local Burmese coordinator to ensure safety and deal with logistics. Accommodation, food, books and computers are provided by ACU.

Since 2011, ACU has worked in partnership with the Marist Fathers in Ranong on the Isthmus of Kra to provide the same Diploma for a mix of refugee and migrant students, all of whom work part-time. Since 2012, ACU has worked with the Bangkok Refugee Centre to offer the course to a small cohort of international refugees stuck in Thailand’s capital city.

The students are taught critical thinking skills which are in total contrast to the rote learning methodology of their Burmese education. In addition, their confidence grows and their living and studying together in a deliberately mixed ethnic cohort is a rich experience in learning about one another’s cultures and augurs well for peace and tolerance among the ethnic groups

in the Burma of the future. All three major faith traditions of Burma are represented – Buddhist, Christian and Muslim - and we aim for a gender balance in the students who first have to sit English tests and then be interviewed to discern their commitment to the common good. In an evaluation of what the students had done after graduation, we discovered that most were working for NGOs or CBOs serving the refugee or migrant population and the others were studying for degrees in universities.

Hannah, a refugee graduate from the program who had been trained as a midwife in Mae La camp, is now studying nursing at Assumption University in Bangkok and wants to serve her own people. Albert, another graduate, is field director of the Karen Human Rights Group which monitors human rights abuses in Burma and publicises those abuses to the wider media and governments. He spoke to the UN Human Rights Council on ongoing abuses at the United Nations in New York in 2012. A current student, Eugene from Mae La refugee camp, speaks with a slight English accent because he learned English in the camp from listening to Stephen Fry's audio books of Harry Potter. He also taught himself the violin and played Vivaldi and Mozart on a borrowed instrument during my last visit in June 2013.

Touching the lives of these bright, young people who have come out of a nightmare existence has also been transformative for staff. One senior Professor, an eminent, internationally renowned human rights lawyer, said that they were the brightest groups of students he has ever taught in universities throughout the world. Others are just entranced by the humanity and humour they display and their hunger for learning. ACU's mission statement talks of its being "guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and for the dignity of all human beings". This program, in its provenance, its execution and its outcomes, is a living witness *par excellence* of the mission becoming reality.

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