

Issues on the higher education access of Myanmar migrants in Thailand

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It is estimated that Thailand has close to 6 million migrant workers, and about 80% of them are from Myanmar. Migrant workers often bring their own family and children with them, so the number of migrant children in Thailand has been on the rise. Migrant children in Thailand are legally guaranteed to receive free public education at preschool and basic education levels. If they don't choose Thai public schools, they usually attend Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) which are run independently (as non-formal schools) by NGOs, philanthropy organizations or migrant communities. Some migrant students attend universities in Thailand, but their data is almost non-existent, to my knowledge, due to the difficulty of having accurate statistics about their education activities.

In this context, this paper first overviews the status of foreign workers in Thailand and the opportunities of migrant children in basic education, and it explores the issues and possibilities of the access of Myanmar migrant children to higher education, based on data collection (survey and interviews) conducted in northern Thailand in 2018-2019.

There are two basic categories for Myanmar migrant students in Thai universities: Those born in Myanmar and those born in Thailand. The former group came to Thailand often with their migrant parents, and the latter was born from Myanmar parents in Thailand. Both groups attend universities after graduating Thai high schools or obtaining general education diplomas through MLCs. Some Myanmar migrant students attend Thai universities making a lot of effort and spending resources, so that they can apply for a Thai citizenship upon graduating from university. The citizenship opens doors to job opportunities and a stable life in Thailand.

MLCs have introduced hybrid (transnational) basic education curricula which enable Myanmar students to be mobile between Thailand and Myanmar under the frequently changing Thai immigration policies. Interviews indicate that such transnational programs would benefit Myanmar students at higher education in the same way.