

Beyond Borders: Navigating the Triple Crisis of Higher Education Access for Migrant Youth

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Abstract

A critical gap exists between aspiration and access for migrant youth on the Thai-Myanmar border. Many migrant youth from Myanmar have completed border-based post-secondary programs but remain unable to progress to accredited tertiary education in Thailand or elsewhere. Myanmar's 2021 military coup and 2024 conscription law created a "triple crisis": disrupted education pathways within Myanmar, elimination of cross-border integration opportunities, and forced displacement of university-age youth to the border. For youth in Mae Sot, Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) provide educational continuity, yet graduates face limited pathways forward. Alternative options like General Education Development (GED) programs offer possibilities but have restricted enrollment capacity, while documentation challenges create additional barriers to university access.

Despite these challenges, documented research examining this demographic's perceptions and experiences of higher education access remains limited. This study addresses this gap by centering migrant youth voices (aged 18-28) alongside education provider perspectives to understand barriers and identify viable solutions grounded in stakeholder experiences.

Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the research integrates survey data from 51 youth with follow-up key informant interviews from 14 youth and 4 education providers. This approach provides both breadth and depth in understanding access challenges. The study applies Tomasevski's "4 As" framework combined with Sen's capability approach to analyze how barriers operate across availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability dimensions.

Findings reveal how this triple crisis intensified pre-existing challenges, creating interconnected obstacles spanning scholarship limitations, documentation barriers, credential recognition, and financial constraints. Despite remarkable resilience, youth possess strong aspirations and capabilities but lack necessary conversion factors to achieve educational functioning.

By amplifying youth perspectives, this study contributes evidence to inform policy development, program design, and advocacy efforts, ensuring future solutions are grounded in the realities, aspirations, and interests of those affected.