

General Educational Development (GED) Study as a Bridge for Higher Education for Myanmar Students at Chiang Mai University

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Abstract

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar displaced 1.4 million people, including 520,000 children, severing educational pathways for countless students. This qualitative study examines the General Educational Development (GED) program as a vital alternative pathway to higher education for displaced Myanmar students at Chiang Mai University (CMU). The GED is vital because it provides access independent of Myanmar's military-controlled education system, is non-discriminatory, is recognized internationally, and is faster and more affordable than alternatives like IGCSE. Using qualitative methods, the research includes 12 in-depth interviews with GED-certified students across five CMU faculties, 3 interviews with GED instructors from Chiang Mai, and classroom observation, with purposive sampling ensuring diversity across geography, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds. Key concepts include educational displacement, alternative credential pathways, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) encompassing embodied, institutionalized, and objectified forms, transnational credential recognition, and the Right to Education framework (Tomaševski, 2001), extended to include Accreditation as a fifth dimension. Findings reveal that students navigated the GED pathway as a multi-stage capital conversion process, with the GED's non-discriminatory design and CMU's formal recognition enabling access impossible through Myanmar's military-controlled system. Students faced three interconnected challenges: academic (content knowledge gaps in mathematics, science, and economics requiring intensive study and peer tutoring), socio-economic (tuition fees annually plus living expenses—addressed through scholarships, part-time work, and family sacrifice), and socio-cultural (language barriers, social isolation, and displacement trauma addressed through peer networks and cultural communities). The GED pathway performs strongest on adaptability and accreditation, weakest on economic accessibility. While the GED functions as an indispensable bridge for displaced students, its effectiveness depends on civil society infrastructure, institutional commitment, and examination integrity—not guaranteed in systems lacking state policy support and bilateral credential frameworks. These findings inform targeted interventions for displaced students and contribute to global evidence on alternative credentials as rights-enabling mechanisms.