Navigating and renegotiating self and purpose from the periphery:

How the ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth are shaped by education in borderlands

Figure 1 Student’s visual response to the question “Think about your life now and think about your life in the future. What do you want to be the same and what do you want to be different?”

Some changes are happening but we still have many changes that need to happy for refugees...it’s not easy for us to go back. I used to think- if Burma is really changing then I will go back. But now I don’t think so. It won’t be easy to move back.
- 24 year old female Chin student

Government is against opinions and expressions. They impose this in the education system. Government and school staff must show authority in Burma. As long as government’s authority isn’t threatened people will continue to say yes in their studies which will result in them saying yes to the government.
- 22 year old male Karenni student

‘I shouldn’t finish my education. The country and the world can’t hear my voice yet.’
- 23 year old female Karen student

Leonard Paul Wenner Boe, GLOBED 2015-17 candidate
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Abstract

Protracted conflicts in Burma have resulted in displacements to the periphery of the country and across the border into Thailand. Youth who live in these borderlands are often in a state of liminality and are simultaneously seeking to develop through education while unintentionally developing their agency and resilience due to frequently changing circumstances. As a result, shifting subjectivities and developing agency inform how they perceive their next steps.

This thesis explores how the multiplicity of aspirations and ambitions of displaced Burmese youth are influenced by the interplay of various actors and factors, including education. As nomadic subjects who have experienced multiple displacements, students undertaking largely unrecognised and non-formal education in borderlands are considering how, when and whether they will return to Burma to support their communities and the peace building process. It seeks to give participants voice by collecting and presenting the narratives of their experiences of displacement and the role of varied cross-border education.

Education can be both a driver and a stabilising influence during displacement and is intractably linked to subjectivity development and, subsequently, the formation of ambitions and aspirations. Education and displacement dialogue with Burmese politics which informs how, where and what students learn in the Burmese government education system. In response, education in borderlands seeks to meet the needs of those on the periphery. In doing so it empowers students through affording them greater dignity through context-sensitive curricula which develop problem solving, critical thinking and relevant, applicable skills.

The thesis identifies how ethno-nationalistic Burmese government education, non-formal education and experiences of displacement give rise to five categories of ambitions and aspirations and the nine factors which influence these. The emergence of tensions within these categories and the nine factors which influence them present implications for those working in the education ecosystem in the borderlands, as well as funders and policy-makers as to how plans for returns and reintegration can be incorporated into their work.
# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1 Introduction**

1.1 Development of research focus and research questions .......................... 8
1.2 Rationale and summary ........................................................................... 11
1.3 Contextual background ........................................................................... 13
   1.3.1 Location and population ................................................................. 13
   1.3.2 Political-military history ................................................................. 14
   1.3.3 Status of Burmese displaced people in borderlands ......................... 15
   1.3.4 Education in borderlands ............................................................... 16
   1.3.5 Life in Mae Sot and next steps ...................................................... 18
1.4 Terms ....................................................................................................... 18
1.5 Positionality ............................................................................................ 21
1.6 Summary .................................................................................................. 22

**Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework**

2.1 Possible Selves, ambitions and aspirations ............................................. 24
2.2 Youth agency .......................................................................................... 27
2.3 Smooth and Striated Space and Nomadic Theory ..................................... 28
2.4 Postcolonial theory and decolonising methodologies ............................... 30
2.5 Grounded Theory ..................................................................................... 31
2.6 Summary Table ......................................................................................... 32

**Chapter 3 Methodology**

3.1 Unit of analysis ......................................................................................... 33
3.2 Sampling ................................................................................................... 34
3.3 Student and school profiles ...................................................................... 34
   3.3.1 Breakdown by schools ..................................................................... 37
3.4 Methods .................................................................................................... 38
   3.4.1 Workshops and questionnaire .......................................................... 39
   3.4.2 Art-based participatory questions and discussions ......................... 40
   3.4.3 Semi-structured interviews (students) ............................................. 43
   3.4.4 Semi-structured interviews (experts and key informants) .......... 46
Chapter 4 Past selves: Previous education and experiences of cross-border displacement

4.1 Frequency of displacement

4.2 Reasons for previous displacements

4.3 Experiences of education: curriculum, quality and teaching style

4.4 Reflections and discussion

Chapter 5 Present Selves: What youth have now

5.1 Education

5.2 Current navigations and decision-making

5.3 Reflections and discussion

Chapter 6 Ideal selves: Ambitions and aspirations of displaced youth and the factors and motivators which influence them

6.1 Nine influencing factors

6.1.1 State and location of family as an influencing factor

6.1.2 Political context, community and conflict as influencing factors

6.1.3 Job availability/accessibility and legal status as influencing factors

6.1.4 Education as an influencing factor

6.1.5 Lived experience as an influencing factor

6.2 Five categories of ambitions and aspirations

6.2.1 Education as an ambition

6.2.2 What job(s) students want to have

6.2.3 Where students want to be over different time periods

6.2.4. Who students want to be with in the future

6.5 How students want to feel

6.3 Reflection and summary

Chapter 7 Steps and gusts; navigating space and identity from present to future

7.1 Tension: Education versus job

7.2 Tension: Undervalued skills and overvalued qualifications
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Tension: Working in the interest of an ethnic group or working in</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the interest of national unity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Politics as a significant gust</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 8 Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1 Implications, conditions and recommendations</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2 Methodological reflections</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3 Theoretical reflections</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4 Limitations</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 1 Introductory note for participating schools</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 2 Questionnaire and information for workshop participants</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 3 Questions for Students and Key Informants</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 4 Complete word graphs relating to current education</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 5 Organisations involved through key informants and experts</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 6 Example of the running order of a workshop</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 7 Examples of managing the research process</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Development of research focus and research questions

Globalisation has profoundly impacted Southeast Asia, accelerating its economic growth, citizens' spending power, and the region’s role in global politics. However, this growth has not been evenly distributed. It is a region of contradictions with acute globalisation overshadowing responsible domestic governance and endogenous industrial development. In many of the region’s capitals, looking up reflects governments' ambitions for economic development, while on street level and at the periphery the costs are visible. Elsewhere across the region, long-running humanitarian crises continue. While policy priorities chime with competition, domestic histories are being forgotten about and repeated.
Global media exacerbates this by allocating the limited airtime reserved for humanitarian crises to the flight and plight of millions in and from the Middle East, with little attention paid to protracted humanitarian, conflict and post-conflict crises. In global political and media discourse, the voices and contexts of those on the periphery, including displaced youth in protracted contexts, are largely ignored.

I chose this research topic when working for the British higher education sector and, indirectly, the UK government, to support UK universities’ international ambitions. In this role, I worked closely with governments and civil servants in emerging economies, including in Southeast Asia, to promote UK universities’ reputations. This meant supporting business and industry links, innovation partnerships and increasing international student recruitment. In this context, there was considerable emphasis on education as a commodity rather than as a social good. Consequently, my work did not involve developing the capacities of those who needed education most.

I approached this research with the desire to understand the role of education in developing capacity and identity in environments where economic, political and social challenges have disrupted traditional education pathways and notions of youth.

My supervisor directed me to the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand where displaced youth study illegally for unrecognised qualifications at non-formal schools. These exist to build capacity and their values and approaches are counter to those of Burmese government education. Their students’ families have been affected by cycles of conflict and alternating dominations of Burmese and ethnic armed groups, which result in surviving in liminal states without stable livelihoods. Although I initially wished only to involve refugee youth, through conversations in the borderlands I grew to appreciate the diversity and previous experiences of Burmese youth, and learnt that non-formal schools did not distinguish between students based on their legal status. Students are bound together by shared experiences of living on the peripheries of two nation-states, and displaced by conflict.

After deciding to research displaced Burmese youth in Mae Sot I had to consider how to consciously act upon my positionality. Drawing on my experience of youth advocacy, I was determined to hand the pen over to participants. By seeking to minimise the impact of my voice, I wanted students to discuss questions which were
important to them and not to disrupt their learning. I hoped to enhance their voice and agency with guidance from local teachers. My anxieties about competence in English language led to the development of visual activities which would form part of my evidence base.

I noted the range of research carried out on the education of displaced or refugee youth (some of which was undertaken in the borderlands), with little success in identifying work which focused on the ambitions and aspirations of in situ youth. For example, Culbertson, Shelly and Constant (2015) discuss the accessibility and quality of education in camps for Syrian refugee youth, Dryden-Peterson (2015) focuses on education in first countries of asylum, Duckworth (2014) discusses the utility of skills among vulnerable adults, Lall and South (2014) focus on ethnic education systems in Burma, Byrne (2013) focuses on the integration of Liberian refugee youth in Ghana, Maclaren (2010) discusses access to tertiary education for Burmese youth and Nawarat (2014) focuses on qualifications recognition of students who attend Migrant Learning Centres in Mae Sot.

My objective was to take a step back to understand the range and diversity of views students held about their futures, while acknowledging their changing identities and priorities against the backdrop of a changing Burma. In growing to better understand the complex education ecosystem, the unique characteristics of the spaces students inhabited and navigated, the diversity of formal and non-formal education students experienced, as well as the history of Burmese people in Mae Sot, I chose the following research question:

**How do experiences of formal and non-formal education interact with the ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth?**

And sub-questions:

*RQ1* What factors, actors and facets of overlapping identities influence ambitions and aspirations and how?

*RQ2* How do displaced Burmese youth describe and visually depict their ambitions and aspirations? What can this tell us about the relationship between identity, education and displacement?

*RQ3* What principles and practices of education in the borderlands are prioritised and how do these shape the ambitions and aspirations of displaced youth?
1.2 Rationale and summary

Policy documents and research note the place of refugees and displaced youth in global education policy (e.g., Dreyden-Peterson 2011). Such accounts and analyses often emphasise access to education without considering the influence it has on the formation of identity, decision-making or the construction of ambitions and aspirations. This is acute when examining how rapidly changing realities result in displaced youth renegotiating identities and priorities. With the average conflict lasting 17 years, millions of childhoods are deprived of stable, quality and recognised education (Themner and Wallensteen 2013). In 2014 there were 32 ongoing conflicts in 26 countries, with 230 million children affected by these (UNICEF 2014).

The Thailand-Myanmar border is affected by decades of conflict and hosts 40,000 youth who attend 140 non-state schools, including in areas of Myanmar which are not returnees' native homelands (Ball and Dim 2016). For 30 years, political change, insecure livelihoods, economic pressures and armed violence have resulted in 3 million displaced Burmese (Ball and Dim 2016). In this context, Burmese youth construct distinctive subjectivities (Zeus 2011) which have not been sufficiently researched. It is important to explore the interrelationships between agency, choice, futures (‘possible selves’), and education because of the potential it has to impact on Myanmar’s peace building efforts and economic development.

Beyond national development, displaced youth and their narratives are under researched and merit increased attention. Rather than viewing youth “either as helpless victims affected by conflict or as[…]inherently violent” (McEvoy-Levy 2001) credible research must view displaced youth as “[facing] all the uncertainties of any adolescent but with few opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and experiences required for a healthy transition into adulthood” (Zeus 2011, 258). It is the alternative education practices in politically active spaces which inform reformulations of “identifications and affiliations associated with home, citizenry, residency and culture” (Maber 2016, 376). As the number of returnees to Burma increases (Jolliffe and South 2015) it is critical to understand the role education and other factors play in influencing how displaced youth exercise agency in deciding how to improve their lives and in facing the choices they need to make. They are a potential asset to
Burma, and are “central to the structural issues of peacebuilding” (McEvoy-Levy 2001).

This thesis will contribute to the field both in its content and through its approach by capturing and analysing the multiplicity of realities, aspirations and ambitions of displaced youth as told and visualised by them.
1.3 Contextual background

This research involved displaced Burmese youth from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds whose identities and priorities are repeatedly reshaped by the nature of the borderlands they inhabit and the education they receive.

Although Burma’s history, the history of the borderlands and the history of education within it are complex, it is efficient to start by focusing on four facets to give findings significance: a brief discussion of the political-military history of Burma, the history of Karen ethnic minority, the status of displaced people in Thailand and an overview of education.

1.3.1 Location and population

This research mainly took place in Mae Sot, the principal town in Thailand's Northwest Tak Province between August 2016 and February 2017. Interviews and observations also took place in Yangon and Hpa-An (capital of Karen State), Burma, and Mae Pa, Thailand. Mae Sot is 7km away from the Friendship Bridge which
connects Burma and Thailand over the Moei River. The river is used for frequent illegal crossings from Burma, often daily for low-wage workers and even students. About 400,000 people live in Mae Sot district, 300,000 of whom are Burmese, according to the Thai Ministry of Health (Expert Interview).

Over the course of Burma’s recent history, 3 million Burmese have been displaced (Burma Link) while 105,000 live across nine refugee camps along the border, the majority of whom are ethnic Karen (79%) and Karenni (10%) (TBC, December, 2014). UNHCR estimates that there are 374,000 internally displaced persons in Burma and 480,000 refugees, including 130,000 in camps (UNHCR).

1.3.2 Political-military history

This research was carried out against a backdrop of nascent political change in Burma which youth in borderlands watch with interest. Through experience or collective memory, Karen and other ethnic minority youth understand that their communities have been at the intersection of armed conflict between the extra-government Tatmadaw and later the Burma Army (Burmese military) and ethnic armed groups pursuing greater autonomy to expand rights for their respective ethnic groups (USAID 2016 and Lang 2002). Students’ families have been the battleground (Lang 2002) between the military seeking to avoid disintegration and a fracturing Myanmar, and ethnic armed groups which seek to protect communities from the military, seek greater autonomy and maintain strong allegiances to their cultural and historical identity (Thawnghmung 2008).

Burma’s post-colonial history has been wrought with politically motivated conflict, in part due to British rule imposing “boundaries modelled in accordance with European political geography” (Lang 2002, 52). Ethnic divisions stemming from pre-independent Burma created by colonisers have laid the groundwork for ongoing conflict; this was the inheritance Burma received from Britain (Lang 2002). The relationship between ethnic groups, including the Karen, is complex. Prior to independence in 1947, Britain used pre-existing tensions to recruit Karen soldiers in conflicts against ethnic Burmans. This lay the foundations for the Karen to fight for the British during the Second World War against the Japanese-sponsored Burma Independence Army (Lang 2002). Thawnghmung (2008) and others reflect that the Karens believed that they would be rewarded with an independent state and other
privileges for their loyalty. However, in 1947 Britain annulled this and allowed country-wide elections to take place in advance of Burma’s independence (Lang 2002).

A desire for increased autonomy if not outright independence for the Karen has continued since, advocated for by the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) which currently control parts of Karen State and surrounding areas with large Karen populations. Over time ceasefires have been negotiated between the military and ethnic armed groups later dissolving, creating a cycle of violence and mass displacement internally and across the Thai-Burma border (Burma Link 2015).

For over fifty years tensions have largely been between the KNU and the authoritarian military rulers of Burma who deprived Burma of democracy. Although elections were held in 1990 and won by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) the military ignored these results and maintained control. A new constitution introduced in 2008 paved the way for fresh democratic elections in 2010 in which the NLD won all but one of the by-election seats. Later, in 2015, the NLD won the first multi-party elections since 1960.

This constitution also cemented the military’s new role in Burma’s democracy. In addition to being allocated 25% of all seats in Burma’s national and local parliaments, the military were given key ministries, including Defence and Border Affairs (Jolliffe and South 2015).

This democratic transition has so far done little to affect the psyches of Karen people living in borderlands whose families still experience land-grabbing by the military and feel under threat from the military whose presence is justified in regions perceived to disrupt the constructed unity of the country (USAID 2016 and Burma Link 2015). Those living in borderlands are waiting to see what the 2015 election will change for them in their places of origin, if at all.

1.3.3 Status of Burmese displaced people in borderlands

Cycles of conflict have led to internal and cross-border displacement, particularly of Karen people who have had to “grapple with an ever more complex patchwork of armed state and non-state actors” (USAID 2016, 3). In 1984 the first temporary
shelters were established on the Thai side of the border for 10,000 Karen refuges who had fled persecution after the military had taken over one of the KNU’s strategic bases (Thawnghmung 2008). Eight more camps have since been established along the border, the majority of which are Karen and Karenni with services, including education, delivered by respective ethnic agencies and governments.

As a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNESCO 2011), Thailand gives displaced people support, principally in the form of “temporary shelters” (refugee camps) through good will rather than legal obligation. Thailand does not recognise the term refugees. Instead “displaced person” (phu opphayop) relates to a specific 1954 regulation which outlines that they are all prima facie illegal immigrants (Lang 2002).

Those who cross the border into Mae Sot from camps or from Burma do so at their own risk. Although some cross legally as migrant workers, many cross illegally and are exploited (Horstmann 2014).

The situation for displaced youth is anomalous with this. Because of its proximity to the border and its large Karen population, diverse advocacy organisations are founded and funded by international donors to strengthen civil society, allowing the space “of exile [...] to reconstitute resources and to re-enter [...] as humanitarians” (Horstmann 2014). Education features as part of this tapestry of NGOs and CSOs and are seen as spaces where youth can develop necessary skills to support transitions in Burma.

1.3.4 Education in borderlands

A range of schools exist in the borderlands. They are distinguished by their funders, curricula, recognition and language of instruction.

Comprehensive education for Burmese children up to 16 is reportedly provided by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) in its adherence to the Education for All goals, in part through supporting some Migrant Learning Centres (Kee 2012) although this is disputed (see Nawarat 2012), and also through allowing Burmese children to be admitted to early years education in public schools (Kee 2012). Migrant schools, which follow a range of curricula (including the Burmese government curriculum), are funded and supported by diverse donors and advocacy organisations (USAID 2016).
They are complemented by a network of non-formal post-secondary (post-10) options. In attending these, students are registered with the RTG and are informally allowed to live within the boundaries of Mae Sot, though this is subject to spontaneous changes.

Ethnic education departments, including the Karen Education Department (KED) and its camp equivalent, the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), play a significant role in education in the borderlands. While camp education is overseen largely by ethnic education departments, religious organisations and NGOs also administer schools (UNESCO 2011). Post-10 schools within camps too are under diverse authorities.

The tacit delegation of authority over education in camps by the RTG to ethnic authorities allows for a deepening of national identity and ethnic values through a distinct approach to history and civics, with priority given to English and minority languages over Burmese. Thawnghmung (2008) writes that camps foster ethno-nationalist sentiments as well as resistance against the Burmese Military.

KED schools operate 31% (837) (WET 2012 presentation, unpublished) of schools in camps and in Karen State alone or in collaboration with the Burmese government. They deliver the same curriculum within Burma (unless they are in collaboration with the government) as in camps and have a role in supporting migrant schools in the borderlands. Neither KRCEE nor KED schools issue certificates which are recognised by the Burmese or Thai governments, although transfer certificates in Burma are in principle accessible for students who return (USAID 2016).

Vocational and academic post-10 schools in borderlands are funded by Thai and international donors and deliver curricula developed in-house, by one of the two curriculum development organisations (Mote Oo and Curriculum Project) in Mae Sot. Most qualifications are not recognised by either the Thai or Burmese governments, except for post-10 schools offering the American General Education Diploma programme.

Non-formal schools adopt student-centred approaches and “[promote] respect for difference and [provide] space for discussion and debate between peers, including the freedom to disagree and contest singular authority” (Maber 2016, 382). By
contrast, Burmese government schools depend on rote and teacher-centred learning to deliver a nationalistic curriculum which excludes ethnic minorities, is taught wholly in Burmese and produced “formulaic, identikit citizens, capable of obediently replicating a predetermined, validated response” (Maber 2016). Although this education is recognised, its lack of quality and context-specific programming are cause for criticism by ethnic minority communities, ethnic governments and donors.

1.3.5 Life in Mae Sot and next steps

Michel de Certeau wrote that “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (de Certeau 1984, 129). The history of Burma, ethnic minorities and the area around the border itself, as well as the education across these spaces, are features which affect how displaced youth consider their next steps. Youth are tied to their ethnic groups and develop conceptions of peace in Burma, while pursuing qualifications which may not be recognised. They live in and amongst a growing Burmese community where advocacy organisations have existed for decades (Kee 2012). They live across a porous border (Jolliffe and South 2015) and have diverse legal statuses. They are in Mae Sot finishing education programmes and considering their next steps. Lang (2002) notes the complexities of life on the border by saying that its politics “involve a multi-layered array of actors and relationships, operating across a variety of political, military and economic dimensions, and occurring at various local, national, regional and transnational levels” (137).

With donor funding moving away from the border as a result of increased democratisation in Burma, the migrant community and youth are thinking about next steps in a more acute context which represents a paradigm shift affecting how students think about the future. With the assumption that political transition will result in increased returns to Burma and preparations for this by UNHCR (2016), donors are pooling their resources into Burma where human rights abuses, land-grabbing (UNESCO 2011) and poor education remain untouched by democratic change.

1.4 Terms

• Burma
Working for IOM Yangon conditioned me to refer to Myanmar rather than Burma. Interacting with the vibrant Burmese community in Mae Sot challenged this. Using ‘Burma’ is in itself an act of resistance to the power and historic role of the military which changed the English ‘Burma’ to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Many on the periphery of Burma do not recognise the legitimacy of previous military rule and therefore don’t acknowledge this change. It was through students and Burmese migrants in borderlands that using “Burma” and “Burmese” became normalised in my language.

- Youth

The target age bracket for participants was 16 to 29. This is a compromise between UN (2007), World Bank (2007) and UNICEF (2009) definitions and recognises the age range within which many are under pressure to make significant choices. Participants are making choices and are evaluating their present selves, which connect their current realities with what they consider to be their ambitions and aspirations (Jolliffe 2015; Zeus 2011).

- Displaced youth

When I learned of conflicts and prolonged disruptions to stability in Southeast Burma which would form the backdrop to this research I appreciated that there would be a diversity of young Burmese living in Mae Sot. Because of its fraught history, changes in rules for migrants, frequent patterns of outbreaks of conflict briefly allayed by peace deals and political changes within Thailand between authoritarian and democratic rule, the diversity of legal status, histories, identities of Burmese living in Mae Sot is broad. Depending on the chronology of students’ or their parents’ migration to Mae Sot, some may live there legally. What students in this research share is not a status but rather comparable experiences of displacement and frequent border crossings as direct and indirect effects of conflict and post-conflict dynamics.

- Post-10 (non-formal) schools

Burma’s pre-university education runs from Pre-School to Standard 10. Elementary school consists of Kindergarten (5-6 years old) to Standard 4 (9-10 years old), middle
school Standard 5 (10-11 years old) to Standard 8 (13-14 years old), and high school Standard 9 (14-15 years old) and 10 (15-16 years old). The schools involved were considered non-formal post-10 because applicants should be able to demonstrate certain capabilities which are expected from students who have been through education for 10 years. In practice, the schools acknowledge that disrupted education and diverse curricula feature in students’ educational history. Post-10 schools in Mae Sot and in Burma are not government funded and cater to students from diverse backgrounds. They form part of the rich fabric of “non-formal education’ (World Education Thailand) which exists in borderlands.

• Borderlands

The porous border between Burma and Thailand which hosts nine refugee camps on the Thai side has its own characteristics, distinct from land further inside each border. This creates different dynamics which influence priorities and movement. Borderlands in this research refers to “zones flanking and straddling international land boundaries” (Rumley and Minghi 1991, 4), in this case, the space which stretches from Mae Sot to Hpa-An and includes refugee camps. This is because the features across spaces in Thailand, Burma and camps have more in common through their “rudimentary socio-political relations…marked by rebelliousness, lawlessness..” (Lang 2002, 78) than spaces within land boundaries. Maber (2016) adds “the nature of borderlands is in their multiple contact points and intersections of influence” (387) and should be viewed as borderlands through their impact on those who are displaced within them. Considering the influential role of international actors in this space also gives rise to this term. Until recently, donors preferred to commit funds to education, service development and humanitarian relief targeting these areas rather than entrusting funds to the authoritarian rulers of Burma (Burma Link 2016).

• Education ecosystem

It became clear in identifying schools that the complicated educational context can be described as an education ecosystem because of how interconnected post-10 schools are in terms of:

- Curricula: many use curricula developed by one of two curriculum development organisations
- Teachers: some of whom have taught at several schools
- Students: many of whom have attended migrant schools or other post-10 schools in the borderlands
- Funding: some schools are funded by or compete for funding from the same donors
- Raison d’être: Similar, mixed student demographics are represented, many of whom have experienced conflict and instability in Burma.
- Similar difficulties: Documentation for students, legal status, qualification recognition.

1.5 Positionality

I am a white European man who had never been to Burma or Thailand. I struggled with the appropriateness of my research focus but decided that it would be preferable to investigate a set of circumstances and behaviours through methods which aimed to amplify endogenous voices.

I was concerned about the impact of being a foreign man on participants and sought to make students comfortable largely through using participatory and peer-led methods.

This research was partly influenced by working as a student leader and advocate during political transitions in the UK between 2010 and 2012. While I would not draw comparisons in the type of political changes, through this experience I grew to appreciate effective processes as well as the importance of capturing voice to empowering those on the periphery to challenge hierarchies. My experience of managing a youth leadership programme for diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in the UK and working with disadvantaged youth in the UK gave me a level of humility which was helpful in approaching this research. In addition, living and working in Yangon introduced me to some cultural norms, aided by 20 hours of Burmese lessons.
1.6 Summary

The principal objectives of this thesis are to identify the ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth and how factors, including education, influence these. This requires a subsidiary objective to investigate how students develop through navigating different spaces during displacements, including when they are moving and when they arrive in unfamiliar surroundings. These were achieved in part through analysing the narratives of participants through diverse interactive methods which aimed to minimise the extent to which my subjectivities could punctuate the research process. Students had ownership over facets of the research insofar as was possible.

A discussion of post-structural theories in Theoretical Framework outlines theories which were infused throughout the research process, from methodology to analysis, and emphasises the importance of youth as nomadic subjects and as active participants. The framework informed how interactive methods were identified and operationalised. This is discussed in detail in Methodology which also details how post-10 schools, students and other participants were identified and what steps were taken to minimise disrupting their lives and education. Together, the first three chapters create a base from which the relationships between students' educational as well as physical journeys and their ambitions and aspirations can be explored within the context of a changing structural and political backdrop.

Markus and Nurius’ ‘Possible Selves’ emphasises that the past and present influence subjectivities which frame future desires. This informs the temporal structure in answering the research questions. Past selves discusses students’ backgrounds and trajectories prior to arriving in Mae Sot. It identifies the diversity of education students had received, the factors which led to multiple displacements and how students evidenced their agency through navigating ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ spaces. Including students’ opinions in this chapter points the thesis along a trajectory which critically analyses the importance of the content of education as a distinct influencer of ambitions and aspirations. Present selves discusses students’ ongoing realities at the time of research, as reported by participants. This includes reflections on and comparisons of current education and the realities of living in Mae Sot with previous experiences. In dissecting these facets, a thought experiment is developed which illustrates how students simultaneously develop and deploy their agency whilst
preparing for a diversity of next steps to achieve their ambitions and aspirations, or imagine and prepare for compromises.

**Ideal selves** builds on previous exploration of how students’ subjectivities are formed to inform discussion about the five categories of ambitions and aspirations and the nine influencing factors which emerged. Using the thought experiment in Chapter 5, **Steps and gusts** discusses the flexibility of students’ ambitions and aspirations giving attention to tensions and incompatibilities which arose and concludes with the critical role of politics in Burma as an ongoing influencing factor. **Conclusion** reflects on the implications of the findings.
Chapter 2

Theoretical framework

2.1 Possible Selves, ambitions and aspirations

Arjun Appadurai’s takes a novel, sociological approach to the formation of aspirations and their role in poverty stricken communities in the Global South in discussing their capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004). His approach goes beyond the material nature of aspirations which economists write extensively about:

*Aspirations certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor, they have been largely invisible in the study of culture.* (Appadurai 2004, 10)

Appadurai dissects aspirations as being culturally significant and influenced by space and surroundings. He writes that “aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs” (12). I interpret ‘local ideas and beliefs’ not to be bounded by a specific culture, but a pseudo-culture formed by students who are bound by their shared state of flux and uncertainty. I argue that students’ culture is formed by sharing a cohabited space which they are navigating in solidarity, against a backdrop of share uncertainties. The aspirations of displaced Burmese youth are informed by this co-constructed culture which is formed by shared needs for survival in pursuit of dignity. I therefore disagree with Appadurai’s assertion that “culture is a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions” in this context, given the unique circumstances and the lack of sedimented traditions.

Notwithstanding the need to affirm the role and definition of culture in this context, Appadurai’s assertion that aspirations relate to needs, preferences, choices and calculations (Appadurai 2004, 10) informed my awareness of breadth and temporality of ambitions and aspirations. Endogenous narratives about immediate pressures informed assumptions about how participants might structure their priorities.

Appadurai reminds us of the importance and role of broader, global influencing factors. He observes that researchers who are considering poverty-stricken populations can lose sight of the higher normative context, “within which … wants are gestated and brought into view” (13). This was one of many motivating factors which,
rather than provoking assumptions about the relationship between the ‘higher level context’ and the subjects of my research, encouraged me to be attentive to education norms, funder behaviour and drivers for investment by funders in education, as well as national politics in Burma and Thailand.

Setting my expectations about fieldwork with displaced youth was challenging. Given the community Involved into Appadurai’s definition of poverty-stricken communities (22), I drew on his writing to identify how the context I was researching might drive ambitions and aspirations. Appadurai asserts that ‘the poor’ use the capacity to aspire as a psychological anchor, “a horizon of credible hopes, with which to withstand the deadly oscillation between waiting and rushing” (26), reflecting further that the capacity to aspire is a ‘cultural capacity’ which, when empowered, can address challenges facing those who are economically excluded.

The oscillation Appadurai presents chimes with concepts of smooth and striated space discussed below. I was led to appreciate that the uncertain backdrops to students’ ‘present selves’ affect how they consider the future, in particular their relationship with Burma. Indeed, an overarching drive for this research is to identify how participants actively navigate their social and physical spaces in identifying who they are and who they want to be. Appadurai supports this investigation: “by bringing the future back in, by looking at aspirations as cultural capacities, we are surely in a better position to understand how people actually navigate their social spaces” (29).

For the purposes of defining and considering the role of aspirations and ambitions I am drawing on both Appadurai’s sociological approach to viewing students’ development as dependent on ‘cultural capacity’, and on Markus and Nurius’ (1986) psycho-sociological approach to ‘possible selves’. Unlike Appadurai who considers aspirations as being borne out of culture, Markus and Nurius help to identify how we imagine our futures, how these influence us in the present and include useful provocations to pursue in this research.

Like Appadurai, Markus and Nurius assert that there are a diversity of ambitions and aspirations and that they are driven by identity and external factors. Markus and Nurius posit that

*Possible selves can be viewed as a continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge. The array changes as individuals experience variation in internal states and social circumstances…they are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals,*
and threats, and they give the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics. (957)

They prompted me to think about aspirations and ambitions as motivators: “[possible selves] function as incentives for future behaviour and… they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self” (955). They understand that who we have been and what we have experienced have led to where we are. In combination, the past and present selves inform how we imagine our future selves, and influence our actions to achieve the ‘ideal self’, one type of ‘possible self’. Markus and Nurius write that we regularly consider who we could be, and the different outcomes there could be of different choices we make or reactions to situations we are aware of in the present that we may face; they argue that we construct ‘ideal selves’ and ‘worst case scenario’ selves, for example: “an individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats” (966). In this research I am considering how displaced Burmese youth imagine their ideal possible selves.

I am interested in exploring their assertion that “the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context… and by the individual's immediate social experiences” (954). The ‘particular sociocultural and historical context’ of student participants are the broader drivers I will be investigating as sources of individual ambitions and aspirations. This also requires Grounded Theory to allow ambitions and aspirations to emerge organically.

2.2 Youth agency

[Displaced children’s] aspirations and their sense of competence or ability to achieve these ends (their agency) are crucial areas of study for researchers and practitioners alike. (Chatty 2009, 320)

This research puts displaced Burmese youth at its core, acknowledging they possess agency, distinctive identities and voices which should be amplified as a marginalised community. I draw on Chatty’s justification for prioritising youth voices (2009) and connect it to Lopes Cardozo et al’s literature review on youth agency, peace-building and education (2015).

I view displaced youth through an anthropological lens to highlight the importance of social and cultural contexts, “placing greater emphasis on relationships, values, and
aspirations in order to better understand [their lives]” (Chatty 2009, 321). The goals of this thesis resonate with those of Chatty: to identify the ways in which displaced Burmese youth respond to the uncertainty of their lives with a sense of agency as well as with clearly identifiable aspirations (2009). I achieved this by drawing on her reflections on youth having “multiple and intersecting identities, which are variously gendered, racialised, localised […] and contingent on context” (2009, 322), and that they are active participants of culture, socialisation and identity; they are “passive beings and are actively involved in shaping their own sociocultural worlds” (2009, 322). This thesis contemplates the connections between social positions, experiences and power to divergent ambitions and aspirations in post-conflict contexts (Davies 2000).

Little is written about the agency of displaced youth which depends on the characteristics of being displaced. While there are multiple definitions of agency and youth agency, the unique circumstances of youth affected by conflict (Lopes Cardozo et al 2015) and who actively renegotiate identity and purpose along a trajectory, are lacking. This thesis organically develops a description of the agency of the youth involved in this research. It posits that agency can be developed and deployed simultaneously. In doing so, it assumes that youth are autonomous. I draw on Lopes Cardozo et al and Evans’ (2007) bounded theory as a base which this is built on.

While I agree that youth agency is neither an act of volunteerism or determinism, and therefore can partially conform to the bounded agency model, participants don’t fall under the influence of a given society’s norms; any pressure youth might be implicitly under would not be homogenous, given their diverse ethnic backgrounds and experiences of developing in different locations and under different conditions.

Rather than the limits of their agency being bound by society or structure, students intentional and unintentional actions are determined by the subjectivities they develop through lived experience- this changes the extent to which external factors and structures students pass through can influence their trajectories.

This thesis agrees with bounded agency, that “actors have a past and imagined future possibilities which shape actions in the present” (Evans 2007, 31), that youth develop internalised frames of reference and that at its core, agency is the capacity of individuals to think and act independently (McEvoy-Levy 2001). Further definition

27
is required, however, as to how future possibilities are envisioned, a line of inquiry this thesis in part seeks to pursue. There is a risk that future possibilities are interpreted to mean that students are aware of their future possibilities with a degree of certainty, including how likely they are and how to achieve them, as opposed to students making best guesses and being driven by these possibilities while simultaneously reconstructing them based on changing circumstances which influence their subjectivities.

I also generally agree with Lopes Cardozo et al’s (2015) perspective that agency is “the space for manoeuvre available to young people in developing (un)conscious strategies…” (1) insofar as unconscious and conscious actions are concerned, this thesis agrees that youth deploy they're agency knowing, through subjectivities build by experience, what likely outcomes and impacts might be. It also appreciates that youth activate their agency when actions are instinctive; when they are unconscious and ‘best guesses’ to propel them away from perceived risks and threats.

The unique circumstances of displaced youth are that they are constantly in a state of becoming as they navigate and overcome changing features along their trajectories which are subject to change. What youth have experienced in the past shapes their subjectivities as markers they draw on for assurances about what the most rational reactions would be under pressure.

However, the idea that students have room to manoeuvre should be further defined to appreciate this constant state of movement. At each point a student activates their agency, they develop the scope of their room to manoeuvre themselves which can be based on a combination of structures, external expectations and internal subjectivity. Rather than being resistant actions, as nomads displaced youth are in constant movement in which indecision and allowing factors to altogether stop their trajectory is not an option.

### 2.3 Smooth and Striated Space and Nomadic Theory

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) present smoothness and striation as a conceptual pair to rethink space as a mixture between nomadic forces and sedentary anchoring. These are opposing forces which interact with each other to define the other in
spatial terms: “in striated space, lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points, one goes from one point to another. In the smooth, it is the opposite, the points are subordinated to the trajectory” (1988, 478). Maber (2016) applies smooth and striated spaces, complemented by Braidotti’s nomadic theory (2012), to education in border regions. Braidotti’s nomadic subjects “inhabit a time that is the active tense of continuous “becoming” (320) who are a “folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding of outwards affects. A mobile entity in a space and time, and also an enfleshed kind of memory….capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations” (306) As per Maber, I will identify displaced youth as nomadic subjects given their tendency to exist outside of the organisational state; they are characterised by movement across space rather than being defined by it. I will therefore adapt Maber’s approach to explore how education in smooth spaces interacts with the ambitions and aspirations of displaced youth as nomadic subjects who are constantly developing their subjectivities from point to point along a trajectory whose points are subordinate.

As outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, smooth and striated are applied as relative and relational; no space is entirely smooth nor striated, and the features of each interact with and determine the other. They are each without value and in combination bring about changes and new priorities which shift their relationship. It is through striation that life and being is organised and depends on smooth space to define it

What interests us in operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces” (500).

Smooth spaces should not be viewed as being liberatory. They allow for struggle to emerge and for life to “reconstitute its stakes, confront new obstacles, invent new paces, switches and adversaries” (1988, 500). All progress is made by and in striated space, but all becoming occurs in smooth space (1988, 486). This research defines the borderlands to be smooth spaces as well as the education systems which fall outside of the state, though this is dissected to reveal tensions which arise out of the nature of striations in some of these.

Maber builds a theory for understanding the position of student-centred, non-formal (smooth) education within situations of displacement which forms a useful grounding for considering the position of participants, their competing identities and their
ambitions. Her adaptation will be used to consider how the dynamics of setting and factors outside of state control, namely education, influence ambitions and aspirations. This will require considering multiple negotiations of relationships and identities: “smooth space is understood as a more fluid site associated with nomadism and informality, in which hierarchy may be contested” (Maber 2016, 375). Maber’s adaptation will be useful because of the similar spaces I will be considering, namely borderlands as sites of current or recent refuge which are by their nature “spaces of flux, the inhabitants of which are confronted with multiple renegotiations” (Maber 2016, 385). Moreover, Davies cited in Maber, advises that non-formal education is moulded by striations which result in its changing nature:

_The mix of competing government, international and ethnic agendas creates an uneasy landscape for community education... which is both subject to these multiple influences and may be complicit in their reproduction_ (Davies 2011, cited in Maber 2016, 378).

Returning to Maber’s approach, and reflecting on Nomadic tendencies, this research assumes and evidences that displaced Burmese youth use their agency, informed by subjectivities, to navigate within and between smooth and striated spaces to thrive and continue their respective self-identified trajectories.

### 2.4 Postcolonial theory and decolonising methodologies

Tuhhiwai Smith (2012), Mora and Diaz (2004), and Chatty (2009; 2012; 2013) write about the need to include the indigenous voice and to seek to use research as a tool of empowerment, focusing on local, relevant priorities and the lived experiences (Briggs and Sharp 2004). Focusing on the realities which emerge from participants avoids the risk of imposing Western norms or my subjectivities into the research process and resists the dominance of “arrogant confidence in the almost unquestioned validity of science and Western knowledge” (Escobar 1995, 4). Tuhhiwai Smith emphasises focusing on marginalised voices and documenting and analysing views in such a way that participants recognise their realities.

Although post-colonialism has been infused in the research process, it is also useful in identifying and applying research methods including how the narratives are captured. This research necessarily avoided making assumptions about the views and experiences of participants to ensure that adequate focus was placed on their narratives.
Mora and Diaz complement this by arguing that participatory methods which dull implicit hierarchies between researcher and participant, and Western and local knowledges, necessarily produce qualitatively different research that is based on community-identified problems and needs.

2.5 Grounded Theory

At the core of this thesis is a search for understanding what factors and actors inform the aspirations and ambitions of displaced youth. This resonates with the purpose of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967); to understand human beings’ behaviours where behaviours are units of analysis. In drawing on aspects of Grounded Theory, this research has been shaped by the data and patterns which have emerged through an indicative approach. In giving equal value to voices and narratives which have been captured, I sought to better understand and present the phenomena of participants’ formulations of their ambitions and aspirations.

I draw on elements of Grounded Theory to explore relationships and dynamics in seeking to identify how actors respond to their changing environments as well as the consequences of their actions (Corbin and Strauss 1990). This complements calls by post-colonialists that creating space to amplify the voices of marginalised groups, is necessary to understand lived experiences. Grounded Theory provides a framework for organising data into categories and properties of categories to help interpret meaning in the diversity of perceptions of ambitions and aspirations, and link these to context, experiences and subjectivities.
### 2.6 Summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Dimension of research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideal selves, aspirations and ambitions</td>
<td>Temporal focus of research; Assume ‘past’ and ‘present’ selves influence ‘ideal selves’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Agency</td>
<td>Viewing displaced youth as active agents; Recognising shifts in subjectivity through lived experience; Builds during displacement and determines how youth respond to challenging factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomadism, smooth and striated space</td>
<td>Displaced youth are nomadic subjects navigating smooth spaces including smooth education; Students’ agency is built through navigating and responding to striations which shape and shift identities and priorities; Subjectivities are constantly being developed over an undefined trajectory. The act of movement defines youth rather than space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcolonial theory and decolonizing methodologies</td>
<td>Youth voice at the core of this research; Giving voice to those on the periphery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Students’ voices determine significant patterns which are the focus of analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 3

Methodology

Figure 4 students during an interactive workshop
This chapter details the practical aspects of the research process from identifying participants through to data collection. It begins by presenting units of analysis, followed by how schools, students and other participants were identified before presenting research methods used in this study, linking these to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.

This research included 63 students, 13 key informants and 9 experts based in Mae Sot, Yangon and Hpa-An. They participated through workshops or semi-structured interviews. In addition, I collected data through immersing myself into the education community as well as through visiting post-10 and migrant schools in Mae Sot, Hpa-An University and a presentation by an American distance learning university.

3.1 Unit of analysis

The primary unit of analysis were the expressions and descriptions of the ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth as told by them. This includes the factors which currently influence them as well as factors which they know could influence their priorities and decisions in the future.

Minor units of analysis include relevant documents and school websites, perspectives of key informants and experts, namely teachers, school administrators, alumni and staff working for NGOs, INGOs and funders. These are all necessarily secondary to youth narratives which are at the core of this research.

3.2 Sampling

I initially wanted to include a cross-section of young people living in Mae Sot without giving weight to the schools they attended. Knowing I would use mixed qualitative methods including interactive workshops led me to want to bring students from across Mae Sot together to participate in workshops. This proved logistically difficult and it became apparent through conversations with staff that it would be easier to access students through schools, it would also strengthen the research in how I made sense of some of the ambitions and aspirations of participants through understanding the objectives, curricula and pedagogical approaches.
I made connections with schools through using social networking apps Facebook and Instagram; I asked people living in Mae Sot for help in identifying schools. I then narrowed my focus and involve up to four different schools which followed different curricula and have students with diverse educational backgrounds and lived experiences. I also identified three ‘back-up’ schools which were ultimately not involved, including a Catholic school and a Christian youth centre and orphanage whose director I interviewed.

The four schools I selected were Wide Horizons (which delivers a two-year community development programme), the Minmahaw Higher Education Programme-MHEP (which delivers the two year American GED programme), Youth Connect (which delivers a nine-month hospitality programme) and Minmahaw School (which delivers a general two-year post-10 programme). Upon selecting these, I emailed a letter of introduction (Annex 1), an overview of the workshops I intended to deliver and a request to meet with them to see what might be feasible. At each school I consulted a member of staff on the content of the workshops which resulted in improving my methods by making them more context-sensitive.

Two of the schools chose to invite students to join workshops voluntarily, whereas full cohorts joined the other two. In total, 63 students participated in four workshops. I also involved 14 of these students in semi-structured interviews as well as 7 other students, 3 based in Hpa-An, Burma and 4 in Mae Sot who teachers put me in touch with. Three of the students in Mae Sot were undertaking work placements as part of an education programme based in Nupo camp while the fourth was a recent graduate from one of the participating post-10 schools. Hpa-An based participants included a recent graduate from a non-formal education programme who was an English teacher at Hpa-An University, a recent graduate from a non-formal education programme who worked as the administrator of an English language post-10 programme, and one student in Hpa-An who had completed a post-10 community development programme in Nupo camp and was completing an intensive English language programme.

*Figures 5 and 6 Classrooms where workshops took place*
In addition to these seven, I relied on students volunteering to speak with me more at the end of workshops. Unfortunately, it wasn't feasible to interview students from each of the schools. Ultimately twenty students from workshops from three schools were willing to take part in interviews although due to logistics and timing it was only possible to interview fourteen from two schools.

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**Shared features of the four post-10 schools**

- Located in Mae Sot, Thailand
- Ethnically and linguistically diverse
  (with a relative majority of Karen youth)
- English-medium teaching and required good English (defined differently) to be admitted
- Student-centred teaching
- Included Thai classes
- Free of charge for students* and rely on donors (one funded through a Thai foundation
- All had or were close to a 50/50 gender split amongst their students
- Students are 16+ years old
- Include context-sensitive education in some way
- A mix of foreign and local teachers
- Only admit Burmese students
- All boarding
- Three of four issue certificates which are not recognised by any government

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Although limitations are included in the conclusion, it is worth including a brief note here about youth who were not included in the research. “For every student who comes to Mae Sot there are a dozen more who are deserving who don’t get a place” said one senior member of staff at a donor funded education development organisation. The four schools I included were regularly described as being where the best students go because they have such high-quality education and they carry little to no cost. Every year, however, one of the schools receives 1000 applicants for 24 places. The 986 applicants who are unsuccessful are a drop in the ocean. Those who are admitted into these schools are exceptionally talented and driven, but they are also lucky; lucky to be in a position where it is feasible to pursue education across the border, lucky to have learned about these programmes which are not easily advertised in acute conflict zones and lucky not to have family forcing them to stay behind (expert interview).

I chose schools where English was the medium of instruction. Participants had received education which emphasised English language prior to arriving at their respective schools.
The 20 key informants and experts I involved in this research I met through teachers and administrators who worked in participating schools.

### 3.3 Student and school profiles

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students involved in research</td>
<td>69a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students involved through workshops</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students involved in semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>21b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were female</td>
<td>33 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were male</td>
<td>36 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of students involved in research (years old)c</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of female students</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of male students</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall age range</td>
<td>17 to 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female age range</td>
<td>17 to 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male age range</td>
<td>18 to 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years students spent in education</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students who had been educated in camps (%)</td>
<td>28 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of female students who had been educated in camps (%)</td>
<td>11 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of male students who had been educated in camps (%)</td>
<td>14 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years educated in camps (for those who had been educated in camps)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years educated in camps (female)</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years educated in camps (male)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of students who had been partly educated in Burma</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of displacements prior to starting current programme</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of displacements prior to starting current programme</td>
<td>3 to 10d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 63 students participated in four workshops which took place in four schools. 8 students outside of these schools participated in interviews.
* 14 students who had participated in workshops were interviewed as well as six others who did not attend these schools.
* Based on surveys I asked the students in workshops to fill in. This does not include the ages of students I interviewed.
* This includes within Burma as well as into camps, between camps and into Thailand, from birth.

Gender is a critical facet to consider in the research of vulnerable groups. Indeed, within marginalised groups, women themselves are a marginalised subset who are critical to involve in research to understand the breadth of experiences and challenges facing a refugee population. Although female students made up almost 50% of workshop participants (48%), they only represented eight out of the 20 students interviewed (38%). I would have ideally had a more equal split between male and female participants in workshops and interviews. I was acutely aware of my presence as a Western man when interacting with female students.
3.3.1 Breakdown by schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Wide Horizons</th>
<th>Youth Connect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were male</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>8 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of students involved in research</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of female students</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of male students</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall age range</td>
<td>20 to 29</td>
<td>17 to 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female age range</td>
<td>21 to 23</td>
<td>17 to 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male age range</td>
<td>20 to 29</td>
<td>18 to 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years students spent in education</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>MHEP</th>
<th>Minnahaw post-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number and (%) of participants who were male</td>
<td>11 (69%)</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of students involved in research</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of female students</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of male students</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall age range</td>
<td>20 to 24</td>
<td>18 to 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female age range</td>
<td>20 to 23</td>
<td>18 to 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male age range</td>
<td>20 to 24</td>
<td>18 to 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of years students spent in education</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4 Methods

The research methods used in this research are presented in detail below. Included are rationales for why each method was selected, how they resonate with relevant theories and how they were operationalised.

Objectives of the research included amplifying youth voice and seeking to empower participants. For these reasons, youth agency is at the core of this research; it resonates with and informed all the methods used, the questions for semi-structured interviews as well as for workshops (Annex 3 and Annex 6). It also informed analysis. Although all theories link to each of the methods used, post colonialism and decolonising methodologies were particularly useful in informing my methods, given their emphasis on giving voice to marginalised groups which may have narratives which counter prevailing rhetoric and norms. In practice, this meant leveraging rich responses by encouraging students to use skills they had developed in borderlands. Across methods students were asked to think critically and reflexively about their position, their futures and different routes to get to their ‘ideal selves’. Prompting them to apply these and associated skills (including problem solving, group work and presentation skills) sought to empower them.

This research is unique because of its data collection methods; the findings themselves are meaningless without a thorough understanding of the methods used and an acknowledgement of the importance of youth voice. Although this will be discussed throughout this piece, it is important to emphasise that the gaps this research seeks to address relate to whose voice is captured and how. Collecting narratives through a variety of means allowed me to minimise interpretation of what was expressed and collected through one method.

Learning about lived and current experiences and views through students’ eyes allowed me to construct an understanding of their priorities, the placement of education in their identities, priorities and ambitions, as well as what improvements they think can be made to education in the borderlands as well as in Burma. I collected stories, narratives, experiences and opinions through the following methods:
Inspired by Bagnoli (2004), I delivered four workshops in four schools with 63 student participants. These took place in the classrooms students used for their normal school day and were participatory, partially peer-led and involved diverse facilitation and data gathering methods. The objective of the workshops was to elicit responses and reactions from students to questions at the core of this research in a comfortable environment. The objective was to “gain entry into phenomenological worlds, recording their lives in as much richness and multiplicity of aspects as possible” (2) The workshops varied in length depending on how much time schools gave me; they lasted between 2 and 3 hours. The workshop sizes ranged from 12-18 students. Each of the groups included students with a diversity of educational experiences, places of origin, ethnicities and represented a mix of these who had spent time in camps and those who had not.

Speaking with teachers beforehand resulted in support for workshops. They also offered advice about cultural barriers and challenges I might face with participants.

Students were asked the following questions:

1) Think about your life now and in the future, what do you want to be the same, and what do you want to be different?
2) Who is the most important person in your life (or max 2 people - e.g. parents or one celebrity role model/politician and one family member)
3) How do they do they help you think about the future?
4) Where do you want to be in the future? Why?
5) What do you think education for Burmese youth is/should be for?
At the beginning of workshops I asked students to read information about the workshop and respond to ten questions (Annex 3) about their education history, where they had lived and their current education. This included nine quantitative questions and one qualitative. It allowed me to calculate the findings found in Chapter 4 which gave me a better understanding of their profiles. Information on the form included an outline of the workshop, what they should expect and what I was asking of them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Process of data collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Think about your life now and in the future, what do you want to be the</td>
<td>Artistic methods. Students were given large paper, coloured pencils and pens to use to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>same, and what do you want to be different?</td>
<td>visually react to the question which they later discussed in small groups before presenting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on the similarities and differences of their respective reactions to the question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I analysed visual outputs, flipcharts from presentations, what they said in</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>presentations (including answers to questions asked by peers, and based on gender),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conversations I listened to as they were sharing their individual reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the most important person in your life (or max 2 people - e.g.</td>
<td>Asked students to first share their response to the question of who is the most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents or one celebrity role model/politician and one family member)</td>
<td>important person in their lives. As they answered I produced a tally on the board I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was provided with. I then grouped them based on their responses and asked them why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do they do they help you think about the future?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you want to be in the future? Why?</td>
<td>Asked students to stand in different parts of the room depending on whether they wanted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to be in Thailand, Burma or in a third country (or camp) in the distant future and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>captured the frequency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think education for Burmese youth is/should be for?</td>
<td>Asked them to share one sentence about what education should be for youth like them and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>noted responses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of workshops I asked students to read information about the workshop and respond to ten questions (Annex 3) about their education history, where they had lived and their current education. This included nine quantitative questions and one qualitative. It allowed me to calculate the findings found in Chapter 4 which gave me a better understanding of their profiles. Information on the form included an outline of the workshop, what they should expect and what I was asking of them.

I had hoped to allow students to visually depict (using a combination of words and drawings) responses/reactions to each question, then to discuss what they had produced with their peers and prepare a presentation for the whole group followed by a general discussion. Due to time constraints I used this approach for the first question and different interactive approaches for subsequent questions. For example, for Q2 and Q3 I ask students to stand in a circle throw an object to each other to prompt answers until everyone shares their response. This also elicited better responses than when I asked specific students; it changed the power dynamic making it more peer led. After students answered Q2, I put them into themed groups. This helped me capture the frequency of responses and made it easier to include a discursive element to Q3. Upon explaining how their selected person/people
influence them I prompted others in the same group whether they could relate or agree/disagree and to ask questions.

A principal challenge during the workshops was capturing conversations students had in small groups and class discussions as well as observing other micro-interactions such as how they encourage or discourage each other during group work. Students asking each other questions after each group presentation (Q1) provided deeper insights into the challenges and decisions at the forefronts of their minds. This brought out useful themes and opinions which wouldn’t have otherwise captured. For example, when students reported that they wanted to go to university others asked about barriers to accessing it. Students also often asked each other ‘how’ they will achieve their career goal.

Workshops aimed to capture narratives, stories and opinions across identities, ages and genders. Aligning to Chatty (2009), the questions and discussions focused on relationships, values and aspirations. Indeed, it sought to identify “ways in which displaced youth respond to the uncertainty of their lives with a sense of agency as well as with clearly identifiable aspirations” (319)

This method was also selected in response to Lopes Cardozo et al’s (2015) challenge that there is “a need to increase understanding of heterogenous youth as embedded within and reacting to processes of conflict and peace”(3). Workshops engaged young people in conversations about their own lives, the realities which affect them as identified by them on both sides and along the border thereby giving them agency within and over the research. Related, post colonialism and decolonising methodologies allow for this interactive method in how it encourages students to use their voices in responding to questions as well as discussing them together. As per Mora and Diaz (2004), this method dulled the hierarchy in the room between myself as the researcher and participants and was therefore used as a tool for empowerment. The questions and the setting (schools) led students to discuss and reflect on local and relevant priorities. In collecting the narratives, stories and opinions through these workshops, I sought to conduct analysis in which students recognized themselves.

Moreover, I was conscious to reduce any perceptions that I may be a teacher. To achieve this, students could speak in their mother tongues whilst working in groups
which increased the likelihood of them being as expressive as they wanted to inform each other about their perspectives which would then be captured in the group presentations which were delivered in English. How I moved and used space was also important. I minimised how long I stood up and walked around students and sat with them as much as possible. Allowing for open, unstructured peer-led conversation gave students agency in leading conversations. This resulted in complementary themes arising organically which would later be explored. Finally, in my introduction I referred to my experience as a student leader which I cited as a source of motivation to understand and amplify the voices of displaced youth.

The broad wording of questions posed to students was informed by Grounded Theory and Possible Selves. The questions were purposefully broad and vague and allowed a diversity of themes to emerge. Phrasing also encouraged responses which alluded to links to students’ ‘historical and sociocultural context’ in the past and present, as per Markus and Nurius.

3.4.2 Art-based participatory questions and discussions

The decision to use art-based participatory elements in the interactive sessions preceded deciding the questions. I chose not include focus groups because they would have required me being a proactive facilitator. This structured approach may have limited students’ comfort and confidence.

One of my assumptions was that students were in a state of flux and that exploring competing priorities and interactions between overlapping identities and experience would happen more successfully through visual expressions and free form dialogue.

I was eager to ensure that the activities in the workshops were diverse and that I could collect meaningful data through various means to create a clear understanding of students’ priorities, current challenges, journeys to get to where they were at the time of the workshops, their motivations, their ambitions and aspirations. Along with Bagnoli (2004), Copeland and Agosto (2012) Creswell (2003) and Meyer (1991) encourage this approach. Using visual methods gave students the opportunity to respond and react to the first question I posed in a free-flowing way. Concepts of smooth and striated space encouraged this; visual depictions can be easier to interpret and establish processes of past, current and future multiple renegotiations.
of relationships and identities compared with verbal responses to questions. Allowing students to visually react also complements the non-linear nature of relationships between factors which shape identity - it is an unregulated and unbounded method (Kress and Kewoen 2002). Banks (2001) supports the use of this by saying that “content is not limited by form - the creative depiction of physical and abstract realities is unbounded” (cited in Literat 2013, 12).

Of all the questions, Q1 required more lateral thinking. I purposefully didn't assume the themes or elements students would refer to in their responses. Through Grounded Theory I allowed themes to organically emerge from the diversity of styles in which students responded. I prompted students in two workshops, informed by themes which had emerged previously. This meant asking students to think about who they wanted to be, where they wanted to be, who they wanted to be with and what job and hobbies they might want to have.

The discursive elements of the applied art-based participation allowed students to engage with each other in small group conversations and through posing questions to groups after they finished presenting on their similarities and differences. The objective was to make the exercise empowering and as peer-led as possible; it allowed for reflexivity and for students to ask each other questions about issues they had not discussed before.

Concepts of youth agency encouraged this method. Giving students the opportunity and responsibility to interpret and respond to the question as they wanted was important and gave them a place of power. This approach helped me to establish connections between participants, their contexts and their aspirations (Literat 2013). In using this approach, students were implicitly encouraged to analyse their own
situations through applying skills they had developed through student-centred approaches in non-formal schools. Finally, asking students to visually react to a question and explaining why I was involving them in my research aimed in part to instil a sense of purpose in producing a meaningful output.

The box above shows how students were asked to respond to the question. I had multiple opportunities to capture students’ reactions. I observed them drawing and seeing their ideas develop and what they did and did not include, how they self-selected into groups, how they individually presented to their group and what their collective approach in identifying similarities and differences.

3.4.3 Semi-structured interviews (students)

I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with 21 current students and recent graduates, most of whom (14) were students who had participated in the workshops. All interviews took place after the workshops and ranged from half an hour to an hour and a half in length and often took place in the schools. It was important to keep students in an space they were familiar with, to maximise comfort while discussing potentially sensitive issues. The objective of these was to gain a better understanding of the relationships between students’ physical and educational journeys, the people who influence them, the decisions they were making and their ambitions and aspirations. The ten questions I included in these interviews were informed by the workshops and reflected themes which emerged. The questions encouraged students to analyse how their ‘past selves’ had influenced their ‘present’ and ‘ideal selves’.

Youth agency, post colonialism and decolonising methodologies encouraged this method to create a clear picture of participants’ lives, experiences and ambitions. These provided students with a space to self-reflect and self-realise whilst being motivated to express their views as a group whose voices are rarely sought to inform policy interventions and structural changes in the borderlands.

Questions were built on narratives, responses and stories shared in the workshops, particularly those relating to politics (Annex 3)

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1 Two of which were conducted with two people simultaneously
3.4.4 Semi-structured interviews (experts and key informants)

I interviewed 20 non-students, divided into key informants and experts. Nine Key informants included people who worked directly in or with schools whose perspectives of students’ aspirations and ambitions and the education options and opportunities were valuable, for example current teachers in Mae Sot, former and current camp teachers, school administrators and local organisations which develop curricula. They were asked about education in borderlands and students’ ambitions and aspirations (see Annex 3).

Eleven experts worked on education or issues relating to it but may not be as acutely aware of the lives and perspectives of students as key informants, but they offered expertise on relevant issues. Experts included staff at INGOs and larger local bodies which interacted with education, for example the KED and KRCEE. The
questions I asked were about their fields of expertise, their hopes for displaced youth and the education about education in the borderlands.

Speaking to these communities allowed me to develop an understanding of the context students find themselves in, introduced me to themes which I later used when involving students,, and connected me to other education specialists and players in the education ecosystem. Their views and responses were secondary to those of students.

3.4.5 Immersion and website analysis

Immersion and observation were important to understand the diversity of education offers in the borderlands. In addition to the four participating schools, I was invited to visit I was invited to visit Hpa-An University, a migrant primary school in Mae Sot and KRCEE offices. Visiting the International Organisation for Migration’s processing facility for refugees going to third countries provided me with deeper insights into logistical processes which students’ relatives had gone through. I was also struck while observing a presentation by and Q&A with the President of the new distance-learning University of the People by the awareness students had of their qualifications, legal status and their interest in pursuing university study.

Less formally, I was frequently involved in discussions with education professionals and practitioners in social settings which gave me insights into the difficulties organisations were facing with funding leaving the borderlands and moving into Burma.

I also looked at school websites to understand their objectives.

3.4.6 Analytical tools

I principally used Atlas.ti to code interview transcripts as well as the visual outputs students produced to Q1 in the workshops. In keeping with Grounded Theory, I allowed themes (turned into codes) to emerge organically.

It was challenging to identify an appropriate way to analyse students’ visual reactions. This is because artistic analysis is a prominent way of seeking to
understand people’s psychology by honing in on symbols as well as the presence and absence of particular themes, colours and shapes. Rather than focusing on these features, I looked through the outputs and considered trends in what they included and the extent to which themes raised in workshops and interviews featured them. The codes I used were therefore common across interviews and drawings.

3.5 Ethics

Consent and anonymity

I accessed students through teachers and education administrators who I approached with an overview of my research, emphasising that students could remove themselves from the process at any point and that their responses would be anonymised. I received consent to access students through emailing and meeting with teachers who act as their informal guardians.

Students in workshops made an informed choice to participate partly through reading an introductory note (Annex 1) which I also explained orally. This was used to gain their consent rather than asking them to sign anything which I had been advised would have been met with suspicion, given the sensitive context and their legal status in Thailand. In interviews and workshops I emphasised that participants could opt out at any point, that contributions would be anonymised, that they could interrupt to ask questions, and that they could ask for their accounts to be deleted.

I emailed a letter of introduction to experts and key informants asking to meet with and interview them. Upon meeting, I repeated the purpose of the research and emphasised that they could stop the interview at any time or ask for their account to be deleted. All but one expert agreed to be recorded on the basis that they would be anonymously represented in this thesis.

I had permission to take photos.

Age
I wanted to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of displaced youth who fell into an unstructured education system. This meant that I would select students who were at least 16 years old. I acknowledged that regardless of age these students were a vulnerable group who risked being retraumatised. This informed the scope of the questions I posed which were vague enough to allow students to share as much or as little about their lived experience and views of sensitive political issues and structures as they wanted.

**Gender**

I was eager for at least half of the participants to be women in order be inclusive in my findings. In workshops, students could self-select into groups and to carry out group conversations where they chose in the school premises which meant female students could choose to be in an environment comfortable for them. I was also conscious when prompting students to be aware that particularly female students were not used to foreign men asking them to respond to questions in a one-on-one setting.

**Awareness of political sensitivities and lived experiences**

I initially assumed that the political backdrop of this research influenced why students were in Mae Sot and how they imagine their ‘ideal selves.’ A challenge was to ensure that students were given a space to express political views without prompting them to feel under pressure to recall potentially traumatising experiences. I posed one question about how the political situation had influenced their views of their own futures. On this basis, I asked subsequent questions using language they used to go deeper into the role of politics in their physical and educational journeys.

**Cultural awareness**

I was aware that cultural differences and my positionality would be a limitation to this research. To guard against these having an exaggerated impact on my findings and discrediting them I took steps to become more culturally aware through informal conversations with teachers and administrators and took Burmese classes before moving to Mae Sot.
Reflexivity and feedback

It was important for the credibility of this research to include spaces for students to speak beyond the topics I asked questions about. To maintain student investment and interest in the project and in order to allow them to realise their importance within the research, I included spaces for them to contribute further opinions, stories and experiences they wanted me to know about and encouraged them to ask me questions.

3.6 Changes to methodology, reflections and summary

Some approaches changed due to two factors. Firstly, in line with Grounded Theory, the methods used in this inductive research were adapted as the project developed. Secondly, the workshop structure changed due to time constraints.

The principal changes to this research fall into the first category. As I spent more time with students I became more aware of what assumptions I could have and what questions it might be appropriate to include. Notably, I initially did not include questions about jobs or politics in workshops or interviews. This changed after the first workshop in which it became clear that displaced Burmese youth reflected on how the skills they are gaining are empowering them to imagine how they could support their communities after they complete their studies. Similarly, it became evident that students are very politically aware and that comments about hoping for changes in Burma were always driven by their understanding of the political context. Further changes are presented below:
3.7 Summary

It has been necessary to outline the steps taken to ensure that I captured youth voice in multiple ways and to describe how this was done to minimise my role as a researcher and maximised students’ opportunities to be empowered to use skills they have developed through education and express their views in a comfortable environment. In doing this I have explained how intractable the theoretical framework is from methods, in particular youth agency and decolonising methodologies.

The methods outlined above captured the experiences, opinions, stories and expressions of students' ‘ideal selves’ in multiple ways; through interactive workshops which capitalised on students’ agency and skills they had developed by asking them to participate in a range of activities including visual reactions to questions and group work, as well as through semi-structured interviews the
questions of which were influenced by responses in workshops. Complementing these, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants and experts to provide context and point me toward themes I should discuss with students.

Summary table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Interactive workshops</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews (students)</td>
<td>21 (14 from workshops at two schools, three were in Hpa-An and three undertaking work placements in Mae Sot as part of their community development programme, based in Nupo camp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews (experts and key informants)</td>
<td>20</td>
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Chapter 4

Past Selves: Previous education and experiences of cross-border displacement

In our reality, real life, we might face a lot of problems after we finish education… At that time we will have to solve many problems. Also we have to think critically to develop our country….If we only focus on memorising we cannot change anything, we cannot change our country. (Ah-Dee, 22 year-old Karen male)

Figure 9 Visual representation of a female Karen student’s future, demonstrating her agency through planning her trajectory to improve education, with education playing an important role in the present as well as being a driver for her ambition to become Education Minister. This is joined by a quote from a male student who identifies a line of sight between the education system and stagnation in Burma.
This chapter explores the role of education in how students discuss their ‘past selves’. It presents the frequency of and reasons for displacement before delving into education as a specific motivator for and as a familiar anchor during displacement. In beginning to answer RQ1 and 3, this chapter introduces the lived experiences of displacements in the past, through which students developed agency, subjectivity and self-knowledge. Through focusing on their education, this chapter also provides students’ reflections on divergent curricula, teaching practices, education systems and structures.

Analysing the themes and implicit links in students’ narratives about the past and present, including Ah Dee’s above, allows for understanding the origins of their ambitions and aspirations and how these interact with relatively smooth or striated education and spaces through which they have become.

Ah Dee’s statement helps us understand where he has been and how this has affected what he wants and points to agency he has developed as a nomadic subject. Moving from point to point influences how he thinks about the possible and desirable. Analysis in subsequent chapters allows us to understand where students want to go and how they think they will get there by drawing on their experiences of simultaneously building and deploying agency.

Ah Dee points to the influence that experiences of changing space and adapting to new surroundings and education within these can have on prospects. New spaces and education systems require navigation. Each location to which students had been displaced in the past had been temporary. These are therefore points on an uncertain route, the direction of which is subordinated to where the student as a nomad is going, intentionally or unintentionally (“although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 380).

Most spaces students had navigated were wedged between state boundaries of authority and geographic limitations. These are namely camps or rural Burma where tensions between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups result in families determining new strategies for maintaining security and dignity, with implications for children’s education and trajectories. Some of these wedges also contain spaces outside of state control (KED/KRCEE schools in Karen State for example) which can be sites for “innovation and ingenuity in response to constraint and also a site of
consolidation for alternative constructions” (Maber 2016, 375) in which youth experience divergent, smooth forms of education. As nomadic subjects navigating multiple displacements in these as well as through smooth and striated spaces, students unintentionally adapt identities and capabilities in light of challenges they face. Through their determination to reach their next goal- whether driven by security or the desire to upskill - they must embrace these and incorporate these into their process of ‘becoming’; “individual and collective struggles to come to terms with events and intolerable conditions and to shake loose, to whatever degree possible, from determinants and definitions” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 317).

Indeed, establishing the ways in which students’ subjectivities are formed during their ‘becoming’ is relevant to the content of those subjectivities. Speaking of refugees in African contexts, Fresia writes that “still in their formative years and unable to leave the camps…refugee youth will have no option but to incorporate these subjectivities into their knowledge base. Such biases will affect construction of identity and the self…” (Zeus 2011, 266). Although not all students were based in camps, Fresia’s understanding guides how we can consider the significance and dialogue between students’ pasts, presents and ideal futures. This resonates with Braidotti who notes that nomadic subjects are “in-process but also capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations, while remaining extraordinarily faithful to itself” (Braidotti 2012, 306). In-process here implies that subjects continuously develop through learned and lived experience which remain as evolving benchmarks in students’ psyches.

This chapter seeks to introduce the relevance and impact of the interactions between changing space, education and life in displacement.

4.1 Frequency of displacement

The starting point for many of the 21 students who were interviewed was government school in Burma, while most started at government or ethnic schools in Karen State specifically. Eight students were enrolled in ethnic schools elsewhere in Burma and one in a third country (China). On average, twenty students had been displaced five times (100 displacements in total) and were exposed to a combination of up to three curricula before completing high school and most attended at least one post-10 school in a camp (15) or in Thailand (2), with eight coming directly from a post-10
school in a camp and two in a post-10 school in Thailand to Mae Sot. In addition, 40% of 63 workshop participants had been educated at least in part in a camp for an average of 6 years.

Figure 10 above demonstrates the diversity of starting and end-points, and shows that students were displaced an average of five times before beginning the programme or job they were in at the point of interview. Although generalised, this shows the diversity of students' trajectories. It is noteworthy that various studies which consider migration trajectories of displaced youth and education exclude this level or granular analysis.

Each displacement, whether by choice or by force, represents a moment when youth had to deploy their agency which is strengthened by having to navigate separation from family, new curricula, different physical surroundings which affect their priorities, preferences and identities. It is not justifiable academically or in policy terms to analyse the lives, education or trajectories of displaced youth nor to make recommendations without considering the breadth of students' experiences.

4.2 Reasons for previous displacements

Diverse reasons for displacement emerged through discussions with students in group settings as well as through analysing interviewees' trajectories. The predominant reason which arose from interviews was education. Education poverty, a symptom of conflict, is prominent in Myanmar and a driver for many in Eastern Shan State (where 90% of 17 to 22 year olds have less than 2 years of education...
(Winthrop and Matsui 2013) and Southeast Myanmar. Poor or nonexistent education has pushed many to the borderlands.

Of the 100 displacements, 65 were a result of at least one education-related factor, provoking the need to firstly understand poor education and how it directed students to where they are now. Secondly, it lays foundations for appreciating the origins of students’ subjectivity formations in relation to current education.

Figure 11 The gap between external financial needs for education and aid received from UNESCO’s EFA World Monitoring Report 2011 (Myanmar highlighted). Lack of funding for and presence of schools was one reason why students came to Mae Sot or camps to continue education.

In addition to education-related factors, students said they had been displaced not out of choice but out of a need for survival, safety and stability (17 displacements). Other factors presented in the box below.
Continuing education within borders or the same type of space was reported mainly by students who continued education by going from one refugee camp to another where there are pathways into other kinds of post-10 provision (for example a two-year ‘junior college' programme would be delivered in one camp and a complementary senior two-year programme would be delivered in another camp). The driver for this type of migration was parents wanting their children to change from an ethnic to a government school (or vice versa) within Burma, which may have meant living in the same space but unintentionally navigating new surroundings. It also includes students who moved from one camp to another to continue from high school into a post-10 school. In each case students emphasised how the active change from one type of education or curriculum to another was significant in shaping how they value education and how it plays a role in navigating their futures.

Interviewees had often been displaced in the pursuit of post-primary education in Burma due to rural villages often only having primary schools while those who did have access to secondary schools were often priced out of the private system with no public alternative. Thus, many students or their parents made active decisions for youth to move to camps or to Mae Sot directly to continue their education, which is often free:

*My older brother and older sister they quit school before grade 4 and help my parents. I finished grade 8 in a government school and I cannot continue anymore. My parents cannot support me anymore. At that time my uncle was in Mae La so my father suggested if I really want to study I can move, also you will improve English schools also school is not expensive like in Burma.* (Thar Saw, 23 year-old female)

In cases such as Thar Saw’s, parents who cannot afford secondary school send their children to live in Buddhist monasteries, Christian ‘Mission Houses' or orphanages where they access free education, sometimes in return for free labour.

Word of mouth regarding the quality of education in camps led to active displacements to camps to continue education into secondary or post-10 education. This was particularly the case for students who had a KED/KRCEE high school certificate, which is not recognised in Burma but is accepted by ethnic schools in camps as well as post-10 schools in the borderlands. Students understood that moving from a Burmese government school to a KRCEE, KED or other ethnic school would mean sacrificing a recognised qualification but would allow them to gain some
kind of tertiary education and skills development in a relatively more secure environment.

The diversity of education students had received before attending their current post-10 school represents six curricula, a combination of which most students had experienced. Most students had come directly from other post-10 schools across the borderlands. In discussing the drivers to attend, these students emphasised the quality of education in these spaces as being draws, without reference to location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for displacement (/100 displacements)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For education (continued in Burma or camp if they were there before): 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For education (displacement to camp): 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of secondary education in Burma: 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School stops at the end of primary school: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights/war: 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instability of school in Burma: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For education (continued) university: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness: 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is through any displacement, albeit compounded by multiple displacements, that students enhanced their resilience through unintentional actions and bolted on their lived experiences to their extant agency. Through Braidotti’s lens of nomadist subject formations it can be argued that during displacement youth are exposed to new challenges, surroundings and processes which result in renegotiation of identity and affiliations associated with Burma, their community, their state and their relationship with their family. In discussing their ‘past selves’, students actively reflected on how their early displacements influenced their current identity, behaviours, allegiances, ambitions and aspirations. For example, students reflected on the diverse curricula they were exposed to. Moving from government schools which implicitly taught the primacy of Burmans, to schools in the borderlands which taught multi-ethnic perspectives of history was one such transition referred to by students. Students said that they were empowered through education in borderlands which considered the dignity of their ethnic group (usually Karen).

Beyond education, students referred to a range of factors and lived encounters in a mix of spaces which were relatively more smooth or striated and which had influenced who they had become over time. These include examples of factors which build resilience in students and constantly reshaped their sense of agency and
endurance, as defined by Braidotti (2012)) “lasting in time [and] the space of the body as an enfleshed field of actualisation of passions or forces…it means putting up with, tolerating hardship and physical pain” (315). Hardships that influenced students’ perspectives were ongoing conflict or direct harassment of their families which were reasons to move from their villages, often to refugee camps. Students shared stories of land grabbing by the military in Karen state, fear of human rights abuses and a lack of economic opportunity. One student shared the story of how she, her mother and her siblings moved to Mae La camp after her father, a community leader, was killed in front of the community. Another described how the military had destroyed their village, leaving them no choice:

There are soldiers in my mom's village which is known as Black Land who are against Burmese soldiers so it's very dangerous. People are insecure about their lives. That's why my father moved. (Htar San, 23 year-old Karen female)

In reflecting on such experiences, students acknowledged that living through and being affected by conflict and human rights abuses pushed them and their families to relocate and, while their dignity had been compromised prior to and during such abuses, the schools they attended in the borderlands enabled them to find catharsis in exploring the meaning of their experiences and rebuild any sense of lost agency and dignity.

Other students reflected on how their parents had sent them and their siblings to live with relatives or friends in different parts of Burma which were safer. In these cases and others, students placed the role and utility of education as an act of resilience, that it would indirectly equip them to counter injustice they had experienced. Students also agreed that the disconnected relationship between the government and the military was a challenge to education. Aye poignantly summarised this:

I like democracy but in Myanmar we don't have it. Surely, truly we don't have 100% democracy. Because the military is still involved in politics. The government, military and ethnic groups keep signing agreements but they're still fighting. Fighting is a barrier to education. (Aye, 24 year-old Chin female)

Viewing the relationship between conflict and education as Aye did was common amongst students while responding to questions about the political situation in Burma. Although not new, these sentiments represent the emergence of the purpose and design of education as a priority (Maber 2016) to counter striated features in Burma which reproduce hierarchies and consolidate the position of those on the
periphery. The underlying objective for these students is to *smoothen* the striated, or indeed to determine the *nature* of striations, in homelands.

By physically moving and living with people less familiar than direct family members, students were exposed to new challenges as well as to new positive influencers. Many students who had *in loco parentis* noted the positive influence they had on their lives, whether they were teachers, grandparents, uncles or parents’ friends. Ye Yint was sent to Mae La with a soldier he had not met before. Through this experience he said he was taught about the struggle for Karen people which empowered him. At the time he said he was convinced he wanted to join the KNU and fight but through education in Mae La he became aware of the multitude of avenues he could follow to support and advocate for Karen people.

Returning to definitions of youth agency, regardless of age, students had similar reflections about how structures and experiences shaped their responsibilities and trajectories, and it is these which built their understanding of responsibility towards their family, their community and Burma. This chimes with Braidotti (2012) who posits that nomadic subjects are “collectively assembled, externally related and multi-layered” (240) whose identities as well as perceived and felt links to others and the space around them are influenced by responding to their circumstances. Whether students were displaced at the age of five or fifteen, their subjectivities were influenced in similar ways by similar factors.

Rather than assume that students’ capacity to deploy or grow agency depends on the potential “space for manoeuvre available” (Lopes Cardozo et al 2015, 3) to unconsciously develop strategies, the above trend allows me to posit that this definition excludes the possibility that agency develops and interacts with the act of becoming over time and the potential for cumulative self-knowledge to prepare or preempt for future transitions. Students simultaneously develop and deploy their agency when they are prompted to renegotiate identity and priorities, and navigate new spaces and structures, where there is no desirable or possible default to return to. Students therefore are not subjected to an amorphous concept of ‘space for manoeuvre’ in which they decide consciously or unconsciously to activate their agency. Rather, students as nomadic subjects develop their agency through navigating diverse spaces and use previous feelings of displacement (in some cases associated with their impulsive reactions to factors provoking displacement) and
subsequent actions as points of reference to know what they can do.

4.3 Experiences of education: curriculum, quality and teaching style

Reflecting on students' experiences of education during displacement rather than as a pull factor allows for a deeper understanding of the significance of its role in students' narratives about the present as well as about their ambitions and aspirations, and the routes to achieve these. The experience of previous education in Burma (both government and ethnic schools), post-10 schools, camp schools and migrant school shape students' subjectivities on education. Students spoke about the quality of their previous education, often critiquing teaching quality and teacher training and teachers purposefully under-performing to increase students' need to pay for after-school tutoring ("tuition"). They referred to the lack of opportunity to apply what is learned, curriculum content and the disempowering teacher-centred learning in government schools. The exclusion of ethnic histories from curricula and discrimination motivated by ethnic difference influenced ambitions and aspirations. These themes arose organically through workshops and interviews, and are significant; it would be inappropriate to consider what students make of the present and how they imagine their ideal futures without considering the impact of poor education on their subjectivities in the present. In reflecting on the importance of poor previous education we are also able to better understand the fundamental role that education has had at early points in students' trajectories to shape their competencies and influence their becoming.

Conceptions and comparisons of quality were discussed by students and teachers alike. Both generally agreed on what 'good' education is. Students made reference to their previous education through the subjectivity that had been formed through their current education, which followed ‘Western’\(^2\) ethoses and pedagogy.

\(^2\) A term used by participants
In interviews and workshops students noted government schools’ strict nature and the lack of opportunity to develop applicable skills within them. Students navigated features of a striated education system where innovation and flexibility are not possible, due to being subordinate to the dynamics and priorities of a striated country, as determined by a government which knowingly applies rigidity in the name of national unity. One of the most evident ways this is expressed is when comparing the extent to which students find the education they receive useful, applicable or empowering. Htoo, an English teacher at the University of Hpa-An and at the post-10 school where she had improved her English, criticised the government system. She described the stagnating state of education in Burma: “students don’t learn anything they can apply…they want to apply their knowledge”. She values critical thinking and noted the differences in the students whom she teaches in the post-10 school versus those at the university, namely that those in the former learn faster and have an appetite to learn and share opinions, while those at the university are less inclined to learn and engage. Aung who had attended and left a Burmese university agrees, noting that at

_Burmese university…you just come and sign your name and leave. Students don’t attend class. Lots of drinking and smoking in the classroom. Before exams, we study for one month and we pay money to tutors or professors before tests and exams. You can qualify even though you don’t know. If you are an English major you can still qualify if you pay the professor even though you don’t speak English._

Drawing on her experience, Htoo noted that students at both are eager to have relevant, applicable knowledge which the government system, including higher education, fails to provide.

She demonstrates the tensions that exist between recognition and application of skills; the system that offers recognised certificates does not allow for exploring interests through applied, student-centred teaching, while the system that does not
confer recognised certificates does allow for this type of learning, together with innovation and skills application. Students also reflected on this tension. One male Karen student said that “many students are very high level and have been in education for a long time. But they have to go through high school again in Burma if they want to have a recognised qualification and go to university”.

In reflecting on their experiences of attending a combination of smooth and striated education, students expressed a preference for what they referred to as ‘Western-style’ education in their schools. The impact and preference for this was made clear, for example Pwo who had attended a community development-focused post-10 school in Nu Po camp said: "I learned about ethics and human mind and tried to change myself. I try to be positive. I try to change my life in a positive way. I don't try to be Obama, I just try to be a positive person". The smooth elements of this education are inversely related to striated education in Burma which can be described as a line between two points; its direction is subordinate to points which distinguish its trajectory (Guattari 1988, 480). This contrasts with smooth education in borderlands being a point between two lines. In this context, this is interpreted as Burmese education being subject to learning outcomes and pedagogies determined by the government which seeks to prolong extant hierarchies. This is in juxtaposition to smooth education which is measured by how students, as the point, grow, move and react to the student-centred pedagogical approaches and curricula.

Moreover, smooth education was praised because it ran counter to government schools through including ethnic minorities and excluding rote learning. Students judged poor education quality on striated teacher-centred learning which taught them how to read, remember and regurgitate content, without allowing them to apply knowledge. Reflecting on language in post-10 schools and their Western-style approaches, Kyi explained:

“We had different language levels as well but working together and explaining to each other was good [in camp education]. We get to discuss and say and share our opinion - talk about what we think. [school] teaches Western-style and has foreign teachers.

The openness of the approaches in borderlands in particular was complemented by students who discussed the importance of having practical experience in applying skills, as highlighted by Khin Shwe:
When I lived in Burma I knew nothing. Truly from my heart I knew nothing. In camp school we studied computer but we never see. We never use it. We line up to see a teacher use a computer and they tell us how to use it. We will never touch it, we just see it.

Experience within the government system led many students to reflect on the seeming impenetrability of striated Burma in which education encourages a perpetuation of the current system to cement current hierarchies: “When Burmese children get older they have to obey and they don’t know how to think about things openly or to be against things or fight for the right things” Nan Htite. Discussions around this perspective are encouraged in present schools. According to Saw Jew in Hpa-An, who had previously lived in a camp and was undertaking a third qualification at an informal post-10 school:

We talk a lot about our education in school here. We know that our school is better than government school. We can discuss freely. Our teachers are not Burman. We can speak freely about what the government does badly. We have more chances in life afterwards if we do something like [my school]. There are many of these schools in Hpa An now. The skills and quality of education is better than government education. Even if we can’t speak very good English, we are better off and have better skills than university students. We have to learn how to do public speaking but in university they just read and examine, but they are not trained very well, like our school.

This aptly summarises how smooth education even within a striated context can empower students and strengthen their sense of agency. It is telling, too, that Saw Jew prioritises skills and not qualifications.

Beyond skills, students became increasingly aware of their potential through self-exploration and reflexivity: “learning in Western-style makes students brave and willing to participate” (Penapa, Thai teacher).

Teacher quality was also raised as a concern across all types of education. Students linked this directly to lack of teacher training opportunities which they themselves had considered pursuing. Beyond the disparities in pedagogical approaches, poor teaching was cited as being partially the result of undereducated teachers. Htoo Htoo summarised this:

Teachers are not qualified so when they teach students, students only get 80% and when these students finish school and become teachers, the ideas and education become less and less overtime and this will create problems.

Finally, it is important to consider the reflections of female students and students who expressed strong ethnic ties. Ethnic minority students had experienced discrimination in government and ethnic schools. There was a cumulative awareness that both can
be problematic, through curricula as well as due to the behaviour of students and staff. This brings relevance to Bush and Salterelli’s two faces of education model which identifies that education can “have a socially constructive influence on intergroup relations” (Oh and Van der Stouwe 2008, 595) through “authoritarian teaching methods [which] diminish the use and effectiveness of inclusive pedagogical approaches” (Bush and Salterelli 2000). For example, the government history curriculum fetishises Burma’s independence whilst teaching students to dislike non-Burman students and excluding their histories from teaching altogether: “At school they [Burmese] make your ideas change. They only teach one side of history. In Burmese school they don’t teach about the bad things they did to ethnic groups and Burmese children are influenced to think this.” (Twam Khan, 22 year-old Shan female). Some students who attended KRCEE or KED schools reflected on the political nature of the Karen-centric history curriculum; while it empowers students by teaching them about their ethnic history (rather than degrading it in Burmese schools), some teachers teach students to dislike Burmans and this discourages efforts to unite Burma. Similarly, some students said if they were not Karen they were treated differently: “In the camp I felt discrimination since I was young. I am Chin and was in majority Karen school. We learn about Karen history- it was the class I hated most. Other ethnicities are taught as enemies of the Karen. It wasn’t good.” (Aye, 24 year-old Chin female).

Female students used strong language when sharing stories of empowerment in continuing education, often acknowledging that sons have priority and the traditional role of women. While some participants noted that they were fortunate in this regard, others said that it was due to their resilience that their families were convinced to send them to school beyond primary education. Aye said:

I want to work outside and in the house, and I want the same from my husband. Sometimes when I speak to my mother she doesn’t think I will marry Chin. After many educated Chin girls get married they don’t go outside, they don’t work. So their education is useless.

Early marriage and early pregnancy were frequently cited as reasons for girls in particular to stop caring about education: “Parents don’t care if they are adult or not adult. If the boy wants to marry her they can request from her parents. If the parents agree, they force their child to marry.” (Mu Tu, 27 year-old Karen male). Developing a critical lens through which to view stories like this was important according to students and teachers. Their education in Mae Sot encouraged critical reflexivity on gender issues.

In some cases, female participants proudly discussed their parents’ decision to invest in their education. This included sending them to orphanages, paying for their transport to camps and investing in them emotionally and not expecting them to work
in menial jobs. These were often cases in which female students were the eldest in
the family and therefore held a traditionally important role to support parents in
eventually providing for their siblings.

The experience of navigating education as a tool to cement loyalty in government
and ethnic schools was shared. It informed subjectivities and subsequently ambitions
and aspirations, including students’ desire to work in education and more broadly
how they could be thought leaders in the purpose of education in Burma and ethnic
communities. One female student captured this sentiment with regards to
government schools: “The cycle of doing things in Burma isn't changing - we just
keep following the way we do things which doesn't progress the country”.

4.4 Reflections and discussion

In discussing their lived experiences and previous education, students explained how
they had arrived where they were at the time of research logistically and
psychosocially. Their subjectivity, opinion formation and conceptions of how they had
become across displacements, enabled through the dual effect of currently living and
learning in smooth environments show an evolution of agency. Although subjectivities
were formed in similar ways, as per Braidotti, there were subsets of shared aspects
of subjectivity for female students and students whose identities were strongly linked
to ethnicity- particularly if they had to conform to gender norms or to Burman-centric
education. In both cases, students’ identities and perspectives of self-knowledge and
the future were a result of wanting to act counter to what they had experienced and
translated this into seeking dignity as a driver for their trajectories. About Pan
reminds us of one of the significant ways striated Burmese government education
shows its ‘negative face’ regarding shifting identities and perceptions:

_Burmese education influences us so we don't understand what has happened to
Karen people. So many people believe lies after they graduate and will not
understand the differences between ethnicities. They will not think about their people
if they are Karen._

Students were reflexive in how they discussed their own identities changing over
time. Many shared stories of how they became more resilient, empowered and
convinced that continuing education was an act of defiance against social
circumstance, structures and ongoing conflict. It is a strategy which developed in
response to striation in Burma. Opposing conventional structures within Burma by
attending KED/KRCEE schools and pursuing other kinds of knowledge negates the significance of space in one way and heightens it in another. On one hand, students' defiance to continue education and to pursue ‘good’ education, to upskill enough to pursue their ambitions and aspirations is so strong that regardless of space, they are driven to receive better education. On the other hand, space then has a critical role in how it creates factors previously absent from students’ lives. Navigating across these mixed smooth and striated spaces and systems results in diverse tensions students continue to navigate when considering their futures. The experiences which have developed subjectivities, however, also serve to indirectly influence students’ agency as they proceed from displacement to displacement. In displacing themselves they unintentionally continue becoming.

Surviving and thriving across challenging trajectories built resilience and agency with each displacement through having to adapt to changing circumstances, including education. Expressing nomadic behaviours prepare students to identify possible challenges ahead and develop coping strategies. It is in part thanks to their current smooth education in a smooth space that they can reflect on their past selves. In Deleuzian terms, it allows them to imagine their role in smoothening out striations or creating new assemblages of striation.

This chapter provides an important basis to understand how students’ subjectivities and self-knowledge are formed, and how and why they view their present education the way they do, as well as how they conceive their ‘ideal selves’. As has been made evident, students’ experiences of a striated education system in the form of Burmese government education, within a striated space (Burma) creates a collective subjectivity about what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ education look like, and what improvements are necessary in borderlands as well as in Burma. Myo Hla offers a pertinent closing reflection on Burmese education, emphasising the limitations of rote learning and how it has influenced her perception of education:

_There is no space for us to create our ideas. Education is when you don’t need to memorise and when you can create your own ideas. That kind of thing. So they make us learn in the wrong direction. As long as we have to memorise, this is not what we call education._
Chapter 5

Present Selves: What youth have now

When I arrived in Mae Sot I was a very shy person. When I arrived...if I spoke in broken English, they didn't care. They let us learn from our mistakes. They let us be confident and they let us dare to do (B). Also they give us a chance to be a leader even if you don't have experience. Also thinking skills we have to think a lot. X (Female student)

This male student reflected students' collective sentiments when asked about their lives in the present, including what is at the forefront of his mind (A). The quote emphasises the "western-style" education students receive, including encouraging students to display their agency (B).
This chapter outlines the realities of in situ displaced youth to form a basis from which it will be possible to understand how evolving subjectivities inform ambitions and aspirations, thereby continuing to answer RQ1 and laying the foundations for answering RQ2. Markus and Nurius (1986) point to the importance of giving attention to the ‘present’ self as a way of analysing self-knowledge before considering ‘the nature and function of possible selves’. They say that we have current self-concepts which derive from

“the set of self-conceptions that are presently active in thought and memory’ and which ‘can be viewed as continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge [which] changes as individuals experience variation in internal states and social circumstances” (957).

Markus and Nurius discuss the importance of recent experiences in shaping how we interpret our present and how these cumulatively influence how we conceptualise our ‘ideal selves’.

Arriving at a post-10 school in Mae Sot or at a camp is one of many moments of renegotiating identity and priorities, influenced by previous experience; it is another experience which continues students’ becomings. It is necessary to understand the changing and diverse role of education in this process. Regardless of students’ route into schools, the act of continuing education in unrecognised (“illegal” as several students said) non-formal education has its own implications and potential to directly and indirectly redirect trajectories.

This section summarises experiences of post-10 education, the indirect implications of living in smooth spaces and the part these play in students' becoming and agentic development. In seeking to continue answering RQ3, it begins by discussing the education students receive, how and what they learn, as well as reflections on education in the borderlands versus education in Burma. It continues by sharing how students have adapted, what they have had to adapt to and how their identities as students create a dynamic with the space they inhabit and the security they feel. Finally, this chapter concludes by outlining students’ current concerns which influence their decisions. Included are references to semi-structured interviews, drawings and responses to questionnaires.
5.1 Education

Education in the borderlands is a symptom of striations in Burma. In its design and delivery it is a response to what striations limit; the absence of parity of esteem afforded to those living on the periphery who attend government schools. Smoothness is therefore driven by a need to counter hierarchies in Burma which result in students’ perennial state of liminality.

The role of education for in situ displaced youth is clear. It provides them with structured and relatively secure environments which are of good quality and worth the investment of time and risk. Moreover, qualifications gained at these schools can unlock opportunities in borderlands and possibly beyond. A local teacher said “if young people continue to stay in the camp, their hopes end in the camps. If they have dreams and goals outside of the camps their lives will be very good”. Coming to Mae Sot as a ‘third way’ for students in camps (as opposed to remaining in camps while rations decrease or returning to Burma to an uncertain future) allows them to be in a relatively more secure context to consider their futures. It is a stop-gap wherein they “equivocate and construct multiple identities to help them deal with the reality of their lives lived very much in limbo” (Chatty 2007; 273).

Not all students had the aspiration to come to Mae Sot or to become experts in community development, the focus of many post-10 schools. As one foreign teacher said, Mae Sot “isn't somewhere students think for years 'when I get to the right age I want to go to one of these schools'. They are living day by day so when it comes to the end of what they’re doing they think 'what do we do next' so they apply to anything they can so they can stay”. Rather, they arrive through unintentional action. This summarises the approaches of nomadic subjects who are navigating their self-concept in a smooth space. Deleuze reminds us that rather than putting value judgments on smooth and striated assemblages, we must consider smooth space as accommodating changes to behaviour rather than directing it: “the smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches and adversaries” (Deleuze and Guattari; 500). This is the case in Mae Sot which is haptic rather than optical for the students (479); they are feeling within it and exploring as a point between lines, rather than seeing its structure and being defined by its limits. In so doing, students are gauging who they are and what they want next.
Three of the post-10 schools offer programmes which students pursue in part to
develop skills and in part to pursue a qualification which is not recognised outside of
the borderlands. These cover community development (Minmahaw and Wide
Horizons) and hospitality training (Youth Connect). MHEP, the only school to offer a
recognised qualification, teaches the American General Education Diploma (GED)
which enables students to apply to university. The former three schools deliver multi-
ethnic curricula developed either by the school staff or by one of three curriculum
development organisations operating in the borderlands. All schools develop
students’ creative thinking and problem solving skills through student-centred
learning delivered by local and foreign teachers. To varying degrees, they all implicitly
seek to help students develop and apply agency and become agents of change in
the borderlands and in Burma.

Wide Horizons and Youth Connect offer the most vocationally-focused programmes.
The latter delivers a two-year community development programme which involves
students studying four subjects, including ‘community development’ which teaches
students about the processes involved in developing communities through applying
skills in community development scenarios (Wide Horizons website accessed
December 2016). Youth Connect teaches hospitality and language subjects over nine
months and includes a placement and work experience at the guesthouse which
hosts their classes (Youth Connect website accessed December 2016). Minmahaw
teaches a range of subjects which prepares students for tertiary education
programmes (Minmahaw website accessed December 2016). Five traits are shared
amongst all schools: equal gender split, mixed ethnicities, all are boarding, all teach
English, and all but MHEP include internships.

Students and teachers alike were supportive of ‘Western-style’ education which puts
“asking why at the centre of education” (Foreign teacher), critical and creative
thinking and problem solving skills at the heart of what is taught and how. In addition,
participating schools apply multi-ethnic approaches, aided by curricula developed by
NGOs on the border. A member of staff at a funding agency said:

*Contextual relevance makes a good programme. The programmes that are run here
are contextually specific. [They take] into account students’ prior leaning experience-
and their styles of learning. They may not have had formal schooling, it may have*
been disrupted and this can change the engagement with content. The content they learn about is relevant.

Although there is firm support for current post-10 teaching practices and curricula, the landscape of the post-10 education is not without its challenges, namely funding, teacher training and lack of diversity of options, as reported by participants (discussed in the Conclusion).

Students were eager to express the transformative nature of their education through the skills and knowledge they experienced through present smooth education which run counter to government schools. Zaw, a 23 year-old male Karen student who had been displaced four times and had attended government schools in Karen State and KRCEE schools in Mae La camp explained:

*I have learned about how to make friends and how to communicate with our community. Especially when you have researched something and you discuss with other people and there are disagreements. Being able to disagree and agree. Disagreements are not bad. Disagreements come out with new ideas. Like arguments also come out with other ideas. Here we [have] different backgrounds, belief, cultures...I have learned a lot from that.*

This student spoke of the soft-skills which accompany smooth education. Dealing with disagreements, learning about nuanced communication and other perspectives are all embedded in the approaches of non-formal education in the borderlands.

Workshop participants shared a maximum of five words they associated with their current education. The majority\(^3\) chose up to five individual words rather than providing a descriptive sentence. Workshop participants contributed 227 descriptive words from which five themes arose:

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\(^3\) Nine of the 63 students included full sentences which were not possible to code with the remaining 54. Some of these phrases are included elsewhere in this thesis.
Figure 12 Themes mentioned by students in response to ‘what five words describe your current education? (% out of 227 terms)

Over 40% of words related to skills (31 words repeated over 111 instances), most of which resonated with the objectives of the programmes involved (leadership, management, collaborative working and proposal writing skills). Most striking, perhaps, is that these are skills that students and teachers alike said added more capacity than the curricula of government schools and universities. This finding notes the tension between skills gained and the recognition of qualifications, particularly for students attending the schools other than MHEP.

When disaggregating communication skills, 39% of all students associated their programme with improving English language which was cited as the top communication skill and the top individual term. This is unsurprising given that all programmes involved are taught in English and provide English language classes. This also resonates with Maber’s finding that the youth are stronger at English in the borderlands whereas “those educated in Myanmar systems were stronger in maths and hard sciences [which] provides a summary of the divergent education landscapes and resultant subject formations” (385).

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4 This includes Youth Connect students whose curriculum does not include a distinct focus on leadership, management or proposal writing skills. If considering them on their own, main skills they cited were cooking and life skills.
The top 11 terms overall were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>% of students who mentioned these terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management skills</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with other people</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Experience</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal writing</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13 top 11 terms students associated with their current education

Also noteworthy is that over 35% of students mentioned self-confidence. This was cited by education professionals as one of the objectives of education in the borderlands, noting the difficult educational and life trajectories many had experienced. This could be one (crude) measure of agentic growth. The multi-ethnic and gender-inclusive approach taken by education counters what exists in government, and to an extent ethnic, education.

The successful role post-10 schools play in developing students’ capacity to support community development also emerged. The content of and pedagogical approaches within these schools necessarily run counter to striated education within Burma and are driven by the needs of communities affected by conflict. The content of the curricula in the borderlands therefore encourages a multi-ethnic perspective which will enable students to empower their communities to counter dominant perspectives which seek to maintain their position on the periphery. Oh and van der Stouwe summarise this:

To address attitudes and political-nationalistic ideas, dialogue and negotiation must challenge the current education environment and the traditional perspectives of the dominant group.

75
Zeus (2011) encourages this line of thinking, and posits that higher education should be used to empower refugees to think of themselves beyond being passive victims. Based on students’ narratives and having observed them in diverse settings within and outside of schools, I find relevance in Zeus’ conclusions, particularly when she writes that “higher education could be a tool to further reverse the narrative as the refugee as a passive victim and help shape a new narrative of refugees as agents of their own and their communities’ development, and as such act as a subversion of power structures from within…” (272).

Returning to skills, Zeus discusses the role of higher education as a tool to help “bridge the gap between relief and development” by “building refugees’ capacity and self-reliance” (264) to actively participate and run community initiatives. Funders are justified in considering the “immediate in terms of the longer-term” (Pigozzi 1999, 19), although the ‘longer-term’ for participants, schools and CSOs is uncertain (see Conclusion).

To shape the new narrative Zeus describes and for students to want to return to Burma, they are taught critical thinking skills which involve developing reflectiveness and reflexivity. Through this they continue to navigate their identities and their place in relation to spaces with which they interact and have interacted. Chatty writes that it is important for displaced youth to simultaneously have a sense of being different and the same “of belonging and of being excluded” (Chatty 2007, 274) in order to develop a self-conception of where students are currently, where they have been and where they might return to. Through achieving these, in returning to Burma the expectation is that students will “restructure political relationships…with a view to ensuring a more equitable future” (Bradley 2013, 105) and ultimately smoothen the striated elements.

Returning to narratives allows us to consider the role of education and how knowledge and skills interrelate. Students rarely discussed their current education without making reference to how it differed from previous education. Thiri 24 year-old male Karenni student who had been displaced six times said “teaching is different [in Mae Sot], they give students’ ideas and questions and then…what you think you can write” compared with the Burmese education system, which a KRCEE staff member described as “…not support creativity. Skills [in Burma] are very low. Even if you
graduate from school you don't know anything”. 26 year-old Karen male student Ye Yint said of Burmese education “we can think our own opinion...we might have many answers for one questions but in Burma we can only use one answer, the answer the teacher taught”.

The lack of opportunity to reflect and think laterally in government schools gave students an appreciation for the skills they gain at present, even if the qualifications they are pursuing are not recognised. Speaking supportively of his current studies, a 23 year-old male, whose ambition is to support the KNU said that, in Burmese government school,

…if I can't solve a math question in homework and I tell the teacher I can't do it he beats me and doesn't tell me the answer. In tests we have to write every word correctly, even if you say something similar you get marks taken off. In the camp it is more flexible.

This is echoed by 24 year-old Than Din, currently studying post-10 in Hpa-An who said “we know that our school is better than government school. We can discuss freely. Our teachers are not Burman. We can speak freely about what the government does badly. Even if we can't speak very good English, we are better off and have better skills than university students”.

The experience of strictness, rote and teacher-centred learning in a striated education led students to link the education system to the lack of progress in Burma. A 23 year-old male Karen student who had attended Burmese government schools and had fled with his family to Mae La, said “many who go through government schools they have the thinking of the military”. This sentiment was also attributed to the teaching of history. In discussing history and peace-building education two KRCEE staff who were current students in Nu Po camp said of their camp education

we are lucky, even though we live in a refugee camp. We have a chance to learn about conflicts, genocides...this is useful for us. It's good that we have different ethnicities and minorities in class, we have open discussion with each other and share experiences (male student) and the government controls a lot. No one knows the real history of Myanmar. When we compare this education with the education in camps - they open our minds. We know what happened with our people, our history, what we are going through, what we have been through (KRCEE female staff member).

Two opinions of education in Mae Sot appropriately summarise and distinguish Burmese government and current education. Twam Kham, a 29 year old Shan male
said that “teaching in [my post-10 school] is different. They give students ideas and questions and then…what you think you can write”. This resonates with how students discussed the communication skills they gained which were useful and empowering. Implicitly, developing critical thinking skills in this way allowed students to build their agency, which Bo, a male Karen student based in Nupo camp reflected on: “students have to learn for themselves, through their environment. They have to think and create. They have to be active”.

Students develop in Mae Sot through education and, whatever their trajectory, they adapt to the new environment around them. They become through navigating new education and living environments.

**5.2 Current navigations and decision-making**

Whether students have come to their post-10 school through choice or circumstance, those who had been physically displaced have had to navigate new challenges which shaped their ambitions and aspirations. The smooth space in which students’ study and live comes with its own striations, restrictions and limitations which shape who they want to become and their perceptions of possible trajectories to achieve this.

Students said there was greater stability and security in the borderlands than in Burma proper, but that this was relative. Some students spoke of the absence of an immediate fear of a military presence while there was still fear of being arrested for not having legal status. Others relished the relative freedom in Mae Sot and spoke of going to the mall and to the market but still acknowledged that their situation was fragile and that political change in Burma or Thailand could have an impact. These are examples of how students respond to new striations in a smoother space than Burma; they are conscious of new possible limitations to navigate to achieve their ambitions and aspirations. Ultimately, Mae Sot affords students more dignity and security than Burma. This significant difference loosens the limitations for what students can do in the present and how they can think about their futures.

Striations allow them to pursue education which builds their skills and sense of purpose, but subject them to ever-changing rules and regulations for migrants and require evidence of legal status in Thailand. Teachers and students alike commented that it is challenging to remain apprised of changing rules for Burmese residents of
Mae Sot which one Karen Pastor described as a ‘Burmese city’. This was made by the disagreements between the narratives of local, Thai and foreign staff members. While one foreign teacher said that news affecting Burmese residents was communicated through trucks with megaphones, a foreign member of staff at a funding agency noted that

*I find it quite difficult to stay on top of what the police are asking for. [ID cards held by migrant teachers] gives them some leverage when they meet police or checkpoints… they can teach in a school in a certain area but they’re not allowed to leave that area. Then you see when the national rangers are in town, they don’t recognise those cards because they’re not national issue.*

The changes to local rules set in place by the local government and police are not aligned with national government policy and soft tensions between the two result in crack downs and mass deportations (for example in 2003 and in 2016). It seems the flexibility of changing practices and inconsistencies at national and local level have resulted in smooth and striated ‘rules’ for quite some time. Writing in 1994, Harris notes that

*…the application of Thai policy varies from group to group, from area to area, and from time to time. Although national policymakers may lay down the rules, at the local level application of those rules becomes much more nuanced, depending upon the attitude of local authorities… a swinging door has emerged, whereby words are not necessarily matched by action and vice versa.*

Although these changes are infrequent, migrants are aware that they are at risk of. Interviewees generally agreed that the authorities in Mae Sot allowed students to cross the border, to live in Mae Sot and to attend schools with little active resistance, but this doesn’t diminish the threat they face. Such threats shape students’ subjectivities as nomads. One male who had lived in a Karen camp before moving to Mae Sot said that “sometimes we cannot go out into Mae Sot even with our ID. Staff have to follow- same if we go to market. Before we used to be able to go around Mae Sot but then they caught students so now we need staff. It became more difficult in the last three months”. This was complemented by a KRCEE member of staff who said that although it is easier to get passports and ID, “the Thai government is becoming more strict. They want the population to be reduced. They will arrest students if they see them outside of their dorm”.


ID featured as a theme at the forefront of students’ minds, and as a factor which influences what they can do in the present and what may be possible in the future. The ID students discussed included documents which would allow them to live in Thailand, and Burma-specific documents including birth certificates and passports. While the former were necessary to remain in Thailand legally, the latter were necessary to apply to university and to apply to the former.

Teachers said some students didn’t have birth certificates and of those, some no longer had parents and therefore assumed what their ages and names were. In this vein, some students expressed that their ages were ‘about 22’ (See A) and that they had changed their names based on their cultural surroundings by choice or by an authority. One female Karen student was told to change her Burmese name to a Skaw Karen name by a teacher at a KED migrant school in Mae Sot who determined what it should be. In her quote, she raises the potential a feature of the negative face of education, that dignity and intricacies of identity can be eroded:

I didn't understand Paw Karen (I am Skaw Karen). I experienced discrimination because of the language difference. Sometimes I felt weak. I ignored it though. I knew I came to Mae Sot for my education so I kept going. The school coordinator changed our names to Karen names because he didn't like Burmese names. Our certificates are in the new names. I have different names. He loves his ethnic group and didn't think about the impact on us. He did it because he doesn't like the military regime and he loves his people.

Figure 14 Examples of questionnaires with assumed ages of participants
The effect an ID or lack of ID can have on students’ decision-making is a current concern. Students knew that at any moment their status in Thailand could be compromised which could result in relocating to Burma or to camps. The most evident way in which ID was considered was when students discussed the likelihood of attending university. While having a recognised qualification was the primary requirement, students noted being ‘legal’ or having an ID would be necessary to unlock higher education opportunities.

Students often said “if I can go to university I will”. Those who wanted to work in Thailand reflected on the need for ID to do so. In the present, students are anxious about their futures and the need for ID while being confident in how to navigate ambiguous circumstances; their day to day lives continue as they are, with or without ‘legal’ status via their ID or lack thereof.

Qualification recognition and the quality of education in the borderlands were prominent themes. This includes whether they feel they need to continue education, to what jobs or internships they should apply, and the extent to which they are motivated to complete their studies. The latter of these was appropriately summarised by the female KRCEE member of staff “I am upset for refugee children because camp education is not recognised... they are depressed about education, they don't feel cared about. Even though they graduate they cannot find their work. They say that they will have to end their future in camp”. A former student and current teacher agreed and put the onus on governments: “if the governments do not recognise our education they cannot have hope for us, students cannot have hope. What will we do? Some quit their education in the middle because they don’t have hope”.

Losing hope had not yet happened to participants, but there was a clear understanding of the challenges regarding qualification recognition. One female Christian Chin student poignantly said “if you get something you have to lose something. You get a qualification but illegal certificate. But if you don't have legal certificate you can’t get a job in Burma”.

Other factors influencing students’ decisions included:
• The state of politics in Burma (A; B; C; Figure 15a)
• Families’ wellbeing, state of poverty and location (D; Figure 15a) (A; B; Figure 15b)
• Conflict in the country as a whole and in their states of origin (A; B; Figure 15a)
• Potential changes in camp regulations which may influence families to resettle in Burma
• Potential changes to recognition of non-formal qualifications.
• Difficulties of living in Thailand (C; Figure 15b)
Figures 15a and 15b Students’ visual representation showing motivations for ambitious and aspirations

5.3 Reflections and discussion

Students are relatively secure and stable in Mae Sot. This is characterised by smooth features which create an environment for the creation and fostering of a loosely connected education ecosystem which delivers student-centred post-10 education predicated on the need to build capacity amongst youth living physically and societally on the periphery. Students promoted their education saying it empowered them and built an understanding of their capabilities and how to convert their innate and learned skills into outcomes. While students were positive about their current education they were open about the multifarious pressures and challenges they faced which interact with how they think about the future. This gave me insights into their states of minds and of becoming at this juncture as well as during previous moments when they were faced with competing priorities and challenges. In living in Mae Sot and unintentionally, unconsciously navigating striations they deploy and build their agency. In combination, appreciating the conditions increases understanding how, as rational actors, students deploy their agency in envisaging
their futures, and presuppose how they might have to adapt and activate their agency in the future to navigate the routes to these futures.

It is important to understand how agency has been built and deployed whilst students have faced previous pressures to survive and thrive in new environments and education systems. Through navigating pressures in diverse striated spaces, students have expressed nomadic tendencies to develop and express their agency. The relative smoothness of Mae Sot and their current education give them a moment to collectively breathe and find a new hybrid identity in the form of a co-constructed culture in which, although trajectories have been different, students bond over their collective need to identify coping mechanisms to thrive and navigate similar current challenges. This does not introduce the possibility of generalising about their lives or trajectories, but it does allow for a deeper understanding of the possible barriers they collectively face and how they plan to cope with these. Biehl and Locke (2010) write about fluctuations in identity and priorities in post-war Sarajevo and how scars of the past are creating renewed resolve. In speaking about the population at-large, they discuss this sense of shared experience amounting to empathy and solidarity:

*we have a responsibility to think of life in terms of both limits and crossroads—where new intersections can sometimes, against all odds, propel unexpected futures (317).*

This forms part of their shared understanding of the nature of the route ahead of them, amounting to my conception of ‘steps and gusts’ which describes possible experiences and identifiable ways in which students build and deploy agency. The thought experiment below was provoked by students’ language of ‘step by step’ and Deleuze’s cartographic approaches which “make space for possibility, what could be, as a crucial dimension of what is or what was. It brings crossroads—places where other choices might be made, other paths taken—out of the shadow of deterministic analytics” (323).

A student is walking down a path, step by step, towards what they perceive to be their goal. They can see alternative paths to the same goal and alternative paths to lesser goals (compromises). As they advance, they are aware of the strength and nature of the gusts which may affect their trajectory. Gusts can knock them off course or be challenging and cut through along their original route. With reference to the latter two, the student uses their agency from the present moment (an accumulated set of coping mechanisms, tools to navigate, and capacity to determine potential
consequences of challenges defined as zero-sum games) to calculate the impact the
gusts could have and plan alternative routes to the same goal, or new routes to new
goals altogether. Through their lived experiences, the student is aware of possible
gusts, and can estimate their potential impact.

As they decide to advance - the first layer of deploying agency, the student
reconfigures their routes depending on how obstructive the gusts are or appear to
be. The student uses their agency (a second layer) to overcome these gusts to stay
on track or use it to proceed down the next ‘good enough’ route, always moving
forward, always informed by what they have experienced.

As prominent challenges, qualifications recognition and ID are potential gusts which
can knock them off course: university may no longer be an option if qualifications are
not recognised which means students might look to gain more work experience to
compensate or find alternate routes to enter university, for example by finding other
post-10 education programmes in which to enrol. This may also give them more time
to view changes in Burma to determine whether they wish to move back. Similarly,
not having legal documents allowing students to remain in Thailand means they must
go to Burma or camps once they finish their programme. As result, they may try to
identify ways to stay in the smooth space studying or working illegally until they
obtain ID which allow them to work legally in Thailand.

At this point students are simultaneously becoming through the present and are
determining their next points. Drawing on Jolliffe and South (2015), they have “well-
developed coping strategies” (2012) informed by what they have experienced and
counter the view that they are “powerless to look after themselves and grateful for
whatever help is given” (Preston 1995, 34). On the contrary, they are activating their
agency in rationally conceiving their ideal selves.

In discussing the multitude of goals students discussed, and the factors which
influence these positively and/or negatively, the next chapter consolidates the
thought experiment above before delving into it in more detail in Chapter 7.
Chapter 6

Ideal selves: Ambitions and aspirations of displaced youth and the factors and motivators which influence them

*I don’t want people to keep coming to Thailand. I want to bring my education and my skill home so I can build a school so they don’t have to come to Thailand.* – Mu Tu, 23 year old male

Chapters 4 and 5 provided insights into students’ past and present selves, through their own words. Having identified the multifarious and simultaneous challenges they face, including those experienced through education, it is now appropriate to indulge students in their narratives about their conceptions of their ‘ideal’ selves. As discussed in Chapter 2, ideal selves are a subset of possible selves which are imagined, possible realities students are motivated to pursue or avoid: “they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 1986, 954)

Ideal selves are translations of self-knowledge from the past and present into what students would like to be, experience and have. Mu Tu’s quote above captures the shared sentiment that students’ end-goals are often to build skills and empower communities in Burma, informed by experiences which have shaped students’ subjectivities. Students’ conceptions are grounded in a sense of reality, rationality and subjective interpretations of their past experiences. The component parts of what makes a ‘possible self’ ‘ideal’ are not defined by Markus and Nurius. This has allowed for the emergence of five categories of ambitions and aspirations, and nine influencing factors (grouped into five themes), identified through students’ narratives. Continuing the thought experiment in 5.3, these can be considered as known gusts; factors which are either currently blowing students in a direction or are known to await them. Figure 16 is a necessarily complex diagram which demonstrates, through coloured lines, which categories of ambitions and aspirations are influenced by what factors.

This chapter builds on the previous two and discusses how past and present experiences influence students’ ambitions and aspirations. It completes the answers to RQ 1 and 2 by discussing the dialogue between lived experiences and ambitions and aspirations, complemented by examples of visual outputs from workshops. Further, it strengthens the answer to RQ3 through evidencing the impact of education
on ambitions and aspirations, both as a motivating factor and as an ambition. This chapter begins by exploring the influencing factors, followed by a discussion of the ambitions and aspirations which arose organically. Each category has its own section and includes a category-specific diagram. Due to the number of interconnections, each ambition-focused section highlights the major themes in the body, complemented by a concluding summary table.

Figure 16 outlines the relationship between ambitions and aspirations and the factors which influence and shape them.

6.1 Nine influencing factors

6.1.1 State and location of family as an influencing factor

Students wanted to avoid replicating their parents' lives and emphasised social mobility, family wellbeing and where they wanted to live as motivators.

Almost all students said they wanted to work near their families. This meant that some students were comfortable for their work to be dependent on family location now and in the future. This was the same for students’ whose families were in Burma, camps and/or Thailand. Students who were most certain of attending
university did not prioritise being near their families during their studies, and prioritised education above their families' immediate needs. This was due to their perception that there was a line of sight between doing what was necessary to attend university, attending university, getting a 'good' job and a salary with which to support family which would be higher than they may could get immediately after the completion of their current studies.

Students felt under pressure to provide for their families, namely through remittances. For some, this pressure was so great that they would work directly after studying.

The desire to send remittances was often justified by the support students had received from family to continue education, as well as current conditions parents were in. One student hoped to work after her current course as a result of her family's financial circumstances; "I do want to continue education but my family has debts to pay and I want to help them so I have to stop education", while the oldest participant reflected on his role vis a vis his ageing parents who had been affected by civil war; I want to have a high salary and help them so they can have a peaceful future...before they die.

Although not all parents or family members supported participants' education, those who did, encouraged them because of the assumed financial return students would get in future jobs. For 15/21 students, supporting family was a short-term goal, while for the other 6 it was short-term. Of the workshop groups who discussed family, 11/13 reported supporting family through remittances as a longer-term priority.

6.1.2 Political context, community and conflict as influencing factors

All students in interviews, and 45/63 drawings, alluded to the political situation and ongoing conflicts in Burma as factors which influence where students want to live, with whom, with what job, how they want to feel and what skills they need.

Students were unsympathetic towards the elected civilian government and perceived it, and Aung San Suu Kyi, as being under the influence of the military, ignoring the difficulties facing minority ethnic groups and neglecting the refugee and displaced populations. 3/21 students said they didn’t think she could do more than she has
tried to do, while the 18 others and most workshop participants said they were not confident that she would follow through with the empowering words she used and the commitments she made during the NLD’s election campaign. Most students said that military presence and lack of political change persuaded them to wait and see whether the context improved. Others wanted to shape and accelerate the slow pace of change. These students wanted to return either to actively support the peace building process by finding ways to mediate or to remove the military, or to “defend my people”, referring to ethnic communities whom the civilian government is failing to protect against persistent land grabbing and localised violence. Female student Aye Mya’s discussed how progress and human rights are at stake if education isn’t used to shape Burma differently:

*I want to give my community the opportunity to learn how to think the right way, instead of them continuing to follow the many. We have to educate them. I have seen many people who really need help.*

Students in interviews and in workshops said that a more rapid resolution to political conflict or increased tensions would influence what they decided to do in the medium-term. If conflict escalates between Burmese military and ethnic armed groups, students are less likely to trust the Burmese government and peacebuilding attempts and will seek to remain in borderlands or to settle in third countries. Whereas, if clear steps were taken to deescalate tensions through meaningful peace agreements, students were more likely to see a future in Burma. There were exceptions to these views, with some considering the former scenario as a motivator to return to support ethnic armed groups.

It was clear that despite the hurdles to return to Burma to support stability-building efforts, students were motivated to support their communities as a result of experiencing exclusion from and feeling the negative consequences of politics. The loss of the ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt 1968) and the lack of opportunity to undertake meaningful political action were discussed in workshops, provoking debates about the most effective ways of supporting communities to become self-reliant versus pursuing jobs which directly challenge the political structure; the difference between wanting to teach villagers about health and hygiene versus working for an ethnic government (see Chapter 7). Pwo, a Karen student reflected on this tension, favouring supporting his community before sending his family remittances:
Even though my family want me to work to send money home. I want to work to help my community as a politician. My community is Karen people. I want to help Karen people overcome and solve the problems they face from civil war.

6.1.3 Job availability/accessibility and legal status as influencing factors

I have to think a lot- we are not citizens in Thailand so it will be difficult to buy land or to be a businessman in Thailand. I would have to do this in Burma but I don't want to go back. – Maying Tun

Students were aware that they hold quasi-legal status in Mae Sot. This affects how they consider where they hope to live in the future, what jobs they might have access to, how they want to feel and the extent to which pursuing further education is feasible. Often the jobs students wish to have are informed by their current legal status and how possible to gain legal status. Although many students wanted to stay in Thailand for the short-term, students expressed that this would only be possible if they had legal status, which could be achieved through continuing education.

Accessibility to jobs in Thailand and Burma influenced their rationality when discussing the future. Through word of mouth students hear about difficulties to work by members of their community in Burma as well as in Thailand. Rumours about low pay, lack of employment opportunities and poor conditions in Burma dissuade students from looking for work in Burma in the short-term. This is a view shared by students on both sides of the border. Students in Hpa-An noted that although it has a growing education ecosystem and non-formal education opportunities, new graduates often move to Yangon to work in low paid jobs.

6.1.4 Education as an influencing factor

As discussed in Chapter 5, students’ perceptions of government education in Burma are negative. Their experiences of education influence what jobs they want (many in education), and develop hopes of influencing education policy to recognise camp and border education so that they can continue education in Burma if they return, or continue education in a third country. Quality, curriculum and language of instruction were specific facets students want to influence through work. While qualification recognition is important for students, many cited the absence of dignity and utility, and the presence of irrelevant or discriminatory curriculum content in Burma, as motivators for pursuing non-formal education. These were also cited as facets
students hoped to change by working in education directly (eg as a teacher) or indirectly (eg in education policy).

Some granular motivations included wanting to build secondary schools in their villages to avoid the need for students to stop education at grade four or for parents to send their children to camp (“Many children in Burma have lost their chance to study, especially in my Karen State. There is a lot of fighting and many people who are illiterate are not really educated, haven’t had a chance to go to school. I really want to build a school or library”), supporting ethnic governments to have ethnic curricula become recognised by the authorities (“I would like to negotiate with Burmese government in order to recognise Karenni education system”) and training teachers to adopt a student-centred approach to teaching.

6.1.5 Lived experience as an influencing factor

In sharing their stories, students discussed in detail how what they had seen, felt and experienced had led them to be displaced and, in combination with the education they had received across multiple displacements, these influenced what they did and did not want in the future regarding how they want to feel and where they want to be. Seeing their parents’ lives and what they had sacrificed for participants and their siblings to have a good life (in many cases including leaving their parents) was a significant driver for students to want more secure futures and non-agriculture based jobs. Students also spoke of being exposed to human rights abuses and poverty, living in a context where it isn’t feasible to continue education and receiving poor education and constructing these as drivers to experience a life that is void of them.

6.2 Five categories of ambitions and aspirations

6.2.1 Education as an ambition

Almost all students in group discussions, interviews and through their drawings included the desire to improve their skills and level of education and to improve education and skills development in Burma.

The principal benchmark for success for many students was going to university, regardless of whether their qualifications were internationally recognised. Continuing
education was usually justified in its potential to accelerate social mobility through having the skills and knowledge to attain a well-paid or high-impact community-focused job. Some saw skills as ends in themselves and others as a means to an end. For example, former student and current teacher Poe who was applying to university said that studying Social Sciences at the Asian Women’s University would allow her to “understand the country situation better, what is happening in our Burma, how it can change and how we can make it better”. Aye Mya whose brother was attending university in the US said that it would take her more than 8 years to obtain the ideal amount of education to give back to her community: “I want to continue to do a Masters if I can. And also if I can I want to do a PhD. My friends say I’m crazy and that it can’t happen. I never think like that. My brother tried and he proved it… I can do it”. A principal tension arises here between the ambition to attend university, and what schools are preparing students for. As per Chapter 2, two schools are vocationally focused and prepare students for specific jobs, yet many of their students wished to go to university.

In considering whether to continue education, as well as what type, students have to navigate the potential and relative value of pursuing education for skills or for recognised qualifications and how these interact with jobs they would like to pursue. All students who wished to continue education beyond their current programme said university was their optimal next step, apart from one student who wanted to attend a vocational school focusing on agriculture in Chiang Mai. They know, however, that without recognised qualifications they cannot achieve this, resulting in many wishing to attend MHEP to gain a GED qualification, or to follow one of the Australian Catholic University’s Associate Degree programmes. There is some irony in students wishing to pursue jobs in community development in relatively smooth spaces in Southeast Burma, being trained in community development to a very high standard and subjectively identifying that a university education is necessary to have the optimum impact on their community. As one funding agency manager said, “I haven’t heard of a student saying that their sibling who works in a camp gained their job because of or due to a lack of qualifications from a university… I’m not sure what the value of the piece of paper from university is in getting a job in places students want to support.” Eventually obtaining an internationally recognised qualification was viewed as the key to exiting poverty, building skills and having greater capacity to support their communities, despite the amount of time away from their communities attending university may require.
Beyond these tensions, students also placed continuing education as a strategy to remain in a relatively secure and stable environment for a period during which they could observe changes in Burma and in camps from the periphery. One foreign teacher aptly posited “going to school is just something to do. They want education to get them somewhere. The top students see it as a way to do something like to try to go to university abroad because they know they can get scholarships”. A male Karen student currently completing a programme in Nupo camp agreed, saying that students “can’t apply knowledge they learn so they keep learning. No one can determine for them what they should do next. They have the capability to decide what to do next. People want the chance to apply their knowledge”.

![Figure 17: Education and skills as a category of ambitions and aspirations and its influencing factors](image)

**Summary table: Factors influencing education and skills as an ambition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>How they influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to support family financially</td>
<td>More likely to work immediately after completing their current programme to send remittances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political context and ongoing conflict</td>
<td>Returning to Burma may be deemed to be unsafe and so remaining in the borderlands to continue education is seen as a rational strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Students pursuing the GED know they can be admitted to university if they pass. Students on other programmes likely to want to pursue the GED in the future or ACU courses to eventually gain entry into a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>If students wish to stay in Thailand and wait to see how Burma changes but don't have legal status, they may wish to continue having a pseudo-legal status through studying at another post-10 school; If they don't have a passport or legal status it isn't possible to apply to university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job availability</td>
<td>Perceptions of jobs and their requirements in Burma, Thailand and the borderlands influence what and how much education students think they need.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.2 What job(s) students want to have

Even though I am not going to be a soldier, if I become educated I can do things for my community in another way, not only through fighting. I can do things like teach students about politics. – (Myo Hla, 23-year-old Shan male)

It became clear early in the research that students were considering their future careers and were making decisions based on how they believed they would achieve their ideal jobs. Most students disclosed multiple job interests and the trajectories to achieve those.

For students who wanted to move back to Burma, there was a clear link between the political situation and the jobs they wanted. Many identified that they wanted jobs which would support their communities, though this was interpreted differently. Some students said this meant defending their communities and working for ethnic administrations (a result perhaps of KRCEE/KED ethnocentric education), whereas others were motivated to bring more cross-ethnic peace education back to Burma or to work in a mediating role or organisation to bring all of Burma together. Either way, the gulf between where their communities were in terms of development, freedom from military threat and availability of resources and where students wanted them to be was great, and a motivator. Oh and Van Der Stouwe (2008) take the view that it is “difficult for the refugees to control the development of their own society” (590) due to restrictions on movement across the border. I posit that this is a challenge for which students are developing the confidence and agency to overcome, in part through their current education. Indeed, students couched their rhetoric about jobs in the political context which was motivating them to think about specific careers; for example, one male student who produced this visual response, vividly noting his desire to work for the NLD (Figure 18; A) and mediate between the government and the military (Figure 18; B):
Most students wanted to work in education, principally as teachers. Many noted the transformative effect education in the borderlands in their past and present had had on their identities, capacity, skills and priorities; this had instilled a sense of purpose to convert their learning into teaching. Through their experience of multiple education systems in the borderlands and within Burma, students understand its role in perpetuating conflict, perceptions of the ‘other’ which can disarm ethnic minority and
female students of dignity and agency. Students want to drive the change they wish to see in Burma. One female Karen student said of camp teachers “our teachers say ‘today you are student tomorrow you are teacher’”. Although she said this as a generalization, many reiterated this:

I have learned that it is not reasonable to hate. That’s why I focus on education. If we have education we can change our new generation. Then we can change the military government...by changing new generation’s minds...we can be successful in achieving our goal. – Htoo Gay 23 male Karen student

I think only through education we can change...because right now we are under control by military and also the education in Burma is government curriculum. So the ones who study in government schools just focus on memorising. They don’t really want the students to think. They don’t really have a chance to learn their own history. They don’t learn anything. Also their mindset ... they’re not taught to think critically. Also they are very narrow-minded. They cannot think about what is happening around the world. – Hla Ku, 23 year old Karen student

The job titles students identified were often related to community development, and were often vague. Recurring roles included ‘social worker’, ‘community leader’, ‘education administrator’, ‘NGO worker’ and ‘politician’. This is not particularly significant given the emphasis most schools have on community development, peace-building and multi-ethnic education. What is significant, however, are the motivating factors for these ambitions. While some drew a line of sight between what they would be qualified to do and jobs which related to their studies, lived experiences within Burma combined with being empowered through education encouraged them to pursue community-focused jobs and gave them conviction that they could do them. It is significant that students spoke of changes and transitions they wanted to affect within Burma which would be achieved through working from the community upwards. Indeed, only 6/63 visual reactions and 3/21 interviewed students wanted to work for either the Burmese government or an ethnic government.

Not all jobs related to community development but the motivations for most jobs were shared; to directly or indirectly support families and communities and to usefully apply skills and knowledge. Many Youth Connect students, for example, wished to work in hospitality. Others who wanted to work in business were motivated by the opportunity to apply skills they had developed, particularly in IT, and by higher salaries. Other roles which did not complement the programmes they were pursuing included:
• Architect
• Documentary film director
• Actor
• Monk
• KNU soldier
• Horticulturalist

Figures 19 and 20 examples of jobs students said they wanted to pursue

A key differentiation between male and female participants in workshops was that male students were more likely to express an interest in gaining a job with an implicit status. For example, in comparable fields, male students said they wanted to be the Minister of Education, Head Teacher or Director of an NGO, whereas female students said they wanted to work in the Ministry of Education, work as education administrators or for a specific cause through an NGO. Moreover, most female students who were interviewed and in workshops said they were considering working in healthcare, a field which male students did not mention.

Most students who wished to return to Burma (or camps) wanted to work in smooth spaces - spaces they could relate to and knew well in which growing NGOs and CSOs were operating outside of state control and largely outside of their influence.
Figure 21: Jobs as a category of ambitions and aspirations and its influencing factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>How they influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to support family financially</td>
<td>A tension noted by students between being motivated to work to gain money to support their parents, and working for low wages (if paid at all) for their community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political context and ongoing conflict</td>
<td>Students are likely to want to work in their field of choice because of the conflict, including roles outside of community development; Few students considered working for peace within Burma, either for the Burmese or for an ethnic government;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Skills students have already developed and qualifications students may have influence what jobs they could realistically pursue; Experiences of multiple education systems influenced many students to want to work within education in Burma or the camps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language competence</td>
<td>Students may be restricted based on what languages they do not speak. For example, if they only speak Burmese and not an ethnic language, or vice versa, they know it will be difficult to gain employment in certain fields, for example education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>If students have legal status they are more likely to consider working in Thailand in the short-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>Students understood that there is a link between skills they have gained through work and what kinds of jobs they would be more likely to have, and which employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job availability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.3 Where students want to be over different time periods

All students were asked about where they would like to live in the future. Most students aspired to return to Burma, including those who had never been. This was idealised and students rarely put a timescale to when they wanted to return. When pressed, most students in workshops said that they wanted to be in Thailand directly after their programme, whereas in five years’ time they wanted to be based in Burma (figure 22). A significant minority, however, saw their futures in camps or in third countries where they hoped to go to university and settle subsequently.

Almost all students were motivated to move to their ideal locations to support their families and communities. Although most students were under pressure to send money home imminently, others spoke of longer-term ambitions through which they could support their families; for example, to move them to third countries where the student hopes to attend university and subsequently remain to work. Others who wished to pursue university study in Thailand wanted to upskill themselves in the short term which would build their capacity to have an impact when they return to Burma. 23-year-old Karen male Poe Kwar said “First I have to be based in Thailand to get more skills” but that he wanted to return to Burma because of instability in Thailand “How long I can stay I don't know. Nothing is sustainable. It is not my country and I don't know when I will have to move”. Paradoxically, many students who wished to return to Burma outlined conditions which would have to be met for them to return. Indeed, many were eager to await any significant changes which could ostensibly affect their lives or their likely trajectories before committing to returning. This often related to the situation of families living in camps who faced uncertain futures as the threat of forced resettlement was on their minds.

Figure 22: How one group of students responded to the question ‘where do you want to live when you finish education?’ (left) and ‘where do you want to live in five years?’ (right)
Those wishing to go to third countries were usually encouraged by the prospect of being able to obtain a scholarship upon completing the GED, regardless of whether they were currently pursuing that programme. Third countries were identified through students’ individual research, and ranged from Japan to Norway, the US to Hong Kong. Many of these planned to support their communities in Burma through remittances after settling in these third countries, and were not eager to return. These students expressed that they had become disconnected from Burma and that changes would not happen quickly enough to make it appealing. In two cases students said this was the case because they had never lived in Burma. Speaking of World War 2 refugees, Shklar suggests that displaced youth may be past the point where they could ever hope for return or reconciliation with their state of origin (Shklar 1993, 193).

Students saw a short-term future in Mae Sot as being an asset for a variety of reasons, including the time to observe transitions in Burma from a distance while continuing education. There was acknowledgement that changes within Burma would influence what next steps might be. It can be argued that they are considering waiting for Burma to become smoother, to be convinced that they have the capacity to navigate current striation, or that they have the capacity to support transitions within the striated features to become smoother. Growing their agency and identity as nomadic subjects through previous cross-border movements informs which of these will be the case for each student wishing to remain in Thailand “until things get better” (student interview).

Where they want to be is also influenced by social factors which are internally prioritised and placed on them from their social and family networks; for example, waiting to move to Burma until the family based in camp choose to return.

Language also played a role in where students said they were confident they could settle in the short-term. One female student simply said she would have to live in Thailand because “I speak Thai and Karen. I have never lived in Burma and I won’t be able to get a job”. Baout Pan, a female Chin student summarised the multiple negotiations students need to revisit when considering their futures:

*Here in Thailand we are guests and we want to go back to our own land but people who want to stay in Thailand - some of them can speak Thai and can get a good job.*
Even though some live in camps they have a Thai ID which means they can buy land or get a job easily. Sometimes they can't speak Burmese because they have been in camp for so long so they don’t want to go back to Burma. Some still want to go to third countries- for their education and their futures.

Figure 23 Location as a category of ambitions and aspirations and its influencing factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>How they influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State and location of family</td>
<td>Students want to move back to live with their family if they are still in Burma;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to support family financially</td>
<td>Students want to stay in Thailand until their camp-based families wish to return; Students want to move to where they can earn money to send remittances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political context and ongoing conflict</td>
<td>Fear and uncertainty in Burma may dissuade students from returning in the short-term. However some students said that the causes for this fear motivates them to return soon so they can support their communities; Some students who wished to go to third countries were not convinced that the situation in Burma would not improve for the foreseeable future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Students may move to where there are education opportunities they can pursue, including Mae Sot and camps for further post-10 or further afield for university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language competence</td>
<td>Students will not seek to settle in a place where they cannot speak the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>If students have legal status to remain in Thailand they are likely to do so at least in the short-term. Students who don't have legal status may still remain in Mae Sot and seek quasi-legal status through continuing education and being registered with a post-10 school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>Students who have worked in camps or specific schools before were considering returning to these locations and places of work to continue working in the short-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job availability</td>
<td>Students wanted to move to places where they know there are jobs they would eventually be qualified for, which matched their interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived experience</td>
<td>Many students wanted to return to where they had grown up in Burma to improve the situation for their community, based on the experiences they had growing up there - often with a lack of services, security and dignity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.4. Who students want to be with in the future

Across ages and diversity of lived experiences, students expressed a wish to move either with or to their family (A below) or community. Some students referred to their own children and siblings. Students identified that they were or would be depended upon for practical, moral and financial support by their families. This meant that they wanted to move where family are or to move with family to somewhere more stable than where family were currently based, often in refugee camps. The language used by students often linked the ongoing conflict with wanting to be reunited with their families to provide for them and to move them away from unpleasant circumstances.

Who students said they wanted to be with shows the significance of the bonds and relationships from the past. What students choose to do with their skills interacts with who they want to be close to and who they want to help. These can be exclusive, for example some students wanted to help their communities in Burma but their parents were in camps. Others were motivated to find a job and move with their family when the time comes.

Students were aware that at any point circumstances could change in Thailand (e.g. regulations for migrants) or Burma, for the better (e.g. meaningful ceasefire as defined by students) or for the worse (e.g. increased violence), and that this could influence when and how they would see family and their communities.
Figure 24 Student’s depiction of life in the future, which features family

Figure 25 Factors which influence who students want to be with
6.2.5 How students want to feel

Although not frequent, students who reflected on how they wanted to feel when responding were introspective and relied on the experiences of the past and present to inform how they wanted to feel in the future. These reflections were evidence of pedagogical approaches which encourage students to find their voices. Through discussions, debates, projects and public speaking which incorporate issues important to students, their self-knowledge grows.

‘Peaceful’, ‘no fear’, ‘confident’ and ‘happy’ were the terms which came up most (see Figures 26 and 27 below). Students’ who used these words often drew on experiences from the past, concluding with a conviction that they wanted to feel the opposite. The striated features in Burma and Bumese government schools which make living and maintaining dignity difficult have informed how they don’t want to feel, compared with their present education which encourages multi-ethnic perspectives which in turn value their identities and seek to empower them.

Students hoped, in the absence of future conflict, that they would feel more secure and able to pursue facets of their ideal selves which would otherwise require difficult navigations through conflict. In a smoother context, students would be able to live without the anxiety that they may need to be displaced once again. They want to be able to either deal with striations within Burma or influence what they are, or both.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>How they influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State and location of family</td>
<td>Where families are at present influenced where some students wanted to be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political context</td>
<td>Determines the likelihood of and desirability for students to return to Burma if their families are based there;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>The challenges facing students' communities motivate them to want to upskill and continue education to be able to provide optimum support to their communities. In particular, students who had experienced or were witnesses of human rights abuses, financial difficulty or discriminatory practices wished to return to their communities to counter or resolve such challenges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An additional feeling, identified in subtext, was that of usefulness through applying skills and knowledge. This emerged through discussions about how without skills or qualifications students’ utility would be minimal; many don’t want to return to their families without being able to help them or their community.

When discussing the sources of these emotions or feelings, students drew on education, the political context, their language competence and legal status as influencers. While previous and current education influenced how confident they would be when deploying acquired skills, future legal status (legally living somewhere), not experiencing discrimination and a changing political context influenced how happy and secure they wanted to feel.

These feelings imply that students want to transition from nomadic to sedentary subjects. They long for a space in which they do not have to navigate new surroundings as points subordinate to a direction. Rather, they wish to no longer wish to travel as their default way of relating to space (Deleuze and Guattari). They wish to belong to and be defined by place.

Figures 26 and 27 provide a snapshot of how students want to feel in the future.
Figures 26 and 27 Two students’ perceptions of what they want in the future

Figure 28 Factors which influence how students want to feel
6.3 Reflection and summary

In establishing themselves physically, intellectually and emotionally, students have developed resilience and wherewithal during displacement. For all students, reaching education in Mae Sot or elsewhere in the borderlands was a goal at one point. Whether enrolling in post-10 in the borderlands was a goal or whether fleeing insecurity was the driver to bring them into a new education system in a new location, students have been motivated to continue to develop by being in a smooth context. Although movement may be limited, their adaptation to Mae Sot shows a continued desire to navigate new contexts and striations in pursuit of a larger goal - to develop applicable skills. In doing so, students redefine themselves, their interests and their desired next steps, thereby demonstrating their agency.

As nomadic subjects, students define their trajectories by movement rather than being directed by it. Their experience of displacement and subsequent renegotiation lead them to desire stability in a space which allows them to convert skills into capabilities and capabilities into meaningful outputs (See Sen 1999). They aspire for their futures to give them the opposite of what they have experienced or been

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>How they influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political context and ongoing conflict</td>
<td>Anxiety over possibility for future displacements; Potential feeling of insecurity if students were to return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Having more skills and possibly recognised qualifications would help students to feel more competent and able to support their communities or pursue their ideal job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language competence</td>
<td>Students want to have dignity, this means being able to have their mother tongue language and ethnicity acknowledged and respected in Burma if they return.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal status</td>
<td>Being able to stay in Thailand would minimise students’ anxieties about the timeframe within which to make decisions about the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived experience</td>
<td>Students don’t wait to continue living with a feeling of displacement. They want to transition from being nomadic subjects to being sedentary subjects.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
defined by. They do not want to be defined by striations which resulted in initial displacement.

Through making decisions about their next steps and adapting, students are actively navigating smooth and striated spaces. Students use their agency to form rational options for what their next steps could be and it is in deploying this facet of their character that they negate striation; their desire to pursue skills lessens the impact of documentation on what they do now, for example.

Further, this chapter has added to how education features in students’ narratives. Education is a factor for displacement and is a feature of Burma’s fabric which students hope to influence. It is evident through their narratives that smooth education in the smooth space of the borderlands equips and bolsters agency and skills to empower them to envision fulfilling futures. It is thanks to this education that students have developed multiple, possible ideal selves by developing their skills and their self-knowledge through exposure to interactive pedagogical practices, complemented by growth in self-assurance through thriving in a new environment.

This chapter has outlined the diversity of students’ ambitions and aspirations, and the factors which influence these. The nine factors are based on what students have experienced and their interaction with students’ becoming. Viewed as known ‘gusts’, each factor has the potential to shift in its core nature or in its significance, and students know that fluctuations are likely, based on their previous displacements and changing priorities through them. Known factors with unknown weight and changing nature are likely to modify how they interact with students’ aspirations and ambitions. Students know the potential these have to change their ideal selves. What they do not know, but are preparing for as best they can, are unknown gusts which await them and the intensity with which changes in known factors might throw them off course. As nomadic subjects, students’ subjectivities and agency have been and will continue to be built across displacements and will determine how they react to changing factors. As nomads in a state of flux who have been displaced before, it is unsurprising that there is such a diversity of ambitions and aspirations and identified influencers of these. Without considering nomadic identities, Jolliffe and South (2015) note that “hopes and fears, and intentions, will vary…over time, depending on options available and the social-political-economic context. Some forced migrants will
likely prefer to stay in-situ, others will want to return to a previous location — and will often be the first to actively move on their own initiative." (221)
Chapter 7

Steps and gusts; navigating space and identity from present to future

The preceding three chapters outlined, among other factors, the role education has played in determining students’ identities, priorities and trajectories. Through recent education, students have developed new self-concepts through reflexively considering how they have arrived at the present and have consolidated thoughts about what and who they could be. Their nomadic traits have helped them to thrive in a diversity of smooth and striated spaces and education systems which has laid down markers in time, reference points for when they consider and pursue their ‘ideal’ selves.

This chapter complements these findings and continues to emphasise students’ nomadic traits by exploring ambitions and aspirations in more detail, through considering how students might get to them and how flexibly they consider their ambitions and their trajectories to achieving these. This is achieved first by presenting examples of students’ individual and multiple ambitions and aspirations and considers their own narratives about what gusts they may face. This is followed by a discussion about three tensions within their narratives which relate to education. This chapter concludes by noting the role of known and unknown political factors.

The thought experiment in 5.3 provides a useful framework within which to discuss students’ perceived trajectories, as well as known and unknown gusts which await them as they progress towards their ideal selves.

Students’ determination to persevere through their programme and consider a diversity of options became clear through group conversations and interviews. Their ambitions and aspirations are fluid and, as rational actors, students are acutely aware that they will face struggles to reach their next goal, and that it will be worth enduring these because there isn’t a default option to turn to. The alternative for many is simply to return to camps where their families are, their village in Burma or to find low-paid work in Thailand. Often driven by the desire to have a different trajectory to what they and their parents have experienced (“They compare their
life...they are uneducated. They talk about challenges they have faced because of being uneducated so I realise that if I don't have education I will become like them"-23 year old Chin female student), students find themselves often worrying about how they can translate this into action, whilst facing shorter-term challenges within their present environment. One foreign teacher noted that the question at the forefront of students’ minds is “What am I going to do in two weeks and how are we going to do it?”.

This isn’t to say students are defeatist. Their agency and self-knowledge preclude this. As has been shown, students are experts at negotiating and navigating different environments and the shared challenges which they have had to overcome or cut through pre-, post- or during displacements. Students’ future movements are determined largely by how possible and desirable it is to return to Burma. A member of staff at KRCEE who was also finishing his post-10 programme in Nupo camp said

I think students become stressed when the situation is so unstable. Should I go back? Where should I go? I don't have a very stable idea of where to go. I cannot plan my future. I want to go to Burma and work, but then I think about how this isn't possible because of the education I have had and that there is also a conflict. The Karen National Union has a ceasefire with the government but I know this can be broken at any time and then the conflict can start again. This is also a worry.

His view is an appropriate summary of what many students implied when they expressed a desire to return to Burma; many idealise returning but critique the lack of political progress which deters them from doing so. Paradoxically, at the time of research, returning to Burma upon completing their current education programme was not a next step for many students. In its own way, the political situation in Burma combined with the lack of recognition of KED/KRCEE/post-10 qualifications have been gusts whose force stops students from considering it a worthwhile risk in the short-term. The situation is considered so volatile by some, including a foreign camp teacher, that students are constantly reconsidering what they may do next;

At the beginning of programmes they come up with plans for what they will achieve and what they will do next and what they have to do to get there but at the end of it most of them had changed because they hadn’t realised what is possible and that's very difficult for people in camp.
Disaggregating students’ arsenal of self-preservation mechanisms allows for broader understanding of how they face and consider gusts as they conceive their ideal selves. In their current state of flux, students often depended on people close to them to seek guidance or applied wisdom from influential figures. When asked who the most important people in their lives were, students responded by naming family members, teachers, friends from their communities or in their current schools, people close to their families, children of Burma, ‘myself’ and figures they hadn’t met (for example General Aung San and Gandhi). In workshops, students shared that they benefitted directly from financial support and advice, and indirectly through being inspired. While parents were both supportive and dismissive of continuing education, students were inspired nonetheless by seeing the wherewithal that parents had exercised over the course of their childhoods, amidst land-grabbing, conflict and political change. One student demonstrates the role of his father in his trajectory in the Figure 29 below. Students draw inspiration and support to help them determine a combination of what is expected by people close to them, what they could do with their futures, how to navigate pathways and how to maintain perspective.

Although in the minority, students who said it was children in Burma and ‘myself’ who inspired them were striking. One student said his one-year-old son inspired him and elaborately described that it was too late for the generation of students involved in this research. His objective was to share relatively more wealth and wisdom than his parents did with him.
The three male students who said ‘myself’ had actively opposed parents’ dismissal of continuing education and noted that they had had to get to the point of applying to school and later moving to Mae Sot from Karen State through their own devices and self-motivation. This was an evident way in which students led me to view youth agency in how it has been outlined. These students had identified ways to navigate gusts with minimal support in their teenage years to arrive in Mae Sot to take their next purposive step. They remember what it took to come to Mae Sot and thrive. It was that these students would be open to facing gusts by activating a stronger sense of agency perhaps than others. It should be noted that one of these students wished to attend university in a third country and never return to Burma, saying that he wanted a good life for himself and that “Burma will never get better. I have been back. I wrote a song called Pray for Burma”. This shows his determination to find an alternate route to find his ideal self; cumulative gusts from Burma were too strong and not worth navigating or overcoming.

Most students had multiple ideal jobs; the number of job titles on flipcharts outnumbered students. This is in equal parts based on indecision and on what was
perceived to be possible. A clear example of this came from a 24 year old male Karenni student:

*After this school I want to continue education - at ACU. If possible I want to attend university. But if this is not possible I will do one of two things - start my own business or go back and help my community. I want to go back to work there but I will not get a salary there. I also want to have my own business to make money - maybe a small business to do with agriculture or animals.*

Due to their lives being saturated with facing daily gusts in Mae Sot, remaining is considered easy by many easy as it requires the least resistance. A current student in Hpa-An who had previously attended two post-10 programmes in camps said that if he could afford it “I would like to continue my education..I am not satisfied with my education. I need more experience”, a paradox discussed in the Conclusion. Needless to say, the opportunity of further upskilling in the borderlands is often viewed as a rational choice given its relative high quality.

Other students expressed ambiguous trajectories, ambitions and aspirations through their visual reactions. Figures 30 and 31 below show different jobs students would like to pursue. Figure 30 shows that this student was considering being a student again, becoming a teacher or social worker in a refugee camp, or a ‘founder’ or leader in the community - presumably a CSO. These terms were common amongst participants which is unsurprising given the exposure to community subjects most students involved have. On the left of the image we can see the current situation in Myanmar from the perspective of the student (“civil war, ethnic conflict, poor healthcare, losing human rights”) as well as the ambition to go to university. Many referred to these as motivators for their ‘ideal selves’.
Figures 30 and 31 show students identifying multiple ambitions and aspirations.
Clearer trajectories were expressed by some students including one who wished to work for the Karen government:

I want to be a politician because of the civil war. I was born in a difficult place. When I was a child I didn’t see Karen Army, only Burmese Army which made me upset. I wanted to be a soldier to defend my people. But then after I had some education I thought I wanted to be a politician to try to negotiate between Burmese and Karen governments and understand how to make things better.

In combination with the Figures 32 and 33 below, we can see that students’ motivations are based in what they have experienced.
Figures 32 and 33 show how conditions and experiences students have had translate into motivations for pursuing specific ambitions

7.1 Tension: Education versus job

Many students identified jobs which resonated with what they were studying, typically in hospitality for Youth Connect and in community development for others. Yet there was an acute common desire to pursue more education beyond current programmes which they believe will support them in achieving their ideal job and which would translate into having an optimum impact on those they seek to support. In discussing career aspirations and the ethos of schools with teachers I found that university or further education were unnecessary for students to achieve most jobs they listed. The source of conviction that university degrees are the qualifications most likely to affect how students contribute to Burma is unclear. While some skills students want to gain must be obtained through university, the majority of community-facing jobs should be obtainable through post-10 programmes whose objectives include building capacity in borderlands.

As previously noted, students discussed the links between the situation in Burma and the jobs they wanted. However, students constructed a gust which dictated that such jobs would be more accessible with more education. Further, students were convinced waiting to have an impact would be worthwhile until they had reached their
optimum level of education. Many of these students were considering strategies to pursue the GED programme in Mae Sot, for example, followed by university.

Some students had a similarly wanted to wait in Mae Sot before taking subsequent substantive steps, driven by a perception that gusts were too strong for them to navigate at present and that their path would remain within Mae Sot in the form of finding education options to anchor them until conditions became more favourable in Burma.

Those who wanted to support their families soon (6/21) said they were willing to compromise on the job they would have after completing their current programme if it meant having a higher salary to support their families with. The livelihood strategy for these students was therefore to work to support families until younger siblings could take over the responsibility, at which point participants would consider university or further training to get them a job in the community. Most students, however, saw the importance of completing their education and were motivated by the state of their communities as a whole rather than their families.

7.2 Tension: Undervalued skills and overvalued qualifications

Students were asked to divide themselves in a classroom based on what they valued more- skills or qualifications- and to discuss the purpose of education. The norm was that the relative majority chose skills. In discussions, however, a perceived and impenetrable link between university degrees and skills gained emerged, regardless of subject. It seemed students currently valued the skills they were developing as well as the prospect of applying them through work placements where applicable, but to achieve their goals they required recognised qualifications.

Some student used the logic that as members of migrant communities, and having been through migrant schools, they are at a disadvantage to get jobs in Burma. Evidencing both skills and ‘legal’ qualifications were therefore necessary to put displaced youth on par with Burmese counterparts. Others relayed that due to their parents’ names and fields asking for ethnicity employers would know students were Karen. One student finished his description by motioning an employer looking at an application, crumpling it and throwing it into a bin. This, he said, was based on his experience of applying to jobs in Burma. Another said:
I don't think I want to go back to Burma because. I tried to get a job [in Burma], but I don't think they even read your application if you have gone to school in the border. Or maybe because I am Karen.

Students’ perspectives of skills versus qualifications was summarised during an presentation and question and answer session with the President of a new US-based distance-learning university which sought to support displaced youth worldwide. The President described the diversity of courses available, the low costs and the fact that there were 50 scholarships available for all applicants. The 120 students in attendance were quick to ask for clarification of whether they could apply upon completion of their current programmes. The President responded uncomfortably, clearly not understanding the complexities of education in borderlands, saying that as long as the qualification was recognised by a government, students could apply. Students steadfastly continued to seek clarification by describing what skills they had developed. The closing question summarised the tension between qualifications and skills:

I don’t think you have come to the right place. If students can only apply with qualifications recognised by Burma or Thailand…you should go to Yangon to speak to students. But what you will find is that they cannot speak English even though they have been studying it for many years…here our qualifications are not recognised because the governments don’t want to take a risk, but we can speak English.

Students understand that it is at best in part due to governments’ ignorance that qualifications are not recognised and at worst due to active political decisions. Students are frustrated that the skills they gain are not recognised despite having the informed conviction that their skills and knowledge are more likely to fulfil university requirements than Burmese students. It is reassuring that efforts are underway to seek recognition for education delivered in borderlands through the advocacy efforts of organisations such as World Education Thailand and KED, with some success (Key Informant interview).

7.3 Tension: Working in the interest of an ethnic group or working in the interest of national unity

Few students expressed interest in working directly for an ethnic government or for the Burmese government. The tension between wanting to work for either
government is noteworthy, however, because of how students interpret their education and the potential for students contradict the objectives of schools.

Students had different definitions of who they wanted to help and how, while agreeing that their efforts would be targeted towards peace. For those whose ambitions related directly to supporting ethnic governments intentions were also to protect their communities from the military and to teach students about their ethnic history. This doesn’t necessarily translate into actively contradicting the aims of education in borderlands, but its potential to see development as a contained ambition for their ethnic group in these ways stands to sympathise with antagonistic behaviours. Students who wish to work for the Burmese government spoke of wishing to change the NLD and the government from the inside, some with clear routes as to how to achieve this, including redrafting the constitution, demilitarising the curricula and negotiating peace with ethnic communities on behalf of the government. The critique of these students in some discussions was their abandonment of what the majority perceived to be their communities, who they were being encouraged to support through their education.

Such subjectivities originate in students’ self-knowledge developed from their own experience with education playing a role in helping them explore such ambitions. Schools are challenged within this tension to consider what kind of community development they would like students to undertake, without diminishing their agency by putting a value judgement on what this could be.

7.4 Politics as a significant gust

*Everything we do is concerned with politics. For example community development work, security and human rights. I think politics is the main thing stopping the country. Everything is bad in the country that is related to politics.* (23 year old male Karen student based in Nupo camp)

Expressions of striation in Burma- whether through its education system or through authoritarian rule which consolidates or exacerbates the situation for those on the periphery- resulted in students leaving for the borderlands where they continued their education. This is the story of youth coming to Mae Sot for at least the last decade.

The number of students reported return to Burma and thrive are few. Perhaps now more than ever there is renewed sustainable hope, however. With the first
democratic elections came freedom of speech, lifted restrictions on NGOs and increased funding going into Burma. Students acknowledged such changes and most were optimistic about meaningful change but were skeptical of the timeframe. One female student said

Some changes are happening but we still have many changes that need to happen for refugees…it’s not easy for us to go back. I used to think - if Burma is really changing then I will go back. But now I don’t think so. It won’t be easy to move back.

Common amongst students who wanted to return was the desire to see the factors which led to them leaving to change which, as some noted, would take a long time. A significant minority of students were skeptical altogether of meaningful change, noting that ceasefires, the main condition for many, were always temporary and that returning to Burma would be temporary until renewed conflict forced displacement again:

“If we look at the situation before the election everyone thought there would be peace in Burma … peace was negotiated but conflict and civil war are still happening. We cannot trust the government we cannot trust the military.”

A heteroglossia is presented in many students’ narratives about the future; the incongruous and simultaneous desires to help their communities as soon as possible and to wait to see what changes may occur which could entice them back. A minority of students saw continuing human rights abuses, land-grabbing, lack of knowledge of human rights and poor education provision as motivators to return and support their communities.

Returning to Burma as agents of change to benefit families, communities or the whole country will inevitably result in having to face known and unknown gusts while trying to achieve next steps. Students are aware that moving back will not be easy or comfortable, but they have a strong sense of agency which has been built as armor and as mechanisms to allow progression. Nothing of what students’ experience exists in a vacuum. They are acutely aware of where they have been, where they are and have come to be at present. They know that throughout multiple displacements they have become. Their identities and experiences of the past and present, and where they want to go are intractable. The gusts they face on the road ahead may be harder or easier than those they have faced in the past but they know how to survive and thrive through decision-making and external challenges to continue step by step. After all, this is all they have ever done as nomadic subjects. Youth will persist with
unfettered endurance and commitment to get to a point in which they are no longer in a state of flux and are no longer nomadic subjects.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

This research used a framework informed by concepts of smooth and striated space, nomadic theory and youth agency to capture a diversity of narratives, experiences and opinions about how displaced Burmese youth had developed ambitions and aspirations against a changing political backdrop in Burma. This thesis drew on Braidotti and considered displaced youth as nomadic subjects, who are not bound to any physical space and whose trajectories are being constantly reformed as they react to variations in striations and smoothness within education and the space they inhabit (Maber 2016). It considered that displacement creates an important dialogue between space, subjectivity formation and aspirations and ambitions.

In using a range of interactive methods, it identified the links between past and present education in Burma and borderlands, experiences of displacement and ambitions and aspirations, whilst noting how navigating different physical and education spaces informs these and develops agency. Agency, in turn, is an evolving capacity which enables students to think pragmatically about their futures. This research has identified the ambitions and aspirations of participants, their influencing factors, and how, as nomadic subjects with agency, they consider their pathways to achieve their ideal selves.

In line with Grounded Theory, answering RQ1 allowed for education to emerge organically as an influencing factor, as well as its relationship with other factors, how it features as a driver for or as a result of displacement. Nine factors and five ambitions and aspirations were identified in chapters 4 and 5, and were explored in chapter 6. Predominant themes included experience of education in Burma and in borderlands (including in camps), lived experiences and strong ethnic ties. Within education, pedagogy, the opportunity to apply skills and the inclusion or exclusion of ethnic histories emerged.

Emerging factors which informed ‘ideal selves’ originating in lived experiences included the extent to which students had seen parents suffer due to economic circumstances, witnessed conflict and experienced discrimination based on ethnicity.
Actors which influenced students’ ambitions and aspirations included predominantly families (parents in particular) and teachers, as discussed in Chapters 4, 6 and 7. Parents are sources of direct (through support) and indirect (through their challenging lives in poverty) motivation for students.

Complementing these, prominent facets of overlapping identities which emerged included ethnicity (particularly for those with strong ties to an ethnic group), discussed above, and gender. While students with strong ethnic ties viewed their ideal selves as inherently linked to the struggle to preserve a distinct identity and culture, gender accounted for minor differences in job titles and, in one case an area of work (medicine).

Ultimately, students’ subjectivities were informed by many shared experiences. Ambitions and aspirations across students, whether they wished to pursue university (education and skills), feel secure (feeling), work in education (jobs), be with their family immediately (who they wanted to be with) or move to a third country (where they wanted to be), all wanted to deploy their skills and knowledge to benefit their communities directly (eg through community-facing jobs) or indirectly (eg through remittances). Ambitions and aspirations expressed were rational elements of their ideal selves, influenced by developed agency built through previous experiences and navigations.

A range of challenges arise from students’ intentions, explored in Chapter 7. These predominantly concern how students transition from their present to ideal self. Qualifications recognition, ongoing political-military volatility, uncertainty over repatriation policy, changing legal regulations in Mae Sot result in many intending to stay in borderlands until sufficient change or stability enables them to return. There is therefore a paradox between the motivating factors for what students want to affect in Burma and borderlands, and the desire to wait until these factors have dissipated enough for it to be more comfortable to return.

In providing vivid visual reactions in workshops and verbal descriptions in interviews, students evidenced links between their experiences of displacement and education in borderlands, with their ambitions and aspirations. By asking about their current contexts and their ideal selves, students showed how motivating factors informed
what they wanted their futures to look like. These accounts enriched findings through interviews. The freedom to express themes and links in response to broad questions individually and in groups allowed for increased context to be shared organically. A mix of methods also allowed for the emergence of themes beyond education.

Through drawings in particular, it was evident that students were motivated by the state of their communities, social mobility, and that continuing education beyond their current programme would sufficiently equip them to improve conditions in their homelands. Chapter 6, informed by interactive methods outlined in Chapter 3, highlights how students relate to the present and what they consider to be current and future challenges to taking their next steps. It also highlights the role current smooth education has in providing them with the environment and competencies to reflect on their lives, identities and aspirations.

Narratives featuring perceptions of content, quality and pedagogical approaches of education in borderlands and Burma answered RQ3. Exploring the principles and practices of education in borderlands in Chapters 5 and 6 showed primarily how current post-10 education gives students skills which empower them to make a difference to their communities either directly through applying their skills or indirectly through remittances. The pedagogical approaches give students the opportunity to be reflective and to think about their lives, the future and the impact they wish to have. The ‘Western-style’, student-centred, smooth education they experience in borderlands combines perspectives to enable students to think creatively, reflect on injustices, solve problems and view Burma’s past and present through a multi-ethnic lens. moreover, applied learning gives students the confidence to be able to apply skills to specific jobs.

However, a hierarchy remains between continuing to go to university, requiring a recognised high school qualification, and deploying the practical skills many have learned in their current education. Whether schools were vocationally or academically focused, post-10 schools involved apply learning models which allow students with disrupted education to build their confidence, identity, resilience and route forward to help their families and communities.

The overall research question could not be legitimately answered by anyone other than students. This thesis has provided insights into their physical and education
journeys, the diversity of experiences studying across divergent systems and learning about how these, along with current smooth education, have informed their ideal selves. Their experiences of living in different environments have influenced their perceptions of what they are capable of doing to support their communities. This has required developing and deploying agency as nomadic subjects. In doing so, students are able to rationally and pragmatically plan and prepare for preferred futures and reasonable compromises. This is aided by education in the present which has given students the opportunity and skills to be reflexive about their experiences and understand how they can smoothen the striations within Burma.

Students’ palpable desire to contribute to peace building and paying forward by developing and building capacity in their communities are the result of becoming through navigating and building agency over multiple displacements and education systems. They have “curved around impasses...pushed through...carved life chances against the odds” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 332) and will use such experiences to eventually survive and thrive in Burma. They currently inhabit a “loaded temporality- a meantime...of grieving and renewal” (332) in relation to Burma; they want to contribute to and shape its future, retain dignity, security and support their families. Their ambitions and aspirations must be considered by those working directly and indirectly in education because their experience will “determine the quality of the next generation...decisions about developing their skills...will have long lasting effects...far beyond them” (World Bank 2007, 15). As per Lederach (1998), overcoming conflict requires a shift towards a frame of references that focuses on...the restoration and building of relations” (86). Pathways for youth to contribute to this rebuilding requires routes to continue education, mechanisms to recognise education, availability of jobs and safe return of families to homelands. Students want to confront the gusts ahead, and they will eventually. The opportunity cost of them not returning soon is significant. While UNHCR and decision-makers plan for the return of their families, students are equipped with the skills to support transitions and develop their communities. Enablers must be put into place to ensure that agencies capitalise on their skills, knowledge and passion at this critical moment in Burma’s political and socio-cultural development.
8.1 Implications, conditions and recommendations

The shared objectives of education programmes involved were to increase students’ capacities to be self-sustaining and to support the development of their communities. Implicitly or explicitly these programmes seek to empower students to return to Burma, yet the conditions remain unattractive for many. Although students’ ideal selves will be fulfilling the goal that the schools infuse into their approach, many are overtly trying to delay their return until returning becomes safe and tenable. Students outlined conditions which would encourage or incentivise them to return found below.

Without the desire to move back immediately, many students are considering continuing education until some of the issues below are improved. This raises a challenge for the education ecosystem in Mae Sot. The opportunity cost becomes the impact they could have on their communities in the short term. This is reflected on in the list of recommendations below.

This research took place during political change in Burma which results in attention and funding shifting from those on the periphery to the central government. Assumptions about the desirability of repatriation are increasingly driving organisations, namely UNHCR, to create mechanisms for return. Across a range of literature obtained at UNHCR events, it was clear that education is not considered thoroughly. Housing, land and property issues are prioritised within these mechanisms, and are connected to assumptions about dignity (UNHCR May 2016), while education is absent. UNHCR’s 2016 Summary Report states that “returnees are unlikely to settle in the area in the absence of basic services...” and later identifies locations of resettlement with schools five to eleven miles away (Figure 32). Within their own data, returnees noted that 15 of the 60 resettlement villages identified had schools. Moreover, there is no evidence that the kind of education being considered would be appropriate or desirable for returnee youth. Furthermore, UNHCR’s Benchmarks for Facilitation of Return’s seven criteria excludes education. It further states that it “considers that the return of displaced populations signals an increased confidence in prevailing peace”, a contradiction of students’ resounding consensus that conflict is ongoing and that if people are returning, it is because livelihoods in camps are decreasing due to reductions in aid money remaining in borderlands. The conditions below should be read with these opposing views in mind.
Figure 31 Potential Group Return Locations in SE Myanmar (hand-out from UNHCR Hpa-An Field Office)
Figure 32 Graphs showing a lack of accessibility to schools in assessed villages for potential returns (hand-out from UNHCR Hpa-An Field Office, September 2016)

Figure 33 Graph showing that there is a need for increased school provision in assessed villages, according to returnees who have already returned to Burma (hand-out from UNHCR Hpa-An Field Office, September 2016)
Complementing these are recommendations developed in discussion with students and staff in the borderlands for policy and decision-makers in camps as well as for schools themselves:

- Increase scrutiny and quality assurance mechanisms in non-formal education at all levels, including post-10.
- Track outcomes of post-10 students to measure the impact of post-10 schools.
- Emphasise education in peace agreements in Burma, including the desecuritisation of schools, recognition of ethnic and non-formal qualifications as well as teacher qualifications.
- Increase the diversity of post-10 schools in the borderlands to increase capacity within the education ecosystem and to provide students with courses which meet a greater diversity of interests.
- Improve resources in camp schools, particularly for science subjects.
- Increase communication and contact between post-10 schools and students in camps.
- Explore pathways for students to continue education to/from Burmese, ethnic and other non-formal schools at all levels, as well as pathways into Thai schools.
- Increase Thai language proficiency among Burmese youth.
- Increase awareness of education options in Mae Sot within camps to ensure students know of more than those they hear about through word of mouth.
- Include students in decision-making and proactively seek feedback from them, particularly in post-10 schools in Mae Sot.

Conditions which would accelerate students’ return

- Fewer human rights abuses
- Cessation of current conflict, for example in Kachin State and Rakhine State
- Real democracy void of military involvement or a clear pathway to achieving this
- Qualification recognition by employers and state education in Burma
- Assurances of where families are able to resettle, and that there will be access to land
- Pathways to continue education within Burma
- Disarmed ethnic armies
- Meaningful and lasting peace
- The ability to gain employment without Burmese language
- Teacher qualifications recognised
- Mechanisms for youth participation in politics
- Develop guidance within post-10 schools of post-study options and work opportunities to help set expectations and challenge the view that continuing education should be the next step.
- Increased teacher training for post-10 as well as ethnic schools
- Ensure access to Burmese state high school exams for students in Mae Sot, regardless of the system they are enrolled in.
- Continued support for and engagement with ethnic civil society and ethnic schools in Mae Sot to inform transition talks in Burma.
- Establish a multi-ethnic history curriculum in Burmese government and ethnic schools.
- Adapt teaching practices in Burmese government schools to be student-centred and interactive.
- Grant full legal status to youth while they study in Mae Sot rather than depend on local authorities to monitor legality through their quasi-legal processes.
- Create a hybrid high school curriculum combining Thai and Burmese curricula which is recognised by both governments.
- Ensure that ethnic schools avoid teaching about the primacy of ethic groups and instead focus on multi-ethnic perspectives of Burmese history.
- Increased awareness among staff, funders and decision-makers of concerns and anxieties students have about moving back, and how education itself features in these.
- Plan for students who return to rural Burma to have access to land.

Greater evidence may be needed to support these. Based on my research, the following topics emerged as areas for further investigation:

- Pre-applicants’ awareness of the diversity of options of post-10 education in Mae Sot
- What students do post-graduation and the hardships they face
- Perceptions of the challenges that female youth will face post-graduation
- The education history and the legal history of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot
- Utility of university degrees versus non-recognised qualifications
- The value and purpose of education for displaced youth
- Expand this research to include: in-camp students, students at other schools in Mae Sot which are not English medium, younger students.
8.2 Methodological reflections

Methods provided rich and insightful data with few complications. The multiple collection methods allowed me to triangulate oral and visual responses from students, combined with expert and key informant accounts.

Crucially, they allowed themes and topics to emerge organically which themselves informed the research process as it progressed.

The use of interactive methods informed by my previous experience as a youth leadership trainer and my supervisor, were well received by teachers and participants. I asked relevant interviewees to feedback on workshops and was humbled by positive responses which mostly cited that these had built solidarity across students by discussing their futures in a structured way, something they don’t usually have the opportunity to do:

“We don’t usually talk about this together as a group. I was happy to learn about other people’s hopes and I felt good that I can relate to them. Many of us have many similarities. We continued the conversations after class and this makes me feel better about the future.”

Others found it generally enjoyable:

“It was fun and different. I learned a lot about myself and my hopes and about other people. It was nice to talk with each other like this”.

and that the workshops were fulfilling because they applied the skills they were developing:

“We learn critical thinking, public speaking…and we used it in this workshop which I like. We were able to have disagreements and problem solve what we think of our lives”.

One teacher complemented this by saying that:

“Students really enjoyed it. This was better research than others had done with my students. It was less intrusive, more respectful. They had a good time and they learned. You brought out issues they are thinking about a lot and helped them make sense of them…at this important time”.

135
Adaptations to methods if this research were to be repeated include:
- Including at least 50% female participants
- Including parents
- Using drawings in interviews
- Asking students to visually react to more questions
- Smaller groups to maximise the amount of time students could speak for.
- Someone to help me capture data. It was challenging to facilitate as well as write down data or findings with a group of students which may have affected accuracy. Similarly it was difficult to be attentive to micro behaviours as well as what was being verbally expressed and having a second pair of eyes would have been helpful.

8.3 Theoretical reflections

The theoretical framework allowed for a clear lens through which to consider the whole research and writing process. I am conscious that more could have been included to expand on gender in particular as well as the role of the classroom in shaping subjectivities.

Facets of Global Education Policy were initially included (eg REF). This would have allowed for deeper discussion about structural factors contributing to challenges students face, as well as the type of education offered on the border. This would have further allowed me to draw links between Western soft power interests and Burmese development, and how funding leaving the borderlands is a result of political interest of funders. It would have also allowed for discussion about how and why ‘Western-style’ education came to Mae Sot, and the extent to which its current forms are appropriate.

The principle reflection is about the definition and use of youth agency. This term has not been academically codified. Several academics use it without directly defining it (eg Chatty 2007), while others provide definitions which are not comprehensive enough to be applicable to displaced youth (eg Mcevoy-Levy 2011). Youth agency is a dynamic trait for displaced youth; it is the ability to propel oneself forward as a nomadic subject, informed by subjectivities which have been influenced by past experiences, which in turn inform the extent to which one can plan for future, comparable difficulties to overcome. It is not a static trait, but it is ever-evolving and
is strengthened each time it is deployed to progress. For students in this research, agency is developed in taking actions which move them from the default, which is both undesirable and often unknown. Participants are experts at dealing with the uncertain, which is what many have only ever known.

8.4 Limitations

This research involved 69 students and 20 key informants and experts. It does not seek to include inaccurate generalisations. Where feasible, differences from the norm have been noted. This thesis has collected and hopes to amplify the stories and views of youth who were students in the second half of 2016. In the months since I left funding changes have continued and changed some of the dynamics explored in this piece. For example, Wide Horizons has moved to the Burmese side of the border, and other schools are under pressure to repeat this.

Participants’ gender has been discussed, but it is worth emphasising that more female participants would have provided a more comprehensive set of findings.

Student participants were youth who had the capacity, resources and means to come to Mae Sot, including a level of English language proficiency. This would have been more complete had it involved students at post-10 schools in camps and on Burma’s periphery. Furthermore, Burmese students attending other post-10 and teacher training facilities in Mae Sot but without English would have increased the richness of this research.

Due to the scope of this thesis, the extent to which funding dynamics, political views and hopes for Burmese students beyond education were reflected is not representative of their prominence in participants’ narratives.
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139


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Annex 1

Introductory note for participating schools

Please feel free to send this to contacts who you think may be interested in helping, but please do not pass on to Burmese youth who might attend a workshop. I have a different document to share with them in the workshop.

About me

I am undertaking research as part of a Joint Masters in Education Policies and International Development at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Oslo. I have chosen to focus my research on displaced Burmese youth (16-23 years old) in Mae Sot. I will spend five months (August 2016 - February 2017) in Mae Sot, Hpa-An and Yangon. Below is further detail about what I am researching, the methodology and how I hope you can help. The second page includes more detailed background.

Before starting my Masters I spent five years in student politics, managing a youth leadership programme, as an intercultural youth trainer and as an international policy advisor in the UK higher education sector, focusing on Southeast Asia. I have come to Thailand and Myanmar to better understand the experiences of displaced Burmese youth, the education they receive, the decisions they are making and their hopes for the future.

If you have any questions about the information below, please feel free to contact me (leonard.p.boe@gmail.com) or my supervisor, Elizabeth Maber (E.J.T.Maber@uva.nl) at the University of Amsterdam.

About my research

It is important to understand the decisions displaced youth are making, what they hope their futures will be and what/who influences these. Research into this has often left out the voices of young people. My research aims to collect information and stories from displaced Burmese youth about how they think about their lives when they are older. I also hope to learn about parents’ and teachers’ expectations for their children’s and students’ futures. In speaking to these groups, I hope to better understand what is driving Burmese youth to make the decisions they are making and the role of education and youth-based initiatives in influencing these decisions.

Once my research has been completed, I hope to share and discuss the main findings with those who participated in the workshops.

Research project title: Ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth: how, when and why they are shaped by education in border regions

Research questions

1. According to displaced Burmese youth in Karen State and Mae Sot, what factors, actors and facets of their overlapping identities influence their ambitions and aspirations, and how? How do these compare by different identities, including gender, and by different experiences of displacement, including internal displacement in Myanmar and multiple cross-border displacements?

2. How do displaced Burmese youth verbally describe and visually depict their ambitions and aspirations and what can this tell us about the relationship between their overlapping identities, experiences and priorities?
3. What principles of education are prioritised by community-based and non-formal schools and how do these interact with the ambitions and aspirations of displaced Burmese youth?

**Rationale**

I will explore how the multiplicity of aspirations and ambitions of displaced Burmese youth are influenced by actors and factors which interact with them, including education. In doing so, this research will give participants voice in collecting and presenting their narratives.

Policy documents and research have noted the place of refugees and displaced youth in global education policy (e.g., Dreyden-Peterson 2011). Such accounts and analyses often emphasise access to education without considering the influence it has on the formation of identity, decision-making or the construction of ambitions and aspirations. This is acute when examining how rapidly changing realities result in displaced youth renegotiating identities and priorities, such as on the Thailand Myanmar border, where 40,000 attend 140 non-state schools, and in areas of Myanmar which are not returnees’ native homelands (Ball and Dim 2016). For 30 years, political change, insecure livelihoods, economic pressures and armed violence have resulted in 3 million displaced Burmese (Ball and Dim 2016). In this context Burmese youth construct distinctive subjectivities (Zeus 2011) which have not been sufficiently researched. It is important to explore the interrelationships between agency, choice, futures (‘possible selves’), and education because of the potential it has to impact on Myanmar’s peace building efforts and economic development.

Beyond national development, displaced youth and their narratives in and of themselves are under researched and merit increased attention. Displaced youth “face all the uncertainties of any adolescent but with few opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and experiences required for a healthy transition into adulthood” and it is the alternative education practices in politically active spaces which inform reformulations of identifications and affiliations associated with home, citizenry, residency and culture. As the number of returnees increases (Joliffe and Ashley 2015) it is critical to understand the role education and other factors play in influencing how displaced youth exercise agency in deciding how to improve their lives and in facing the choices they need to make.

This thesis will contribute to the field both in its content and through its approach by capturing and analysing the multiplicity of realities, aspirations and ambitions of displaced youth as told by them.
Annex 2

Questionnaire and information for workshop participants

Hello! My name is Leo. I am a student doing research as part of my Masters degree in Education Policies and Global Development. I am focusing my research on Burmese youth in Mae Sot. I have come to Thailand and Myanmar to understand the experiences of Burmese youth, the education they receive, the decisions they are making and their hopes for the future. I hope to understand the experiences and stories of Burmese youth by speaking with them about their thoughts about their futures.

Before starting my Masters, over five years I was a student activist and national student representative in the UK, an intercultural trainer working with ethnically diverse schools, I managed a youth leadership programme and also worked as a researcher focusing on higher education in Southeast Asia.

About the workshop

This workshop will last about two hours. It will be interactive and I would love your participation to help me understand your stories, what you want for the future, what decisions you are making and who is helping you think about your future. I will ask you to share your thoughts about four questions in total. We will discuss these questions in small groups and in big groups. Before the group discussion I will ask you to think about your own answers to questions and to draw or write what your answers are.

Students will not be named or identified in my research. If you feel uncomfortable you can feel free to leave the discussion. If you don’t wish to answer any questions you don’t have to. If you have any questions for me at any point, please feel free to ask! At the end I will ask if you would like to speak with me more about your stories on your own. If you do, please let me know and we can arrange a time to meet!

1. How old are you? __________________________
2. Are you male or female? __________________________
3. How many years of education in a school or in a special training centre have you had? ___
4. How many years have you been to school in Thailand? __________
5. How many years have you been to schools in a camp? __________
6. Were you in a school when you applied to [school]? __________
7. Have you ever lived in or gone to school in Myanmar? __________
8. If you could describe what you have gained from [school] in five words what would they be?
________________________________________________________________________
Annex 3

Questions for Students and Key Informants

Semi-structured interview questions for key informants:

1. What do you think about the educational options and opportunities in Mae Sot and on the border (including camps)?
2. What are the main challenges youth face on the border?
3. What are the main challenges to education on the border?
4. What do young people want out of post-10 education on the border?
5. What are young people’s realistic options after finishing post-10 education on the border?
6. What should post-10 education on the border prepare young people for?
7. What are your hopes for displaced Burmese youth?
8. How do changes in Myanmar affect how young people think about their futures?
9. What do you think are the aspirations and ambitions of long people?
10. What could improve education on the border and support young people’s future prospects?

Semi-structured interview questions for students:

1. Tell me about your education
2. How long have you lived in Mae Sot?
3. What are the most valuable things you have learned in school?
4. Tell me about the decisions you and your friends are currently making
5. What do you hope for your future?
6. What do you think others hope for? Who do your friends want to be?
7. Who are the most important people in your life?
8. What do you speak with them about?
9. How do they help you think about the future?
10. What do you think would improve education on the border?
Annex 4

Complete word graphs relating to current education (see 5.1)

### Top skills mentioned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>% of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer skills</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management skills</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal writing</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with other people</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Types of knowledge mentioned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>% of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More knowledge about other ethnicities</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights knowledge</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Emotions/feelings mentioned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>% of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Top opinions mentioned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>% of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Experience</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aggregated terms expressed by students

- English
- Happy
- Computer skills
- Management skills
- Friendly
- Proposal writing
- About other ethnicities
- Teaching skills
- Helpful
- Cooking
- Writing
- Communication
- Unity
- Planning for future
- Warmth
- Apply
- Responsibility
- Initiative
- Trying hard
- Good
- Freedom
- Non-violence
- Wonderful
- Easy
- Experimenting
- Independent
- Friendship
- Video editing skills
- Planning
- Empathy
## Annex 5

### Organisations involved through key informants and experts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of interviewees</th>
<th>Org</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wide Horizons (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Burma Link (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Youth Connect teacher (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MHEP (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Camp teacher (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Burmese orphanage and youth centre (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Curriculum Project (curriculum development org) (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mote Oo (curriculum development org) (KI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>World Education Thailand (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>IOM (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Karen Education Department (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cotton On Foundation (E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (E)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Annex 6**

Example of the running order of a workshop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time (mins)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1     | Introductions  
Hand out resources and ask students to read and fill in forms | 10 | Forms include background about me and my research, explain that they do not have to participate and ask questions about their education history. |
| 2     | Introduce Q1: Think about your life now and in the future, what do you want to be the same, what do you want to be different? (prompt: think about who, where, what you want your life to be like, what you want to be doing, what you want to be good at…) | | |
| 3     | Students *individually* draw (visually express) responses and reactions | 15 | Participants can draw or use words (eg mindmap) or a mix |
| 4     | Organise groups of 3-4 | - | Self-selected groups |
| 5     | Groups discuss what they have drawn/ written among themselves and write similarities/differences on a bigger piece of paper. | 10 | Who is dominating? Gender dynamics? What are they discussing that might not be written down? |
| 6     | Each group presents on similarities, differences and common themes | 10 | Who presents? Invite other students to react before I say anything. |
| 7     | Group discussion and reflections on Q1 and follow-up questions | 10 | Flexible- might be covered already during presentations |
| 8     | Q2/Q3: Who is the most important person in your life? How do they help you to think about your future? | 15 | Group students into type of response and props discussion in smaller groups. |
| 9     | Q4: Where do you think you want to be after you finish your education? Why? | 5 | Activity - choose a different side of the room |
| 10    | Introduce Q5: How should education in Mae Sot prepare Burmese students for the future? [prompt: for you, what is the purpose of education?] | | |
| 11    | Ask students to give one sentence in response to the question | 10 | |
| 12    | Group discussion and reflections | 15 | |
| 13    | Wrap up and summary | 5 | Invite students to be interviewed at a later date |
Annex 7

Examples of managing the research process

Activity tracker

Workshop tracker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/tracker</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Status/notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimahaw</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>DONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHEP</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>DONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Connect</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>DONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide Horizons</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>DONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian youth</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual so far</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>