

EDUCATION

From left: students Aye Thein, Thet Hnin Aye and Khine Lynn Thu are studying at the University of Hong Kong.
Photo: Nora Tam



Scholarships to Hong Kong universities can offer great opportunities for students from Myanmar. But the cultural barriers can be insurmountable for some, writes Mabel Sieh

WORLDS APART

Being able to study at a university outside Myanmar is a dream come true for Aye Thein, Thet Hnin Aye and Khine Lynn Thu. Three years ago, they came to study at the University of Hong Kong under a scholarship programme co-sponsored by the university and a number of NGOs.

This overseas education can boost career prospects enormously. A graduate with a degree from abroad may earn up to 10 times more than a local graduate – with salaries of US\$1,000 a month compared to US\$100, the students say. “The education we have back home is terrible. The teachers aren’t qualified. I had a teacher who gave us only 20 pages of notes for a module on world history, and she can barely understand English,” says 27-year-old Aye Thein, a final year politics and public administration student.

Aye Thein is from Sittwe, a small town in the country’s Rakhine state, and had completed an English degree before arriving in Hong Kong. He had no idea where he would end up when he applied for scholarships as the NGO matched his qualifications with

the grants available. He still remembers what it was like when he arrived in Hong Kong. “I was amazed at how incredibly clean the city was. And I love the university library; I’ve never seen so many books in my life,” says Aye Thein.

Thet Hnin Aye, 22, is from Yangon, and she, too, was overwhelmed when she arrived. “There were so many tall buildings, roads and cars; it’s totally different from home,” says the undergraduate student. Like Aye Thein, Thet Hnin Aye also had a degree from home.

There were plenty of adjustments to make at the beginning, Khine Lynn Thu remembers.

“Everything was written in Chinese in restaurants and shops. Not many local people can speak English well. It’s difficult to communicate with others,” says the 24-year-old from Yangon, who is studying politics and public administration.

Before coming here, Khine Lynn Thu also obtained an English degree and had worked for an NGO for two years. “Studying overseas will get me a higher position with a better salary back home,” she says.

The trio are among 11

Burmese students currently studying at HKU, which has had a scholarship programme for Burmese students since 2009.

The programme was set up by Professor Ian Holliday, then dean of the faculty of social science, who has published a book and a series of journal articles on the politics of Myanmar.

“At the time, I contacted some NGOs to see if they’d be interested in a collaboration. Child’s Dream was the one that got back. They kindly took me on a guided tour on the Thai-Burma border,” says Holliday, who now teaches in the



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MANUELA BIANCHI, CHILD’S DREAM

department of politics and public administration.

After the trip, Holliday launched the MOEI programme which takes students to the Moei River section of the Thai-Myanmar border, and other parts of Southeast Asia, to deliver English-language classes for migrant children and adults.

Based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Child’s Dream aims to empower marginalised children and youth in the Mekong region, which includes Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Its scholarship programme began in 2006 and has helped 180 students obtain further education outside Myanmar, mostly in Thailand.

It brought six students to Hong Kong, including two at HKU, another two at City University and one at Polytechnic University.

But the Hong Kong experience wasn’t particularly happy for the students, who struggled constantly with their grade point averages and cultural differences. The students at HKU had their scholarships discontinued after the first year.

“They told me the dorm culture was a big problem. It was a nightmare for them. I had a

student ... who lived as a Shan refugee. She couldn’t cope at all,” says Manuela Bianchi, director and chief operating officer of Child’s Dream.

“If someone grows up in a bamboo village in a jungle and then comes to live in a concrete city like Hong Kong, it’s not eye-opening, like people think; it’s frightening,” says co-founder Marc Thomas Jenni.

Dorm life also proved difficult for Thet Hnin Aye and Khine Lynn Thu; the two girls moved from Lady Ho Tung Hall to an off-campus flat when it became too much.

Having been brought up in the harsh political climate of Myanmar, the students tend not to talk about themselves or their problems.

“They have issues they won’t tell you about. Their father might have disappeared or died. Some haven’t heard from their family for a long time,” Jenni says.

Two of their sponsored students went back to Myanmar without finishing their degrees, but one came back via another funding initiative after a year’s break. Now in her final year, she is on a leave of absence, according to the university.

“We’re not going to send any students to Hong Kong any

more. The level of education and the cost of living are too high, and they often can’t cope with the cultural differences,” says Bianchi.

In response, Holliday says: “I fully understand their position ... As a responsible NGO, they have to [make tough choices]. Academically, students in the first batch struggled, but it was a learning experience for us as well as them.

“We’ve got better at selecting the right candidates. On cultural differences, our Burmese students are very happy and well-integrated into campus life, and often play key roles in cultural exchanges on campus.

“Hong Kong offers unparalleled opportunities in Asia, what with the global standing of its top universities, its outstanding networking opportunities, and the truly cosmopolitan atmosphere on its leading campuses.

“I really hope Child’s Dream will build a fresh partnership with HKU,” he says.

In the meantime, local institutions are promoting an understanding of Myanmar among local students and staff through conferences, service trips, and exhibitions. life@scmp.com

NEWS

Summer school

Applications for the British Council’s UK Summer School Competition 2014 are open until May 19. Students are required to submit an essay in English of not more than 800 words explaining who or what from Britain inspires them the most and why? The best five entries will be offered a summer school place from June to August. The winners will be sponsored with flights, accommodation and tuition fees. Participating universities include Aberystwyth University,



University of Leeds, SOAS, University of London and University of Stirling. Entries can be sent to competition@britishcouncil.org.hk. Visit educationuk.org/hongkong for more information.

IELTS mock exams

The British Council is offering a full IELTS (International English Language Testing System) mock exam that covers listening, academic reading, academic writing and speaking. They are also offering one-to-one feedback. Call 2913 5100 or visit britishcouncil.hk/English. There will also be a free “Success in IELTS” information seminar on 28 April with experts explaining the procedures for taking the test and how results will help them apply to universities at home and abroad. IELTS preparation course teachers will also share exam preparation tips and hints. Places are on a first come, first served basis. Register at britishcouncil.hk/en/events/success-ielts-information-seminar.



Barrier-free access

To promote the concept of barrier-free access for people with disabilities, parents with strollers or the elderly, Baptist University student society Enactus adapted an app made by National Chiao Tung University in Taiwan that has information on friendly restaurants in Hong Kong. Users can download the app Google Play.

Learn how to be a critic

The Asian Art Archive is hosting teaching labs from April to June for visual arts teachers. The first workshop, scheduled for April 26, will focus on art criticism and art writing. Speakers include poet Tang Sit-wah. Visit aaa.org.hk/programmes

LEARNING CURVE
ANJALI HAZARI

Policy on international doctors needs urgent treatment

I need to declare a vested interest. Our son is a doctor.

In fact he is the kind of doctor Hong Kong needs. As a clinician-scientist, he is committed both to his patients and to contributing to the growing body of medical research.

Although he has studied in Hong Kong from kindergarten through to his A-levels, poor long-term projection and planning regarding needs of the community disadvantaged passionate students like him. Fierce competition for few available places required him to seek a medical education outside Hong Kong, despite excellent A-level results.

Question rules that preclude doctors like him, Hong Kong residents, from returning to their home and families. I question why they are disadvantaged by prohibitory licensing exams while they read about government concerns to reunite families from across the border.

I question why his classmates who studied banking and law

and some who did very little, are able to make a life in a place that is their home, while he cannot.

In fact I have a lot of questions.

Since the Licensing Examination of the Medical Council of Hong Kong (HKMLE), “aims to ensure that those who wish to register as medical practitioners in Hong Kong after having received medical training elsewhere have attained a professional standard comparable to that of local medical graduates”, I question why international medical graduates need to undertake a different examination from local medical graduates?

“This is to safeguard the quality of our medical services and hence public health,” Secretary for Food and Health Dr Ko Wing-man said in the Legislative Council.

So foreign medical graduates undertake a three-part examination, of which part two – the Proficiency Test in Medical English – is the only examination

they can feel confident of clearing. Part one comprises of 240 multiple-choice questions that are “designed to test candidates’ professional knowledge in basic sciences, medical ethics/ community medicine, medicine, orthopaedic surgery, psychiatry, paediatrics and obstetrics and gynaecology”.

And that is all the information that is provided to doctors taking the examination.

There are no recommended text books. There are no past papers and there are three, yes, just three, sample questions per discipline provided as guidelines. The goal of the exam clearly seems to be ensuring that



few doctors are able to pass it.

I question why more information is not made available.

Here’s how the HKMLE compares with the US Medical Licensing Examination

(USMLE). Physicians trained outside the US take the same three-part exam, and are scored by the same standard as US medical school students.

An exhaustive list of recommended books, sample questions and past papers are readily available. Students can avail themselves of online-revision courses and timed tests or attend classes that prepare students for taking the test.

The Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board test is the assessment procedure that international medical graduates undertake prior to being allowed to practice medicine in Britain and is a different examination from that undertaken by British

medical graduates as are the exams administered by the Australian Medical Council (AMC). However, the standard of results attained in the AMC exam is intended to be the same as that required of a newly qualified Australian medical graduate. And again, there are detailed guidelines, recommended books and past papers easily available to help meet the required standards.

Recently, results of AMC part one examination held in March have been declared and a total of 140 of the 221 candidates passed the examination and qualified to sit the AMC clinical examination. A comparison of the clinical aspect of these examinations with those set by the HKMLE yield similar information.

Interestingly, foreign medical graduates are not able to achieve these results at the HKMLE. There exists a notion that a low-pass rate will ensure that foreign medical graduates who pass the HKMLE will attain a certain

medical standard, and thus sub-standard health care service to the community will be avoided.

The reality is that this standard is determined by ambiguous questions collated in an arbitrary manner and has been described by doctors who have passed this examination as “shooting darts”.

I don’t ask that rules be relaxed and my son be granted an exemption from the HKMLE. As an educator, parent and a taxpayer – I simply ask for a transparent examination.

It is only when assessment criteria are clearly articulated, standards clearly established and textbooks recommended to facilitate acquiring knowledge that is deemed essential and disseminated to Hong Kong medical graduates that it will be possible to ascertain whether or not foreign medical graduates achieve similar standards.

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