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Cross-border educational mobility and selective inclusion: GED as an alternative higher education pathway for Myanmar migrant youth in Thailand

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Abstract: Although there is a formal commitment to inclusive education, international migration and displacement still limit inclusive access to higher education for marginalised youth. Some challenges faced by migrant youth along the Thailand-Myanmar border include insecure legal status, lack of economic security, language barriers, interrupted education, and non-recognition of certificates acquired in migrant education. In this context, the General Educational Development (GED) diploma is a key pathway to college. The present study aims to explore opportunities and challenges of the GED pathway among migrant youth in Myanmar in the context of Mae Sot, Thailand. A qualitative case study and an intersectional lens approach are used to analyze the research results. The research participants are 18 current or former GED learners, university students and graduates, school educators, a GED school principal, and NGO practitioners. It is found that the GED provides flexible study options, less expensive than some overseas options, few employment opportunities, and some opportunities for university admissions. Meanwhile, the process of participation and transition to the next steps is linked to financial resources; documentation; English language skills; previous learning experience; examination arrangements; institutional support; and the recognition of qualifications. The GED thereby serves as a selective inclusion pathway, which not only opens up opportunities for formal education but also channels participation and results in the uneven distribution of legal, economic, linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional resources.

Keywords: Myanmar migrant education; GED pathway; higher education access; alternative credentials; intersectionality; selective inclusion; educational inequality; Thailand-Myanmar border

1. Introduction

Educational systems and transitions have been transformed by international migration and displacement. While SDG4 calls for inclusive and equitable education, migrants and refugees may be facing exclusion in education. While SDG4 calls for inclusive and equitable education, migrants and refugees may be facing exclusion in education. Policy research on displaced learners in the recent past indicates that merely making formal provisions available is not enough, unless accompanied by the process of admission, financial support, documentation support, language assistance, and institutional guidance [1].

Such tension is particularly felt along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Thailand has introduced education-for-all policies that provide access to education to children, irrespective of their nationality or legal status. The education-for-all policies in Thailand require children to be offered access to education irrespective of their nationalities and legal statuses [2]. Despite this, there are still legal documentation,

language training issues, poverty issues in the household, issues of instability and mobility, and differential institutional treatment issues that continue to impede the progress of Myanmar migrant youth [3–7]. These conditions limit educational mobility and make the students' transition from basic education to higher education difficult.

Despite these obstacles, alternative educational institutions have sprung up to meet these needs. Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) and community schools, as well as NGO programs, are more accessible to migrant youth [8–10]. But the certificates from MLCs do not always count as secondary-school qualifications for admission to tertiary education in Thailand [9,10]. This knowledge gap has led to a growing need for credentials that can link migrant education to higher education.

The General Educational Development (GED) credential is one that has become very popular in this context. It is widely considered to be more flexible, more portable across different countries, and a quicker learning path than the traditional schooling experience, and is especially attractive to students affected by migration, poverty, or political conflict [11,12]. The GED seems to be a feasible path for many families and institutions to enroll in Thai universities and overseas higher education.

But alternative qualifications are not necessarily accompanied by equal access to higher education. Educational equity research has revealed that interventions designed to increase opportunities can actually result in an increased inequity in access to resources, recognition and support [13,14]. Research on higher education transitions also reveals that graduates' mobility is not assured even if they have a higher education credential when they have not accumulated financial resources, institutional knowledge, language skills, or personal support [15]. The tensions are key to the GED pathway and undervalued in the context of the Thailand-Myanmar border.

Selective inclusion is a descriptive term referring to an institutional design that extends the formal eligibility to access but meaningful involvement and impacts are still limited by uneven distribution and policies. The idea thus separates out the “opening” of an avenue from the ability to traverse it, finish it and then use the credential to gain access to higher education participation.

Educational mobility is defined as transitioning between educational levels, credentials, and systems, not just between statuses upwards. Family resources and institutional pathways, and the unequal access to culturally portable attributes of the educational system, have been identified as key antecedents to study-related movement in the literature on transnational education. Educational mobility is also related to spatial mobility in and between borderlands, moving to study in another province or another country, and the desire for a job or further mobility. These are forms of movement that can be facilitated by the GED, but are only feasible if legal, financial, linguistic, and institutional factors permit.

This research explores the role of the GED pathway as a facilitator and a filter towards higher education for youth migrants from Myanmar in Mae Sot, Thailand. The intersectionality approach is used to capture the phenomenon of the legal status, economic status, language, previous schooling, and institutional recognition as an overall disadvantage, not as separate disadvantages [16–18]. The key research question is: What are the enabling and constraining factors of the GED pathway to higher education for Myanmar migrant youth in Thailand? Two secondary questions

are posed: (a) When can the GED increase opportunities for higher education, and (b) what can we learn about the pathway from an examination of structural inequalities?

The article contributes three ways to the literature on migrant education. First of all, it takes a different approach which moves discussion of alternative schooling from secondary provision to transition to higher education. Second, it addresses access to GED, by articulating the idea of selective inclusion instead of inclusion being universal when a credential becomes available to students. Third, it pinpoints areas of intervention throughout the journey, from test preparation to documentation, to university enrollment and beyond. In addition, this focus is in response to global monitoring work, which demonstrates that non-state and alternative providers can potentially introduce greater opportunities for entry, but also can be the source of further inequality if regulation, recognition and support are uneven [19].

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design and setting

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the experiences of Myanmar migrant youth using the GED pathway to higher education. This design was suitable given the study of meanings, barriers, decisions and transition experiences as understood by individuals directly engaged in the credential [20]. Additionally, a case study approach enabled an analysis of the GED pathway in the socio-legal, economic, linguistic and institutional context of the border context in which it functions [21].

The case study took place in Mae Sot, Tak Province, Thailand, where education programs for GED preparation and education programs supported by NGOs are clustered. The choice of Mae Sot is due to the fact that migrant education is influenced by the cross-border mobility, linguistic diversity, legal uncertainty, and the complex network of state and nonstate institutions [10,22].

2.2. Participants and sampling

Migrant education and the GED to university transition were the context of the study, so participants were purposively selected for their information-rich cases [20]. The final sample consisted of 18 participants: current GED students, GED completers who had not enrolled in a university, university students and graduates who had taken the GED pathway, GED educators, one GED school principal, and representatives from NGO's or foundations. The multi-actor design allowed for comparison at different stages of the pathway and for the various positions in the institutions. The sampling and preliminary analysis were done in an iterative manner. Recruitment was continued until all the actor groups within the sampling frame were represented and subsequent interviews added examples or nuances without the need for a new main code, sub-code or a new relationship to be coded in the coding framework. In the bounded case, this stopping rule meant that there was adequate information power to accept it as evidence for universal saturation, not that it was a universal saturation.

The participant profile is summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Participant profile.

Code	Participant category	Number	Institutional affiliation	Role/position	Educational stage
S1–S3	Current GED students	3	GED preparation center	Student	Pre-university
G1–G3	GED completers without university transition	3	GED preparation center/independent learner	GED certificate holder	Post-GED transition
U1–U3	University students via GED pathway	3	Thai university	Undergraduate student	Higher education transition
UG1–UG3	University graduates via GED pathway	3	Thai university	Graduate	Post-university
T1–T2	GED educators	2	GED preparation center	Teacher	Institutional perspective
P1	GED school principal	1	GED preparation center	Principal	Institutional perspective
N1–N3	NGO/Foundation representatives	3	NGO/Foundation	Program director	Organizational perspective

Source: Compiled by the author based on fieldwork interviews conducted in Mae Sot, Thailand (2026).

2.3. Data collection

The semi-structured interview technique was used to gather data. To ensure coverage of the research questions, a general guide to the interviews was used, and the participants were given the opportunity to describe their educational experiences, decisions and histories in their own words [23]. Students discussed their previous schooling experiences, their use of mainstream and alternative education, why they decided to use the GED, the cost and nature of preparing for and taking the GED, documentation of the GED, language issues, university applications, access to scholarships, and experiences of unequal treatment.

Interviews were conducted for about 45 to 60 minutes both in person and online based on availability. Interviews were taken in English since English is the language in which many university application processes are conducted and English is widely used in GED preparation in this context. Each interviewee was given an information sheet and a consent form prior to the interviews. The use of English was taken into account in the interpretation process, as this would impact participation and the extent to which some experiences could be conveyed.

2.4. Data analysis

To discover trends in participants' accounts, reflexive thematic analysis was used [24]. Recordings were transcribed and transcripts and field notes were read back many times to aid in familiarization. Manual coding started with close coding, primarily on the semantic level regarding experiences of access, financial issues, documentation, language, institutional support, examination fairness and university transition. The codes were then compared across interviews and groups of participants and clustered into provisional categories for which part of the data set they were compared.

Inductive Coding and theoretically informed interpretation were used to analyze the data. The analysis was informed by the concept of intersectionality, which was important in its focus on the interplay of legal, economic, linguistic and institutional factors, and by literature on alternative pathways, which directed attention to inequalities after credential acquisition. The development of categories was done in a recursive fashion starting with extracts then to codes, then to candidates and themes

and finally back to the transcripts for coherence and boundaries. The resulting codebook is given as follows in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Thematic coding framework and codebook.

Main code	Sub-code	Description
1. Compensatory functions of the GED pathway	1.1 Flexible learning	Adaptive learning arrangements accommodate interrupted schooling and work-study balance.
	1.2 Economic affordability	Lower costs relative to international programs reduce some financial barriers.
	1.3 Livelihood support	Certification improves access to tutoring, NGO internships, and informal work.
	1.4 Higher education access	The GED serves as a recognized gateway to selected university routes.
	1.5 Social mobility	The pathway expands career expectations beyond low-skilled labor.
2. Structural barriers to GED participation	2.1 Socio-legal constraints	Financial hardship and documentation requirements exclude some potential participants.
	2.2 Pedagogical mismatch	Language demands and different learning traditions create adaptive difficulties.
	2.3 Systemic inequity	Leaked materials and informal networks produce unfair examination advantages.
3. Post-GED constraints in university transition	3.1 Financial exclusion	Tuition, housing, and living costs block sustained university enrollment.
	3.2 Legal vulnerability	Unstable documentation restricts admission and scholarship eligibility.
	3.3 Institutional bias	Admissions procedures designed for local students disadvantage migrant applicants.
	3.4 Language thresholds	Additional IELTS or TOEFL requirements add cost and academic pressure.
	3.5 Qualification recognition	Uneven acceptance of the GED limits access to competitive programs.
Overarching theme	Selective inclusion and reproduced inequality	The GED expands access while stratifying outcomes across students.

Source: Developed by the author based on qualitative fieldwork interviews conducted in Mae Sot, Thailand (2026).

2.5. Trustworthiness and researcher reflexivity

Source and case triangulation were used to enhance analytic credibility. The current learners, GED completers with no university transition, university students and graduates, educators, principal and NGO representatives were compared, and successful and stalled transitions were compared. Transcripts were compared to field notes, codes and categories were continually cross-checked with the entire data set, and any extracts that challenged the developing interpretation were kept, and incorporated into the development of the theme boundaries. Incorporation of a coding record that traces source extracts, initial coding logic, category decision to final thematic coding structure, thereby forming an audit trail. Themes were only kept where supporting extracts were internally coherent and the links between themes were clear.

The researcher studied the situation from a university perspective, and was not a GED learner, a GED teacher, a school principal or a GED service provider from an

NGO who would have had first-hand experience with the situation. The outsider position enabled comparative study across institutions and also meant that there was a distance from the participants' day to day legal and economic insecurity. For reasons of not going too far with interpretation, any contradictory responses and failed cases of transition were not deleted, and the English language interviewing was assumed to be a potential source of selection bias and/or expression. The Mae Sot case, then, and the accounts produced by these interviews, were thus bracketed by interpretative claims.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The Naresuan University Institutional Review Board approved this study with number P2-0392/2568. Participants were told that they were participating voluntarily and that there was no restriction on their participation if they wished to stop at any time. To avoid identifying information which might be sensitive, participant codes (not names) were used, and identifying details were minimised in both transcripts and reported findings.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Analytical framing: selective inclusion through the GED pathway

It is important to understand the GED pathway as a model of selective rather than open access. It offers a pathway to recognised schooling and university education for certain migrant youth from Myanmar who may be at risk of not accessing either of these pathways. However, the actual utility of this path is contingent upon the availability of resources which are not evenly distributed, such as financial, documentation, English language skills, education, organizational support, etc.

The analytical logic of selective inclusion through the GED pathway is presented in **Figure 1**.

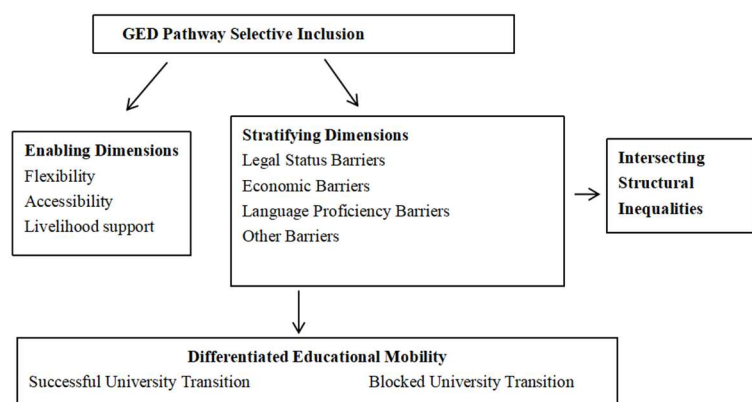


Figure 1. Analytical framework of selective inclusion through the GED pathway.

There are two mutually supportive processes identified in the framework. Flexibility, accessibility, and some support in terms of finance and institutions are elements of the enabling dimension. Stratifying dimension barriers are legal, economic, linguistic, pedagogical and examination-system barriers. These processes create

differentiated mobility: some students move on to university and others are not able to use the same credentials to get into or stay in a university.

3.2. GED as an enabling alternative pathway

3.2.1. Flexibility and accessibility for migrant youth

Throughout, participants consistently cited the advantages of the GED over the other options available to them. It seemed quicker and less reliant on the ability to speak the Thai language than Thailand's non-formal education system. It was generally viewed as less expensive and more accessible to learners who had dropped out of school than other international programmes, e.g. the IGCSE. The following GED student said:

"NFE is a very long process, and you have to know Thai. For GED, it is much quicker – I will graduate from high school equivalent in no time and will go straight to university." (Interviewee: S1, current GED student).

This flexibility was particularly significant to those learners who had changed schools, missed years of schooling, or were working while attending school. Preparation may be done in a preparation centre, online or self-study. A student of a university who prepared for the GED online explained how he was able to take the course and also work:

"I can do my courses online at my leisure. Since I need to work every day, this approach works well for me." (Interviewee: U2, university student via GED pathway).

These accounts show that the GED can reopen an educational route for learners who cannot readily return to a conventional secondary-school pathway.

3.2.2. Educational and livelihood opportunities

The GED also provided some employment opportunities which were rarely permanent or sustainable. The respondents mentioned tutoring, community education programme, internships in NGOs and short-term volunteer work. This could give them a chance to have some practice, stay close to school and earn a little money while they're waiting for university acceptance or scholarship offers. One GED graduate said:

"After I completed my GED, I started working as a tutor for children in our center who do not have GED certification yet. Many NGOs prefer to employ graduates of GED program in volunteer and internship projects." (Interviewee: G2, GED completer without university transition).

NGO participants similarly observed that GED holders were better positioned to assist in community education programs and participate in training. The credential also gave some learners an interim option of enrolling in online higher education when local scholarships were unavailable. One participant stated:

"Because of the lack of scholarships, I use the GED certificate to enter online courses in the University of the People as a temporary measure to continue studying without any interruptions." (Interviewee: G3, GED completer without university transition).

For participants who entered university through the GED pathway, the credential was also associated with broader social mobility. One university graduate described how it contributed to employment and greater financial independence:

“The GED became the milestone of my future life. Having graduated from the university, I found a good job as a GED instructor. In this way, I am able to become a self-reliant person who is able to provide financial assistance to my family members.” (Interviewee: UG1, university graduate via GED pathway).

These accounts explain why the GED has acquired value within migrant communities. They also show that the benefits remain uncertain and depend on what becomes possible after the credential is obtained.

3.3. GED as a selective pathway

3.3.1. Unequal access to credential acquisition

Despite the pathway’s apparent availability, entry was not equally accessible. Cost was the first major barrier identified by participants. Preparation classes, GED Ready tests, official subject examinations, transport, books, materials, and repeat attempts could place the pathway beyond the reach of low-income migrant families. One university student described the cumulative burden:

“GED consists of four parts: RLA, Math, Science, and Social Studies. The fee varies depending on which test you take. Ready Test will cost around USD 8 while the GED itself will cost USD 90 for one subject. If you cannot pass, you need to pay these amounts again.” (Interviewee: U1, university student via GED pathway).

Cost was closely linked to documentation. Registering for the official examination required acceptable identification, meaning that some learners who were academically prepared could not book a test because they lacked the necessary documents. A current GED student described this form of exclusion:

“I have studied really hard in order to sit in the GED exam. However, without a valid passport or any kind of official documentation, I am not able to register. Undocumented youth cannot even think about taking this exam.” (Interviewee: S3, current GED student).

Obtaining a passport or other accepted documentation created additional expenses for some families. The GED school principal explained that NGO funding could support only a small number of learners each year:

“If there is NGO funding, we cover the fees for applying a document and reimburse GED examination fees for our enrolled students. Unfortunately, due to limited resources, our school can only support a handful of youth in pursuing the GED each year. Those without this type of support have no other option but to abandon their plan due to financial constraints.” (Interviewee: P1, GED school principal).

English proficiency was another major barrier. Although the GED offered an alternative to Thai-language pathways, the international examination was taken in English. Learners who had studied in English or received sustained language support were therefore better placed to demonstrate their subject knowledge. One student explained that content knowledge alone was insufficient when the wording of the test could not be understood:

“I know how to solve math, science, or social studies problems. However, my previous education took place in Burmese, and thus I don’t know the English language. In other words, I cannot understand what to do.” (Interviewee: S1, current GED student).

A teacher likewise emphasized that language could prevent students from demonstrating knowledge they already possessed in mathematics, science, or social studies:

“The biggest problem with GED is related to English. Our students understand mathematics, sciences, or social studies but cannot express themselves due to language barriers.” (Interviewee: T1, GED teacher).

3.3.2. Pedagogical mismatch and examination-system weaknesses

Participants also recognized barriers that exist in the design and preparation culture of the GED pathway. Some of them said that it used educational and cultural references which were not familiar to learners from the Myanmar educational background. Some examples were passages from American civics that contained federal and state institution language, context-based word problems where the language was not as familiar as the underlying mathematical concept, and passages of reading that were in idiomatic English terms. Participants also noted the difference between the GED expectations for explanation/evidence and analytical writing and the memorization-based activities they had experienced in prior education. One teacher commented, “As I said: As one teacher noted:

“Many students get used to memorizing the answers in the Myanmar system. However, the thing about the GED is that students need to explain, analyze and do critical reasoning on their own. This proves quite hard for them at first.” (Interviewee: T2, GED teacher)

A student similarly described the difficulty of moving from memorization-based learning to an examination that required explanation and critical reasoning:

“In the Myanmar education system, we mostly just memorize everything and repeat it. In the GED exam, however, sometimes I do understand what the question is, but I am not able to write an adequate response because it requires critical reasoning.” (Interviewee: S1, current GED student).

Participants also raised concerns about the circulation of remembered questions and commercialized past material. They attributed this problem to repeated or similar examination content, which allowed earlier test takers to pass details to those testing later. The principal of a GED school explained:

“There are always similar questions in the test, so students who took the test before can remember them and tell others. In time, it gets commercialized as more and more people can buy the questions before they enter the test room.” (Interviewee: P1, GED school principal)

Participants believed that this practice favored learners with money or stronger networks and weakened the credential’s intended assessment function. They also linked weak preparation in English and analytical reasoning to later university difficulties. University students in the sample indicated that the mismatch could persist after admission, particularly in English-medium coursework, analytical assignments, evidence-based writing, and the independent reasoning expected at university.

Inequality therefore, arose not only from poverty and legal vulnerability but also from pedagogical and examination conditions within the credentialing process itself.

3.4. Unequal university transition after GED completion

Getting a GED wasn't enough to ensure a place at the university. It was seen as a key prerequisite for university, yet not an automatic right. The issue of financial resources, valid documentation, access to scholarships, institutional guidance and university recognition remained as determining factors regarding the use of the credential.

The pathways of 9 GED completers are summarized in **Table 3**. Cases 1 and 2 went to the university shortly after they were completed due to having valid passports and receiving full scholarships. Cases 3–5 also went on to university, but required partial scholarships, family support or self-sufficiency later in their life. Cases 6–9 were GED completers who were still not enrolled.

Table 3. Post-GED university transition under different documentation, financial, and institutional conditions.

Case	GED completion	Completion year	University entry year	Document support	Documentation status	Financial support	Outcome
1	Yes	2014	2015	NGO support	Valid passport	Full scholarship	University entry
2	Yes	2021	2021	Community support	Valid passport	Full scholarship	University entry
3	Yes	2023	2025	Family/self-support	Valid passport	Partial scholarship + family support	University entry
4	Yes	2024	2024	Family support	Valid passport	Full family support	University entry
5	Yes	2024	2025	Family support	Valid passport	Full family support	University entry
6	Yes	2024	-	NGO support	Valid passport	Not available	Unable to enroll
7	Yes	2023	-	Family support	Valid passport	Not available	Unable to enroll
8	Yes	2023	-	Not available	Limited documentation	Not available	Unable to enroll
9	Yes	2024	-	Not available	Limited documentation	Not available	Unable to enroll

Source: Compiled by the author based on qualitative interview data collected during fieldwork in Mae Sot, Thailand (2026).

Scholarship access was the clearest dividing line. One university graduate stated that higher education would have been impossible without external financial support:

“Without the scholarship support, I do not think I could have continued to university because my family could not afford the tuition and living costs.” (Interviewee: UG1, university graduate via GED pathway)

Learners without such support could remain stalled after earning the credential. One GED completer explained:

“Even after getting the GED certificate, I still could not go to university because my family could not support the tuition fees and living expenses. I tried to apply for scholarships, but the competition was very high and I could not get one, so I have to wait.” (Interviewee: G1, GED completer without university transition)

NGO participants confirmed that demand for scholarships exceeded available funding. Documentation intensified this constraint because recognized identification was often needed for both university and scholarship applications. One GED completer stated:

“I already got the GED certificate, but I still do not have enough money to apply for a passport. Without a passport, I cannot apply for university and I also cannot

apply for scholarships. Right now, I can only work and try to save money to get the documents first.” (Interviewee: G3, GED completer without university transition)

University application procedures created an additional institutional barrier. Migrant applicants often lacked guidance on portfolios, admission routes, and program-specific requirements because these processes were designed around Thai students educated in the national school system. One GED graduate explained:

“I studied hard to get my GED, but when I applied to Thai universities, I had no idea how to prepare a portfolio. Local students learn this in their schools, but we never had that guidance.” (Interviewee: G2, GED completer without university transition)

The need for English-language entry requirements added to the costs and preparation required when Universities demanded IELTS, TOEFL or similar proof. Participants also shared concerns about inconsistency in how the GED is recognized by various Thai institutions and degree programs, and concerns about whether a learner’s GED would be accepted at a college or university.

The two phases of inequality found in the results are summarised in **Figure 2**. The first stage is access and completion of the GED, costs of the GED, documentation, language, pedagogical mismatch, and examination conditions. The first stage is access to and completion of the GED, costs of the GED, documentation, language, pedagogical mismatch, and examination conditions. The second relates to transition upon completion, such as tuition and living costs, uncertainty over migration policies, institutional support, opportunities for scholarships, and disparities in credential recognition.

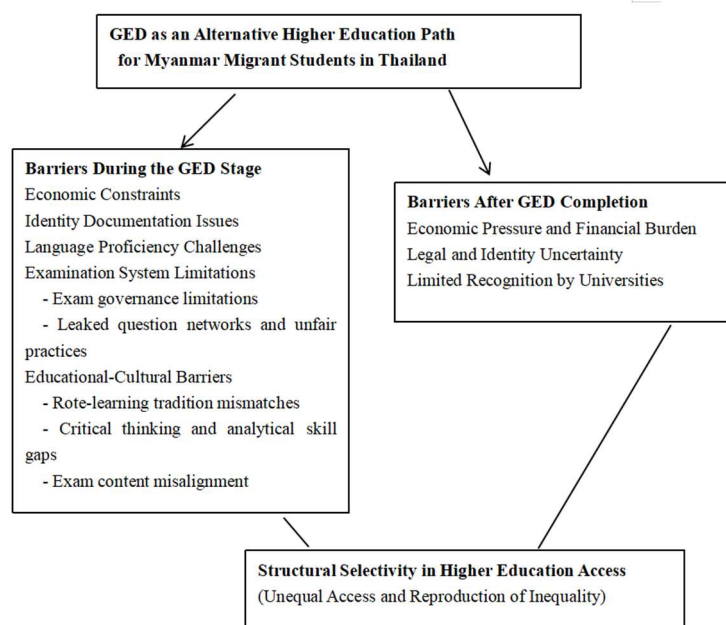


Figure 2. Dual-stage inequalities shaping educational mobility within the GED pathway.

Overall, the GED operated as a selectively inclusive pathway rather than a guaranteed bridge. It enabled university entry when the credential was combined with financial support, valid documentation, institutional guidance, and recognition by higher education institutions.

4. Discussion

4.1. Selective inclusion and the GED pathway

The results cast doubt on the notion that an alternative credential is less selective than the system that it is intended to supplement. The GED opened up opportunities, as it was quicker and more flexible than a few alternative pathways and allowed for interruptions in schooling. The results are in keeping with studies indicating that alternative schools tend to develop when there is a shortage of state schools [10,25].

In parallel, the path created or retained filters that were more or less accessible to all learners. There were a number of factors that determined who was able to receive the credential and who was able to use that credential for university entry, including English proficiency, documentation, scholarship, previous schooling, and institutional support. These are also indicative of the argument of Bourdieu and Passeron that educational institutions can perpetuate inequality by favouring forms of cultural, linguistic and social capital that are distributed unevenly [26].

Choosing to be included and not excluded is more accurately reflected in selective inclusion than in distinguishing between inclusion and non-inclusion. Legal status, financial resources, language, pedagogical preparation and institutional support remained as the determining factors who can participate and progress - the pathway widened formal eligibility.

4.2. Educational mobility under selective inclusion

The GED credential did not create educational mobility. The outcomes varied among learners with the same qualification due to differences in supporting resources. The study was made possible by financial support, documentation by language proficiency, testing by language proficiency and university learning, and institutional recognition by which programs were open. The traditional pathway for Thai students from the school to the university system includes curriculum, secondary certification, language preparation, and application information, all linked to a nationally-suggested sequence. They feel that Thailand's non-formal education path is more closely related to the Thai language and Thai system, whereas the IGCSE is more international and is perceived as more expensive. The GED is shorter, more portable, and leaves much to any student, family, and support organization to prepare, document, recognize, and acknowledge the application. It, therefore, creates mobility through the conversion of systems of mobility rather than the progressive movement within one system.

The results highlight the importance of intersectionality when studying migrant youth transitions. The four factors of legal status, economic constraint, language and institutional recognition were not separate. Without a passport, a participant would have a hard time applying for a scholarship, and if a participant had limited English, this would not only make the GED exam more difficult, but also language proficiency tests and courses at universities. These overlapping factors led to differential transition capacity for students on the same pathway [16–18].

The results are also consistent with studies on integration and boundary-making, which indicate that institutional rules and inequalities of belonging create social and political boundaries [27]. In the GED track, the selection of who gained admission to

movement between education institutions was pushed by documentation requirements, eligibility for scholarships, and credential recognition procedures.

Recent refugee higher education scholarship also reveals that formal enrolment is not enough to achieve participation, but rather funding, institutional support, technology, recognition and belonging constitute the ability to sustain access [28–30]. In Mae Sot, these concerns are apparent - a GED certificate could provide an application pathway; but tuition, documentation, academic preparation and institutional navigation remain unresolved.

In the literature on international student mobility, transition to another institution and/or another country is the main mobility event. Learning mobility starts earlier in Mae Sot: Learners have to travel from the migrant school to the learning center or to test centers to prepare for a foreign credential and then to the Thai university or online learning system. Spatial movement is dependent on and does not automatically occur if credentials, documentation, language, finance and institutional recognition are not aligned. Educational, social and spatial mobility are therefore linked but not synonymous, and the ability to move is socially structured as a result of unequal infrastructures, permissions and resources [31].

4.3. Rethinking alternative pathways in migrant higher education

This study expands the existing research on the education of Thai migrants to look at transition to higher education, a topic which has not yet been studied at this level in much depth. However, research on MLCs demonstrates that alternative institutions are able to increase access but remain limited by legal uncertainty, funding insecurity and recognition [8–10,25]. This is a similar tension that is evident in the GED pathway at the transition point to higher education.

The question of whether an alternative path leads to a credential should not be the only measure by which it is evaluated; it should also be evaluated as to whether the credential can lead to meaningful and sustained participation. The concept of access must be examined in terms of equity issues in education, how the learning resources are distributed, how their needs are recognised and how they are able to utilise education in a manner they may have reason to value [32]. The GED in this instance was a response to a single certification gap, rather than eliminating the structures that created inequities in education.

This reading aligns with the scholarship of refugees in higher education, which has focused on the importance of contextual design, academic support and accompaniment after enrolling in higher education [33]. This also supports international guidance which calls for the education in migration and displacement contexts to be based on access and continuity, protection, and recognition and institutional coordination [34]. For alternative credentials, this means clear recognition criteria, safe and equitable evaluation processes, language and academic transition/bridging, and continued support in the transition to college and early university experiences.

The mismatch of the pedagogical aspects that came out in the findings is not just about performance in examinations. University students and graduates reported problems with independently studying in English, reading, analytical assignments, and

writing based on evidence, which may persist after enrolling in the university. Students who study by heart and regurgitate answers or questions may be able to get a credential without the academic habits that are expected in university. Preparation programs should, therefore, be not just about preparing students for the GED test, but preparing them as a transitional curriculum, which involves subject learning with higher-order thinking, academic English or Thai, digital study skills, portfolio preparation, and task-based practice and preparation for university tasks.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion and implications

This study demonstrates that the GED is a viable pathway for migrant learners whose learning has been disrupted by migration, financial constraints, language challenges, and/or limited recognition of migrant education. It provides flexibility, is relatively accessible, has an established credential, and has a low livelihood value, which can help propel students toward higher education.

The pathway however, does not address the structural inequalities faced by higher education in Thailand as a whole. The financial resources of the family, documentation status, English proficiency, prior educational experiences, admission practices, institutional guidance and credential recognition continue to influence entry into and completion of education, as well as onward mobility. The overall policy challenge is thus to enhance the transition process as a whole and not just certificate completion.

International organizations and NGOs. The budget should include the cost of the GED tests and the official test, documentation, transportation costs, emergency living expenses, and university scholarships. Programs should also offer portfolio workshops, application mentoring and transition grants, and should not leave learners to their own devices once they complete the test.

GED Testing Service and preparation providers. The integrity of examinations should be enhanced by effective item rotation, support of commercialized recalled items and examination administration and/or monitoring. The Burmese-language option is worthy of formal consideration for feasibility since it would enable learners to develop their knowledge of the subject in the language. However, the international GED is currently offered only in English in Myanmar and other countries [35 – 37]. Equivalent test forms, secure delivery, psychometric validation and recognition agreements would be necessary for any Burmese test, too. At present, preparation providers should provide concept instruction of mother-tongue language, orientation materials (in the translated version), subject-language glossaries and a structured transition into academic English.

Thai universities and policymakers. Institutions should make it abundantly clear through program-level policy guidelines the following: recognition of GED, acceptable documentation, language requirements, portfolio expectations, and eligibility for scholarships. Transparency and usability of the admission process would be enhanced by flexible and lawful documentation pathways, fee waiver, bridge semester and portfolio clinics, and designated advisers for migrant applicants.

Cross-sector learning support. Analytical reading, evidence-based writing, problem solving, portfolio, digital learning, and academic English or Thai should be available as modules offered jointly at GED centers, universities, or community organizations. The purpose should not be to lower the intellectual level of the test but to enable the learner to exhibit his or her current knowledge and acquire higher-order skills that will facilitate continued participation at the university.

A coordinated legal, financial, linguistic, pedagogical and institutional support along the entire path is then necessary to address a sustainable response to migrant higher education.

5.2. Limitations and future research

There are a number of limitations on the findings. First, Mae Sot is a unique border and migrant-education hub, and is home to a high density of MLCs, NGOs, and networks that cross the border. The results are therefore analytically applicable to situations with similar circumstances but should not be statistically considered as representative of Myanmar migrants in Thailand. The experiences might be different in different parts of Bangkok, industrial provinces, rural areas, or areas where fewer support organisations for migrants exist and where there are different links with universities. Second, it was a small, purposive sample rather than a representative sample, an appropriate sample for a bounded qualitative case, but which restricts the ability to claim prevalence. Thirdly, some experiences may have been limited because the interviews were conducted in English, which may have been preferable for some participants and would have been preferable for those with stronger language skills. Lastly, the study did not track students into retention, graduation, jobs or extended social and spatial mobility.

Studies are needed that examine and compare the GED pathway in various contexts of migration and different locations in Thailand, such as those with varying labor markets, documentation procedures, and institutional assistance. There is also a need for longitudinal work to track learners from preparation through testing, university entrance and onward, retention, graduation, employment and perhaps further migration. Comparative studies of other alternative credentials can help to shed light on what types of recognition and support lead to lasting inclusion. Lastly, recent work on refugee Higher Education demonstrates the need to study the role of documentation, language, funding, institutional guidance, belonging and technology-mediated access over time as they influence the sustained participation, as alternative credentials do [28–30].

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