Imphal, the capital city of Manipur – a former kingdom turned federal state currently situated on India’s border with Myanmar – is experiencing a private education boom. The boom appears counterintuitive. Imphal is a militarized and often dysfunctional city, yet enormous swathes of land are now occupied by relatively expensive private schools that draw pupils from all over the city and from other parts of the state. Private coaching classes are run out of homes. Education agents all over the city offer admission to universities and colleges in South India, Thailand, and Eastern Europe. Education providers from outside Manipur, mostly from other parts of India, recruit students from Manipur – most noticeably at the large education fairs held in Imphal in the spring such as Edufest, Edu-options, and Edu-expo. 

The boom in private education cannot be appreciated by steadily increasing teacher salaries in the public system, though this seems to have raised the stakes for securing a post, besides providing teachers with more salary to distribute to proxies. Proxies do not exactly live a comfortable life – they face a continual anxiety of being found out, or of losing their income, if the person who actually holds the job disappears or dies – not an uncommon occurrence in Imphal where disappearances and extra judicial killings have marred everyday life for the past three decades. 1

With the increase in the problem, the naming and shaming of teachers who do not report for work or appoint proxies have also become more common, especially in the print media. Furthermore, non-state actors, including student unions and some underground groups undertake physical inspections of schools in various towns and urban localities and take action against absentee teachers directly or report them to the government and monitor the response. The most well-known and sustained campaign is the Ekali Jain Ningthou Tetum (loosely translated as ‘Let’s Study Correctly’) run by the Manipur Students Federation since 2007. If we add to this scenario, the practice of teachers requesting money or ‘present’ to award high marks, teachers leaving the state to work in other parts of the borderland and beyond where the employment conditions are more stable, routine closures of schools for bandhs (strikes), and schools closing during blockades (Imphal city was blocked off from the rest of the country for over three months in both 2010 and 2011 by protestors demanding long-denied autonomy in hill areas of the state), and it becomes clear why the public school system in Manipur has been declared “near impossible to run”. The issue is a lack of schools. Indeed Manipur has a relatively high number of schools per 100,000 head of population: 150 elementary and 31 secondary compared to a national average of 97 elementary and 14 secondary. 3

The Manipur Government attempts to deal with the problem by providing students with money to pay for tuitions and hostel rooms. There is also evidence of bribes, it is possible to offer a large sum and still miss out.

The national curriculum is needed to qualify for tertiary admission lies between three main roads that run southwest and south out of the city: National Highway 150, Mayai Lambi Road, and the Indo-Myanmar Road. Peri-urban farmland has become a dense conglomeration of schools, hostels, and small shops. Infrastructure has been slow to catch up and brand new schools with four floors of reflective blue glass can be found at the end of muddy tracks across waterlogged rice fields. Since the mid-2000s, the epicentre of the boom has been Sangapreu, where the oldest and most reputable catholic secondary schools are located. Much of this area lies beyond the municipal limits, crossing into the so-called ‘outgrowth’ area (Naoriya Pakhanglamla, a ‘Census Town’), as well as into areas of paddy fields and small farms.

Many of the entrepreneurs who started schools in Sangapreu are returnee migrants. Having spent time outside Manipur studying and working in other parts of the state, returnees have a social standing in Imphal that helps facilitate trust, gain access to loans and finance, and open doors with officials. Of course, a great many migrants return unemployed, in debt, and with few connections to make anything happen at all. However the relationship between returnees and the booming private education sector is significant.

Walking through the back blocks of Sangapreu between the main roads, the various stages of the education boom are revealed. At one end of the scale, ground is being broken, or more accurately filled, for new schools. Labourers shovel soil and stones into former rice fields and swampy wasteland. Corrugated iron sheets, steel construction rods, and bricks lie in piles at the edge of uncleared roads. Completed and semi-completed schools loom behind painted brick walls with broken glass and nails embedded in cement along the top. Functioning schools with names like Herbert, Zenith, Children Ideal, Comet, Modern English, Little Flower, Shemrock Bubbles, Standard Robert English, and Kids Foundation occupy buildings of various sizes and styles; some with brightly painted bricks, others with mirrored glass, others with patterned concrete and tiles. Hostels are found in similar buildings with walls, gates and guards and also within local houses. Some houses advertising hostel accommodation have extra floors or outbuildings added. Electricity poles and walls are plastered with advertisements for tuitions and hostel rooms. There is also evidence of
Students apply for further study outside. The flipside of hostels, offering extra coaching, and as agents helping running hostels in their houses, opening shops near schools provides a stark contrast: buildings in poor condition, few newer schools that need to build up their student numbers. Schools and either offer to pay higher tuition or turn to ‘first divisioners’. Thus competition to get into schools screen applicants very carefully so that their overall profile these students. Neighbourhood associations do the ceremonies for rank-holders and gives scholarships to study perpetuating the culture of high achievement. Local governments acquire land. And conversely those able to pay fees are transferred from smallholders to commercial entities on a large scale, as in other contexts where land-grabbing is studied – it is being transferred from smallholders to others, to middlemen and large scale farmers for a completely different usage. Manipur is already dependent on imported agricultural produce, a highly vulnerable position for residents in Imphal when the city has been cut off for months at a time during blockades. The profusion of imported rice, much of it from faraway states like Kamataka and Andhra Pradesh, and the increasing cost of animal feed increases the pressure on smallholders. Dependency on non-Manipuris for food is often raised in arguments for instating the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to restrict entry and settlement of non-Manipuris in the state. Cheap food, mostly packaged, comes from across the border with Myanmar and includes food manufactured there as well as from Thailand, China, and even Korea (the stock of Choco-pie biscuits in Imphal appears never-ending).

In areas like Sangaijupri notices posted on walls of granaries and warehouses interposed among the new school buildings read ‘Save Agricultural Lands. Save Manipur’. The same signs can be found in other areas on the edges of the city where farmland is being redeveloped. The issue highlights sharp divides between the agrarian populations of the valley, especially on the outskirts of the city, and the new purveyors of private capital investing in education and also hospitals, pharmaceuticals, and shopping malls. The boom in the private education sector is driven by the desire of residents to leave Manipur and pursue aspirations for a better life in other parts of India. The desire to leave is also symptomatic of life in this part of the borderland where violence, surveillance, insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities (or perceptions thereof) push many young people to leave, and a higher secondary education, as well as vocational training, is a crucial component. The privatization of the education sector stems, in part, from the dysfunctionality of the state apparatus and the other sources of power that make things happen in Imphal. In other words, it is doubtful whether such a boom would be possible without the “transgression and erosion” of sovereignty power that characterise life in Imphal.11

Duncan McDuie-Ra is Associate Dean Research, Arts and Social Sciences, and Associate Professor in Development Studies at The University of New South Wales, Australia (d.mcduei@unsw.edu.au). Some transactions are legal, some illegal, and others are legal on paper but involve some coercion. Much of the agricultural land is not being transferred from smallholders to commercial entities on a large scale, as in other contexts where land-grabbing is studied – it is being transferred from smallholders to others, to middlemen and large scale farmers for a completely different usage. Manipur is already dependent on imported agricultural produce, a highly vulnerable position for residents in Imphal when the city has been cut off for months at a time during blockades. The profusion of imported rice, much of it from faraway states like Kamataka and Andhra Pradesh, and the increasing cost of animal feed increases the pressure on smallholders. Dependency on non-Manipuris for food is often raised in arguments for instating the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to restrict entry and settlement of non-Manipuris in the state. Cheap food, mostly packaged, comes from across the border with Myanmar and includes food manufactured there as well as from Thailand, China, and even Korea (the stock of Choco-pie biscuits in Imphal appears never-ending). In areas like Sangaijupri notices posted on walls of granaries and warehouses interposed among the new school buildings read ‘Save Agricultural Lands. Save Manipur’. The same signs can be found in other areas on the edges of the city where farmland is being redeveloped. The issue highlights sharp divides between the agrarian populations of the valley, especially on the outskirts of the city, and the new purveyors of private capital investing in education and also hospitals, pharmaceuticals, and shopping malls. The boom in the private education sector is driven by the desire of residents to leave Manipur and pursue aspirations for a better life in other parts of India. The desire to leave is also symptomatic of life in this part of the borderland where violence, surveillance, insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities (or perceptions thereof) push many young people to leave, and a higher secondary education, as well as vocational training, is a crucial component. The privatization of the education sector stems, in part, from the dysfunctionality of the state apparatus and the other sources of power that make things happen in Imphal. In other words, it is doubtful whether such a boom would be possible without the “transgression and erosion” of sovereignty power that characterise life in Imphal.11

References
1 This chapter is based on content from my forthcoming monograph, McDuie-Ra, D. Frontier City to Gateway City: Militarisation and Liberalisation in Imphal, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
6 McDuie-Ra, D. 2012. Northeast Megatrends in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Relocation, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
10 Ibid., p. 4.