



**University of Papua New Guinea
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**The State of Tertiary Education in Papua New
Guinea: A Critical Review on the 50th Anniversary
of Independence.**

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The State of Tertiary Education in Papua New Guinea

-A Critical Review on the 50th Anniversary of Independence.

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1.0 Introduction

- ❑ **Papua New Guinea (PNG)** commemorates **50 years of independence in 2025**, a milestone not just politically but also socioeconomically.
- ❑ Tertiary education plays a **transformational role in national development** shaping leadership, workforce readiness, innovation, and identity.
- ❑ “Education is not just a sector; it is the lifeline of PNG’s Vision 2050 and Economic diversification.”
- National Vision 2050, PNG Planning Commission

1.0 Introduction

- Despite decades of reform and investment, **Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio (GTER) in PNG remains extremely low:**

Countries	GTER
PNG	2%
Fiji	46%
Malaysia	51%
Australia	100%

Source: *The Global Economy; UNESCO UIS; Trading Economics*

- Clearly a **mismatch between national aspirations and educational capacity**, especially given surging growth of youth population and demand for higher education. [*Oxford Business Group, 2015; DHERST Selection Reports 2023–2025*]

1.0 Introduction

Key Statistics

❖ In **1975**, PNG had **just one university (UPNG)**; by **2025**, **6 public universities**, **4 private universities**, and over **50 technical/vocational colleges**.

- *DHERST, Wikipedia, Oxford Business Group*

❖ **30,000+** Grade 12 graduates in 2025, only $\approx 11,500$ secured tertiary places leaving over half without access to formal post-secondary pathways.

- *study.pngfacts.com, pnginsightblog.com*

2.0 Background of Study

Post-Independence Foundations (1975–1985)

- ❑ Inherited a limited post-secondary education system
- ❑ UPNG (First National University) was founded in 1965 and Unitech (Lae) followed soon after.
 - *Wikipedia – UPNG, Unitech*
- ❑ By the mid-1980s, PNG has only 2 Universities with tertiary access concentrated in urban centers.
- ❑ Education was largely state-driven.

2.0 Background of Study

Expansion & Diversification (1990s–2000s)

- Formal recognition of Faith-Based Tertiary institutions - Divine Word University (est. 1996) and Pacific Adventist University (est. 1997)
- DWU & PAU – Wikipedia
- PNG's Public Tertiary Network expanded to four main universities by early 2000s - UPNG, Unitech, University of Goroka, and University of Natural Resources and Environment (UNRE – Vudal)
- National Education Profiles, DHERST
- ***Despite institutional growth, enrollment capacity remained low, and regional disparities persisted in access in Tertiary Education.***

2.0 Background of Study

Challenges

Over time, the tertiary education sector struggled with:

- ❑ **Low enrollment rates**

PNG's Gross Tertiary Enrollment remained around **1.5–2.3%**, in comparison to 30 – 50% in neighboring countries.

- TheGlobalEconomy.com, Index Mundi

- ❑ **Rural-urban divide**

Students from remote provinces continue to lack pathways or support to access higher education.

- ❑ **Underinvestment**

Infrastructure, staffing, and funding shortfalls limited expansion.

2.0 Background of Study

Policy Reforms and Governance (2010s–2020s)

- The **Higher Education (General Provisions) Act 2014** established the **DHERST** as the coordinating body for the sector. [*Education-Profiles.org, DHERST*]
- Strategic plans such as:
 - **Vision 2050, MTDP IV (2023–2027)** and **National Higher & Technical Education Plan 2021–2030** - sought to strengthen institutional quality, student pathways, and relevance to labour market needs.
- National Planning Dept., DHERST

3.0 Objective of Study

The objective of the study

- ❑ To assess the historical development and current state of tertiary education in Papua New Guinea (1975–2025)
- ❑ To evaluate the effectiveness of public and private tertiary institutions in meeting national development goals
- ❑ To identify key challenges and propose strategic recommendations for the transformation of the tertiary education sector

4.0 Literature Review

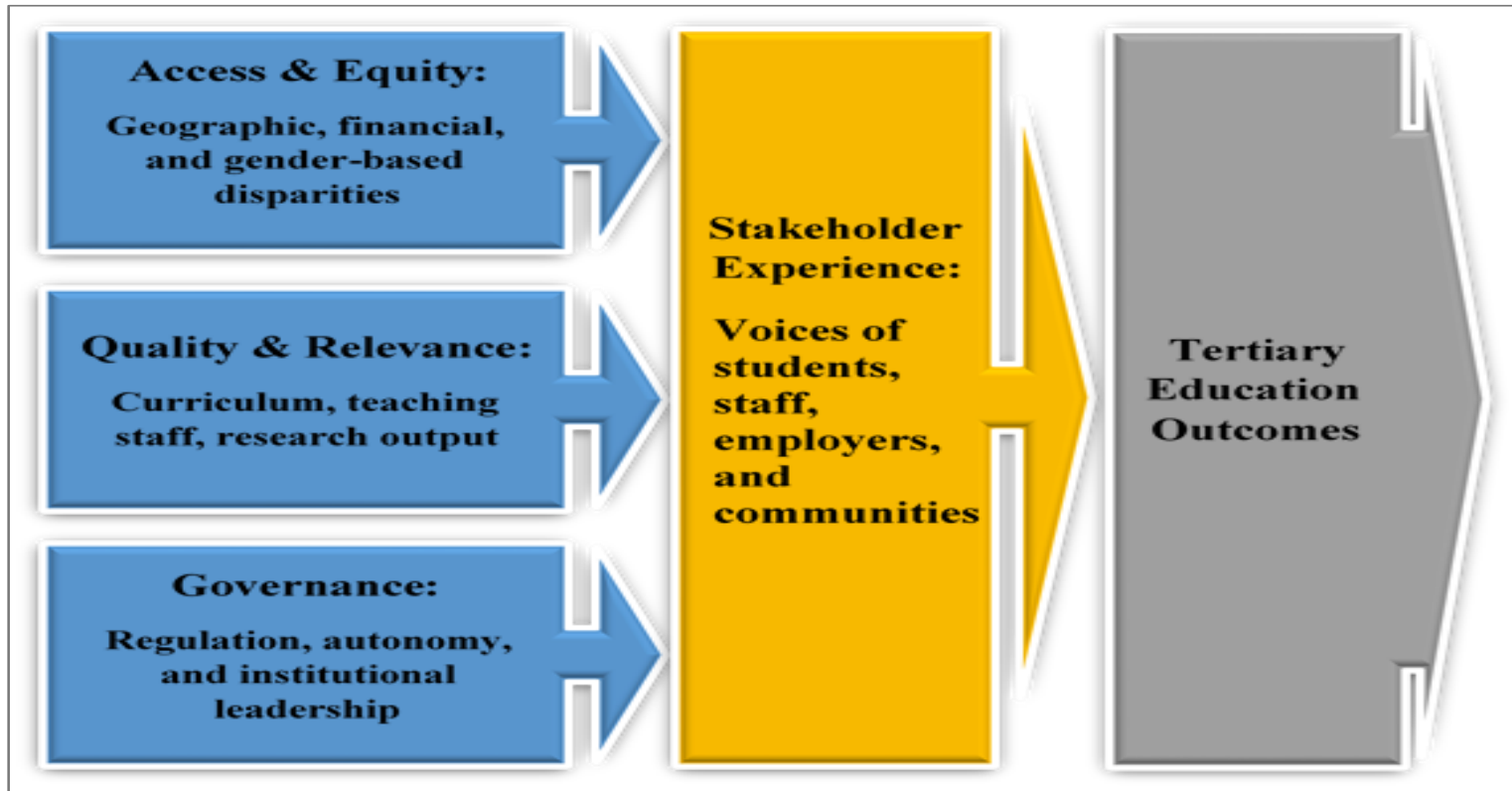
- ❑ **Global Perspectives on Tertiary Education:** According to the **World Bank** and **UNESCO**, tertiary education is vital for knowledge-based economies, national competitiveness, and innovation.
- ❑ The **Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio (GTER)** is a key benchmark of education inclusion: Australia (2020): 100%, Fiji: 46%, Malaysia: 51% and PNG: a $\approx 2.3\%$ [*World Bank Data, 2020*]
- ❑ **Regional and National Challenges:** **Altbach et al. (2009)**: Developing countries face challenges in access, quality, and academic capacity.
- ❑ **Papua New Guinea's context** reflects persistent **Low access** to formal tertiary pathways, **Fragmented governance and leadership**, **Limited investment** in infrastructure and faculty development [*DHERST Reports, 2017–2023*]
- ❑ **Access and Equity in PNG: NRI (2012)**: Education inequalities are shaped by regional disparities, gender bias, and affordability gaps.

4.0 Literature Review

- ❑ **World Bank Education Sector Review (2019)** highlights the needs for diversified and decentralized institutions in PNG. Church and private institutions (e.g., DWU, PAU, IBSU) **bridge state capacity gaps**—but vary in regulation and quality assurance.
- ❑ **Workforce and Employment Linkage:** ADB (2018): Technical and vocational education must be aligned with labour market demand.
- ❑ In PNG, many tertiary graduates face unemployment or underemployment, indicating a mismatch between academic programs and skills demand.
- ❑ **Policy & Reform Literature:** PNG's major reform documents include: Higher Education (General Provisions) Act 2014, National Education Plan, Vision 2050, National Higher and Technical Education Plan (2021–2030). These plans emphasize institutional autonomy, public-private partnerships, and digital innovation, but implementation remains slow. Limited research and innovation output further constrain the sector's development role.

5.0 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Research Framework for Tertiary Education Outcomes



Source: Author

6.0 Methodology

- ❑ Qualitative analysis research approach is used focusing on providing a detailed and comprehensive account of a phenomenon or experience as it is naturally occurring (Lambert & Lambert, 2012).
- ❑ **Design:** Qualitative Approach.
- ❑ **Data Collection:** Document analysis.
- ❑ **Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis and triangulation.
- ❑ **Scope:** Higher educational institutions.

7.1 Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Assessment of the historical development and current state of tertiary education in Papua New Guinea (1975–2025).

- An analysis of higher education in Papua New Guinea at significant milestones (1975, 1985, 1995, 2005, 2015, and 2025)
- Emphasizing Gross Tertiary Enrollment as a proportion of the eligible population.

Year	Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio	Notes
1975	1.5%	Few Institutions and Low Access
1985	1.33%	Lowest recorded rate, limited institutional Capacity
1995	2.8%	Growth period, yet limited institutional capacity
2005	2.0%	Slight stagnation due to funding and infrastructure issues
2015	1.8%	High demand but limited expansion of tertiary spaces
2025	2.3%	Increase grade 12 outputs, capacity remains constrained

Source: World ban, UNESCO, Index Muni, Global Economy

7.1 Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Assessment of the historical development and current state of tertiary education in Papua New Guinea (1975–2025).

- An estimate of the total population and the population of aged 18 –24 (i.e., **Tertiary-Age cohort**) in PNG.

Table: Total Population and Tertiary Age Cohort (Aged 18 – 24)

Year	Total Population (Estimate)	Tertiary Age Pop.	Tertiary Age Pop. %	Gross Enrollment Population	Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio (GTER)
1975	2,814,820	338,000	12%	5,000	1.5%
1985	3,478,936	418,600	12%	5,567	1.33%
1995	4,644,378	534,000	11.5%	14,952	2.8%
2005	6,535,905	718,950	11.0%	14,379	2.0%
2015	8,743,246	917,661	10.5%	16,518	1.8%
2025	10,762,817	1,076,282	10.5%	24,754	2.3 %

Source: UN-Derived Worldometer, data worldmeters.infor

7.1 Results and Discussion

Objective 1: Assessment of the historical development and current state of tertiary education in Papua New Guinea (1975–2025).

Table: State vs Private Institutions (1975 – 2025)

Year	Public Universities/Colleges	Private
1975	1-2 Public Institution (UPNG only active)	None, Just Informal
1985	3-4 Public Institution (UPNG, Unitech, Vudal, UOG)	None, emerging mission colleges
1995	4 Public Universities	Divine Word Institute (Later DWU) & Emerging Mission colleges
2005	4 Public Universities + 25 Technical/Vocational Colleges	2 recognized (DWU & PAU)
2015	4 Public Universities + 25 Technical/Vocational Colleges	2 Church Universities + Private (IBSU)
2025	6 Public Universities + 46 - 50 Technical/Vocational Colleges (DHERST)	2 Church, IBSU and growing number of Independent Institutions

7.2 Results and Discussion

Objective 2: Evaluation of the effectiveness of public and private tertiary institutions in meeting national development goals.

Table: 2020 Population and Tertiary Enrolments –PNG vs Other Countries

Countries	Population in Millions	GTER
Papua New Guinea	9.75 M	2%
Australia	25.4 M	100%
Fiji	0.9 M	46%
Indonesia	273 M	32%
Sri Lanka	21.9 M	58%
India	1.38 B	30%
Malaysia	32.5 M	51%

Source: The Global Economy.com

- ❑ PNG remains an outlier in the Pacific with extremely low tertiary participation.
- ❑ Australia stands at near-universal tertiary access ($\approx 100\%$ GTER).
- ❑ Indonesia and India are mid-tier ($\approx 30\text{--}32\%$); Malaysia and Sri Lanka are high ($\approx 51\text{--}58\%$); Fiji sits just under half ($\approx 46\%$).

7.2 Results and Discussion

Objective 2: Evaluation of the effectiveness of public and private tertiary institutions in meeting national development goals.

National Development Goals Related to Tertiary Education:

- ❑ Vision 2050: Human Capital Development as a cornerstone for prosperity.
- ❑ National Higher & Technical Education Plan (2021–2030): Expanding access, improving quality, promoting innovation.
- ❑ MTDP IV (2023–2027): Workforce alignment and inclusive education.
PNG Development Strategic Plan (DSP) 2010–2030: Target of 30% Tertiary enrollment by 2030.

7.2 Results and Discussion

Table: Comparison of Public and Private Institutions

Public HEIs		Private HEIs	
Strengths	Limitations	Strengths	Limitations
Broad national reach & Historical Prestige	Underfunded & overcrowded	More flexible & responsive to industry needs	Limited access- Located in Urban centers
Large Student Intake (70-80%)	Rigid/fixed curricula	Provide holistic & value-based education	Quality varies – lack rigorous accreditation
Government Supported	Slow to adapt	Emphasis digital literacy	Capacity Constraints
Offers core disciplines: law, education, etc	Graduate unemployment remains high	Partner with International and regional networks	Higher Tuition fees

7.2 Results and Discussion

Objective 2: Evaluation of the effectiveness of public and private tertiary institutions in meeting national development goals.

Criteria	Public Institution	Private Institutions
National Coverage	High	Moderate -Low
Program relevance	Moderate	High
Affordability & Access	High	Low -moderate
Graduate Employability	Moderate	High
Research Output	Low-moderate	Low
Contribution to Policy Goals	Moderate	Growing but fragmented

Key Findings

- Public institutions are foundational but require reform in funding, governance, and modernization.
- Private institutions are more agile and innovative, but inequitable access limits their broader development impact.
- Both sectors lack consistent quality assurance and structured industry linkages.

8.0 Challenges and Solutions

Objective 3: Key challenges and propose strategic recommendations for the transformation of the tertiary education sector.

Table: Challenges and Strategic Solutions

Key Challenges	Strategic Solutions
Limited Access & Equity	Expand Scholarships, remote learning, inclusive policies and National Open Universities PPP Initiatives etc.
Low Quality & Outdated Curriculum	
Weak Governance	
Poor Infrastructure	Public Private Partnership, performance audit, policy audit, leadership training, performance-based appointment etc.
Graduate Unemployment	Skills audits, internships, donor investments, e-learning, platforms, self-financing initiatives

Transforming PNG's tertiary education requires inclusive policy, sustained investment, and shared responsibility. By learning from the past 50 years, we can shape a more equitable, quality-driven, and future-ready system.”

8.0 Challenges and Solutions

Objective 3: Key challenges and propose strategic recommendations for the transformation of the tertiary education sector.

Table: Strategic Transformation Framework

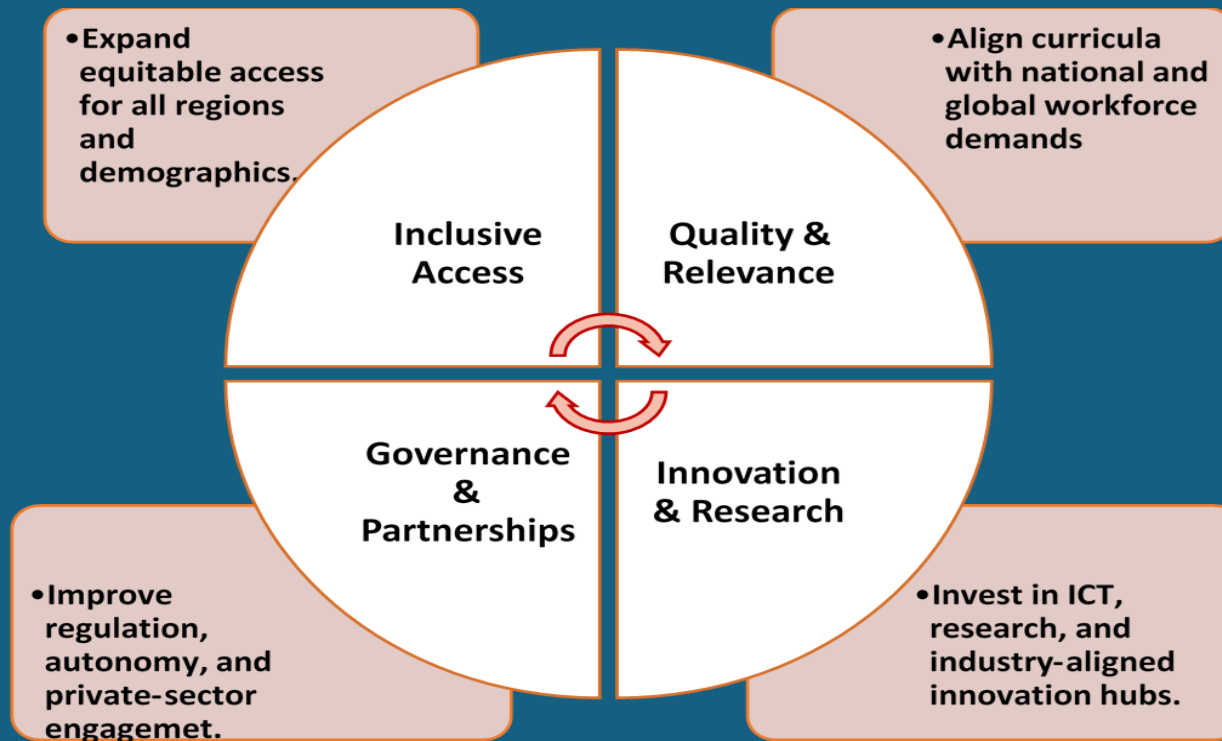
Four Strategic Pillars	Strategic Focus
Inclusive Access	Expand equitable access for all regions and demographics
Quality & Relevance	Align curricula with national and global workforce demands
Government and Partnerships	Improve regulations, autonomy and private – sector engagement
Innovation and Research	Invest in ICT, Research and Industry –aligned innovation hubs

For Papua New Guinea, investing in tertiary education is not merely a development option, it is a national imperative for shaping a skilled, innovative, and united society for the next 50 years and beyond."

8.0 Challenges and Solutions

Objective 3: Key challenges and propose strategic recommendations for the transformation of the tertiary education sector.

Strategic Transformation Framework for PNG Tertiary Education



Source: Author

9.0 Conclusion

Concluding Message

- ❑ Tertiary education is not just a stepping stone for individuals; it is the cornerstone of PNG's human development and national progress. The next 50 years require bold reforms, inclusive strategies, and a commitment to excellence.”
- ❑ **"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."** - *Malcolm X*
- ❑ "Tertiary education is the engine of Papua New Guinea's human capital and the bridge to a prosperous, self-reliant nation. An educated population is not a luxury , it is the foundation of economic growth, good governance, and sustainable development.”

Authors- Manoha, Mo, Dilu

Thank You !