

Rebuilding the University of Papua New Guinea

by Scott MacWilliam

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After years of neglect as well as deliberate policies which downplayed the importance of tertiary education for Papua New Guineans, there are some signs suggesting changes are underway. What is not clear is whether increased attention from the relevant PNG institutions and international aid donors is too late to rescue the country's first university, the University of Papua New Guinea at Waigani. If UPNG, located in the nation's capital cannot be reconstructed to international standards, then it is unlikely that any substantial university-level institution will exist elsewhere in PNG.

UPNG, which is primarily an undergraduate teaching university, is in a near-terminal condition regarding classrooms, staff offices and housing, out-dated library facilities and limited internet access. Most importantly of all, staff-student ratios are disgraceful and despite their undoubted enthusiasm and abilities many students are taught only by junior staff, many of them on temporary employment contracts as early-career lecturers and tutors. The standard of undergraduate teaching and learning is very low, and has declined substantially since the university was established over forty years ago.

UPNG bears little resemblance to ANU and the other Go8 universities. Many of its problems are more like those faced by the Australian universities which teach large numbers of undergraduates, by staff who have little time or other resources for research. Despite the recent Garnaut-Namaliu Report advocating the construction of postgraduate courses and higher degree programmes, this is fanciful. There will be no Kennedy School/Crawford School at Waigani in the near or even mid-term future, nor should there be. Resources are too limited and better graduate training can be obtained more efficiently and effectively outside PNG. While there may be some UPNG staff who are involved in international collaboration on research, the number is very small. Instead more permanent academics supplement their university wages and salaries through consultancies, which also reduces their commitment to teaching. Attention should be directed at strengthening undergraduate courses, up to the Honours level, though, as argued below, this will also require a strengthening of research capacities.

While some changes may be on the way, there are also signs that the 'mobilization of bias' against substantial shifts remains powerful. An especially discouraging indicator is the superficial process now taking place to find candidates for the soon-to-be-vacant position of Vice Chancellor. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the search did not go beyond placing ads in the country's newspapers. No advertisement appeared on the UPNG website, which has not been updated since 2007. While the closing date for applications was May 18 and the applicants are not publicly known, the limited scope of the advertising does not provide much hope that the senior management of the university is about to be revitalised. At a time when education is internationalised and students at UPNG aspire to obtain training and credentials which will be accepted world-wide, the failure to scour the globe for the best candidates is tantamount to neglect on a major scale.

What is to be done? Firstly, the PNG government and international donors should closely monitor the decision-making process now under way to select a VC. In the likely event that the list of candidates shows no one with international university management experience, there should be pressure to re-open the process. Extend the advertising and sharpen the criteria to ensure the new VC meets international standards of expertise and experience, as well as the physical capacity to perform an undoubtedly stressful and demanding task.

Secondly, commit immediate resources to ensure that the electronic needs of a twenty-first century university are met. Whether this is done by the university investing in a few satellites, creating study centres with internet access as well as wireless communications on campus for students who have their own computers but no funds to buy even Digicel time is for others to decide. However with a library packed, not enough study space and little in the way of contemporary books or journals, rapidly improving internet access would provide an important starting point for a wider up-grade of facilities.

Thirdly, because of the above, any Australian twinning arrangements must first address improving the standard of undergraduate teaching. Although the Go8 secondment of academics to teach for relatively short periods has had limited success, and is not helped by the indifference of the current UPNG administration, it is probably worth pursuing this form of assistance providing adequate housing and other facilities can also be supplied.

Fourthly, a major contribution that AusAID and Australian universities could make is to persuade the UPNG administration of the merit of external course advisers and co-examiners. Once the international comparisons of the standard of student education at UPNG are made and known, then constructive, **not punitive**, steps can be taken to improve all aspects of education at what should be PNG's foremost

university.

Finally, while the PNG government and UPNG administration focus upon improving living and working conditions for staff and students, Australian academics could assist UPNG with journal publication. As far as I am aware, UPNG has no journal in any area that appears regularly and publishes at an international standard. (I have heard claims to the contrary but have not seen evidence to back the claims.) Australian academics could be involved on editorial boards, refereeing articles and providing mentoring/editorial functions. These tasks could be combined with teaching students and academics at UPNG how to do research, to write up the results of their work, to apply for research grants etc from UPNG and other domestic sources. Building a domestic research culture is vital and UPNG academics collaborating with academics at overseas universities, utilising ARC and other funds, have a limited demonstration effect as islands of relative privilege. Papua New Guineans who train overseas are less likely to want to return to work at UPNG without seeing a research culture developing.

Rebuilding UPNG will be a monumental task. However, every effective modern nation-state needs tertiary institutions which educate their labour forces to international standards and instil the civic virtues of citizenry which play a part in good governance. Despite the neglect of recent years, there are still dedicated teachers and enthusiastic students at UPNG whose efforts deserve domestic and international support so that their country can be enriched by continuing generations of well-educated people.

Scott MacWilliam has taught and conducted research in Canada, the USA, the UK, Uganda, Kenya, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, as well as Australia. In July he is joining the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project at ANU where he is completing a book Securing Village Life: Development in Late Colonial Papua New Guinea for ANU E-Press.

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