

# Tertiary education in PNG: a critical review

by Ponnusamy Manohar, David Mo and Loretta Dilu

3 June 2026



The New Lecture Theatre at the University of Papua New Guinea

*Photo Credit: Loretta Dilu*

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” declared South African President Nelson Mandela in 2003. Fifty years after independence, Papua New Guinea would not be where it is today were it not for education. In spite of the many challenges and issues the country faces, it is a milestone achievement to have come this far as a sovereign state. Education is the lifeline of **PNG’s Vision 2050** that drives the nation forward and tertiary education in particular plays a transformational role in national development, shaping leadership, workforce readiness, innovation and identity.

The findings summarised in this post are drawn from a critical review of PNG’s tertiary education system since 1975 that we presented at the **2025 PNG Update conference**. The review used the **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** for the tertiary sector to benchmark PNG against other countries in the region and around the world. It had three objectives: to assess the historical development and current state of tertiary education in PNG from 1975 to 2025, to evaluate the effectiveness of public and private tertiary institutions in meeting national development goals and to identify key challenges and propose strategic recommendations for the sector.

The **University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG)** is the country’s first university and was founded in 1965. In that same year, the PNG Institute of Higher Technical Education was established in Port Moresby. In 1967, the institute moved to Lae, Morobe province, and in 1970 was renamed the PNG Institute of Technology. It was officially upgraded to the **PNG University of Technology (Unitech)** in 1973. By the mid-1980s, the country still had only two universities, with tertiary access concentrated in urban centres, and education was largely state-driven.

The period between 1990 and 2000 was an era of expansion and diversification, during which faith-based (private) tertiary institutions gained formal recognition. **Divine Word University (DWU)** and **Pacific Adventist University (PAU)** both attained university status in 1996. They had existed in other forms since the early 1980s.

By the early 2000s, PNG’s public tertiary network had expanded to four main universities: UPNG, PNG Unitech, the **University of Goroka (UOG)** and the

From 2010 to 2020, major governance reforms transformed the sector, notably the passage of the *Higher Education (General Provisions) Act 2014*, which created the **Department of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology** (DHERST).

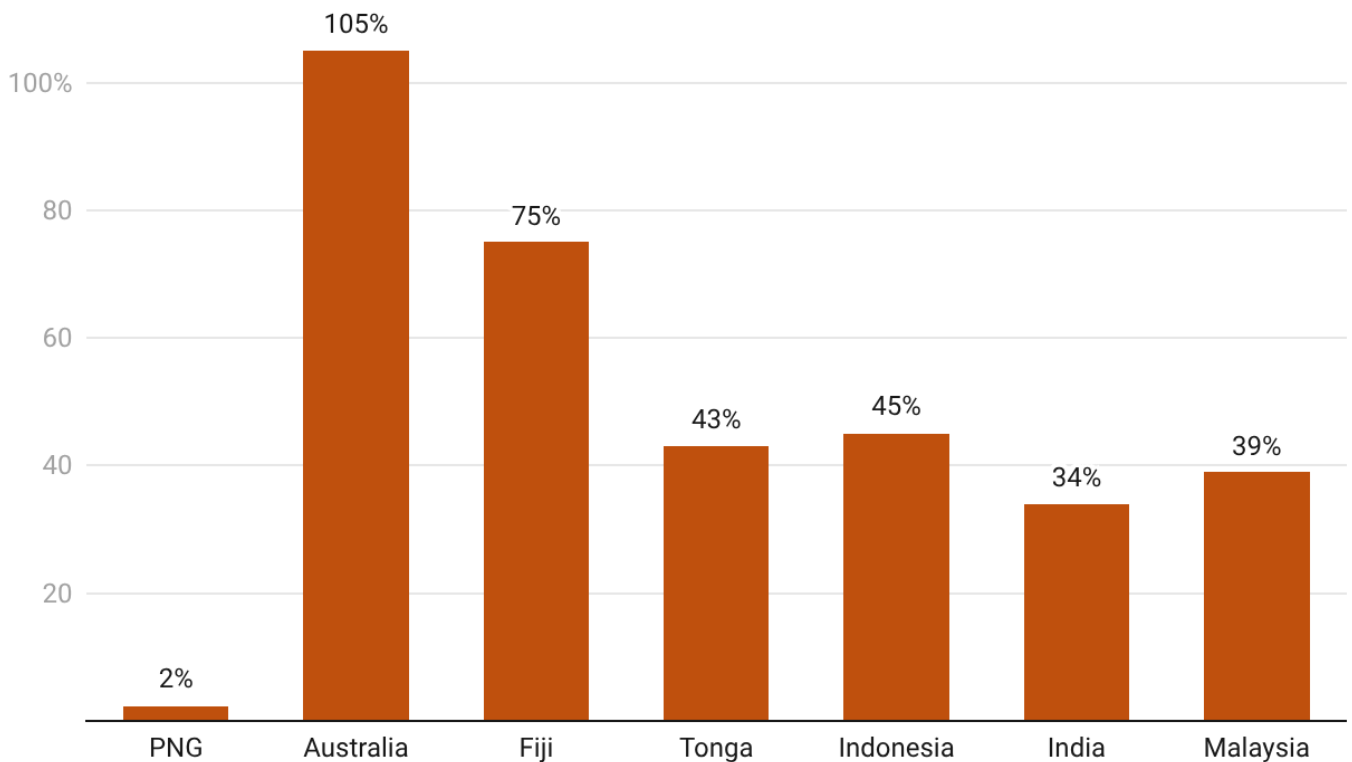
In 2014, the Institute of Business Studies (IBS) submitted a proposal to become a university under the Act, and in late 2016 **IBSUniversity** was formed. The **Lutheran University of Papua New Guinea** (LUPNG), a faith-based institution, was created in 2022. It was created as a merger of three existing Lutheran institutions: Balob Teachers College in Lae, Martin Luther Seminary in Lae and the Madang Lutheran School of Nursing. It started enrolling students in 2023. The **Innovative University of Enga** (IUE) was formally established under the IUE Act 2022 and welcomed its first intake in 2024 with over 860 students in 2024 and graduated 166 students in 2025.

There are currently 10 higher educational universities — six public institutions, three faith-based institutions and one private university — plus over **100 technical and vocational colleges**. In 2024, more than **30,000 Grade 12 school leaver applicants** and about **2,268 non-school leavers** competed for places, yet only around 11,500 secured tertiary placements for studies in 2025, leaving over half without access to formal post-secondary pathways.

By 2025, the number increased with more than **38,000 grade 12 students** sitting final exams. Interestingly, the results of **a national online selection process** reported that over 23,000 students had been selected to study in different tertiary institutions in 2026 — an impressive increase of more than 11,000 compared with 2024. This is due to the increase in the number of tertiary institutions, institutional reforms, improvements in the higher education online selection system and the expansion of quotas for each program offered in each institution.

Despite decades of transition, enrolment capacity remains low and regional disparities persist in access to tertiary education. PNG's GER for the tertiary sector remains lower than that of other comparable lower-middle income economies around the world. PNG's GER has been fluctuating at **a much lower rate between 2% and 2.8% since 1999**, which is far lower than that of the Philippines (47%), Morocco (48%) and Nicaragua (30%), and relatively closer to Eritrea (3%), if higher than Haiti (1%). In the region, PNG's GER is extremely low, while Australia hits the target of universal education for all. Fiji, Tonga, Indonesia and Malaysia are also doing well, with GERs above average.

**Figure 1: Gross Enrolment Rate (Tertiary) - Papua New Guinea vs selected Asia-Pacific countries**



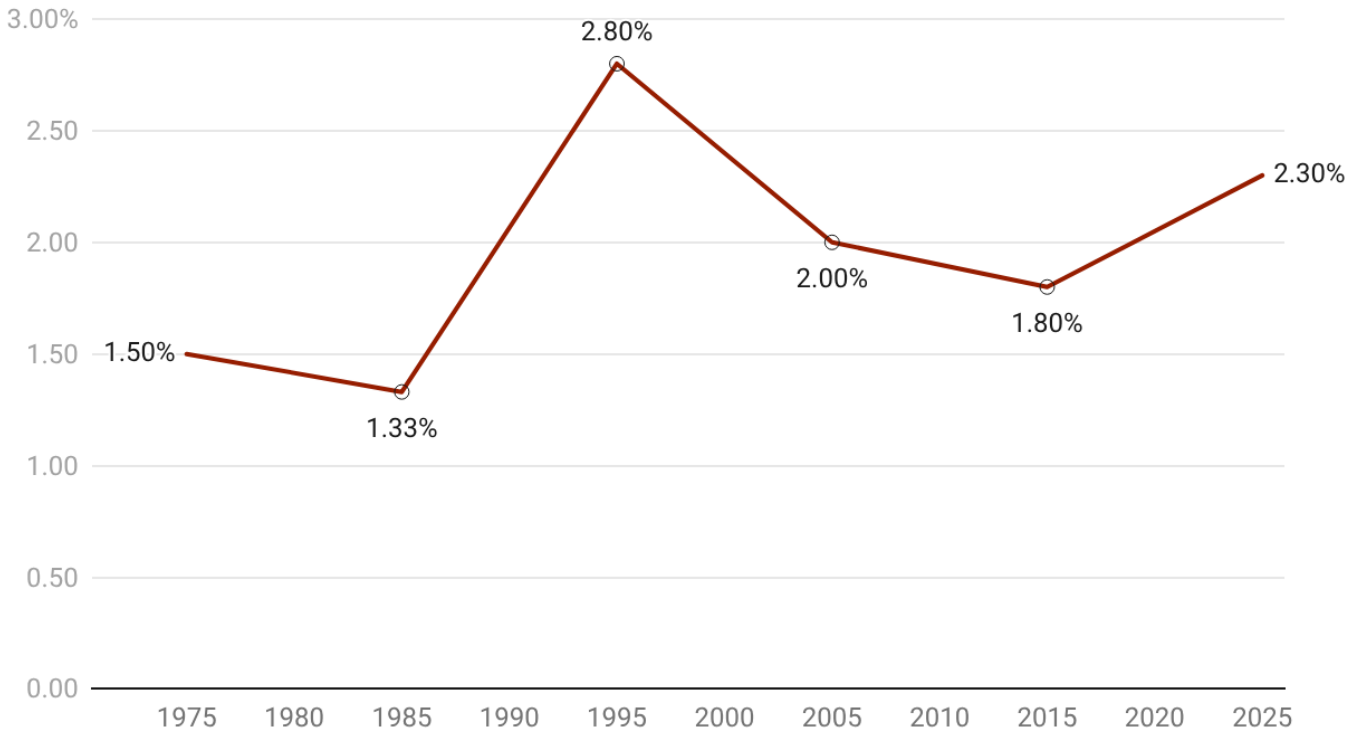
Notes: The Gross Enrolment Rate for the tertiary sector is calculated as the total number of enrolments divided by the tertiary-age population. The GER is calculated in different years: PNG (2025), Australia (2024), Fiji (2024), Indonesia (2023), Tonga (2023), India (2024) and Malaysia (2024).

Source: World Bank • Created with Datawrapper

Since 1975, the tertiary-age population has increased as the country’s population has grown. However, GER is progressing at a slow pace. To understand why PNG’s GER fluctuates, it is important to visualise how it is calculated. GER is calculated as the total number of enrolments divided by the tertiary-age population. Even when the total number of enrolments goes up, if the population grows even faster, the GER will actually go down.

This is exactly what we see between 1995 and 2015. While the education system is expanding, it is not expanding at the same speed as the youth bulge in the population. Demand for higher education is growing much faster than the available seats and infrastructure. PNG remains an outlier in the Pacific, with extremely low tertiary participation. Clearly there is a mismatch between national aspirations and educational capacity, given the youth population bulge and demand for higher education. The pressure is even greater now with the **no age limit policy for non-school-leavers**.

**Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Rate (Tertiary) trends for PNG**



Notes: 2005, 2015 and 2025 figures are estimates of GER (Tertiary) in PNG based on the authors' research.  
 Source: World Bank, UNESCO, IndexMundi, The Global Economy.

Created with Datawrapper

Public and private tertiary institutions demonstrate clear differences in how they accord priorities to their various goals and measure success. Public institutions, which are state-owned and government-funded, ensure extensive national coverage and high levels of affordability and access, particularly benefiting rural communities. However, they often demonstrate only moderate relevance of programs and graduate employability, alongside lower research output due to limitations in funding and resources.

Private institutions, by contrast, are generally fee-based and predominantly urban-oriented, and they provide more market-relevant programs and stronger graduate employability, facilitated by adaptable curricula and closer ties to industry. Nonetheless, their reach is more restricted and access is limited by financial constraints, resulting in moderate to low national coverage.

While public institutions consistently contribute to national policy objectives through centralised systems, the contributions of private institutions are increasing but remain fragmented due to their varied ownership and operational structures.

**Table 1: Comprehensive Performance Metrics**

Criteria	Public Institutions	Private Institutions
National coverage	High	Moderate – Low
Program relevance	Moderate	High
Affordability and access	High	Low – Moderate
Graduate employability	Moderate	High
Research output	Low – Moderate	Low
Contribution to policy goals	Moderate	Growing but fragmented

Source: Authors' research • Created with Datawrapper

Despite improvements in some areas, key challenges persist. The rural-urban divide means education is limited to certain parts of PNG, where there is a gendered imbalance in access and low-quality, outdated curricula. Weak governance, poor infrastructure and graduate unemployment also hinder the system’s capacity to provide inclusive, relevant and high-quality education aligned with national development requirements.

Consequently, comprehensive strategies should give priority to the expansion of scholarships and inclusive policies to enhance access, while also utilising digital and distance learning models like the **PNG National Open University**. At the same time, curriculum reform must be guided by industry demands and bolstered by skills audits, internships and stronger employer engagement to improve graduate employability.

Governance and institutional performance can be strengthened through regular policy and performance audits, leadership development and merit-based appointments. Addressing infrastructure deficiencies will require coordinated investment through public-private partnership models and donor support, along with the implementation of e-learning platforms and self-financing initiatives to ensure sustainability.

Tertiary education is the foundation of **PNG’s human development** and national progress. A holistic approach is needed to put in place bold reforms, inclusive strategies and a commitment to excellence in the sector for the next 50 years and beyond.

## Disclosures:

*This research was undertaken with the support of the **ANU-UPNG Partnership**, an initiative of the PNG-Australia Partnership, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.*

## Author/s:

### **Ponnusamy Manohar**

Dr Ponnusamy Manohar serves as the Deputy Executive Dean of the SBPP and is Associate Professor in business management at the UPNG. His research focuses on the quality of higher education, socioeconomic development, and management.

### **David Mo**

David Mo is the Head of the Business Management Division at the University of Papua New Guinea.

### **Loretta Dilu**

Loretta Dilu is a lecturer in the Strategic Management Division in the School of Business and Public Policy at the University of Papua New Guinea. Loretta was a recipient of the Master of Economics and Public Policy Scholarship through the ANU-UPNG Partnership.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/tertiary-education-in-png-a-critical-review-20260603/>