

The historical ANU-UPNG relationship

by Sinclair Dinnen

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Photo Credit: ANU-UPNG Partnership

*This is an edited version of **a speech** given at the 2025 PNG Update conference dinner at the UPNG Waigani campus on 22 August 2025.*

I've been asked to talk this evening about the history of the relationship between the Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). It's one that goes back to the establishment of both universities — ANU in 1946 and UPNG in 1965.

In many respects it is a unique relationship — a relationship between two national universities that is also, by extension, a relationship between two nations.

My personal association with UPNG goes back to 1984 when, having come from the United Kingdom, I commenced as a lecturer at UPNG's then Law Faculty. I visited Australia for the first time in 1985 for a conference at the ANU on law and order in PNG. The conference coincided with the launch of the Clifford Report which provided a comprehensive review of that subject over PNG's first decade of independence.

As a young academic, I was struck by the interest in and expertise about PNG at the ANU. Many of the senior scholars I met — including the likes of Ron May, Bill Standish, Hank Nelson and Donald Denoon — had deep connections with PNG.

The ANU's association with PNG goes all the way back to its own establishment in 1946 following the Second World War. Its founding charter as Australia's national university identified its responsibility to undertake research that would improve Australia's understanding of itself, its neighbours, and its place in the world, particularly within the Asia-Pacific region. Reflecting this mandate, the Research School of Pacific Studies with a focus on the South-West Pacific was one of the ANU's four founding research institutes. With growing awareness that it would eventually transition to independence, PNG became an important focus in the new School's research agenda.

In 1953, **three distinguished ANU academics** — historian Oskar Spate, anthropologist Cyril Belshaw and economist Trevor Swan — were tasked by the

Australian government to investigate the economic structure of the then Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Their report identified significant knowledge gaps standing in the way of effective social and economic policy development in the Territory.

Eight years later in 1961, the ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies set up the New Guinea Research Unit (NGRU) with a mandate "to carry out work on problems of an inter-disciplinary nature which have both practical importance and scientific interest". The Unit's early research included seminal work on internal migration and urbanisation, and land use and productivity. In 1964, it coordinated a major study of the elections for the first Legislative Assembly and the first of an unbroken series of studies of PNG's national elections that continues to this day.

In 1963, Sir Paul Hasluck, the longstanding Australian Minister for External Territories, initiated a Commission of Enquiry into tertiary education in the then territory. ANU's Oskar Spate was a member of the Currie Commission which led to the establishment of UPNG in 1965, viewed as an important step in preparing the territory for eventual self-governance and independence. A total of 58 students commenced preliminary year studies in 1966. Many of this first cohort went on to become prominent national leaders, including future Prime Minister Sir Rabbie Namaliu; future Treasurer and Minister for the Public Service, Bart Philemon; and Vincent Eri, celebrated author ("The Crocodile") and future Governor-General.

In those early years, ANU played a critical role in assisting the development of the new university, providing academic expertise, administrative support and curriculum development. ANU academics who taught at UPNG included Gerry Ward, Hank Nelson, Donald Denoon, David Hegarty, Bill Standish, Bryant Allen and Tom Dutton. Two ANU Vice-Chancellors — Sir John Crawford and Peter Karmel — served as Chancellors of UPNG. ANU scholars (including the likes of Ross Garnaut, Andrew Elek, Diane Conyers and Ron May) also made important contributions to policy making in PNG, offering expertise in law, economics and finance, among other areas.

The ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies became the global leader in studies of PNG's pre- and modern history, politics, economics and society, with UPNG an important partner in many of these research activities.

ANU also became a favoured destination for young PNG scholars pursuing higher degrees. Among the first generation of scholars who attained their PhDs from the ANU were distinguished historians [John Waiko](#), Ann Dickson-Waiko and August Kituai — all later professors at UPNG.

In 1967, the NGRU, UPNG and the then Administrative College organised the first

of the renowned Waigani Seminars, which became a focal point for debate on a range of policy issues in the lead-up to independence. Papers from these seminars were published jointly by UPNG and ANU and remain an invaluable resource from that period.

In 1968, the NGRU moved from its original premises in Badili to a new campus in Waigani across from the newly established UPNG. At independence in 1975, the NGRU was transferred from the ANU to the Government of PNG and renamed the Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research (IASER) and later in 1993 assumed its current name, the National Research Institute (NRI).

PNG's Independence in 1975 naturally led to UPNG asserting its own independence as an autonomous institution. This has meant developing its own academic identity as the nation's leading tertiary institution. Over time, this has meant less reliance on expatriate staff and the nurturing of PNG's own academics to run and set the academic direction for this university and the country's other tertiary institutions.

However, throughout this broader transition, the links with ANU have remained strong, particularly through the personal and professional networks I have alluded to, the many joint research projects that have been undertaken over the years, and the institutional partnerships between different parts of our two universities.

Over time, the relationship has evolved from one of mentorship to one of collaboration between equals, although disparities in funding and capacity have sometimes challenged the balance.

There have also been many changes at the ANU end — some of which reflect growing challenges facing universities across the world, while others relate to shifts in Australia's national priorities and strategic interests. Those of us who have been at ANU for a long time are well aware of the fluctuating fortunes of Pacific studies over the years.

That said, the interest in PNG has remained fairly constant. A new generation of ANU-based researchers are working with a new generation of researchers at this university, as well as at NRI and other PNG universities, on a range of important research collaborations. These include work on economic development and management, decentralisation, service delivery, electoral reform, anti-corruption, digital technology, gender empowerment, violence reduction and peacebuilding, and many more topics.

Whereas in the early days of the relationship the direction of expertise was largely one way, it is less so today. We are talking increasingly of two-way traffic between

our institutions. In my own Department of Pacific Affairs, we have research staff from across the Pacific including PNG, such as Dr Theresa Meki and Dr Mercy Masta. Along with their colleagues, these young scholars are actively shaping our research and other engagements with PNG and the wider Pacific, and improving understanding of the region among Canberra decision-makers and in the broader Australian community.

It is clearly a deep and enduring relationship that has weathered major transitions and many changes over the last 60 years. We look forward to the next 60 years of this important relationship.

Visit the [PNG Project website](#) to read [the full speech](#) and view a booklet celebrating the achievements over 10 years of the current ANU-UPNG Partnership and posters celebrating the relationship between the two universities.

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