

# UPNG students think PNG heading in wrong direction

by Kelly Samof and Stephen Howes

15 November 2024



Students at the University of Papua New Guinea

*Photo Credit: Kelly Samof*

Few public opinion polls are undertaken in PNG, perhaps because of the expense. Students at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) are not representative of the population but are the nation's future elite and leadership.

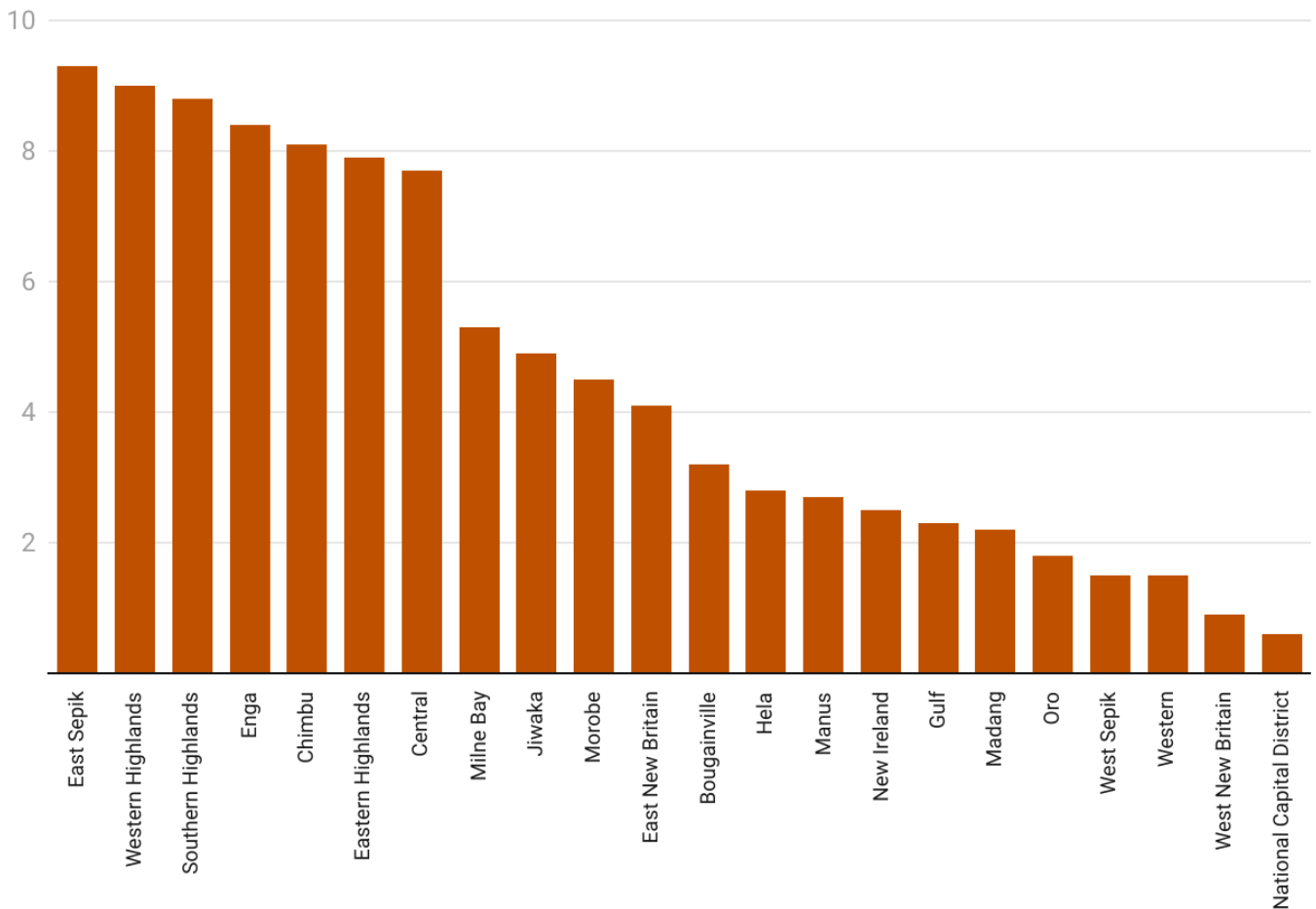
We carried out a public opinion poll at the UPNG's School of Business and Public Policy in April 2024. A total of 373 students participated in our survey. The survey examined three key areas: student demographics, attachment to national identity and views on PNG's future.

The demographic profile of the surveyed students reveals a predominantly male population, with 61% identifying as male and 39% as female, which is almost the same split as [a similar survey](#) carried out 12 years ago at UPNG. Most of the students are between the ages of 18 and 24 years, as we would expect.

The students hailed from all 22 of PNG's provinces, with some smaller provinces like Milne Bay and Jiwaka represented as well as much larger provinces like Morobe and East New Britain (Figure 1). 69% of students identified only one province of origin, 17% two provinces and 12% three provinces.

## Figure 1: Province of origin

Percentage share of students surveyed.



Source: UPNG survey. Students could answer more than one question. Responses weighted by number of provinces selected to add to 100%. • Created with Datawrapper

Nearly 77% of our surveyed students identified as coming from a two-parent home, while 15% of them reported that they were raised by a single parent.

About 80% of the students reported having a guardian who had at least completed high school. Compare this to the 2016-2018 PNG Demographic and Health Survey, which found that **only 28% of individuals** in PNG had completed high school. Likewise, 56% of students were raised in an urban area (versus 13% for the entire population) and 67% said their parents had wage-based employment (versus 15% for the entire population).

In summary, UPNG students have a much higher socio-economic status than the average citizen, and this may mean they have different views.

The second part of our survey looked at issues of identity to understand students' allegiances to their families, cultural groups and nation, **an important topic of**

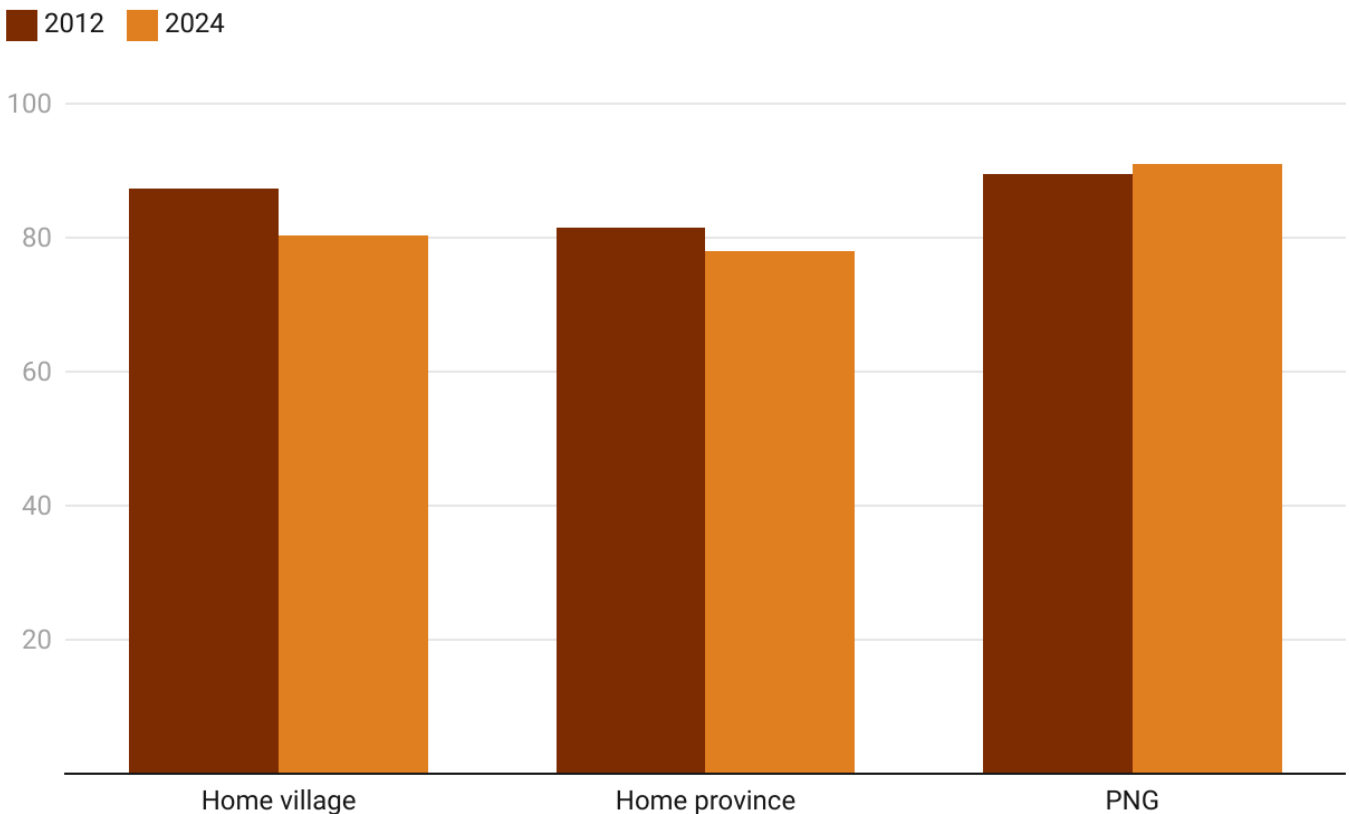
research.

When we asked students what group they were most loyal to, the typical student put family first, then village, wantok or province second, and nation third. However, when we asked which entity they felt close or very close to, more said the nation (90%) than either home village (80%) or home province (78%).

Comparing the 2024 results to [the 2012 survey](#) of UPNG students, feelings of attachments to smaller groups such as home villages and provinces have declined, while feelings of attachment to PNG as a nation have, if anything, increased (Figure 2).

## Figure 2: Attachment to home village, home province and to PNG

Percentage share of students saying they have a close or very close attachment.



Source: UPNG survey. Students could respond very close, close, not very close, not close at all, don't know. • Created with Datawrapper

This idea that the nation is becoming more important to students is supported by another comparison to the 2012 survey. The portion of students that said it is better for local groups in PNG to blend into one society instead of maintaining their distinct languages, customs and traditions increased from 29% in 2012 to 42% in 2024.

On the regional front, when asked about how close they feel to PNG's close

neighbours, Australia and China, students felt closer to Australia than to China with 43% of them feeling no closeness at all to China. This is **consistent with earlier research**.

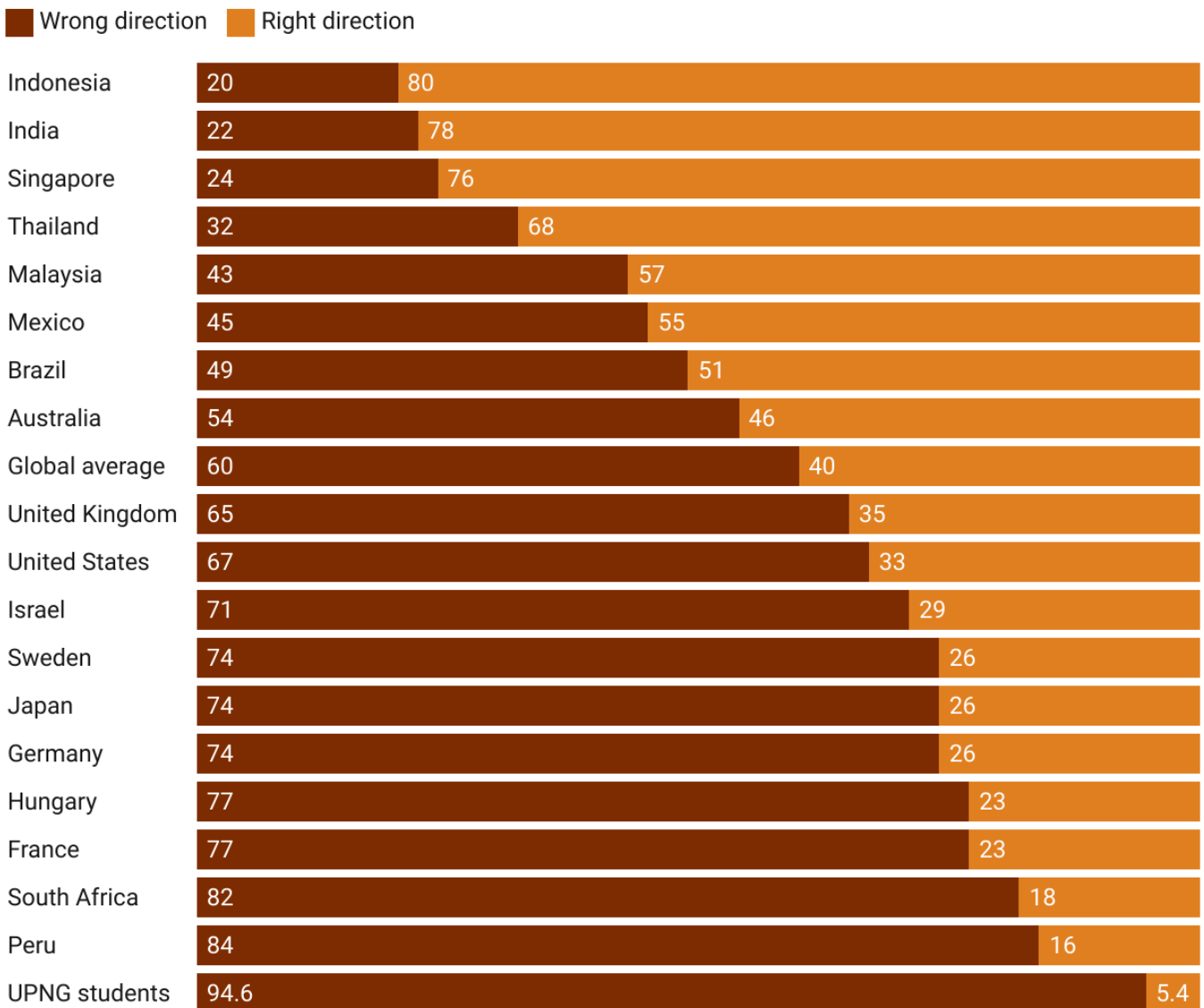
We also asked students what it means to be Papua New Guinean. More students believed that being a Christian (84%) was very important to making you truly Papua New Guinean compared to those who selected other significant factors of national identity such as respecting your traditions and customs (76%), having PNG citizenship (79%) or being born in PNG (74%). Clearly PNG's national identity is closely tied to the country's largest religion. When asked about national pride, students overwhelmingly cited PNG's natural beauty and its diverse cultures, languages and traditions.

The final part of the survey investigated the students' views on PNG's direction of travel. Students were in fact overwhelmingly pessimistic. A staggering 80.2% said that the country was heading in the wrong direction; 15.2% said they didn't know or didn't want to answer the question; and only 4.6% said it was going in the right direction.

Perhaps this pessimism is not surprising given the **rioting in Port Moresby** in January. Nevertheless, the results certainly convey a very negative national mood. This is a standard public opinion question, so international comparisons are possible. If we take only those responses that answered the question, **the degree of pessimism** in our survey exceeds that observed in the 30 other countries for which data have been compiled (Figure 3).

### Figure 3: Whether the country is heading in the right direction

Percentage share surveyed by Ipsos and UPNG.



Source: Ipsos - What Worries the World report February 2024. UPNG survey. (Numbers scaled to so that right and wrong direction shares add to 100%.) • Created with Datawrapper

While these other surveys are of the entire population rather than of only university students, the comparison is alarming. The primary reasons students gave for their negativity were poor economic management (39%), rampant corruption (23%) and inadequate leadership (16%). Surprisingly, issues related to law and order, while significant, seemed to rank lower.

The strong and increasingly unified sense of national identity is certainly a positive to emerge from this survey. The almost unanimous view that things are heading in the wrong direction should serve as a wake-up call for Papua New Guinea’s politicians.

## 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 author only.*

## Author/s:

### **Kelly Samof**

Kelly Samof is a lecturer in economics at the School of Business and Public Policy, University of Papua New Guinea.

### **Stephen Howes**

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/upng-students-think-png-heading-in-wrong-direction-20241115/>