

Submission to Australian Review of Aid

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## **Rebuilding and Expanding the University of Papua New Guinea<sup>[1]</sup>**

There is an urgent need to rebuild and expand UPNG to meet the country's national objectives,<sup>[2]</sup> and in line with Australia's national interest. What had started out with promise, as an excellent example of how Australian aid directed by colonial administration officials could establish an important educational institution, has become a seriously flawed university.<sup>[3]</sup> Without a major project to revitalise UPNG, within the broader AusAID sectoral program for PNG's focus upon education<sup>[4]</sup>, the most likely outcome over the next few years is continued decline leading to institutional collapse. Such a collapse would have direct as well as indirect consequences for living standards and poverty levels in a country which already is struggling to meet the Millenium Development Goals.

A developing country, with the second largest population in the South Pacific region,<sup>[5]</sup> PNG can not maximize its potential without having at least one

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<sup>[1]</sup> In this Submission, UPNG refers to the institution currently located at Waigani. It is recognised that there are proposals to include the University of Goroka, as well as the National Research Institute and the Papua New Guinea Institute of Public Administration within an administrative framework that also involves UPNG. However it seems likely that any changes will involve lengthy negotiations, and in the meantime UPNG needs urgent attention, which is the purpose of this Submission.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Department of Prime Minister and National Executive Council *Papua New Guinea Vision 2050 National Strategic Plan Taskforce* Waigani: Government of Papua New Guinea, p.3 'Pillar 1. Human Capital Development, Gender, Youth and People Empowerment' and p.5 1.17.2.7 'Expand the state universities and support private universities and other institutions'

<sup>[3]</sup> See S.MacWilliam <http://www.pmc.aut.ac.nz/articles/two-visions-outcome-uncertain-university-papua-new-guinea>

<sup>[4]</sup> *Review of the PNG-Australia Development Cooperation Treaty (1999)* April 19 2010: p.4 'Sectoral focus: summary of recommendations' 3.2 'We recommend that education (defined broadly to include secondary, technical and tertiary education so as to strengthen the felt need expressed by many stakeholders to use the aid program more purposively to boost PNG growth prospects) become the flagship sector for the Australian aid program to PNG.'

<sup>[5]</sup> PNG's current population is estimated to be approximately 6.5 million. With a population growth rate of 2.7%, the population is projected to reach around 18 million by 2050. See

major, international standard undergraduate university. While there are small, promising private universities, none of these is likely to ever satisfy the growing demand for tertiary education or take the place of a major national public university located in the national capital.

Such a national university is required to provide skilled labour for the PNG economy, and to supplement an Australian labour force already stretched by an ageing population and insufficient numbers of skilled workers in rapidly growing sectors, including mining and health services. Of equal importance for PNG's future are the university educated middle class professionals who will work in private firms and the public service. In addition to their labour skills, such professionals can be a vital source of inspiration for the political and administrative reforms that are demanded by international donors and Papua New Guineans alike. Governance reforms, to take one instance, require tertiary educated citizens committed to and capable of implementing major changes in the country's political economy.

Revitalizing UPNG would fit within the existing, entirely appropriate geographic focus of the Australian aid program as well as the sectoral focus designated in the latest PNG-Australia Agreement. While the Agreement also emphasised the merit of directing further aid to existing successful projects, and UPNG would not qualify for attention on this ground, nevertheless the importance of rebuilding the most important national university should outweigh other criteria for allocating aid. Producing highly trained undergraduates at a quality national university will also have spill-over effects for other areas of primary, secondary and tertiary education where success depends in part upon the standard of undergraduate tertiary education attained by teachers.

Australian aid already focuses upon particular projects within sectoral programs. This form of directed aid was envisaged in the 1984 aid review,<sup>[6]</sup> and practised since. Australian aid also already provides substantial funds to tertiary education elsewhere in the South Pacific region. In November 2010, the Vice Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific reported to the Council that confirmed donor funding up until September 30, 2010 had exceeded FJ\$ 60 million. The Australian commitment to USP was over FJ\$ 20 million, surpassed only by Japan's contribution of almost FJ\$21.5 million.

Significantly too, for the need to renovate decaying buildings at UPNG, the USP VC reported that (p.4): 'The Governments of Australia and New Zealand are still the only two donor countries which contribute a portion of their aid budget to the University's recurrent budget.'<sup>[7]</sup>

The decline in UPNG since at least the early 1980s has been caused, in part, by the neglect of aid donors at the same time as there has been a substantial reduction in the national government's commitment. The UPNG budget for 2010 is reputed to be less than PNG Kina 30 million or just over AUD 11 million. This amount is under half of the income of the Crawford School, one School within the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, which teaches a small fraction of the UPNG's student numbers. A recent estimate is that while in PNG real per capita government expenditure 'was 46 per cent lower in 2009 than in 1975', the relative reduction for higher education has been much greater. This estimate concludes that: 'In 2009, the inflation-adjusted public funding per student made available to the universities was about one fourteenth of the level of the early years of Independence (in 1975: SM). Some downward adjustment in the share of public resources going to the universities was warranted after the crash programmes preceding Independence, but the correction went too far.'<sup>[8]</sup>

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<sup>[6]</sup> Committee to Review Australian Overseas Aid Program *The Australian Overseas Aid Program (The Jackson Report)* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1984, especially Chs.4 and 9

<sup>[7]</sup> [http://www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/vc/rpt/vc\\_report\\_council\\_nov\\_2010.pdf](http://www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/vc/rpt/vc_report_council_nov_2010.pdf)

<sup>[8]</sup> Professor Ross Garnaut and Sir Rabbie Namaliu *PNG Universities Review Draft Short Report with Recommendations To Prime Ministers Somare and Rudd* 2009

There is undoubtedly an urgent need for PNG governments to reverse their stance on tertiary education funding. A major AusAID commitment to UPNG could play a part in stimulating such an important change. While AusAID currently provides limited assistance to UPNG, it is a drop in the bucket compared to what is desperately needed.

While student numbers continue to increase as popular demand for tertiary education grows, UPNG is seriously under-staffed, poorly equipped and with decaying infrastructure. Access to the internet, an elementary tool for most universities, is almost non-existent, and the library has a limited numbers of books and journals of contemporary relevance. The main library building needs to be expanded and renovated, class rooms and other facilities, including toilets, have not been maintained, staff have no adequate access to the internet, and housing is unsatisfactory. Given the conditions under which they live and work, the continuing dedication of so many staff to students and the university is inspirational, and a source of optimism providing other much needed changes can be implemented.

Recruitment of national staff is difficult given the competing demands for skilled Papua New Guineans elsewhere in the economy. The absence of adequate secure housing makes attracting qualified national and international academics harder. Senior academic positions remain unfilled for many years and a small number of junior staff carry very heavy teaching loads, with little prospect that they will be able to engage in staff development programmes without academic courses collapsing completely due to lack of replacement academics. In short, UPNG is in a near-terminal condition, already offering students an education which is sub-standard in international terms.

**The Submission recommends:**

- a) that UPNG be made a high priority project within the Papua New Guinea component of the Australian overseas aid budget;

- b) that the broad objective of the project be to assist UPNG, either as a sole campus institution at Waigani or a dual campus institution including Goroka, to become an international standard undergraduate university;
- c) that AusAID take the lead role in convening and coordinating the activities of a forum of aid donors (NZ AID, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Commission, and possibly also USAID with its new regional focus centred upon the Suva office) to advance objective b);
- d) that one principal purpose of the donors' forum would be to determine and allocate specific tasks within the broader project in line with individual agencies' over-all programs (eg where an agency's focus is upon infrastructure, that agency could be tasked with liaising with UPNG administration to determine priorities and meet infrastructure requirements);
- e) that AusAID take a further, specific responsibility to assist UPNG with student and staff development, including: i) providing funding for regular course and programme reviews, which reviews would also contribute to assessing progress toward objective b; ii) providing additional long-term support to assist the current efforts of the Go8 group of Australian universities to obtain needed assistance to UPNG for student and staff development, inter-changes and general staff recruitment; iii) encouraging other Australian university organisations, such as Universities Australia, Australian Technology Network of Universities and the National Tertiary Education Union to provide additional similar assistance to UPNG; and iv) consulting with Australian firms, Commonwealth and State government departments, other government institutions including hospitals and boards, and NGOs, including Australian Volunteers International, to ascertain what additional forms of assistance to UPNG, its staff and students might be

available. Further support could take the forms of scholarships, cadetships, secondments, on-the-job training and various forms of mentoring.

**Conclusion:** Such a project will require a long-term commitment by successive governments of PNG and by international donors. There will be little point in conducting expensive reviews every one to two years to ascertain how the project is progressing because revitalization and expansion of UPNG will take a lengthy period.

Instead, and of considerably more use than the types of reviews currently employed, the project should have the appropriate monitoring mechanisms on budgeting, expenditure and progress toward achieving physical infrastructure goals which are based upon PNG conditions. Other appropriate longer-term measures of staff development and student assessment of staff and the courses undertaken should be constructed, along the lines of those currently employed by universities world-wide. Improvements in some of the worst staff-student ratios in major courses could be an early indicator of desired changes.

It is difficult to over-state the importance of rebuilding UPNG, or the urgency of making a start upon the task. Given the age profile of the PNG population, and the numbers of young people reaching tertiary level age, there is either an already existing wonderful opportunity or a national disaster looming. It is to be hoped that this Review of Australian Aid will provide some indication of how the former is to be grasped and a recognition that the latter can not be allowed to occur.