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HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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It is not always easy to obtain information about higher education in Papua New Guinea, particularly for those living outside the country. For example, a recent article in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (Anon. 1983a) managed to give virtually no information. This brief description of higher education in Papua New Guinea has two aims: firstly to quote a variety of sources which will give readers the opportunity to find out more information for themselves and secondly to mention some current problems of higher education in the country.

For a general guide to education in Papua New Guinea (Smith, 1975) gives a fairly broad-ranging picture but the book is becoming dated. Books by Howie-Willis (1980) and Meek (1982) mainly concern the University of Papua New Guinea, whilst the following more recent articles look at different aspects of higher education in Papua New Guinea – Murphy (1983), Parry (1983) and Rogers (1984). The author is interested in particular in matters concerning Goroka Teachers' College, which is the main training institution for secondary teachers in Papua New Guinea, and for those interested in secondary teacher training the following references may be of interest – Cortis (1983), Palmer (1983), Rogers (1980), Solon (1980) and Tinsley (1977).

The following are major problems in the higher education system with a brief background given in each case.

Demography, Geography and Communications

The population of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is less than 3 million which is small for a state with a land area of 462,000 sq. kms. (Ranch, 1983). PNG is an archipelago, which would in any case make communications difficult, but road development within each of the islands is also hampered by a variety of problems including huge mountain ranges, major river systems, swamps and forests. There are also areas of unstable soils which compounded with high rainfall and seismic activity make road building a difficult task. Much travel is thus by air and this increases the costs of establishing and running tertiary institutions which by their nature are centralised and recruit their students from all parts of the country.

A Late Start to Higher Education

There was virtually no secondary education in Papua New Guinea prior to the United Nations Mission of 1962 which was led by Sir Hugh Foot. The Mission insisted upon an immediate start to secondary education and planning for tertiary education. 1966 saw the start of higher education in PNG with the first intake of Preliminary Year students into the newly formed University of Papua New Guinea (Meek 1976). This late start has meant that the number of Papua New Guineans who have themselves received tertiary education is comparatively small, so overseas staff are recruited to teach at both secondary and tertiary levels in the education system thus increasing costs considerably.

Multiplicity of Institutions

Secondary education expanded rapidly from 1962. At present there are 110 Provincial High Schools and 4 National High Schools which provide upper secondary education to about Grade 12 level). Tertiary education also expanded rapidly and a wide variety of institutions of higher education were started. They were mainly small in size and expensive to run, with some controlled by government though under different ministries, some controlled by various church agencies (mission) and a few controlled by private organisations. Most of these institutions had the overriding aim of training Papua New Guineans to take responsible positions by Independence (1975). In 1971 the Brown Commission (Brown, Cohen, Eri, Nash, 1971) looked into these problems but for a variety of reasons little action was taken, so the problem of a multiplicity of institutions remains and has in fact grown over the years. At present there are more than 80 institutions of higher education attended by more than 10,000 students most of whom receive government grants. The growth of the problem may be illustrated by the fact that a major mission has recently started its own university in Papua New Guinea (Post Courier 1984), giving the country its third university.

Educational Standards

There is general agreement that educational standards are low at all levels in PNG, though concrete evidence for such a statement is difficult to find. In the fields of mathematics, science and engineering, where the problem is most acute, views expressed by Hayter (1982) and Blowers (1982) might indicate a level of knowledge two to three years behind the United Kingdom. Papua New Guinea is also taking part in the Second International Study in Science Education (S.I.S.S.) which should give more definite evidence on standards in science compared with other countries.

Finance for Higher Education

Papua New Guinea remains comparatively well off among developing countries due to its revenues from minerals such as copper and gold, diverse agricultural products and generous aid from Australia. Nonetheless the recession has hit the country hard and unemployment has increased considerably. Higher education has been, and still is, subject to considerable financial restraint, though cuts in expenditure have not been as severe as in many countries. Student costs vary considerably between courses and between universities. For example, in 1982 costs at Goroka Teachers' College were K3800 per student per year, whilst they were about K12,500 in the Medical Faculty of U.P.N.G. Higher education accounts for 6.8% of the national budget, and about half this sum (K21 million) is spent on the two universities. Some figures referring to 1976 indicate that the amount of money spent per student at university is about 40 times higher than that spent per primary school (community school) pupil and about 4 times higher than that spent per student in the upper secondary school (National High School), (Anon, 1983b). These ratios are unlikely to have changed much, so higher education remains under considerable pressure to justify its costs.

Localisation and National/Expatriate Relations

Localisation in community schools has been virtually complete for many years. At the lower level of secondary education (Provincial High Schools) staffing is about 70% localised, though only about 35% Provincial High School headmasters are Papua New Guineans. The author knows of no figures for higher education as a whole but would estimate that localisation is probably in the order of 10%. The University of Papua New Guinea has a number of localisation programmes which have been quite successful. However, for national staff trained at this level better employment opportunities usually exist outside higher education. Relationships between national and expatriate staff are in general good, but there is a wide salary differential which government plans to phase out, as it causes some resentment. In 1983, there were student riots at PNG, University of Technology (Unitech) as the result of the dismissal of a national member of staff. Although the situation is now quiet, many expatriate staff at Unitech are reconsidering their long term position.

The Future

It is impossible to predict the future, but academic standards, financial restraint, increased rates of localisation and salary parity will certainly be on the agenda for any debate on the future of higher education in Papua New Guinea.

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