

The Road to Universalizing Primary Education in Papua New Guinea: Are we really serious about getting there?

Dr Thomas Webster, Director, National Research Institute

Introduction

This paper looks at the goal of Universalizing Primary Education in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and asks the question, Is Papua New Guinea really serious about achieving UPE?

UPE has been a goal since 1958, when the colonial administration drew up a plan for UPE. It has since been stated and restated in various education plans and national development plans. The PNG Government has also signed up to various international agreements to pursue the goal of UPE including the Millennium Development Goals set by the UN that sets 2015 by which all countries must achieve UPE.

PNG will not achieve UPE by 2015 if we progress along the current trend, and even if we implement the plans set out by the recently approved National Education Plan 2005 to 2014.

It is most likely that PNG will again shift the goal post to another future date as we have often done in the past.

Most other countries that started off with PNG on the same levels since the 1970s have now achieved Universal Primary Education and are well on the way to achieving Universal Secondary Education Status. They include most of the Pacific Island countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, India etc.

PNG needs to up the stakes if we are serious about achieving UPE.

In this paper, I outline what we mean by UPE in order to get a clear definition. Next, I provide three areas of measures that we can develop to monitor progress as well as to provide clear framework for working towards UPE. I argue for the establishment of a monitoring and support system to help provinces, districts and schools work progressively towards UPE.

Next I highlight the issue of whether we can afford Universal Primary Education under the current structure. This needs to be addressed immediately. Finally, I argue for a policy of Free and Compulsory Education Policy to fast track PNG's efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education.

Why Universalize Primary Education?

The Benefits of Education

It is generally agreed that Education benefits individuals as well as the general society. It enlightens individuals to the world around, imbues and nurtures civic knowledge and values and provides individuals with productive skills.

Primary school education provides a basic education that covers the essential skills and knowledge for someone to live within the contemporary PNG society, whether

this is in the urban context, or in a rural subsistence economy. It also provides a building block to acquire higher order skills and knowledge. As PNG develops and can afford, we can aim for universal secondary education and mass tertiary education.

The individual who completes primary school should be able to read and write, know and apply basic arithmetic skills and a better understanding of the physical and social world around them. They should be able to apply these skills and knowledge to improve their productive capacity.

The increases to individual incomes also benefit the wider community. Increased buying and selling leads to more cash circulating within the community and as a result generates economic growth. As a result of the economic growth, there is more business, more jobs that in turn generates more taxes for government to fund infrastructure and other development projects.

Primary school graduates should be able to live healthier and productive lives. If everyone practiced healthy habits, there would be less sick people requiring treatment at hospitals and clinics. This would result in reduced costs to the public health care system and money saved could be used to fund other government activities.

A healthy population is also critical for social and economic growth.

The education of girls as future mothers who would take responsibility for the health of young children is extremely important. Mothers with some education are more likely to take an interest and support the education of their own children. We can expect the next generation to be better educated, if we get girls to school now.

These are improvements that the PNG society would enjoy if everyone had the benefit of a basic education.

Conversely, a predominantly uneducated population can be a drag on development efforts, not making a full contribution as well as increasing the costs of providing health and other benefits.

Definition of Universal Primary Education (UPE)

In order to know where we are, we need to define UPE and then having defined the parameters, assess as to where PNG is with regard to the agreed goal.

A clear definition also focuses attention on what must be done to get there. Whilst the MTDS sets out UPE as a goal, the new National Education Plan 2002-2014 does not define UPE and in my view does not clearly articulate as to how we will get there.

I will therefore refer to the Education Sector Review Report of 1991 where it clearly describes UPE as

... every person in Papua New Guinea having had the benefit of Primary or Community School Education. Universal Primary Education status then will

only be achieved if all persons in Papua New Guinea complete the full six years of community school and acquire the basic skills, knowledge and values contained in the curriculum (NDOE; 1991:11).

This definition is also consistent with that adopted at the 1990 Jomtien World Education for All Conference.

We need to measure if all children of school age have access to a school, whether they are participating and whether having completed the full primary school phase have learnt as much as they should have.

On the basis of this definition, I had written and proposed a three pronged measure to monitor progress as well as to help identify and prioritize strategies for working towards UPE more than ten years ago (Webster:1995). I find the ideas just as relevant now and would like to set them out again in order to establish the parameters for a UPE Monitoring Framework at this forum.

Gross Enrolment Ratios

The Gross Enrolment Ratio is used to indicate the proportion of the school age group that is enrolled in school. We express it as “Gross” because we know that most children are not six years of age when they enroll in elementary prep or are not fourteen (14) years of age when they are in Grade Eight.

In 2000, it was estimated that 64% of the Basic Education Population Age Group were in School.

It is a better measure than simply monitoring enrolment figures. Enrolment figures only tell us how many are in school.

It does not tell us how many are out of school and how large the problem is in terms of the percentage of school age population. According to the Census, we had more than a million school aged children in 2000. If 64% were in school then nearly 400,000 children were out of school.

To attain UPE, we must have a 100% GER.

Those not enrolled were either not living near a school or if they were, they were just simply not enrolling.

In most instances, children of school age not attending school are those who had initially enrolled in first grade but had dropped out along the way.

It is therefore important to monitor the retention rate in order to work progressively to ensure that 100% of those who enter first grade complete the final grade of primary school.

Retention Rates

The Cohort Retention Rate indicates the proportion of students completing the final grade as a percentage of the cohort that enrolled in the first grade.

For instance, of the 1995 cohort that enrolled in Grade One, only 57% were enrolled in Grade Six according to the Education Departments Annual Statistical Bulletin.

If 100,000 children had enrolled in first grade, more than 40,000 children had dropped out along the way.

Those who drop out have not learnt as much as they should have and will not have gained much from the time at school.

Poor Retention remains the single most important barrier to attaining UPE.

If dropping out was eliminated and all the children who entered first grade were retained in school, the Gross Enrolment Ratio would be more than 90% and closer to the target of 100% rather than about 64% as in the year 2000.

The two charts attached illustrate what would happen if we did not have any dropouts and had a 100% Retention Rate.

The first chart (figure 7), shows the growth in student enrolment and growth in school aged population from 1975 to 1990. The gap remains the same and not all school aged children were enrolled in school.

The second chart (figure 8), simulates and illustrates what would happen if there were no student dropouts and there was a 100% retention rate of all students that entered grade one commencing in 1975.

The gap between enrolments and the school aged population would have gradually been reduced and we would have achieved a near 100% Gross Enrolment Rate by 1990.

It also indicates that providing adequate places is not enough to achieve UPE. We need to improve retention to 100% in order to achieve a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio.

Quality of Learning in Schools

It is simply not enough for one to enroll at a school and stay on to complete the final grade of the basic education cycle. One must show evidence of having acquired the necessary knowledge, skills, and values that we as curriculum planners and teachers want children to learn. After all, we want a population of people with primary education having particular knowledge, skills and values.

In the 1995 article, I argued for the then Grade Six Exam Results to be used for monitoring and to establish whether those who were sitting the exams indicated whether they had learnt as much as they should have.

The average score for each subject could be used as a benchmark. If there were fifty questions and the average score was 12, then clearly the majority of the cohort performed poorly. It could have been that the exam was more difficult than for other years.

If constructed and used properly, we can develop a monitoring system that tells us whether primary school graduates have learnt as much as they should have.

The main purpose of the primary school exam should be to monitor the level of learning. We need to analyze all results to see if most of the children leaving school have learnt as much as they should have. If a school or a group of schools in a district or province are not doing so well, further analysis and a more focused approach to improving learning in those schools is required.

The use of exam results for secondary school selection should not be the principal use as is currently practiced.

Monitoring Progress towards UPE

UPE will be achieved once we have all children enrolling at school, staying on in school to complete the full phase of the primary school cycles and then with all or most of them passing the primary school exams. This means that PNG will achieve UPE once we attain a 100% Gross Enrolment Rate, a 100% Cohort Retention Rate and a 100% Pass Rate for the Primary School Certificate Exams.

The Education Department needs to establish a Section or Division simply focusing on helping the country moving towards achieving UPE. Part of its task would be to develop a monitoring and information analysis system and assisting provinces and districts to establish the current status, analyze problems and identify strategies for improvements.

We know many of the factors that impact and cause the low enrolment rates, why students drop out of school and those that contribute to poor learning in primary schools. Many of the strategies do not require millions of kina but constant supervision and follow up to ensure that schools are operational as they should be.

With a systematic monitoring system, we can assess progress and provide advice to the government on what specific measures to take in order to advance more rapidly towards Universalizing Primary Education.

Without this we run the danger of engaging in activities that consume resources (financial and human resource in terms of time spent), but do not contribute effectively to the attainment of UPE.

We may continue to move around in circles without much real progress.

Significant Problems and Areas for Immediate Attention

There are two significant policy issues that need addressing in order to fast track the progress of Universal Primary Education in PNG.

Cost of Teachers Salaries

The first issue is of whether we can afford to pay all the teachers salaries needed to provide UPE.

The most important factor for enrolment remains making a place available. Places are often determined by the availability of a teacher and with teacher’s salary costing close to 90% of the annual recurrent cost of primary education, we need to understand the constraints being faced.

Since 1996, planning, budgeting and funding for teachers salaries, a major cost component in the implementation of the education reforms was transferred to the provinces. The education component of the provincial budgets has increased disproportionately at the expense of other areas and may not be sustainable.

For instance in WHP, the Education Budget had increased on an average of K1.5m per annum from K15.3m in 1999 to K21.5m in 2001 consuming more than half the total national budget allocation to WHP. (See table below). It also shows that grants for infrastructure had remained at K1.3m and this is the case for most budget areas.

National Government Grants to WHP as per Budget

	<u>1999</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>
	(Actual K000)	(Actual K000)	(Actual K000)	(App. K000)	(App. K000)
-					
Unconditional Grants					
Administration Grant	3,290.6	3,290.6	3,111.3	3,356.6	2,045.5
Staffing Grant	7,170.4	7,766.4	9,645.0	8,732.4	9,734.9
Teachers Salaries	15,385.2	17,063.9	18,967.1	19,282.1	21,496.0
Public Servants Leave Fares	-	44.3	44.3	-	194.1
Teachers Leave Fares	-	54.2	54.2	-	923.2
Conditional Grants					
Derivation Grants	1,662.8	1,662.8	2,828.7	3,132.1	2,109.5
Organic Law					
Infrastructure	2,535.7	2,535.7	2,457.6	2,662.5	1,438.2
Local Level Govt. Grants	3,008.9	3,008.9	3,135.7	3,135.7	1,452.8
Town and Urban Services Grant	189.8	189.8	218.3	239.8	247.3
Church Health Services	2,101.4	955.6	-	-	-
District Support Grant	1,750.0	-	-	-	-
Education Subsidies	610.4	610.4	660.4	-	660.4
Total	37,705.3	37,182.6	41,122.6	40,541.2	40,301.9

Source: PNG Government Budget Documents

If you think that this is for Western Highlands only, look at the other table below showing the 2003 budget allocation for all provinces and what percentage was going

for teacher’s salaries. Provinces collectively allocated more than 60% of their budget on teacher’s salaries only. This does not include allocations for other expenditures on education such as administrative and operating costs, capital costs etc.

2003 Provincial Budget Allocations and Proportion-Teacher Salaries			
<u>Province</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Trs Sal.</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Fly River	25,388,900	15,906,000	63%
Gulf	14,321,100	6,312,300	44%
Central	27,782,200	17,517,100	63%
NCD			
Milne Bay	26,476,400	16,148,500	61%
Oro	16,042,000	7,780,800	49%
SHP	38,737,100	21,438,400	55%
Enga	28,204,700	14,527,900	52%
WHP	34,393,700	21,496,000	62%
Simbu	27,885,600	19,150,400	69%
EHP	35,863,400	23,261,500	65%
Morobe	45,246,300	31,713,400	70%
Madang	31,495,700	20,962,000	67%
East Sepik	32,832,800	19,778,200	60%
Sandaun	20,512,200	11,608,200	57%
Manus	11,573,800	5,577,000	48%
New Ireland	18,990,200	10,657,500	56%
ENBP	30,929,300	20,010,300	65%
WNBP	23,989,300	15,723,000	66%
North Solomons	23,811,500	15,894,600	67%
Total	514,476,200	315,463,100	61%

Source: PNG Government Budget Documents.

The cost of universalizing primary education has been increased significantly by the decision under the education reforms to extend the basic education school cycle from six years to nine years.

Several provinces have completed implementation but many have yet to fully implement the reforms. In Western Highlands, the full complement of elementary and primary schools have yet to be built with the reforms estimated to be less than fifty percent completed.

For most provinces, additional funds available each year are being used to pay for teachers salaries as the education reforms are being implemented. There is therefore less money available for education administration, school inspections etc. More importantly, there is less money for roads and infrastructure maintenance.

As a result roads and the transport infrastructure have deteriorated to a stage where schools are not accessible by teachers and other government workers. There are many, many teachers appointed to remote and rural schools, receiving pay but not teaching at the schools.

We need to assess the situation and make some decisions about whether to allocate an additional fifty million kina each year to meet teacher's salaries or to allocate the funds for improving transportation infrastructure.

At the national level, in the Medium Term, we are informed that the resources available to government are going to decline with the targeting of short term and more focused export driven economic recovery package.

In the long term, revenues from the mineral sector currently propping up government revenues are also going to decline. If the agriculture sector and the proposed increases in agricultural exports do not meet the short fall, there is going to be more belt tightening.

Whether the country can afford the cost of the education reforms in its current form and structure is a question that requires further study and investigation.

The key question is, Can PNG afford providing a nine year Universal Primary Education for All?

If not, then there must be some serious questions about whether we should reduce the primary education cycle to four years, or back to six years. The curriculum would then also have to be repackaged in order to cover the basic skills and knowledge within a shorter time period.

Otherwise, I see the children of urban and semi urban areas benefiting from the nine year primary education policy whilst most of the rural areas missing out on accessing primary education because of no money to pay additional teachers. The majority of the rural population would not have received a full primary education and national development in PNG would still be lagging behind the rest of the world.

Compulsory Education Policy

The second major policy issue that the Government must seriously consider is that for a Limited Compulsory Education Policy. If compulsory education is introduced, then it also makes sense to have free education.

As outlined earlier, UPE will not be reached if we continue as we are without addressing the poor retention issue.

Retention of students had emerged as a problem to be addressed in the World Bank Sponsored Primary Education Project documentation in 1980. It was then hoped that qualitative improvements as well as specific programs such as the community helpers project of Madang Province would help improve retention.

The situation had worsened and when the Education Sector Study of 1990 was being carried out, the biggest obstacle to UPE was identified as the poor retention rates. Based on one or two studies, the main factor it was argued the main cause was boredom and a disengagement from the learning process because of the language

sued. This led to the push and adoption of the many changes implemented under the current education reforms.

The improvements in teacher training, introduction of learning in a language that a student can clearly understand, restructuring of the curriculum to make it more relevant would all help to make the learning process more interesting and engaging.

It was also argued that the low transition rate with limited access to grade seven forced many students to abandoned school when they saw limited opportunities. By increasing opportunities for more children to progress from grade six to grade seven, we then argued that more children would stay on and complete the full primary school phase.

After spending so much money and effort, the evidence to date indicates that this has not happened. Retention rates are worsening.

The 2005-2014 Education Plan is even disturbing as it does not adequately addresses the issue of Retention. The section on Primary Education covers Access, Quality and Management but does not have a section on Retention, the biggest obstacle to UPE.

Having been involved in Education Policy and Planning in some form or another, and having looked at the issue of UPE for some time, I must say that we cannot try some other measures or as proposed in the 2005 to 2014 Education Plan, “carry out more intensive research”

We cannot bury our head in the sand and deny that we have a problem. We must acknowledge that it exists and do something about it now.

I am reminded of a saying by Jeffrey Sachs, a noted Development Theorist from Harvard University who after observing the changes varying advice to African countries but no tangible changes taking place described it in the following manner;

“In the old story, the peasant goes to the priest for advice on saving his dying chickens. The priest recommends music for the chicken coop but the chickens continue to die. The priest then recommends music for the chicken coop, but the deaths continue unabated. Pondering again, the priest recommends repainting the chicken coop in bright colours. Finally, all the chickens die. “What a shame”, the priest tells the peasant. “I had so many more good ideas.

We cannot continue to propose various activities in the hope that that will lead to improvements in student retention. We must now take the problem head on and deal with it directly.

We must have a Free and Compulsory Education Policy to fast track and achieve UPE before the year 2015.

There is a general fear that Compulsory Education will increase significantly the costs of education. This is unfounded and without basis.

There may be additional costs in materials and supplies, in classroom furniture and for funds to fund a free education policy associated with the compulsory education policy.

The Village Court System can be used to ensure the implementation of a compulsory education policy and may need funding. Village Court officials can prosecute offenders and ensure that parents do enroll and take responsibility for ensuring that their children are attending school on a regular basis.

However, the most important factor is that no additional teachers are required. All it takes is ensuring that the same cohort that entered first grade stay on to complete the final grade of primary school.

The dropping Out problem contributes to the inefficient use of teachers in schools where class sizes dwindle from about forty children in the first grade to about 10-15 children in grades five and six.

The Education Department proposes that multi-grade teaching to combine classes when class sizes get smaller. It is difficult to implement and furthermore does not address retention but coping with the problems of retention in order to make the system more cost effective. A limited compulsory education policy is a more comprehensive way to address the problems.

We also must have free education as a policy. My experience with the accelerating girl's education program shows that girls are dropping out because they cannot afford the school fees. The experiences of Kenya and Tanzania and many other African Countries where enrolments have been boosted with free education is something that PNG must learn from.

If we are serious about UPE then we must have Free and Compulsory Education.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by answering the question I posed at the beginning; the road to UPE, Are we really serious about getting there?

I must conclude that our actions demonstrate that we are not really serious about achieving UPE.

First, we have never been serious about UPE by setting up a division or section to take responsibility for the development and monitoring of UPE policies and programs. It has been rather haphazard with no focus even when the International Agencies have set up EFA Program Development and Monitoring Activities.

We also seem to be experimenting with this and that and not giving due analysis to what is UPE and how we might get there. The level of analysis in fact seems to have deteriorated from work undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s.

Politicians on the other hand have been serious about UPE and have continuously supported programs and activities that were proposed. There has been consistency in political support resulting in adequate resources allocated for the education sector.

However, those of us involved in education as researchers and as technocrats have not carried out in-depth analysis of the problems in order to develop more effective responses to work towards universalizing primary education.

We cannot push the goal of UPE to another decade or two. We need to take the bold steps now.

Attaining UPE will move the country forward as a nation with an educated populace at the community level.

We need to empower the ordinary citizens of this country by making sure that they get a good primary education. By having had the benefit of that education, they can take the responsibility to improve their own lives. In doing so, the collective efforts of all individuals will contribute to the improvement in the social and economic status of this country and hence the development and the well being of all.

The rest of the world is moving forward and we are in danger of being left behind. Most of the Pacific Island countries have achieved near Universal Primary Education and are now looking at expanding secondary education and making that universal.

Our South East Asian neighbors have also progressed towards universal secondary education and are now moving on to expanding tertiary education levels for all young people.

Let us be serious about universalizing primary education.

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