

PNGUoT at 50 Years of Independence: A Vice Chancellor's Vision for a World-Class University

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Abstract: As Papua New Guinea marks fifty years of independence, the role of higher education in national development must be redefined and strengthened. This manuscript reflects on the philosophy, vision, and institutional reforms that have guided the Papua New Guinea University of Technology (PNGUoT) over the past five years. It articulates the belief that universities are sovereign institutions of knowledge, entrusted with authority to generate, transfer, and apply science and technology to uplift livelihoods. The paper highlights milestones achieved under the current leadership, including full accreditation of five engineering programs under the Washington Accord, establishment of international collaborations, creation of the Office of Strategic Internationalization (OSI), and mobilization of industry partnerships. Ultimately, it argues that PNGUoT must be a driver of societal transformation by ensuring that higher standards of education directly translate to higher standards of living for the people of Papua New Guinea.

Keywords: PNGUoT, world-class university, sovereignty, accreditation, Washington Accord, internationalization, industry partnerships, Pacific Islands, sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION: UNIVERSITIES AND THE QUESTION OF SOVEREIGNTY

In 2018, as I prepared to apply for the role of Vice Chancellor of PNGUoT, I was compelled to ask a fundamental question: *What is the real role of the University in society?* My conclusion was unequivocal—the University must be the custodian of science and technology, a repository of knowledge to be imparted to young men and women, and a generator of research and innovation to improve livelihoods.

I articulated this philosophy using the term **sovereignty**, defined as the authority of a nation to govern itself. The root word for “authority” is *author*, and it is the authors—of theses, publications, project reports, and consultancies—who reside within universities. Professors, researchers, and scholars collectively form the intellectual authority of a nation. Thus, universities are not merely training institutions; they are sovereign bodies of knowledge that must inform and influence governance with scientific evidence and guide national development.

This philosophy led me to articulate three objectives for PNGUoT:

1. Students must graduate with world-class degrees.
2. Professors must conduct solution-oriented research for industry and community, attracting sustainable funding from both.
3. Technology transfer must extend into projects that improve rural livelihoods.

I have consistently emphasized in public forums that Port Moresby and Lae are not the entirety of Papua New Guinea. With 85% of our population living in rural communities, the true measure of a university's success must be its impact on improving the living standards of the rural majority. In developed countries, the leadership role of world-class universities is directly linked to higher standards of living. PNGUoT must assume this same mantle of leadership.

2. INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND ACCREDITATION MILESTONES

Upon my appointment as Vice Chancellor in April 2019, PNGUoT launched a **Strategic Plan** with a vision to grow world-class technocrats for the real world. A major challenge lay in securing accreditation for our engineering programs, which required upgrading facilities, procuring equipment, and strengthening staff capacity. A turning point was the termination of the catering contract with iPi Ltd and the insourcing of services. This bold decision resulted in annual savings of K8 million, which were strategically redirected into accreditation activities. As a result, **Engineers Australia awarded full Washington Accord accreditation to five engineering programs in December 2024**—a historic milestone that placed PNGUoT on the global academic stage.

This achievement was only possible through decisive leadership, prudent financial reforms, and the support of visionary Council members. It has elevated PNGUoT's profile, enabling our graduates to compete globally while reinforcing our institutional credibility.

3. INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS AND THE ROAD TO GLOBAL STANDARDS

I have always believed that collaboration with world-class universities is central to PNGUoT's growth. Exposure to global practices equips students and staff with international perspectives, ensures graduates are globally mobile, and enables professors to contribute to cutting-edge research.

In 2023, Associate Professor George Varughese of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) visited PNGUoT as part of UNSW's mission to enhance global rankings through societal impact, measured by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). His visit catalyzed agreements for collaboration, strengthening PNGUoT's research engagement in climate change, agriculture, energy, and other critical fields.

That same year, at the Pacific Islands Universities Research Network (PIURN) meeting in the Cook Islands, I successfully bid for PNGUoT to host the 2025 PIURN Conference. This positioned our University as a hub for Pacific knowledge exchange.

Recognizing the increasing demand for coordination of these partnerships, I proposed the establishment of the **Office of Strategic Internationalization (OSI)**. Although initially rejected, the motion was eventually passed with strong advocacy from Councilor Hemetsberger and financial support from Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML). The OSI has since become the driver of our global collaborations.

4. RESEARCH, INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS, AND THE 2025 PIURN CONFERENCE

By 2025, PNGUoT's international profile had expanded significantly. Following the accreditation celebrations in June, PNGUoT hosted the **PIURN Conference from July 1–3, 2025**, which brought together Pacific researchers, industry partners, and international collaborators, notably from UNSW.

Key research collaborations emerged in areas vital to the Pacific, including climate change, renewable energy, food security, sea-level rise, urbanization, transport engineering, and environmental conservation. The **United Nations Global Pulse Program** committed to supporting PNGUoT-led sea-level rise studies.

Crucially, industry stakeholders rallied behind PNGUoT. Companies such as OTML, Kumul Petroleum Holdings Ltd (KPHL), Kumul Minerals Holdings Ltd (KMHL), Wafi-Golpu Joint Venture, and Dataco Ltd became financial patrons of OSI, demonstrating their confidence in PNGUoT's role as an engine of innovation and development.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY WITH SOCIETAL IMPACT

Reflecting on these milestones, I return to the conviction that ignited my vision in 2018: universities must translate higher standards of education into higher standards of living. For PNGUoT, this means:

- Benchmarking academic programs to international standards.
- Expanding collaborative research to address national and regional challenges.
- Strengthening industry partnerships for solution-based research.
- Enhancing community outreach to improve rural livelihoods.

Through the OSI, strategic reforms, and partnerships, PNGUoT is increasingly recognized as a world-class institution. The journey is ongoing, but the direction is clear—PNG's future prosperity is inseparable from the strength of its universities. PNGUoT must continue to lead, innovate, and serve, ensuring that the knowledge we generate transforms the lives of our people.