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# Education In Papua New Guinea

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## Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a land of extraordinary diversity, boasting a rich tapestry of over 800 languages and countless cultural groups spread across rugged mountains, dense rainforests, and vibrant coastlines. This inherent complexity, while a source of immense national pride, also presents unique challenges and opportunities for the nation's educational landscape. Understanding education in PNG is not merely about examining policies and statistics; it is about delving into the heart of a nation striving to balance ancient traditions with the demands of modernity, to foster national unity amidst immense local variation, and to empower its youth for a future shaped by both global influences and indigenous wisdom.

This book, "Education In Papua New Guinea: A Comprehensive Overview from Early Childhood to Higher Education," embarks on a journey to explore the multifaceted world of learning within this captivating Pacific nation. From the foundational knowledge passed down through generations in traditional settings to the structured curricula of modern institutions, we aim to provide a thorough and nuanced examination of how education has evolved, adapted, and continues to shape the lives of Papua New Guineans. It is a story of resilience, innovation, and persistent dedication to the ideal of an educated populace, despite significant geographical, economic, and social hurdles.

Our exploration begins by tracing the historical threads that have woven the fabric of PNG's education system, from pre-colonial forms of knowledge transmission to the profound impact of missionary schools and colonial administrations. We then dissect the current structure and governance, scrutinizing the policies and practices that govern learning from the earliest years of childhood through to tertiary institutions. Each level of education—early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational, and higher education—receives dedicated attention, revealing the curriculum, challenges, and ongoing reforms specific to its domain. The discussion extends beyond mere structures to delve into critical cross-cutting themes such as language policy, inclusive education, gender disparities, and the unique complexities of delivering education in rural and remote areas.

Furthermore, this book illuminates the vital contributions of various stakeholders, including the crucial role of non-governmental organizations, the intricate dynamics of funding and financing, and the continuous pursuit of quality assurance and standards. We also examine the transformative impact of technology, the principles of education for sustainable development, and the overarching challenges and opportunities inherent in educational planning for a developing nation. Issues such as brain drain, the retention of skilled educators, and the indispensable role of international

partnerships and aid are also thoroughly investigated, offering a holistic perspective on the forces shaping PNG's educational future.

Ultimately, "Education In Papua New Guinea" serves as an invaluable resource for educators, policymakers, researchers, development practitioners, and anyone with a vested interest in the future of this remarkable nation. By offering a comprehensive overview, we hope to foster a deeper understanding of the triumphs and tribulations within PNG's educational journey, to highlight areas of success, and to identify pathways for continued growth and improvement. It is an invitation to engage with the complexities and celebrate the rich potential of education in Papua New Guinea, as the nation strives to equip its citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Historical Foundations of Education in Papua New Guinea**

The educational journey of Papua New Guinea is as intricate and diverse as its geography and cultures. Before the arrival of European explorers and missionaries, a deeply ingrained system of traditional education flourished, seamlessly woven into the fabric of daily life. This informal, yet highly effective, approach to learning was the bedrock upon which all subsequent educational developments would precariously perch, often influencing, and at times clashing with, the imported models of schooling.

Traditional education in Papua New Guinea was a practical, community-driven affair. Children learned by observing, imitating, and actively participating in the daily rituals and necessities of their tribes. This immersive approach ensured the transmission of vital life skills, social behaviors, and spiritual beliefs from one generation to the next. The curriculum, though unwritten, was comprehensive, encompassing tribal law, hunting and gathering techniques, agricultural practices, craftsmanship, and an understanding of the intricate social structures and spiritual worldviews unique to each linguistic and cultural group. Knowledge of medicinal plants, storytelling, dance, and ceremonial practices were all integral components, ensuring the holistic development of individuals within their communal contexts. There was no formal "school" in the Western sense; instead, the entire village served as a classroom, with elders, parents, and community specialists acting as the primary educators. This system cultivated a profound connection to the land, community, and ancestral heritage, fostering self-reliance and cultural continuity.

The late 19th century ushered in a new era with the arrival of Christian missionaries, fundamentally altering the educational landscape. Their primary objective was evangelization, and the establishment of schools was a strategic tool to achieve this. The London Missionary Society, for instance, founded the first school in Papua New Guinea in 1873, with the initial aim of teaching islanders to read scripture. This marked the formal introduction of Western-style literacy and a structured curriculum, a stark contrast to the existing traditional methods.

As colonial powers began to exert their influence, the educational efforts of the missionaries expanded. After 1884, German and English missionaries established primary schools, introducing Western concepts of morality, the German and English languages, arithmetic, and Christian doctrine. In German New Guinea, for example, the Lutherans adopted the Kote and Yabim languages for instruction, while the Methodists in New Britain opted for Kuanua. The London Missionary Society, active in British New Guinea, chose Motu for its schools in the south coast region. These early

mission schools were driven by several key aims: to translate the Bible and convert indigenous people to Christianity, to introduce Western morals and values, to create self-reliant Christian communities, and to train local pastors, catechists, teachers, and skilled artisans for mission work.

The colonial administrations, particularly the German and later the Australian, initially showed limited direct involvement in providing education for the indigenous population, largely delegating this responsibility to the missions. German New Guinea, which comprised the northern part of what is now Papua New Guinea, was under German control from 1884 until 1914. During this period, education remained primarily in the hands of missionaries. While there were discussions about implementing a government education ordinance, it remained largely unfulfilled. German schools, like those run by the Catholic Mission in Madang, sometimes taught in German, but the overall impact of German language instruction on the broader population was limited due to the relatively small number of German settlers and the subsequent shift in control after World War I.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Australia seized German New Guinea, and by 1920, the League of Nations granted Australia a mandate to administer the former German territory. This marked a significant shift, as English became the sole official language of instruction, laying the groundwork for the modern education system in Papua New Guinea. However, the Australian administration, particularly before World War II, did not prioritize formal education and English acquisition for the indigenous population, viewing it as both wasteful and potentially dangerous. Consequently, the Christian missions continued to be the primary providers of schooling for Papua New Guineans during this era.

The period between the two World Wars saw a gradual, albeit slow, expansion of mission-led education. The curriculum often focused on religious instruction, basic literacy, and rudimentary vocational skills to support mission activities and create a compliant workforce for colonial enterprises. For example, in the early 1900s, the British government, which administered Papua (the southern part of the mainland), encouraged missionaries to develop vocational education programs aimed at producing farmers, craftspeople, and skilled laborers. However, these vocational policies often faced challenges due to a lack of financial support and, at times, suspicion from the indigenous population regarding the motives behind such initiatives.

World War II brought about immense disruption to the burgeoning educational efforts. Many missionaries and explorers returned to their home countries, and the educational infrastructure suffered. Following the war, in 1946, the control of the two territories (Papua and New Guinea) was officially handed over to Australia, and the Department of Education was established. This marked a turning point, with significant growth in government involvement in education finally taking shape. The New South

Wales Department of Education curriculum was introduced and adapted for primary schools in the territory from 1946 onwards.

The post-World War II era, particularly from the 1960s, witnessed a more concerted effort by the Australian administration to develop a comprehensive education system. The "Deliberate Education" period from 1961-1970 saw increased funding for education from the Australian government. The Currie Commission, formed in 1964, was instrumental in investigating the establishment of higher education in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, leading to the founding of the University of Papua New Guinea in 1965. This institution was heavily influenced by the Australian education system.

By 1970, the Papua New Guinea Education Ordinance was established, aiming for a uniform education system that integrated both government and mission schools, clearly outlining specific powers and responsibilities. This move towards a unified system was a crucial step in preparing the nation for self-governance. The momentum for independence, achieved in 1975, was also fueled by Papua New Guineans who actively challenged Australian colonial rule, demonstrating a growing desire for self-determination and an education system that served their national aspirations. The historical foundations of education in Papua New Guinea, therefore, are a complex tapestry of indigenous learning traditions, the evangelizing efforts of missionaries, and the administrative policies of colonial powers, all contributing to the unique educational landscape that exists today.

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