

University of Papua New Guinea shuts early after student protests over fee rises

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The University Council has closed the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) three weeks before the end of the academic year in response to student boycotts that have spread to university campuses across the country. More than 2,500 UPNG students had been on strike since October 1 protesting against a planned 25 percent increase in tuition fees.

The huge fee rise, to take effect next year, is part of a proposed “restructure” package, which includes proposals for the closure of the Creative Arts and Health Sciences faculties. Students also oppose a new tri-semester term structure introduced at the start of this year.

Pilyo Maeokali, chairman of the Crisis Committee leading the students' protest said: “Most of us come from families with low incomes and this increase is too much to pay.”

The 25 percent fee increase is being adopted by all of PNG's public universities. At the University of Technology in Lae students struck on October 12 in solidarity with fellow students at UPNG and in protest at the proposed increase at their own university. SRC President Joe Wemin said 90 percent of PNG's population lived in rural areas and could not afford to support their children while they studied at university.

Last week, as the protests spread and classes at UPNG remained suspended due to the students' actions, UPNG's Academic Board recommended an early end to the university year. University Council, at its meeting held earlier this week, formally closed the university for 1999. As a result, undergraduate students will have to repeat their studies next year, while first year students must compete for a university place with school leavers.

The Student Representative Council has written a submission to the National Executive Council of the

University, calling for the scrapping of the fee increase. The submission, however, proposes alternative means for making budget savings and criticises the UPNG administration for failing to close programs and make academic staff retrenchments.

The UPNG “restructure” is the result of a massive reduction in government funding carried out on the demands of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The 1999 budget allocation to the university was only 24 million kina (\$US9 million)—barely enough to cover its operating costs. The introduction of the principle of “user-pays” for university students is in line with the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Program being enforced by the government of Prime Minister Mekere Morauta.

The tertiary education system introduced following PNG's formal independence in 1975 is being rapidly dismantled. National scholarships, known as Natschol, have suffered a large reduction in funding with more than 250 qualified students this year missing out on a university place. Up-front university fees were introduced in the mid-1990s. The latest moves to charge students the full cost of their courses will make it impossible for all but the wealthiest in PNG to obtain a tertiary education.



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