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ASSESSING QUALITY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN ENGA PROVINCE, PNG: FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Key Points

- Tuition-Fee-Free Education (TFF) in Enga Province increases student enrollment but strains resources, leading to overcrowded classrooms, limited learning materials, increase repeaters, and heavier teacher workloads, ultimately compromising education quality.
- External factors such as natural barriers, tribal conflicts, transportation challenges, and family dynamics significantly hinder students' learning experiences.
- Internal factors within schools, including lack of teacher and head teacher support, bullying, inadequate resources, and poor sanitation facilities, also impede students' learning.
- Addressing these issues hindering quality education requires adequate strategies and collaborative efforts between the government, local communities, and educational stakeholders.

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ASSESSING QUALITY OF BASIC EDUCATION IN ENGA PROVINCE, PNG: FACTORS IMPACTING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE

By Hafford Norea

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the education system comprises of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Basic education, which encompasses the Primary stage, is crucial as it forms the foundation for a child's learning journey.

PNG has made significant strides in education since gaining independence, evident in expanded education services, infrastructure development, teaching methods, curriculum development, and educational outcomes despite challenges like poverty, crime, corruption, and leadership instability (PNG Insight, 2024). For instance, by 2020, the National Department of Education (NDOE) had enrolled over 2.2 million children, taught by 68,000 teachers across 12,800 schools in the National Education System (Devette-Chee and Norea, 2023). This data reflects effective investment in children's education by the government, stakeholders, and NGOs.

However, PNG still has work ahead to meet international commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Education for All (EFA), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasising education rights for all children (UBE Plan 2010-2019).

Quality basic education is crucial for a child's academic and personal growth, fostering critical thinking, drives social and economic development, empowering individuals, reducing poverty, and enhancing community well-being.

Governor for Enga, Sir Peter Ipatas, plays a leading role in advancing national education plans, making education a top development priority in Enga, aligned with NEP 2020-2029, MDG, and Vision 2050 (*The National*, 2014).

The Enga people formed a district in Western Highlands Province in 1973 and became Enga Province in 1978 (Britannica, 2024). Despite socio-economic and administrative challenges, the education ministry supported by provincial and national governments, has seen significant progress in education since separation.

This paper briefly outlines the province's background, progress of the Tuition-Fee-Free Policy, and examines basic

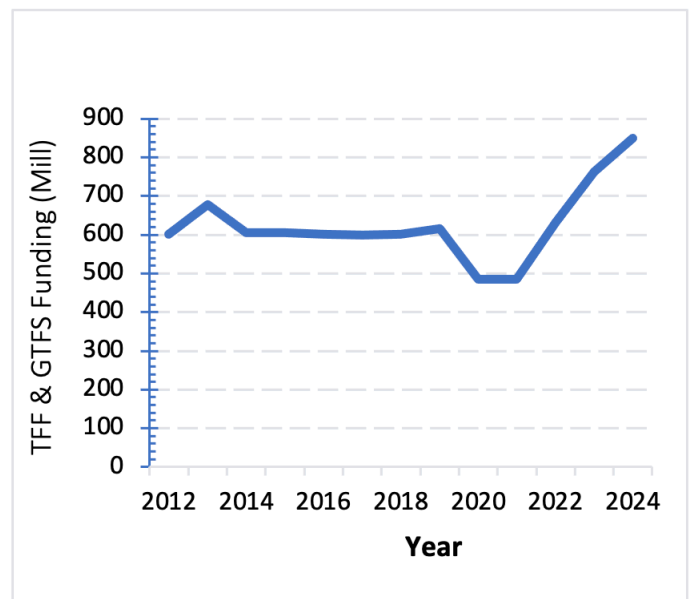
education to understand factors affecting its quality. It suggests interventions for stakeholders to improve education quality based on a 2018 study by the PNG National Research Institute's Education Research Program.

Background

Enga Province, located in the northern Highlands of PNG, consists of six districts with a predominant ethnic group and a shared language across diverse landscapes. Since PNG gained independence in 1975, Enga's population has grown significantly from 120,000 to nearly 600,000 in 2021, with an average annual growth rate of 2.26 percent (NSO, 2021).

With a focus on education, Enga has responded proactively to the rising number of school-age children. In 2019, approximately 107,161 children (aged 5-14) were enrolled in basic education. To support this surge, Enga has expanded school infrastructure, hired more teachers, and established teacher training colleges. Currently, the province has about 600 schools and 2,500 teachers in elementary and primary education (atlasPNGNRI, 2019).

Fig.1. TFF & GTFS Budget By Year



Source: Aggregated

To implement the PNG Government’s Universal Basic Education (UBE) Plan (2010-2019) and ensure all children have access to quality education, the government, led by then Prime Minister Hon. Peter O’Neill, reintroduced the Tuition-Fee-Free (TFF) policy in 2012, allocating K602 million. Subsidies increased to K677 million in 2013 but declined steadily from 2014 to 2018. When James Marape took office in 2019, the TFF Policy transitioned to Government Tuition Fee Subsidy (GTFS) Policy, with a reduced subsidy of K486 million in the 2020 budget, a 21 percent decrease from O’Neill’s 2018 budget. This policy change aimed to share financial responsibilities among parents, local MPs, and Governors. The Marape administration subsequently revised the GTFS policy to Government Tuition Fee (GTF) Policy, aiming for full government payment of fees from 2022 onwards (Ministry of Education, 2021).

While the government’s fee coverage eases financial burdens for families and enhances student accessibility, it also impacts education quality alongside internal and external challenges, as discussed below.

Factors affecting quality education

Among the external and internal factors, TFF has contributed to the decline in quality of education in Enga Province despite its advantage in improving students’ accessibility and financial relief to the parents. The study in the Enga Province involved three groups of respondents: students, teachers, and head teachers; to give feedbacks on the impacts of TFF and their experiences on both external and internal factors which also contributes to the poor quality of basic education.

Impacts of Tuition-Fee-Free (TFF) Education

The study participants were 1,358 students, 130 teachers, and 15 head teachers. The participants in the survey were given nine closed-ended questions pertaining TFF and they responded accordingly, as displayed in Table 1.

The findings recorded in Table 1 enlighten the impact of TFF in Enga Province. Among the respondents, a significant majority of students, teachers, and head teachers (95%, 92%, & 87% respectively) concur that TFF led to an increase in enrolment. This potentially strains educational quality and learning outcomes due to higher student-to-teacher ratios and resource allocation challenge. Equally, 80 percent, 96 percent, and 93 percent of students, teachers, and head teachers agreed that TFF led to students overcrowding in schools, compromising quality of education.

Furthermore, a notable percentage of respondents (75% of students, 92% of teachers, and 80% of head teachers) highlighted TFF as a catalyst for increased teacher workload due to upsurge in student enrollment, straining teacher-student ratios leading to heavier workload, which potentially

compromises the quality of education. Similarly, the majority observed that TFF caused increase in Grade 8 dropouts and teacher leaving their jobs.

Table 1. Respondent’s feedback to TFF impacts

ENGA PROVINCE			
TFF Impacts	Respondents (Agreed)		
	Students (1358)	Teachers (130)	Head Teachers (15)
Increase Enrolment	1288	120	13
Overcrowding	1081	125	14
Teacher workload	1016	119	12
Increased Grade 8 dropouts	735	115	11
Teachers leaving job	618	100	10
Increased repeaters	1158	112	13
increased student absenteeism	734	90	10
Increased enrolment of failures	1020	110	11
Increased school project	600	120	14

Source: UBE NRI TEAM (2018)

According to the respondents, TFF led to increased enrolment of repeaters, especially the failures and undisciplined students, which potentially affect other student’s motivation and undermines learning quality. 75 percent of students, 85 percent of teachers, and 73 percent of head teachers highlighted that TFF caused increase in the enrolment of failures, alongside its impact on escalating school projects due to the influx of student access causing strain on both infrastructural and teaching resources, leading to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, and overwhelmed teachers.

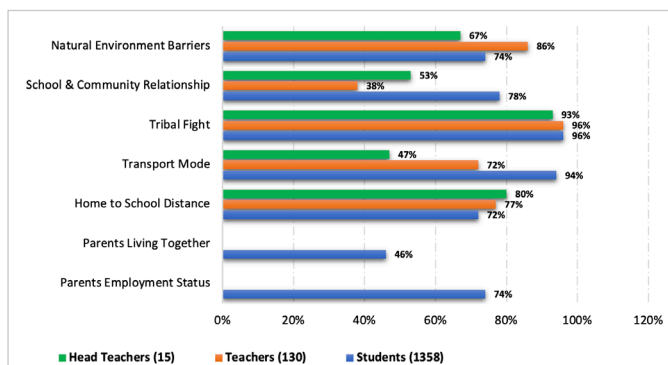
These findings underscore the adverse effects of TFF on the quality of basic education in Enga Province.

External factors affecting quality education

In the province, various external factors significantly pose adverse impact on the quality of education. Understanding their effects is crucial for addressing educational disparities and enhancing learning outcomes.

Figure 2 presents the notable external factors that impedes the quality of education. As displayed in the bar graph, natural environment barriers were identified as a significant concern, with 74 percent of students, 86 percent of teachers, and 67 percent of head teachers agreeing that these barriers hinder the quality of education and students’ learning.

Figure 2. Response on external factors' adverse impact on quality education



Source: UBE NRI Team (2018)

Another key factor is the relationship between schools and neighbouring communities. While 78 percent of students perceive positive relationships, only 38 percent of teachers and 53 percent of head teachers share this view. Conflicts arising from poor relations affects school operations and worsen education quality.

Tribal fighting emerged as a prevalent issue in the province, with 93 percent of head teachers and 96 percent of students and teachers acknowledging that it's a detrimental factor to education quality as it destroys schools, displaces people, and affects students and community.

Transportation challenges also contribute significantly, with 94 percent of students, 72 percent of teachers, and 47 percent of head teachers noting that students predominantly walk. Additionally, the long distances traveled by many students, as reported by 72 percent of students, 77 percent of teachers, and 80 percent of head teachers, further impede learning of the students which compromises education quality.

Family dynamics play a role as well, with 54 percent of students reporting that their parents were not living together due to divorce, separation, or death. Another 74 percent indicated parental unemployment. These circumstances adversely affect students' learning, which contributes to the poor quality of education.

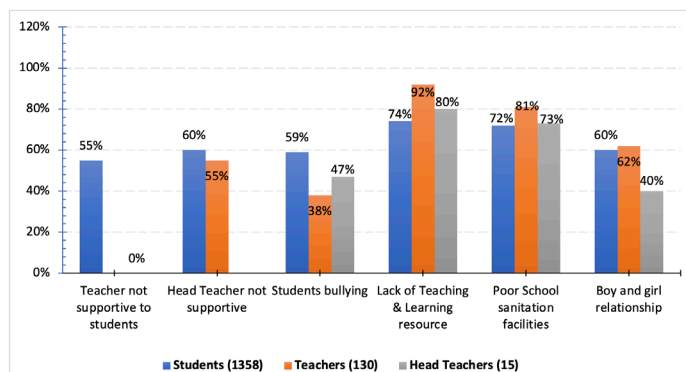
Internal factors affecting quality education

For schools in the province, various internal factors significantly pose adverse impacts on the students' learning. These factors affect the quality of education. Understanding their effects is crucial for addressing educational disparities and enhancing learning outcomes.

The data in Figure 3 indicate factors within schools which affects the quality of education and students' learning. According to the identified factors displayed in the graph, lack of support from teachers and head teachers emerges as a significant concern. About 55 percent of students and 40 percent of head teachers believe that unsupportive teachers

contribute to poor learning quality. Similarly, 60 percent of students and 55 percent of teachers perceive unsupportive head teachers as detrimental to education quality. This lack of support hinders students' ability to engage effectively with their studies and impede their overall learning progress.

Figure 3. Response on internal factors' adverse impact on quality education



Source: UBE NRI Team (2018)

Additionally, bullying within schools is recognised as another crucial issue affecting students' learning experiences. About 59 percent of students, 38 percent of teachers, and 47 percent of head teachers acknowledge the negative impact of bullying on education quality. Bullying can create a hostile learning environment, leading to decreased academic performance and emotional distress among students.

Furthermore, the inadequacy of teaching and learning resources poses a significant barrier to effective education. A considerable majority, comprising 74 percent of students, 92 percent of teachers, and 80 percent of head teachers, agree that the lack of resources hampers students' learning and contributes to poor education quality. Insufficient resources limit teachers' ability to deliver comprehensive lessons and hinder students' access to essential educational materials.

Poor sanitation facilities in schools also pose challenges to students' learning experiences. Most students, teachers, and head teachers agree that inadequate sanitation facility negatively impact education quality. Particularly, female students and staff feel uncomfortable and face hygiene risks due to substandard facilities, affecting their ability to focus on learning.

Moreover, distractions arising from boy-girl relationships within schools are identified as a concern. Many respondents, including 60 percent of students, 62 percent of teachers, and 40 percent of head teachers, believe that such relationships can detract students' concentration and focus on learning, ultimately contributing to poor education quality.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

The findings reveal the factors affecting the quality of education in Enga Province. Adequate strategies and

collaborative efforts are required in addressing these issues. Therefore, this paper recommends that it is crucial for respective stakeholders to:

- Improve the TFF administration, procurement process, governance, and management to mitigate its adverse effects that deteriorates the quality of education;
- Consider building schools within the reach of feeder communities, ensuring accessibility, to enhance the quality of education, particularly in remote areas;
- Develop community-based initiatives to fostering positive relationships between schools and communities;
- Prioritise conflict resolution mechanisms to mitigate the impact of tribal conflicts to protect schools and promoting stability;
- Prioritise funding on improving access to teaching and learning resources and school infrastructure and
- Implement awareness programs to address distractions like bullying and boy-girl relationships, fostering a safe and focused learning environment.

By addressing these recommendations, Enga Province can work towards improving the quality of education and fostering better learning outcomes for its students.

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