



**Welcome Remarks by Dr. Thomas Webster**  
**Opening of the Universalizing Basic Education Conference**  
**12 July 2011, NRI Conference Centre, Port Moresby**

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Good Morning everyone, Let me extend a warm welcome to you all and thank you all for accepting our invitations either to present papers or just coming to listen and participate. I want to especially thank those who have flown into Port Moresby for this conference, either from within PNG or from outside of PNG.

- Let me acknowledge the presence of Honorable David Arore, Vice Minister for Education and thank him for being here to open this Conference on this key problem that PNG has faced for decades; providing Universal Basic Education for All Citizens.
- Let me also acknowledge the presence of the Secretary for Education, Dr. Joseph Pagelio, Senior members of his Department and also the many school teachers and principals who are here today.
- I acknowledge Heads and representatives from other Government Departments and agencies and thank you also for coming.
- I also acknowledge the members of the Diplomatic Corp who form a valuable partnership with the PNG Government to deliver Education and other critical services.
- I also want to acknowledge the Churches and their contribution.
- Also members of the academic community who have accepted the invitation to conceptualize issues and contribute to a better understanding of the many and varied issues affecting the provision of universal basic education for all in PNG.
- Finally and not the least, members of the media fraternity who form a vital link with NRI by disseminating valuable information that is generated here to the wider PNG public.

Achieving Universal Basic Education has been a goal for Papua New Guinea prior to Independence, captured as a goal in the Constitution of PNG, adopted at Independence, and stated in many development plans since. PNG has made declarations and international commitments to take serious steps to progress towards making Quality Basic Education Universal, with the latest target date being 2015.

Sadly for PNG, the target date of 2015 will be missed once again. As someone who has been observing PNG's progress towards the goal of Universalizing Basic Education, it would be fair to say that PNG has never been really serious about achieving Universal Basic Education for all. It has often been simply, statements of intent, with no strategic measures being taken to move the country forward.

The challenges are immense. Less than 10 or 15 percent of our children aged six are now able to enroll at elementary prep. Of the many that do enroll into the elementary prep at different ages, about half drop out of school and do not get to complete a full primary education cycle. The quality of education is so poor that even many of those who get to complete a full primary education have not mastered the competencies desired in reading and writing, in arithmetic skills and in general knowledge.

Literacy levels as per the 2000 National Census, indicates that PNG has a literacy rate of 57 percent but evidence from other work suggests that the actual desired competency levels in reading and writing may be at much lower levels.

In terms of global comparisons, PNG ranks one of the lowest in UBE indicators with parallels to war and drought stricken countries of the Sub-Sahara.

Basic education for all is critical for participation in a modern society and is a right of every child – girl or boy. It is essential for one's personal development, to identify and use opportunities for income generation and for being aware of the social and natural environment in order to utilize and improve the quality of living.

It is the building block on which all other levels of education, as well as a lifelong education, are built upon. Basic education provides useful skills of literacy, numeracy and of the science and social sciences so that one has a better appreciation of the world around them and can engage as more useful citizens of PNG and the global community.

Papua New Guinea will not develop socially and economically if the majority of its people do not have a basic education.

We must make every effort to Universalize Basic Education if we are to achieve the goals espoused in Vision 2050.

The Government of PNG launched the Universal Basic Education Plan, 2009-2018. Now that the plan has been approved by the Government, the implementation plans have yet to be developed, drawing attention and focus of resources to do the things that matter, and will get us across the line.

What is Universal Basic Education? What are the different components? What are the different perspectives, experiences and lessons that we can bring to each other's attention that can help us to better understand what needs to be done. What can we as an individual, as a parent, as a citizen, as a teacher, as a government official, and as an academic contribute to understanding and to achieve Universal Basic Education? How can we shape and challenge the many responsible organizations that we work with, starting from the school level, to make a difference by doing our fair share of the work towards achieving Universal Basic Education?

The National Research Institute sees the lack of Universal Basic Education as a major obstacle to national development and has organized this Conference as a forum to bring together a wide spectrum of people to discuss and to analyze ideas about how PNG can work towards achieving Universal Basis Education as quickly as we can.

Once again, thank you all for coming and I look forward to a productive conference.