

Australian Academic Volunteers Abroad

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25 July 2024

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

Australian Academic Volunteers Abroad (AAVA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region. In particular, we address Terms of Reference 4(a) Explore opportunities to enhance people-to-people links, cultural exchanges, and educational partnerships between Australia and the Pacific to maximise local and community development outcomes.

AAVA is a nonprofit organisation dedicated to sharing the transformative power of education by supporting locally led capacity building efforts at universities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Please contact me for further information or to discuss any issues raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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Inquiry into Australia's Response to the Priorities of Pacific Island Countries and the Pacific Region.

Terms of Reference 4. Strengthen People-to-People Links and Partnerships including through well designed development programs.

(a) Explore opportunities to enhance people-to-people links, cultural exchanges, and educational partnerships between Australia and the Pacific to maximise local and community development outcomes.

Submission prepared by Professor Graham Schaffer
on behalf of
Australian Academic Volunteers Abroad Ltd

Summary

Knowledge is central to a sustainable world and knowledge diplomacy strengthens relations among countries through education and research. Education transforms the lives of individuals, families, communities and nations. The *Pacific Regional Education Framework* seeks to empower Pacific Islanders to fully enjoy the benefits of education. There are fifteen universities in the Pacific region, educating approximately 80,000 students each year. There is a dearth of academic leadership in many disciplines, arising from the difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff at senior levels and developing junior staff in the absence of academic leadership. Capacity building across all domains of academic leadership, including governance and the academic disciplines, will support the aspirations of Pacific Island universities, including gender equity, widening access to more diverse student cohorts, and adapting to emerging technologies. It is recommended that Australia support direct, targeted academic volunteering by current and retired Australian university professors and senior academics to provide strategic academic leadership that enables the careers of others.

“Investments in our university are viewed not merely as contributions to an educational institution but as integral components of a broader economic reform program. This perspective is rooted in the conviction that higher education is a powerful catalyst for societal transformation, capable of unlocking the immense potential of our nation and its people.”¹

Professor Transform Aqorau, Vice Chancellor, Solomon Islands National University

About AAVA

Australian Academic Volunteers Abroad (AAVA) is a nonprofit organisation dedicated to sharing the transformative power of education by supporting locally led capacity building efforts at universities in the Indo-Pacific region. We support the goals and aspirations of universities by matching their strategic priorities in teaching and research with suitably qualified and motivated volunteers who are current or recently retired senior academic staff from accredited universities. Our focus is on long term assignments rather than short term transactional approaches which have proved counterproductive in the past. Each volunteer assignment is typically 12 months, with a mixture of in-country and remote components.

We are an Australian Partner Organisation with the Australian Volunteers Program (AVP), the Australian Government funded initiative that supports global volunteering. Our volunteers are mobilised through AVP.

Our Board of industry professionals include those with Pacifica heritage. Our Patrons include Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of the South Pacific. This submission was prepared on assignment at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. A recently retired Deputy Vice-Chancellor has been mobilised to support the strategic development goals of the Solomon Islands National University. We thus have deep knowledge and experience of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

The opportunity

Education transforms lives. By enhancing the capacity of individuals, education can also transform families, communities and nations. Education breaks down barriers, leading to diversity, inclusion and social cohesion. At its core, the attributes of a university education include intellectual curiosity, moral courage, the capacity for critical thinking and analysis, and effective communication skills. University graduates can apply knowledge and undertake research to solve complex problems for the benefit of current and future generations. Universities are also responsible for education as the foundation of the professions, including but not only medicine, nursing, engineering, law, economics, business and teaching. Universities are therefore essential to building national capacity.

Knowledge is central to a sustainable world. Based on values of reciprocity and mutual benefit, knowledge diplomacy is a collaborative process for strengthening relations among countries through education and research.² As institutions that curate, create and disseminate knowledge, universities contribute to the resolution of national, regional, and global challenges and strengthen relations between countries. Universities are thereby key players in knowledge diplomacy.

To support the Blue Pacific vision endorsed by the Pacific Island Forum Leaders in 2017, the *Pacific Regional Education Framework, Moving Towards Education 2030* (PacREF) seeks to empower Pacific

¹ Email to University Partners, 13 February 2024.

² Knight, J., Knowledge Diplomacy, International Higher Education, Spring 2023

Islanders to fully enjoy the benefits of education.³ Over a twelve-year period, the PacREF seeks to produce high quality graduates who are able to contribute economically and socially to their communities. Collaboration and cooperation among national education systems and regional institutions are critical to the success of the PacREF. Australia directly supports PacREF to improve education development outcomes. Australia invested \$280.8 million in 2022-23 in education in the Pacific region. This comprises regional scholarships, investments in regional education institutions, technical support for national education systems, research grants and educational linkages between Australia and the Pacific.⁴

Higher education in the islands states of Oceania is provided by a mixture of regional, national and private universities. These are the University of the South Pacific (USP), Fiji National University (FNU), the National University of Samoa (NUS), Solomon Islands National University (SINU), Tonga National University (TNU), The National University of Vanuatu (NUV) and the University of Fiji. There are also six universities in Papua New Guinea and national universities in New Caledonia and in French Polynesia. Together, they enrol approximately 80,000⁵ higher education students each year.

The University of the South Pacific (USP), founded in 1968, is one of the ten regional universities of the world.⁶ It is owned by the governments of 12 Pacific Island countries: the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The University's main campus is in Suva, Fiji, with additional campuses in each member state. The University's mission is to shape Pacific futures by empowering students, staff and alumni to become inspirational agents of positive change leading to innovative, cohesive, resilient and sustainable communities. In 2024, USP enrolled 10,000 university students (equivalent full-time), employed 1,600 staff with budget expenditure of FJD\$176.7 million.⁷ Australia has provided core funding to USP for over 50 years. The current investment is AUD\$86 million over six years from 2019 – 2025. The partnership provides flexible funding to support implementation of USP's Strategic Plan, including efforts to meet the tertiary education needs of the Pacific.⁴

A key difficulty faced by all the universities of the member states of the Pacific Islands Forum is the provision of academic leadership. This is the role of the Professoriate (Level E Academic Staff), who are scholars with a distinguished record of high-quality and impactful academic achievements. They provide leadership to the disciplines through demonstrating and fostering excellence in teaching and research, and by building and sustaining partnerships with government, industry, the professions and the community. USP has 13 professors.⁸ By comparison, Charles Darwin University, which is also a dual-sector university with a similar student enrolment, has 50 professors.⁹ There are no professors at USP in key disciplines, including Agriculture, Civil Engineering, Climatology, Information Technology, Law and Psychology. This situation is essentially replicated at the other

³ Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) 2018 - 2030: Moving Towards Education 2030. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018

⁴ Development Assistance in the Pacific. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/development-assistance/education#usp>, accessed 13 June 2024

⁵ Headcount, derived from university annual reports and websites.

⁶ A regional university in this context is a higher education institution founded, funded and/or governed by a group of countries located in a supra-national region. Knight, J., Zhang, Y. (2022). Regional Universities Around the World. In: Cremonini, L., et al (eds) Reconfiguring National, Institutional and Human Strategies for the 21st Century. Springer.

⁷ USP Annual Plan 2024.

⁸ USP Annual Plan 2022.

⁹ Charles Darwin University, Annual Report 2022.

universities in the region. The cause is multi-faceted, including budgetary constraints, the difficulty in attracting and retaining senior scholars, and the difficulty for junior staff to be promoted when they do not have the senior leadership to guide, support and enable their careers.

Additionally, as Pacific universities seek to ensure mobility for their graduates, quality assurance, accreditation and international comparability of programs becomes more critical. Robust evaluation of teaching and learning and staff development to engage effectively with technology and the increasing diversity of students is a further opportunity for the engagement of experienced academics to enhance the quality of university offerings, while building networks of scholars across institutions.

Recommendation

The Australian government should support direct, targeted and sustained academic volunteering by senior scholars to provide strategic academic leadership at universities in the Pacific Island countries, not to replace the need for the universities to recruit senior scholars, but to support the recruitment process and empower junior staff while doing so.