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Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into *Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Region*.

From: The Oceania Institute at The University of Melbourne

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### **Introduction**

This submission is collective contribution from academics associated with the Oceania institute at the University of Melbourne.

The Oceania Institute is a new initiative of the University of Melbourne that commenced in 2023 and was officially launched in March this year. The Institute is working to create meaningful, reciprocal, and sustained partnerships between the University of Melbourne and people and institutions throughout Oceania. It has four aims, to:

*Enhance collaboration* by bringing together academics and graduate researchers from across faculties and showcasing Oceania-focussed research, teaching and engagement activities.

*Support communities* by creating a welcoming and supportive environment for people from Oceania who work and study at the University, and for Pasifika communities in Melbourne and Victoria.

*Strengthen relationships* by leveraging the University's research capability and networks to better understand and address key challenges faced by people in Oceania.

*Develop communities of mutual learning* by connecting the University's education and training programs with those of institutions in Oceania.

Here we address topic 4 of the inquiry, which asks for input to "Strengthen People-to-People Links and Partnerships including through well designed development programs". We do this based on our collective experience totalling many decades of research with people, cultures and countries in the South Pacific, and our experience developing the Oceania Institute.

In the following we identify four key issues and opportunities in developing educational partnerships between Australia and the Pacific region. We now outline these and associated recommendations.

## **1. Student exchanges.**

The New Colombo Plan Mobility Program provides welcome assistance to support Australian students to study in the Pacific region. But the potential benefits of such student exchanges are limited and could be enhanced.

The absence of funding to support students from Universities in the Pacific Islands to study in Australia constrains genuine mutual exchanges. For example, we have explored developing undergraduate field courses that are paired with those offered by universities in the region. In this model Australian students taking field classes in the region would work alongside students from regional Universities taking a similar subject, and then students from both Universities would undertake classes together in Australia. This is not possible now because there is no funding to support students from the region to travel to Australia.

There are three obvious and important benefits to extending funding to support students from the region to travel to Australia. First, this would build strong friendships, reciprocity, trust and understanding between future leaders in Australia and the region. Secondly, this will allow people from the region to learn about Australian society, science and technology, including on mutual challenges such as adapting to climate change, conservation, environmental engineering, public health, strategies for gender equality, and urban and regional planning. Third, this is only fair, and signals Australia's willingness to meet the demand from the region for decolonising knowledge production and exchange.

An additional limitation to the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program is that it is restricted to undergraduate students, whereas many of the benefits from sharing information about Australian society, science and technology would be better suited to postgraduate subjects where students have more advanced skills and knowledge and take subjects that are more vocationally oriented.

A final limitation to the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program is that it is restricted to students who are Australian citizens, and not citizens or permanent residents of the proposed host location/s. This creates significant discrimination within student cohorts given many students in Australian Universities are not Australian citizens. Restricting access to students who are citizens or permanent residents of the proposed host locations is also counterproductive since those students can offer important insights and connections to Australian students in the field and may themselves have little understanding of the subject as it relates to their own countries.

Recommendations:

- 1a. Extend the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program, or create a separate program, to support students from Universities in Pacific Island Countries to undertake joint field classes in Australia in partnership with Australian Universities.
- 1b. Extend eligibility for the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program and the extension we propose to postgraduate students.
- 1c. Extend eligibility for the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program and the extension we propose to include: some students who are not Australian citizens.

1d. Remove the restriction on citizens or permanent resident of the proposed host location/s eligibility for the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program and the extension we propose

## **2. Postgraduate students**

Many of the challenges the region faces requires leaders who have deep knowledge in the fields, a strong understanding of research practices (and their limitations), and a capacity to move between science and policy. This is clear, for example, in areas such as infectious disease management and climate change adaptation. These are attributes that are most developed through research higher degrees (PhD and Master by Research). It is notable that in Australia many of the leaders in these fields hold research higher degrees.

The University of Melbourne has through various schemes significantly increased scholarships for research higher degree students (PhD and Master by Research) from the Pacific Islands. This includes through the Melbourne Climate Action Scholarships, which are offered to international students from Pacific Small Island Developing States who are enrolling in graduate coursework or graduate research course in the fields that address the effects of climate change in the Pacific.

Our experience in recruiting, funding, and supervising research higher degree students from the region has been overwhelmingly positive, and one of mutual benefit between the students and their supervisors and the University community. But we see some limitations in this endeavour.

First, the standard scholarship stipends provided by the University and Australia Awards are insufficient. The standard scholarship stipend is calibrated to support the living costs of an Australian citizen or resident who is in their early 20's. This is not the demographic profile of research higher degree students from the Pacific Islands, who are typically mid-career, in their 30's or early 40's, with a family, and needing to pay private health insurance (which costs between \$2,000 and \$2,200 per person per year for basic coverage, meaning a PhD candidate with a family of four pays up to \$16,000 over the course of their degree). These are not students who can live at home with their parents, or in a share house, and so their living expenses are far higher. Furthermore, scarcity, discrimination and high cost in the rental housing market all make it extremely difficult and stressful for research higher degree students from the Pacific Islands to access housing of an appropriate standard. These additional expenses in turn tempt some students to seek part-time work to help make ends meet, which undermines their academic progress.

Second, as we have become a preferred destination for research higher degree students from the Pacific Islands, we have come to realise that the supply of excellent candidates far outstrips available funding. We have found that there are many potential PhD candidates, but in most countries the availability of Australia Awards for them is very limited (and so typically targeted at master's level students). Australia, Australian Universities, and the Pacific Islands would benefit greatly from increasing the supply of Australia Awards for research higher degree students from the region.

Recommendations:

- 2a. Increase the supply of Australia Awards for research higher degree students from the region
- 2b. A loading of 50% to scholarship stipends for research higher degree students from the Pacific Islands travelling with children
- 2c. A loading of 25% to the welcome and relocation grant

### **3. Harnessing the potential of the diaspora**

Pasifika peoples are mobile and transnational. Their mobility and extended networks of kin are key to their cultures, identities, and livelihoods, and deliver benefits to both Australia and the Pacific Islands. Schemes such as the Falepili treaty and the Pacific Engagement Visa support this transnationalism, though we stress the benefits to all parties are constrained when Pasifika peoples in Australia do not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as Australian citizens.

We are deeply concerned by the emerging stigmatisation of Pasifika peoples that arises from prejudice but is not helped by inadequate support for settlement in Australia including for accessing education, health care, housing and work. This can be addressed by public campaigns that celebrate Pasifika cultures and the contributions Pasifika people make to Australian society, and by more specialised social support services. These will be increasingly important as the number of Pasifika migrants increases under the Pacific Engagement Visa. We add that the Pacific Engagement Visa is an important experiment that should be independently monitored and evaluated to ensure its benefits for migrants, Australian society, and the Pacific islands are maximised.

Appreciating that Pasifika peoples in Australia are inseparable from their families in the Pacific Islands offers some important opportunities. This includes the opportunity to support Pasifika Australians so that they can in turn support their families and friends to settle well in Australia. For example, funding could be provided to Pasifika community organisations such as the United Pasifika Council of Victoria to employ staff to support new arrivals, and to provide them with small grants on arrival.

The presence of Pasifika peoples in Australia also presents an opportunity to support the exchange of skilled Pasifika people to work in both Australia and the Pacific Islands. For example, Pasifika Australians and their employers could be supported to return for periods of time to work in the islands to which they are associated, and in so doing share their skills and knowledge and refresh their understanding of Pasifika social and cultural contexts.

Conversely, skilled Pasifika people in the islands and their employers could be supported so that they might work for periods of time in Australia and share their skills and knowledge and in turn learn from Australian practices, as well as boost their incomes through Australian wages. Such a scheme would work well, for example, for workers in fields such as education, engineering, health and medicine, sports, public administration, research, and urban planning.

Exchanges such as these could do much to improve understanding of and support for Pasifika peoples, cultures and societies in both Australia and the Pacific Islands.

Finally, it is well understood that Pasifika peoples abroad are a major source of investment in the Pacific Islands. Remittances of goods and money now play a significant role in the development of Pacific Island communities. For example, it has been estimated that: remittances account for up to 30% of GDP in Samoa and Tonga; seafarers from Kiribati account for approximately 15% of GDP; and the remitted wages of Tuvaluan seafarers fund up to 75% of consumption in the rural islands of that country. Remittances therefore most likely far exceed flows of Australian aid, underscoring the important principle that Pasifika peoples are the best people to act on their own needs and values, and supporting them to do that is a very effective and efficient way to support development. This support can take many forms, but one key mechanism shown to be effective in the Pacific Islands themselves (where urban populations remit funds to rural communities), and in other countries with diaspora populations, is for governments to match funds raised by diaspora communities to support development projects in their communities of origin.

#### Recommendations

- 3a. Invest in public campaigns that celebrate Pasifika cultures and the contributions Pasifika people make to Australian society
- 3b. Invest in specialised social support services for Pasifika migrants to Australia
- 3c. Establish an independent mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the Pacific Engagement Visa
- 3d. Provide funding to Australian-based Pasifika community organisations to employ staff to support new arrivals, and to provide small grants to new migrants.
- 3e. Develop a scheme to support skilled Australian Pasifika peoples and their employers to work for periods of time in the Pacific Islands, and for skilled Pasifika people in the Islands to work for periods of time in Australia.
- 3f. Develop a scheme to match funds raised by Australian Pasifika communities to support development activities in the Pacific Islands

#### **4. Strengthening support for Pacific Islands Universities**

There are huge opportunities for Australian Universities to better share their skills and knowledge in administrative systems, teaching, research, and research higher degree supervision with existing and emerging tertiary institutions in the Pacific Islands. In turn, Australian Universities and their staff and students would benefit enormously from closer collaborations through improvements in knowledge of and teaching about the region, more rewarding work, and reciprocal and enduring partnerships for research.

Despite these opportunities, and mutual goodwill, there are disincentives to closer cooperation between Australian and tertiary institutions in the Pacific Islands. Financial constraints, high workloads, performance targets, visa requirements, and personal

responsibilities all mitigate against systematic cooperation. There is a need to create platforms or processes that help overcome these barriers. This could be done by a scheme that supports joint appointments and the secondment of staff between Australian and Pacific Island universities. This might involve travel grants that support staff and their dependents; a visa classification that expedites approval travel; measures and incentives for Australian Universities (and staff) who demonstrate collaboration (from the Department of Education and TESQA), and financial support from the Australian Government for Pacific Island Universities who participate in such exchanges.

One significant, long-standing obstacle to closer collaborations between Pacific Island and Australian universities is Australia's visa system. The current system makes it unnecessarily difficult for Australian institutions to bring Pacific academics, artists and development practitioners to spend time in Australia as visitors, and to speak at or attend conferences, exhibitions, workshops and the like. This is particularly the case for visitors from Melanesian countries. The costs, medical processes and sometimes the need to travel to national capitals or even other countries for interviews for visas are onerous. When Pacific people with close professional or personal connections to Australia have their visas rejected, are issued too late, or are issued only after great expense and inconvenience, Australia's reputation within the region is damaged and our capacity to develop strong people-to-people links is undermined. Australia's universities also lose the benefit of learning from and sharing with Pacific thinkers and doers.

Recommendations:

- 4a. Establish a scheme that incentivises joint appointments and the secondment of staff between Australian and Pacific Island universities
- 4b. Review the processes for issuing visitor visas and the financial and other requirements for obtaining visas so that Pacific Islander applicants with support from Australian institutions can enter Australia with certainty and without excessive expense and inconvenience.

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