

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## Australians' knowledge of the region

Australians are *in* the region, but are they *of* the region? Australia's strategic role in the region is not matched by broad public awareness of the contemporary Pacific.<sup>1</sup>

8.1 The above remark captures a key contradiction in Australia's relationship with the countries of the Pacific, and one which was reiterated throughout the Committee's inquiry.

8.2 This chapter explores the extent to which the usual means of awareness raising—primarily the media and education—are failing to secure the sustained interest of most Australians in Pacific issues, or to convey an adequate account of the richness and diversity of Pacific island cultures, of their political and economic circumstances, and of their inhabitants' views of Australia as a regional power.

8.3 The Committee acknowledges that to some extent the interests of journalists and curriculum authorities will be directed by the nature of the higher order attention being paid to the region by those responsible for Australia's official engagement with it. One commentator has described that in the following terms:

I'm certainly not claiming that our politicians, diplomats and defenceniks have taken their eyes off the region; that is a rather silly claim that ignores the more serious charge about Canberra—its inability to think new thoughts, to alter failed policies. We are in a hole, and the only response has been to increase the vigour of the digging. Much of our Pacific policy has been reduced to aid policy. And because our aid is going into failing states our Pacific policy is beset by a sense of failure.<sup>2</sup>

8.4 The ignorance of otherwise globally aware Australians concerning Pacific affairs appears to stand in stark contrast to the relatively well-informed views of Australia that are encountered amongst the educated sections of the Pacific population.

Through media exposure, travel and education in Australian institutions, many elite Pacific islanders have a better knowledge of Australia than comparable Australians have of the contemporary Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

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1 *Submission 30*, p. 2 (Mr Nicholas Maclellan)

2 G Dobell, *The Reluctant Pacific Nation—Policy taboos, popular amnesia and political failure*, Quadrant, May 2003.

3 *Submission 30*, p. 4 (Mr Nicholas Maclellan)

One of the basic things is that, with this new generation of Pacific leaders coming through, Australia needs to be flirting with them a little more. There really are some very bright young people who could whip the pants off all of us in terms of understanding issues. I think Pacific Islanders are often sold short but there is a whole group of them out there that are emerging... I am really appealing to Australia to take these people a little more seriously... Most of them have been educated in Australia, New Zealand and the States—you name it. Some of them speak three or four languages.<sup>4</sup>

8.5 The Committee consistently experienced direct evidence of this situation as its members travelled to several Pacific nations gathering at first hand the views and insights of Pacific islanders concerning Australia, its role in the region, and how the region might position itself in relation to broader international developments and issues.

8.6 That Pacific leaders pay considerable attention to how Australia views the Pacific was evident in their strong reaction, conveyed to the Committee, to a report by the Sydney-based Centre for Independent Studies *Papua New Guinea on the Brink* published in March 2003. This report, in the Issues Analysis series published by the CIS, elaborated an account of PNG as being 'on the path to economic paralysis, government collapse and social despair.'<sup>5</sup>

8.7 Without debating here the relative merits of the report in question, it was clear to the Committee that several Pacific leaders resented what they believed to be generalizations in it which they felt misrepresented, or indeed condemned, the region as a whole. Their anger was invariably couched in terms of their frustration with the levels of ignorance in Australia about Pacific affairs which led, in their view, to a failure to reflect fairly and accurately the distinctiveness and diversity of the Pacific countries, and to account properly for the particular situation of each.

8.8 While acknowledging the criticism and frustration voiced on these occasions, the Committee also experienced at first hand the true warmth and generosity of many Pacific islanders in their disposition towards Australia. This quality is often commented upon by those who know the region well.

[W]e are lucky in how well the region knows us (Australia). To make the broadest of unprovable assertions, many in the Pacific quite like Australians. We get a welcome there that is more relaxed and natural than any reception we get in Asia. the Pacific finds us arrogant and ignorant sometimes; but they make some allowances for the biggest kid on the block, and often they know us well enough to forgive us.<sup>6</sup>

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4 *Committee Hansard*, 18 October 2002, pp. 72–73 (Wendt)

5 Windybank S and Manning M, *Papua New Guinea on the Brink*, Issue Analysis, No.30 March 2003 (Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, Australia)

6 G Dobell, "The Reluctant Pacific Nation", *Quadrant*, May 2003.

## Direct contacts with Pacific countries

8.9 The participation of Australians on the ground in various Pacific countries has its roots in Australia's early engagement with the region as a colonial power. Australians were present primarily as administrators, police, teachers and medical workers. There was also a relatively strong missionary presence.

8.10 World War II military service also brought many Australians into direct contact with Pacific islanders. The close relationships established during those early periods and events have waned considerably, to the extent that today there is relatively little intimate engagement of many Australians with the daily lives of our Pacific neighbours.

My parents' and grandparents' generation had a lot more organic links with the Pacific islands. Australia, as a colonial administrator, had many people operating in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere. The churches had a lot more links in the forties, fifties and sixties, through the missions that operated in the Pacific islands, than they do today. There was a generation of people from World War II who had emotional ties to Papua New Guinea, East Timor and so on, and those sorts of links are not there to the same extent.<sup>7</sup>

8.11 Apart from tourism, contemporary involvement of Australians in the Pacific operates largely at government level through diplomatic relationships and aid programs, complemented by a core of NGO workers and volunteers. There are also some notable commercial ventures, and a variety of smaller scale business links which sustain a valuable network of in-country, personal associations. There is a complete absence of any pervasive, coherent practice of engagement which brings Australia and the Pacific countries together in a way that might enable each country and its citizens to fully represent themselves to each other.

With the exception of people like the Australian Volunteers Abroad program, which has people living and working at the community level in the Pacific, the contacts with the Pacific are not deep. They are not that sort of organic link of people living and working alongside people. Volunteers live and work on the same salary as their Pacific island counterparts. There is a tendency for business and commercial people to come in and out, on vastly different salary conditions, and to live a separate life.<sup>8</sup>

8.12 It is clear to the Committee that one of the most sustained and direct forms of engagement between Australians and islanders arises from the programs of volunteers working with indigenous communities. From its own discussions with Pacific communities and leaders, the Committee can confirm the fundamental importance of person-to-person connection as the basis for more elaborate relationships—political, commercial, institutional, cultural.

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7 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, pp. 135–136 (Maclellan)

8 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, pp. 135–136 (Maclellan)

The strength of the volunteer program is the ability to place people in neighbouring countries who are equipped to both provide high level technical assistance and to live and work harmoniously within the community for extended periods. Australian Volunteers have the opportunity to develop and maintain a practical working knowledge of Pacific Island states and to rejuvenate contact at a personal level. Programs, which integrate opportunities for people to people links, have the potential to continue to build lasting social, cultural, economic and political relationships.<sup>9</sup>

8.13 In the Committee's view, based on extensive discussions with Pacific leaders as well as on the evidence of numerous witnesses, the Australian government must heed the message of the importance of direct personal links if it is to secure an influential seat at the table of Pacific nations. The following observation reflects a widely held belief among Pacific watchers:

It would help if the Prime Minister went to the Pacific forum countries. They have noticed his absence; they take it as: 'We're not important enough for him to come.' I know that the [Australian] high commissioner in Honiara... seemed a bit upset when I indicated that perhaps our reputation was not as good as it might be... [I]f you look at the media, in the newspapers I get from the Solomons, Taiwan and Japan feature very prominently—with photographs, comments and so on. Australia is there a little bit. I think maybe Australia needs to use the local media better—our PR needs to be improved.<sup>10</sup>

8.14 The significance to enduring Pacific relationships of a committed presence of Australians 'on the ground' becomes particularly acute at times of crisis. Evidence to the Committee suggests that Australia has sometimes been perceived as a fair weather friend.

At the time of the crisis in the Solomon Islands and the Fiji coup, Australia advised Australian nationals to leave the country. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and AusAID ordered out consultants and contractors who were working on non-humanitarian projects in Fiji, for example. It was a political decision taken because of concern over the coup d'état that had occurred. Living in Fiji at the time, I was struck that, right across the political spectrum, people were feeling that Australia was deserting them at a difficult time. I lived there and stayed until the end of the year through a period of curfew, power cuts and so on. When my contract finished and I left the country, people did not congratulate me on the work that I had been doing, which I had hoped would contribute to the development of the country; they congratulated me on staying, on sticking with them. The perception was that Australia had pulled out its people from the Solomons and Fiji at a time when there needed to be links.

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9 *Submission 28*, p. 4 (Ian Kennedy and Associates)

10 *Committee Hansard*, 19 February 2003, p. 212 (Kinne)

I understand why the government made the decision it did—there were obvious security and political implications. At the same time, many people at the grassroots felt that they were being deserted at a time when Australia, as a key part of the Pacific, should have been there helping. It was a perception that went across the political spectrum, both from people who supported and people who opposed the coup.<sup>11</sup>

8.15 The social and cultural imperatives of face-to-face communication are deeply embedded in the Pacific way of doing business. The Committee developed a rapid appreciation of this factor during its visit to the region. If Australia is to enjoy the quality of relationship and degree of influence to which it aspires in the Pacific, these imperatives must be responded to faithfully and consistently.

It is evident that interpersonal contact at all levels of government and community interaction is an important facet of working in the Pacific region, yet Australian knowledge of Pacific cultures and the social, economic and political issues faced by our closest neighbours is limited... This deficit in knowledge and understanding of other countries and cultures within the region has impacts at all levels in Australia's relations with Pacific Island states.

In recent years one of the manifestations of this has been the apparent reluctance of Australia to involve the highest levels of political leadership in regional government forums. This lessens the opportunity to build effective cultural understanding at a government to government level. Indeed, it appears to reinforce the perception that, apart from its interest in maintaining trade relations, Australia is distancing itself from the region rather than identifying as an integral part of the region.<sup>12</sup>

The point has been made about people living behind barbed wire in Papua New Guinea. That is because there are not those organic links with the community—the people-to-people links—that have sustained many Australians in the past. I think that is a problem in terms of our ongoing relationship. The sense that Australians will be there when times are good but when times are tough Australians will not be there is a problem.<sup>13</sup>

8.16 The Committee believes that the importance of the cultural and social dimensions to Australia's engagement with the Pacific cannot be overstated. Whether the matter is one of development, trade, governance, security, health or global affairs, Australia will fall well short of its negotiating goals if it neglects the personal communication basics.

The cultural and social aspect of development is often minimised or neglected in the design and delivery of aid projects and programs. The Australian Volunteer program forms a solid basis on which to build future

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11 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, pp. 135–136 (Maclellan)

12 *Submission 28*, p. 3 (Australian Volunteers International (AVI))

13 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, pp. 135–136 (Maclellan)

cooperation through human development. Volunteers can facilitate institutional, organisational and personal links in areas such as education, health, agriculture and community development. This broad base of personal contact and technical exchange is imperative in securing improved social connections, trade and business development.<sup>14</sup>

8.17 Of obvious assistance in building good personal relationships, and in conveying a genuine sense of commitment to and interest in a nation or community, is the capacity to speak the language of those whom one is seeking to engage. The Committee is not persuaded that sufficient attention is being given to this requirement.

One of the big problems is that many staff from both government and non-government organisations who work in the Pacific do not have vernacular language skills. So if you are talking to people who speak English or French, their views do not often represent the views of people from the rural areas. Unless you learn pidgin you are not getting much of a sense of what grassroots people are saying and feeling. And if you are in a posting for only two or three years before being moved to a different desk within AusAID or DFAT, the government tends to be reluctant to put the resources into the language training and the skills training that you need to operate beyond a very comfortable circle in town.<sup>15</sup>

8.18 The Committee has witnessed at first hand the dramatic effect of an islander being able to converse in a familiar language with aid workers and officials. To know the language is also to come to understand the nuances and cultural sensitivities that can be crucial to resolving a misunderstanding or to reaching a mutually satisfying agreement.

8.19 Issues of language come strongly to the fore in the context of media reporting, broadcasting and programming by Australian media outlets. Media issues are discussed in more detail below. Suffice to note here, the enormous value to dispersed communities, and to relationship building, of local language broadcasting by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Any reductions in such services have a considerable impact.

The 1997 closure of Radio Australia's French language service (at a time when New Caledonia was moving towards a negotiated solution after the conflict of the 1980s) was a significant blow to growing links between Australia and one of its nearest neighbours. The government should increase funding to resume this important service.<sup>16</sup>

Radio Australia, the international service of the ABC, broadcasts daily in English and Pidgin to the Pacific. For many Pacific islanders, Radio Australia is their main window on Australia and Australian attitudes and a

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14 *Submission 28*, p. 3 (AVI)

15 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, p. 133 (MacLellan)

16 *Submission 30*, p. 6 (Mr Nicholas MacLellan)

major source of information on political and economic developments in the Pacific. Increasingly, Radio Australia is also becoming a trusted source of educational programming on key issues such as health, governance, the environment, development and social issues.<sup>17</sup>

8.20 The Committee commends the ABC for its efforts to maintain programs in Pidgin, broadcast via satellite and short wave, thereby making information and comment about Australian and regional affairs readily accessible to the vast majority of Pacific islanders. In its submission to the Committee, the ABC outlined its Pidgin language programs as follows:

Radio Australia broadcasts for 3 hours a day to the Pacific in PNG Tok Pisin. These broadcasts also have a strong following in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. RA provides news and current affairs as well as programs on the environment, agriculture, health and social issues.

In recent years, Pidgin broadcasts have focussed more strongly on health, governance and sustainable development as well as political and economic issues. Radio Australia weekly Tok Pisin features are relayed by 13 provincial radio stations in PNG as well as SIBC Solomons and Radio Vanuatu.

The daily Pidgin broadcast is from 6am–7am and 7pm–9pm (PNG time). Tok Pisin broadcasters Pearson Vetuna, Paulus Kombo, Warium Benson and Kenya Kala are household names in many provinces of PNG and Solomon Islands.

In recent developments, Radio Australia has started broadcasting and distributing an educational series on governance issues in the Pacific, *Time to Talk*. The series has been produced in both English and Pidgin with an accompanying website in both languages. These radio programs and website have been distributed via CD and CD ROM technology to a network of educational institutions and Pacific radio rebroadcast partners.<sup>18</sup>

8.21 The Committee is persuaded that, in formulating policy and developing programs that addresses Australia's relations with Pacific island countries, the highest priority must be placed on ensuring that those policies and programs maximize the opportunities for Australians' direct engagement, communication and on-the-ground interaction with islander peoples. Failure to ensure that this fundamental requirement is met will lead inexorably to the weakening of Australia's influence and effectiveness, and is likely to foment active resentment of Australia's presence in the region. This is very much against Australia's interests not just regionally, but globally.

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17 *Submission 27*, pp. 4–5 (Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC))

18 *Submission 27*, pp. 5–6 (ABC)

## The role of the media

There is a small cadre of Australian journalists (about five in number) who have a sound knowledge of the Pacific islands region. Beyond these, the reporting in Australia of issues in the region tends to be of a sensationalist nature and largely uninformed... There may be a role for government in this through selected targeted briefings of senior journalists, editors and publishers to try to engender a recognition that the Pacific Island countries do represent a significant Australian economic relationship for Australia, and reporting needs to be better balanced and responsible.<sup>19</sup>

8.22 The combined Business Councils who delivered the above assessment to the Committee were supported in their view by numerous other witnesses who lamented the inadequacies of reporting on the Pacific, especially the:

continuing insistence of much of the media in portraying negative and narrow images of PNG and other countries in the Pacific without providing well founded analysis of the global and regional issues which impact on the development of the region. This limits understanding of the region and Australia's role and responsibilities within it.<sup>20</sup>

8.23 The narrowness of most of the portrayal of the Pacific islands is exemplified by the simplistic duality of the depiction of the region as either 'paradise' or 'paradise lost'. Such clichés inform the views of most Australians.

[T]ourist brochures provide the image of sunlit beaches and smiling faces, while the media focuses on crises like the coups in Fiji, human rights violations in West Papua or environmental disasters like the Rabaul volcano or Aitape tidal wave. Rarely do people from outside the region get a good sense of the daily life of islanders, as they live, work and enjoy life with friends and family. Media commentary persists in referring to the region as Australia's "backyard" or "doorstep"—an unfortunate image that ignores the need for good neighbourly relations.<sup>21</sup>

At the moment from the press you get either the conflict or the paradise type of approach. The public has very little understanding of what it means to live in a Pacific island country and what Pacific Islanders are on about. It is not surprising that the people coming through who eventually go out and do some of the aid work really have a very poor understanding of the Pacific.<sup>22</sup>

8.24 The Committee discerns a vicious circle in the way the media deals with the Pacific. With most journalists spectacularly ill-informed about the region, any reports

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19 *Submission 15*, pp. 15–16 (Australia Fiji Business Council, Australia Pacific Islands Business Council and Australia Papua New Guinea Business Council)

20 *Submission 28*, p. 2 (AVI)

21 *Submission 30*, p. 5 (Mr Nicholas Maclellan)

22 *Committee Hansard*, 18 October 2002, pp. 72–73 (Wendt)



that they might make on a fleeting visit—usually at a time of crisis—are bound to be superficial and reinforce the very prejudices with which they arrive.

It is scandalous that most media organisations in Australia—except the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)—do not allocate sufficient resources and staffing to report on the Pacific islands region.

With a few notable exceptions, Canberra-based reporters going to the annual Pacific Islands Forum are poorly briefed with little knowledge of the region. Apart from ABC media programs focussing on the region such as 'Asia-Pacific' or 'Pacific Beat' on Radio Australia, there is a dearth of regular reporting on island affairs. Only The Australian newspaper maintains a reporter solely dedicated to South Pacific affairs, and this journalist is a long-time resident of the country married to a Solomon Islander.

The overwhelming sense of crisis presented in much media coverage doesn't reflect either the diversity of social, political and economic circumstances across the Pacific region, the dynamism of change, nor work being done by Pacific islanders to deal with the social, environmental and political problems affecting the region. Media commentary often under-emphasises the contribution made by the policies of donor nations, including Australia, to creating and exacerbating these problems.<sup>23</sup>

8.25 The notable exception here is the ABC which has, largely through its reporting and training activities:

... a history of involvement with aid in the Asia-Pacific region, dating from the Colombo Plan in the 1950's. The reasons for engagement in training activities relate to the ABC's Charter responsibilities, and also the benefits to be gained by the ABC and by its staff.

ABC staff who train in other countries have a unique opportunity to engage with the people and culture of those countries, and to learn firsthand about their mores and attitudes in relation to western preoccupations and concerns. Journalists and broadcasters are usually much more sensitive to the nuances of events in the countries where they have worked and are less prone to the 'parachute journalism' of which Australian reporters are frequently accused, particularly in the Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

8.26 The Committee received a very detailed submission and oral evidence from the ABC on the extent of its activities in the region. There is certainly no other Australian media organisation that comes close to the ABC's level of engagement.

8.27 Radio Australia, the international service of the ABC, broadcasts 24 hours a day in the Pacific via satellite and short wave. It delivers programs in both English and

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23 *Submission 30*, p. 6 (Mr Nicholas Maclellan)

24 *Submission 27*, p. 13 (ABC)

Pidgin, and is now relayed by 35 local and national stations in fifteen Pacific countries. Similarly, Radio Australia's online education material is becoming, either on the internet or via CD ROM, available to an expanding network of Pacific Island libraries and educational institutions.

8.28 Radio Australia broadcasts for three hours a day to the Pacific in PNG Tok Pisin. In recent years, Pidgin broadcasts have focussed more strongly on health, governance and sustainable development as well as political and economic issues. Radio Australia weekly Tok Pisin features are relayed by 13 provincial radio stations in PNG as well as SIBC Solomons and Radio Vanuatu. Tok Pisin broadcasters Pearson Vetuna, Paulus Kombo, Warium Benson and Kenya Kala are household names in many provinces of PNG and Solomon Islands.

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8.30 RA's daily Pacific current affairs program, *Pacific Beat*, has become the region's premier current affairs program, delivering the only credible independent current affairs of its kind to the Pacific via an increasing number of rebroadcast partners and complementing RA's news service. RA reporters and on air personalities such as Sean Dorney, Brendon Telfer, Caroline Tiriman, Bruce Hill and Jemima Garrett have a high degree of recognition throughout the region.<sup>26</sup>

8.31 *Pacific Focus* magazine programs on health, business and trade, the environment, regional sport, culture and social issues address some of the key issues facing Pacific island communities from PNG to Samoa and the Cook Islands.<sup>27</sup>

8.32 While PNG and Pacific audiences can keep abreast of local developments through their own media, their access to international and regional information is limited. Radio Australia is often their main source of reliable and independent information on international and regional issues. For example, RA's coverage of events and issues in Fiji, Bougainville, PNG and Solomon Islands provided many Pacific listeners with a useful link with the rest of the region and an insight into how conflicts or issues similar to theirs are tackled in neighbouring countries.<sup>28</sup>

8.33 In early 2002, a rebroadcast agreement was settled with Papua New Guinea's national broadcaster, the NBC, under which selected RA programs in English and

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25 *Submission 27*, pp. 5–6 (ABC)

26 *Submission 27*, p. 6 (ABC)

27 *Submission 27*, p. 6 (ABC)

28 *Submission 27*, pp. 6–7 (ABC)

Pidgin are now heard on NBC airwaves across PNG. This was followed by the signing of another agreement with the Kalang Network, another major broadcaster in PNG.

8.34 Relations with Radio Fiji were also formalised for the 24-hour rebroadcast of Radio Australia programs in Suva, and selected RA programs across Fiji. Radio Australia and Radio Fiji are also cooperating for the recruitment of an RA Suva-based reporter. These agreements indicate the high level of respect for Radio Australia's trusted and relevant programming in Papua New Guinea and Fiji, two key South Pacific countries. Similar arrangements exist in another 13 Pacific countries.<sup>29</sup>

## The role of education

Australia has had a very rich history in the Pacific but, if you went to school these days, you would never learn about it... [I]t is as though Australia is anchored somewhere up in the North Atlantic between Ireland and the United States. There has been a sort of belief that we are a Northern Hemisphere country and our interests are in the Northern Hemisphere rather than in the region. Our educational authorities should see that as a problem.<sup>30</sup>

8.35 In these days of the so-called 'crowded curriculum', educational authorities have considerable difficulty responding to demands that they introduce extra courses of study to remedy an identified shortfall in the knowledge of young Australians about a particular matter. However, the Committee believes that a strong case can, and should, be made for a greater use of the Pacific region as the *context* within which the study of economics, the environment, geography, history, art, languages, civics or sociology might take place.

8.36 This would not necessarily add to the amount of content to be covered by any given course of study, but would help orient students towards the Pacific region. This might go some way to mitigating the widespread ignorance of the Pacific so loudly lamented by many witnesses appearing before the Committee. It might also help break the vicious cycle of poor media reporting of the region.

Sometimes journalists say they cannot get coverage and they cannot get column space. Their editors blame the public and say it is not interested. We say the public needs to be interested... The problem you have identified is a real one. I am not sure that we can fix it easily.... But the Pacific is there, it will continue to impinge on us and it is certainly an issue that we wish to try to address.<sup>31</sup>

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29 *Submission 27*, pp. 7–8 (ABC)

30 *Committee Hansard*, 18 February 2003, p. 163 (Dorney)

31 *Committee Hansard*, 25 October 2002, pp. 98–99 (DFAT)

### ***The role of Australian academic institutions***

8.37 Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of the vigour and effectiveness of Pacific research, scholarship and teaching in Australian institutes and universities, it is worth taking a snapshot of the current array of institutions engaged in such pursuits.

8.38 The Australian National University (ANU) has a number of schools involved in the study of countries in the South Pacific region. The Asia Pacific School of Economics and Government, for example, runs graduate and executive training programs. It lists on its website (<http://apsem.anu.edu.au>) a number of publications available, some free on-line, dealing with the Pacific region. These include:

- Labour and Management in Development;
- Pacific Resources Online;
- Pacific Economic Outlook; and
- APSEG Working papers and Research Program papers.

8.39 This web site also provides links to other relevant sites dealing with the Pacific region such as:

- South Pacific Information Network (SPIN) (<http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/spin/>) and
- the Pacific Studies WWW Virtual Library (<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVL-PacificStudies.html>). The Virtual Library provides access to a number of other significant sites including Pacific Mailing Lists and Discussion Group, online maps and atlases of the region and the Asian Studies world wide web monitor site.

8.40 The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, also at ANU, (<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/>) carries out research and publishes material related to South Pacific countries. Within that School, the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific (<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ccp/>) declares its objectives to be:

- developing and promoting Pacific studies within the Australian National University;
- developing links with government agencies, institutions and universities within Australia and the Pacific region and acting as a focal point for their access to Pacific studies at ANU;
- facilitating contact and communication between Pacific scholars in Australia and the outside world through active cooperation with other centres and institutes for Pacific studies; and
- undertaking an outreach role in the Pacific region on behalf of the ANU and more generally for Pacific studies within Australia.<sup>32</sup>

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32 From the Centre for South Pacific Studies at the University of New South Wales website.

8.41 The *Coombsweb*—named in honour of Dr HC “Nugget” Coombs—is the world’s oldest Asian Studies online research facility having been established on 25 January 1994 (<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/>). The site is operated by the National Institute for Asia and the Pacific within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. It provides extensive online access to newsletters and journals and thousands of web pages dealing with research on Asia and the Pacific.

8.42 The University of New South Wales’ Centre for Pacific Studies (<http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/southpacific/homepage.html#Contents>) was established in 1987 to:

... collect, collate and distribute information from a diversity of disciplines, in printed and electronic form, about the peoples and places of the Pacific islands.<sup>33</sup>

8.43 According to the website of the Education Network Australia (EdNA), the following academic institutions conduct courses related to the study of the Pacific region:

- APEC Study Centre at Monash University (<http://www.apec.org.au/>);
- Australian Defence Studies Centre, Canberra (<http://idun.itsc.adfa.edu.au/ADSC/>);
- Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University (<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/sdsc/>);
- Australia Asia Pacific Institute at the Victorian University, Melbourne (<http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/aapi/>);
- Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific at Sydney University (<http://www.riap.usyd.edu.au/index2.html>);
- Asia Pacific Higher Education Network (<http://www.mq.edu.au/Aphen/>); and
- Asia Pacific Research Institute at Macquarie University (<http://www.aprim.net/profile.htm>).

8.44 The Griffith Asia Pacific Council at Griffith University in Brisbane/Gold Coast describes its role in the following terms:

Griffith University has long been renowned for its strong commitment to enhancing knowledge about the Asia Pacific region. Through its School of Modern Asian Studies, and later its School of International Business and Asian Studies, it developed strong undergraduate programs which integrated knowledge of Asia’s societies, cultures, and languages with applied and disciplinary knowledge. For twenty–five years it has produced graduates who combine knowledge of an Asian language with cultural fluency and relevant applied knowledge of Asia.

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33 From the Centre for South Pacific Studies at the University of New South Wales website.

In 1997, in recognition of the fact that its Asia Pacific work has for some time extended beyond the boundaries of any single School or Faculty, the University moved to enhance further its commitment to the study of the Asia Pacific region by establishing the Griffith Asia Pacific Council. This Council, which has University wide responsibilities, is intended as a point of policy reference to advise the Vice-Chancellor about the most effective facilitation and coordination of the University's work related to the Asia Pacific region.<sup>34</sup>

8.45 The Australian University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) Program is administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (<http://www.dest.gov.au/international/awards/umap.htm>). The UMAP, which was founded in 1993, is a voluntary association of government and non-government representatives of the higher education sector in the Asian Pacific region. It provides funding to Australian higher education institutions to subsidise the cost of their establishing and monitoring Australian students' participation in the UMAP student exchange programmes with their counterpart higher education institutions in countries in the Asia Pacific Region.<sup>35</sup>

8.46 The Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS, <http://www.capstrans.edu.au/>) is:

... an Australian Research Council Key Centre of Teaching and Research and a joint venture of the University of Wollongong and the University of Newcastle which carries out research, teaching and provides policy advice. CAPSTRANS aims to provide global, regional and transnational understandings of the transformations of state and society in the Asia-Pacific. CAPSTRANS is producing innovative theoretical and empirical insights by combining understandings from political economy with research into cultural issues.<sup>36</sup>

8.47 Apart from the Pacific-oriented institutions and programs in Australia's universities, there a number of other important agencies that make a significant contribution to research, scholarship and the dissemination of information about the Pacific region.

8.48 For example, the National Library of Australia has a long-standing interest in Pacific affairs and history. Its website (<http://www.nla.gov.au/gov/pacific.html>) provides access to the Library's extensive Pacific collection of library materials:

... on the Pacific region, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. Within the Pacific, the Library gives priority and emphasis to collecting from the countries and territories of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. The strength of the Library's holdings, which are at a level capable of sustaining

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34 From Griffith Asia Pacific Council website.

35 From the UMAP website.

36 From the Centre for Asia Pacific Social Transformation Studies website.

research study, reflects Australia's strong historic and continuing connections with the region.<sup>37</sup>

8.49 The Library also provides on its website a useful list of Pacific countries along with their relevant internet URLs. These countries include the Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, Guam, Kiribati Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Island, American Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

8.50 In some instances, the internet sites offer links to other publications providing additional sources of information, such as *World Factbook* produced by the CIA and the *Political Reference Almanac*.

8.51 The Centre for South Pacific Studies at the University of New South Wales provides links to a number of non-academic internet sites:

- the Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Commission (<http://www.sptc.gov.au/>) PITIC;
- Pacific Islands Internet Resources (<http://www2.hawaii.edu/%7Eogden/piir/index.html>); and
- International Centre for Island Studies (<http://www.islandstudies.org/>)

8.52 The ANZ Bank produces a publication titled *ANZ Country Briefs* which assesses economic conditions and prospects in countries of importance to the ANZ Bank and Australia. These briefs are produced on an ad hoc basis. The Economics Research Centre of the Bank of Hawaii produces a publication titled *Pacific Islands Report*. These reports provide economic profiles from time to time of various countries in the region.

8.53 The Asian Development Bank produces two publications: *Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries* and *Pacific Studies* which deal primarily with economic issues related to the region. The International Monetary Fund (<http://www.imf.org/external/country/index.htm>) has a section on its internet site titled *Country Information* which provides access to a wide variety of official statements related to economic issues affecting virtually every country in the world including those in the South Pacific region.

8.54 The Asia-Pacific Educational Research Association (APERA) ([www.apera.org/activit.html](http://www.apera.org/activit.html)) is a not-for-profit organization supported by UNESCO, with a secretariat provided by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in Melbourne. It sets out the objectives and mission of APERA as being:

- to support and encourage educational research in the Asia-Pacific region, and;
- to build stronger links between research, policy and practice in education;

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37 From National Library of Australia website.

- to support educational research and researchers in the Asia–Pacific region;
- promote greater communication between researchers and policy makers; administrators and educational practitioners;
- disseminate educational research findings; and
- support the development of educational research skills in the Asia–Pacific region.<sup>38</sup>

8.55 The Committee acknowledges the valuable contribution that all the above services and institutions make to the collection, analysis, assessment and distribution of information about the Pacific region, and to promoting its availability to any and all who are interested. However, evidence to the Committee suggests both that the level of teaching and research endeavour may be dwindling. Moreover, the scholarly product and expert advice that emerges from these diminishing sources seems to fall on unreceptive ears.

8.56 Dr Max Quanchi from the Queensland University of Technology painted a rather bleak picture of Australia's status in the realm of Pacific studies.

From a position of leadership by Australian scholars and universities in the field of academic research and teaching about Oceania... the epicentre of research, teaching and publishing had shifted outside of Australia... Australia is no longer home to the cutting edge of scholarship. There is no longer a critical mass of scholars working on Australia–PNG or Australia–Oceania relationships and Oceania generally. From a position in which units were offered by most universities, there is now only one university with a committed ‘package’ of Pacific units and only one university that offers a unit specifically on Australia–Oceania relations.... QUT has offered a package of Pacific open to all degrees... since 1988 and has recently expanded its offerings.... In Australia, the other notable offerings are a Masters degree program on International Relations offered by ANU, but not exclusively devoted to Australia–Oceania relations, and a proposal for a unit on Australia–PNG relations at the University of Queensland.<sup>39</sup>

The number of research centres in Australia focussing on research and teaching about Oceania has declined dramatically. There is no centre focussing on contemporary Australia–Oceania relationships. The recent funding of the *Centre for the Contemporary Pacific* at ANU has had little impact as it serves primarily to promote the work of ANU. As a funding initiative to promote Australia–Oceania relations in the contemporary era, this has been an opportunity lost. Research Concentrations and Centres of Excellence on Marine Environment, Tropical Medicine, Development Studies and Literature and other fields do have Pacific programs but they are not a primary focus.<sup>40</sup>

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38 From the Asia Pacific Educational Research Association website.

39 *Submission 12*, p. 3 (Dr M Quanchi)

40 *Submission 12*, p. 5 (Dr M Quanchi)



8.57 If tertiary teaching and research about the Pacific have contracted to the extent suggested by Dr Quanchi, it does not augur well for the extent to which Pacific studies will appear on secondary school syllabuses, or will be well taught if and when it does so.

In 1996, it was noted that “although the study of history in the Pacific is represented by a complex infrastructure of research and teaching institutions and an extensive range of book and journal publication, little has been done to prepare teachers for classrooms in which students can learn about the Pacific on a regional, subregional or individual nation basis” (Quanchi, 1996, p. 73). There have been some significant but small gains in the Queensland and NSW curriculum since then, but it is a negative reflection on our schooling that our students know little about our most immediate neighbours.<sup>41</sup>

8.58 A prominent feature of Australia's earlier engagement with the Pacific was the extent to which students from Oceania undertook postgraduate work in Australian universities. This was effective in establishing ongoing linkages with countries as the returning postgraduates continued to rely on their Australian colleagues for ongoing support, advice and access to research networks. The Committee is concerned to note advice that “the recent decades have seen Australia's significance as a provider of postgraduate study decline as indigenous student preference and the scholarship awards priority by their governments has switched to New Zealand, Asian, European and North American institutions”.<sup>42</sup>

8.59 The Committee had drawn to its attention a range of proposals for recovering lost ground in Australia's intellectual engagement with the Pacific, and in the disciplined knowledge of the region that can only come with a soundly constituted curriculum and teaching framework at both tertiary and secondary levels. Such proposals include:

- An annual national seminar bringing together academics, teachers, curriculum experts, NGOs and educational authorities to provide impetus for and guidance in the re-establishment of Pacific studies.
- A bi-annual international seminar bringing together the hundreds of scholars working in the region as advisers, consultants, publishers, managers, researchers, fieldworkers and volunteers to facilitate exchange and cooperation between their discrete activities.
- A teacher-focussed professional development project to enhance teachers' knowledge about and enthusiasm for Australia-Pacific relations—past, present and future—preferably in a way that involves teachers from all parts of the region.

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41 *Submission 12*, p. 3 (Dr M Quanchi)

42 *Submission 12*, p. 4 (Dr M Quanchi)

- An exchange program, similar to the Fulbright arrangements, by which Australian scholars could work in Pacific universities and vice-versa.

8.60 The Committee is persuaded that a coherent, strategically-focused array of educational and promotional initiatives, resourced for the long haul and driven by a high-powered council of eminent persons from the academies, journalism, business and the professions will arrest the decline in the knowledge of and interest in Pacific affairs and in the relationship between Australia and the Pacific.

8.61 Models for such councils already exist, notably the Australia-India Council (AIC), which was established in 1992. The Council's purpose is to broaden the relationship between Australia and India by encouraging and supporting contacts and increasing levels of knowledge and understanding between the peoples and institutions of the two countries. The Council initiates or supports a range of activities designed to promote a greater awareness of Australia in India and a greater awareness of India in Australia, including visits and exchanges between the two countries, development of institutional links, and support of studies in each country of the other. The Council offers support, in the form of funding, for projects likely to contribute to the development of the relationship, within the context of the Council's objectives and guidelines.

### **Recommendation 33**

The Committee recommends that the government establish the Australia-Pacific Council<sup>43</sup> to advance the interests of Australia and the countries of the Pacific region by initiating and supporting activities designed to enhance awareness, understanding and interaction between the peoples and institutions of the region.

The functions of the Australia-Pacific Council (AustPaC) shall be:

- to make recommendations to the Australian Government, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs, for the broadening and deepening of the relationship between Australia and the Pacific;
- raising awareness of the Pacific in Australia and of Australia in the Pacific, and promoting visits and exchanges between the two countries of individuals and groups for the purpose of broadening relations in a number of areas, including the arts, commerce, education, the news media, science and technology, and sport;
- encouraging the development of Australia-Pacific institutional links between universities, museums, libraries, technical colleges, research institutes, professional bodies and appropriate non-government organisations; and
- supporting Australian studies in the Pacific, and Pacific studies in Australia.

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43 Including Papua New Guinea.

8.62 Without pre-empting the Council's determinations as to its program, the Committee suggests a range of initiatives that might be given early consideration. These would include:

- The immediate establishment of a bi-annual Australia-Pacific International Conference for scholars, journalists and others involved in communicating ideas and establishing joint research projects aimed at greater Australia-Pacific engagement and improved policy-making.
- The establishment of a special series of annual media awards to mark the achievements of journalists and broadcasters who have made significant contributions to the interpretation, analysis, promotion and dissemination of information about Pacific affairs.
- Facilitating an exchange program for staff of educational institutions, both at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary level, and also for staff of media organisations.
- Commissioning a major Pacific trade and investment expo in Australia to promote business opportunities across the region, with a particular focus on Australian entrepreneurs developing joint enterprises with Pacific communities.

8.63 In the Committee's view, the price of ongoing, seemingly increasing, ignorance of the Pacific and of Australia's role and responsibilities in the region will inevitably be a dramatic loss of Australian influence in the region, an increase in threats to Australia's interests resulting from regional instability, and probably the bemused contempt and justified criticism of our major friends and allies. We expect Australia to function in the region at a level commensurate with our status as a middle ranking power and as a stable, economically sound democracy. Australia's recent commitments in respect of the Solomon Islands should prove a welcome sign that the Pacific's biggest country is beginning to shake off its regional lethargy.

