



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Celebrating 20 years of SSGM and 70 years of Pacific studies at The Australian National University

The Pacific Research Colloquium: Strengthening Skills and Partnerships with Pacific Researchers

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In Brief 2016/26

For almost a decade the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) at the Australian National University (ANU) has had the privilege of convening the annual [Pacific Research Colloquium](#) (PRC). With funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), scholarships are awarded to early career researchers from the Pacific, including Papua and Timor-Leste, to participate in intensive training in social science research methods at the ANU. The PRC is unique because it supports emerging researchers regardless of their educational attainment, current employment, or affiliation. Participants range from high school graduates to doctoral students, who may be working with international non-government organisations or within government ministries. They have had some exposure to social science research but typically no formal training in research. Approximately 20 scholarships are awarded each year. Participants come from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Zealand, Timor-Leste, Samoa, and Tonga. For the first time, in 2015 we had participants from Papua, Indonesia. We hosted the first Kanak participant in 2016. For 2017, we are anticipating a strong showing of participants from Solomon Islands. The PRC also incorporates a few Pacific students already studying at ANU as well as Australian and international postgraduate researchers wishing to work in the Pacific.

The origins of the PRC go back to 2003. The then ANU Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies established an annual Asia-Pacific Week that aimed to encourage emerging scholars from both Asia and the Pacific to come to the ANU to undertake postgraduate study. SSGM welcomed the concept and developed its own approach aimed at supporting early career Pacific scholars' interest in research and their knowledge about Pacific research and resources at the ANU. In addition, SSGM always aimed to contribute to developing links and networks among early career Pacific scholars, and between them and other researchers in the Pacific.

In 2007, SSGM received financial support from AusAID (and since 2014 from DFAT) to develop a specialised program for participants from the Pacific region. The PRC has evolved greatly since then as staff have learned from each year's cohort and aspired to an interactive hands-on program that engages participants in practical exercises while also developing a grounded knowledge of historical and political aspects of research.

Training and Mentorship

During the first week, a small group of facilitators who are primarily SSGM staff members run interactive sessions designed to help participants gain an understanding of the most important features of social science research. We begin with asking what is research and why do it, and discuss histories of research in the Pacific. We lead participants from the beginning of a research agenda through to analysis and dissemination, acknowledging that this is not usually a linear or simple process. We work through defining research problems, choosing research methodology, quantitative and qualitative approaches, and particular data collection techniques. We develop interview guides, practise interviewing, and use a number of participatory methods for gathering and analysing data. Towards the end of the week, the sessions move to analysis, planning and budgeting, writing skills, and disseminating research.

Participants also apply what they learn by working in small groups on case studies. With the assistance of the facilitators, they develop a realistic research project based on information from a real life scenario. On the last day, the groups present their research project proposals, discuss differences, and receive feedback.

In addition to research skills development, participants are tasked with developing a 6000-word paper on their research. At least two SSGM academics or other researchers provide detailed advice and extensive mentorship. Each applicant

is required to revise their paper, taking account of mentors' comments, in advance of their arrival in Canberra for the 10-day program. They also meet with their mentors during the first week of the PRC with the goal of further improving their paper.

Week two is led by participants as they present their papers and act as discussants for other participants' papers. In this way, participants are asked to think deeply and critically about both their own work and that of their peers. They take the mentoring process very seriously, and the improvement in the quality of their material by the time they make their presentations is dramatic. Several SSGM researchers have remarked that the papers were of such high calibre that they could have been presented at any academic conference.

Impact

The PRC continues to strive to best meet the needs of early career researchers from the Pacific region. Participants have described it as 'practical and relevant', 'easy and very applicable', and 'designed in a manner that participants can learn quickly about research'. Recent participant evaluations indicate that they increased their skills in research design, methods, and presenting their research.

The PRC facilitates valuable opportunities for networking, cooperation, and mutual learning among Pacific scholars and with ANU researchers. SSGM researchers develop and extend local collaborations and synchronise current research activities with additional opportunities for research and policy partners in the region. One important way this has happened in Papua New Guinea is through research training that SSGM facilitated in Port Moresby in 2015 for the Papua New Guinea Constitutional and Law Reform Commission (CLRC). Part of this effort included consulting with researchers at the University of Papua New Guinea and the National Research Institute on curriculum development, and advancing a network of individuals and agencies interested in research skills for evidence-based policy. Similar training was undertaken with the Vanuatu Law Commission.

The networks that develop among the PRC participants are significant and enduring. Alumni actively share information, opportunities, and ideas both over social media and in person. Some participants, especially those from Papua and Timor-Leste, have not had much contact with researchers from the Pacific island countries. One participant described the significance of such a forum as follows: 'The PRC is a bridge to uniting future Melanesian leaders'. PRC alumni come to be at the centre of research networks that link Pacific institutions and agencies with researchers at the ANU.

The PRC also complements and extends other SSGM activities such as the annual State of the Pacific Conference, the Pacific Visitor Program, and capacity building at regional universities. The PRC Visiting Fellowship, awarded to the participant who submits the best research paper, funds a return four-week visit to SSGM and participation in the State of the Pacific Conference.

Looking Forward

Since 2016, the colloquium is part of an accredited ANU course, PASI9001 Introduction to Research in the Pacific: Methods and Research Design, for incoming PhD students. There is no better introduction to doing research in the Pacific than participating in research skills training and networking with Pacific researchers.

PRC facilitators plan to advance the curriculum on Pacific methods and indigenous methodologies as we have received strong feedback that participants want more in-depth coverage of Pacific approaches to research that incorporate Pacific world views, knowledge systems, values, principles, and conceptual frameworks (Smith 2012). One way we plan to do this is by including PRC alumni as facilitators in the training. We are also incorporating more on electronic research methods and social media as sources of data.

We are excited by the prospect of further research training in the region, working closely with local institutions and networks. We are collaborating with the CLRC on further training proposed for law and justice sector agencies in 2017 and are working with non-government organisations funded through DFAT's Pacific Women program to enhance research skills for program monitoring and evaluation in Papua New Guinea.

Author Notes

Susan Dixon and Jenny Munro are research fellows, and Anthony Regan is a fellow, at SSGM.

Reference

Smith, L.T. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd Edition. London: Zed Books.

