

Australia and education in the Pacific: What is relevant and who decides?

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Education plays an essential role in defining national culture. Therefore, aid donors' involvement in recipients' national education systems is always likely to be controversial. In the case of the Pacific Island Countries, this sensitivity is increased by the fact that there are significant divisions of opinion within the countries, notably between those who emphasise the role of education in preparation for participation in the global economy and those who are fighting to preserve their local cultures from extinction. Whilst optimists argue that it is possible to do both by creating global citizens who are deeply grounded in their own cultures, realists suggest that with very small groups this is simply not possible. Both sides accept the statistical evidence that the small group cultures of Melanesia have failed in delivering even basic literacy to all as compared with the nationwide cultures of Polynesia. Meanwhile, Australia pursues an explicit neo-liberal agenda of providing education to the islanders to make them employable across the globe. This paper explores some of the issues in this debate, including differences of approach between AusAID and NZAID.

Vanuatu's Official Statement of the Aims of Education -

the empowerment of children and young people so that they can become self-reliant in mastering their own life and career as individuals and as members of their community and society. (Ministry of Education Corporate Plan 2004 to 2006)

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Introduction

Australian aid to education in developing countries began with the Colombo Plan Scholarships in 1951. Whilst the Australian aid program has pursued various themes in education, limited attention has been devoted to developing a coherent education policy. The AusAID document, *Better Education: A Policy for Australian Development Assistance in Education*, released in May 2007, is a populist brochure with a strong emphasis on educational governance. Scholarships continue to play a major role in Australian development assistance. The 2005 White Paper has

announced the doubling of the number of scholarships over the next five years to a total of over 19,000. Unlike some other donors such as the United States and Japan, Australia used not to try to use scholarships to ensure future connexions with potential national leaders. But that is now changing with the creation of a new category of Australian Leadership Awards focused on developing future leaders.

Australia has also been at best a lukewarm supporter of the Millennium Development Goals (partly because several of the numerical goals have limited relevance to the relatively well off countries of the Pacific). Samoa actually ranks 29th in the world, well above Israel and Chile, on the Educational Development Index which monitors the education goals whilst Fiji ranks 47th with Papua New Guinea ranked 107th out of the 121 countries with data (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database for 2002). Whilst Australian NGOs have campaigned for every child's right to attend school and the eradication of illiteracy, government agencies have been more inclined to stress recipient governments' rights to set their own agendas. However, major civil unrest in Timor Leste, the Solomon Islands and parts of Papua New Guinea has again highlighted the question of whether a democracy which does not provide education and the context for gainful employment for all of its citizens, can in the long term avoid civil conflict (Ware 2005).

Current Developments

The aid budget is to be doubled by 2010. The Australian White Paper on Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability (2005, Ch 5: 1) says that the aid program will focus on four interlinked themes:

1. accelerating economic growth
2. fostering functioning and effective states
3. investing in people and
4. promoting regional stability and cooperation.

Health and education are both covered under "investing in people". "Education", the paper states "has a central function in reducing poverty. As well as providing the foundations for economic growth, education also provides important benefits in health, in population, in stability and security, and in fostering effective states" (ibid 5:14). There is no mention of any right to education. Nor is any evidence offered for the striking claims for the direct relationship between education and stability and security.

The "Key Points" from the White Paper cheerfully declares that "The Australian Government will work with countries in the region to improve their health and education services and enable them to become more productive. Australia's aid will get more children into school, for longer and for a better quality education." The White Paper also states that

...aid programs should strengthen partner countries' own national systems of education rather than focusing on discrete activities or sub-sectors. AusAID will help foster national school systems that deliver

quality universal basic education with good basic literacy and numeracy outcomes, as well as high-quality, relevant secondary education and vocational training. In the Pacific there is a particular need for skills training to meet domestic needs and enhance opportunities for migration, which will generate remittances. Australia will ensure that education spending is of sufficient quantity and quality, and that partner government policies promote efficient and equitable service delivery. (White Paper 2005: 52)

So much for national autonomy! Further, a major new education strategy is to focus *inter alia* on “reversing the slide in education quality such as in the Pacific, through multi-donor sector programs with relevant and unbiased (sic) curricula and teaching methods” (ibid: 53). The White Paper indeed lays out what the educational expenditure will be spent on: scholarships, the Australia-Pacific Technical College and support to national education budgets and then says that the development of an education sector strategy is still to follow! Any such strategy will need, at least implicitly, to recognise that donors who support sectoral budgets become hostages to the good will and good sense of the recipient government as recent events in the Solomon Islands amply demonstrate.

Since this paper concentrates on the Pacific it is worthwhile setting out the basic economic and demographic parameters, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Economic and Population Data: Selected Pacific Countries

Country	(1) Per capita GNI US\$ 2002	Growth rate of (1) 1995-2002	Aid as % GNI 2002	Total population 2003	Population Growth Rate % 2002	% Urban
Fiji	2,130	1.3	1.9	832,000	0.8	49
Kiribati	960	2.9	22.9	89,000	1.6	38
PNG	530	-3.2	7.6	5,620,000	3.2	17
Samoa	1,430	3.4	14.5	179,000	2.0	22
Solomon Is.	530	-4.9	10.9	504,000	3.5	20
Timor Leste	520	1.9	58.3	768,000	1.1	8
Tonga	1,440	1.6	16.4	101,000	0.4	33
Tuvalu	1,380	3.0	na	11,000	2.0	52
Vanuatu	1,070	-1.7	11.9	208,000	2.7	22

Source: ADB Pacific Database 2004

Who Determines Which Donor Does What Where?

Before examining Australia’s involvement in some of the education issues across the Pacific, it is worth looking at how it is determined whether and where Australia is involved in the education sector within a given country. Essentially, Australia would be willing to give assistance in the education and health sectors in any country where we provide aid. Whether Australia actually does assist with education depends on the sectors to which the country itself is giving priority and even more importantly upon what other donors are doing. As the pressure for co-ordination amongst donors increases, donors to small countries tend to opt to carve up sectors

amongst themselves. East Timor/Timor Leste provides a good case in point, in order to promote the Portuguese language (which UNESCO says may be extinct within 100 years), Portugal wanted to assist with education and so health fell to Australia. In the Solomon Islands education became New Zealand's area and was then supported by the World Bank whilst health again fell to Australia. Australian assistance to Papua New Guinea is so extensive that most sectors including both education and health are covered. In the Tongan case, both Australia and New Zealand are involved in education with 57 per cent of New Zealand aid going to human resource development and 28 per cent of Australian aid going to education and training, amounting to about AUD\$3 million dollars each (1999/2000 figures from Tonga 2001). A recipient may of course decide that they would prefer assistance in a particular sector from a particular donor because they wish for a specific approach to the issues involved. However, with Australian consultants being able to be employed by NZAID and vice versa this can be less of an issue. Australian educationalists such as Professor Alan Luke are also widely employed across the Pacific by multilateral agencies such as the European Union and the Asian Development Bank.

Once it has been decided that a donor will be involved within a sector such as education, what they are going to do in that sector is usually determined in discussions between the donor and the recipient which take into account sub-sectoral preferences of both sides. Increasingly in larger countries donors are banding together to fund the recipient government's own sectoral plan. Uganda provides a well-known case of joint educational funding by donors. One objective of the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Education (PRIDE) project discussed below is to assist each of the Pacific Island countries to prepare a strategic education plan as an umbrella under which all education funding should occur.

Proportionality

Another factor in determining the influence that donors can bring to bear is simple proportionality. Pacific figures on overseas aid as a proportion of total government budgets are presented in Column 4 of Table 1. Whilst it is increasingly fashionable to speak of development cooperation as a partnership between the recipient country and the donors, this terminology leaves unanswered the question as to where the power of decision making lies. In development, as in other spheres, however much consultation there may be, she who pays the musician does get to choose the song to be sung. The White Paper (2005:52) notes that often AusAID's "contribution represents only a small fraction of the overall education budget and needs to be increased to meet compelling needs and to have a significant impact on improving education systems". The White Paper (2005:51) also includes a generalised statement about under-investment in education across the Asia-Pacific which should not be uncritically applied to the Pacific where national investment in education is generally high (see Table 2).

Table 2. Education Expenditure as a Percentage of GNI, GDP and Total Government Expenditure

Country	Public Exp on Edn as % GNI 1998-1999	Public Exp on Edn as % GDP 2001-2002	Public Exp. on Edn as % total govt expenditure 2001-2002
Fiji	5.6	5.5	19.4
PNG	2.1	2.3 2000-1	17.5 2000-1
Samoa	4.5	4.5	14.6
Solomon Islands	3.3	3.5 2000-1	15.4 1999-0
Tonga	5.3	5.0	13.1
Tuvalu	n/a	n/a	16.8 1999-0
Vanuatu	8.9	10.5	26.7

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database

In Papua New Guinea the level of donor, and particularly Australian inputs is so high that donors do, for good or ill, come to set the agenda. Thomas Webster, then Provincial Administrator of Western Highlands Province, who was formerly a national education planner, has argued that “if early PNG education policy had focused on developing primary education in an equitable manner at independence, as desired by locals, perhaps the attainment of UPE would no longer be an issue” (Webster 2000: 4).

Australia Compared with New Zealand

Table 3 presents data on the sectoral allocations within total educational expenditure by AusAID and NZAID. The most significant difference is that because of its proportionately greater expenditure on scholarships, NZAID spends almost twice the percentage on higher education that AusAID does. Conversely, AusAID spends significant amounts on education policy and administration and training in these bureaucratic areas which is a category which does not appear in the NZAID data. NZAID has a separate category for expenditure on ICT in education, which in AusAID’s case appears under other sectors within education.

Table 3. AusAID, NZAID Funding to Education by Sector 2002-3

Sector	AusAID %	NZAID %
Early Childhood	n/a	0.3
Primary	34.6	13.4
Secondary	4.1	8.6
Higher Education	31.3	60.7
TVET	10.9	7.0
Non-Formal	5.5	2.5
ICT	n/a	7.5
Education Policy/Admin	13.6	n/a
Total	100.0	100.0
Total Amount	90,748,452	15,552,732
Regional expenditure	4,343,330	1,075,367

Sources: AusAID Statistical Office 2004; NZAID Office 2004.

Many of the differences between the two agencies are more of a philosophical nature. Australia is much less likely than New Zealand to engage in producing philosophic statements about the nature of education in a development assistance context. This is partly because New Zealand can and does draw upon islanders and Maoris resident in New Zealand to draft such statements. AusAID has employed Aborigines on the staff and, occasionally, as consultants, but it would be a rare event to see their thoughts on what constitutes relevant education committed to paper or the web. However, Peter Bake, the former Secretary of Education for PNG is now advising AusAID on education for Nauru.

The problem with the Pacific's own philosophising about education is that it is generally very abstract and thus it remains unclear what the practical implications of what is being said would be. Opponents of Western education are much more vocal about the broad aspects of what they dislike than they are descriptive of the detail of what they want. Often island speakers compare Pacific education with a tree with its roots in Pacific culture, the trunk as schooling in Western traditions and the branches reaching out to the broader world. One Oceanic formulation states that the primary goal of education "is to ensure that all Pacific students are successful and that they all become fully participating members of their groups, societies and the global community" (Pene, Taufe'ulungake and Benson 2002:3). This is said to require that curricula and pedagogies are firmly grounded in the local while at the same time achieving an effective syncretism with the global world beyond (Teasdale 2005: 5). The practical application of this approach may (sic) require a bilingual approach with an equal but separate use of the vernacular; the development of a culture of literacy for people who are unaccustomed to read for pleasure and the use of group learning and peer tutoring rather than academic competition (ibid 6-7). The focus on the vernacular is much more practicable in Polynesia where whole countries speak a single language, than in Melanesia where the countries vie for the title of having the highest ratio of languages to individuals of anywhere in the world. (Contrary to popular belief, Vanuatu with roughly 2,000 inhabitants per language wins this race ahead of Papua New Guinea with 7,000), It is possible to study academic subjects at university level in Samoan at the University of Samoa or Tongan at the private Atenisi University. This is never going to be possible with the much smaller vernaculars of Melanesia.

Another difference between Australia and New Zealand relates to the strong emphasis which New Zealand places upon the importance of pre-school education in the Pacific although this is partly buried in regional figures. Australia, on the other hand, would be more likely to query whether, given limited education budgets, significant expenditure on pre-school education is appropriate. Certainly, in Melanesian countries where some children never get to go to school at all, it would appear to be inequitable that other children should receive government funding for both pre-school and primary school (see Table 4). Undoubtedly, mothers across the Pacific are very fond of pre-school activities. They attend together with their younger children, making pre-school a cheerful social event with the children learning a few songs and perhaps the alphabet and to count to ten in English.

That every child has a right to education should be beyond debate (NZAID 2004). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 Article 28 states to “recognise the right of the child to education” and to “make primary education compulsory and free to all”. The Convention goes on to declare that states should “encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child”. Polynesia comes near to achieving this; Melanesia falls far short of the goals.

The World Bank also provides significant support to education in the Pacific including \$28 million for schools in Timor Leste; \$55 million for education in Papua New Guinea and a further \$27 million for educational needs in the Solomon Islands. The Asian Development Bank is also increasingly involved. Another major donor to education in the Pacific is the European Union which will provide \$50 million over the period 2003-2008 including \$9 million for the PRIDE Regional Program and \$7 million for TVET in Kiribati. In contrast UNICEF makes a great deal of noise but spends less than \$500,000 a year

Table 4. HDI and Education Data: Selected Pacific Island Countries

Country	HDI 1999	Pacific HDI Rank	Pre Primary Enr F %	Net Primary Enr T %	Gross 2ndary Enr F %	Adult Literacy F %
Fiji	667	2	16	100	83	91
Kiribati	515	9	V, low	85 ap.	47	91
PNG	314	13	37	77	20	57
Samoa	590	5	60	95	79	98
Solomon Is.	371	12	V, low	85 ap.	18	62
Timor Leste	395	11	V, low	74	20 ap.	43
Tonga	647	4	32	100	106	99
Tuvalu	583	6	89	100	73	95
Vanuatu	425	10	77	93	29	30

Source: ADB Pacific Database

Regionalism

Until very recently, say 2004, Australian aid participation in the education sector in any given Pacific country was largely independent of the limited regional cooperation in educational matters which was in place. The University of the South Pacific (USP) has played a Pacific-wide role since 1968 (although Samoa also has its own university founded in 1988) and the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment has set common examinations for senior secondary school students since 1980 but other regional education activities involving UNDP, UNESCO and UNICEF have tended to come and go at the whim of donor funding. The USP, which is based in Fiji, but has campuses in Samoa and Vanuatu and distance education centres in 12 Pacific island countries linked via a dedicated VSAT satellite funded by Japan, Australia and New Zealand, could play much more of a

regional role, including through its education faculty's role in the training of teachers. But national jealousies tend to get in the way and AusAID in recent times has had little association with regional educational projects in association with USP. One reason why Australia has not taken a more cost-effective and regional approach to education across the Pacific is that the Papua New Guinea program, where AusAID has a massive involvement in the sector, is administered separately from the Pacific island programs, so that lessons learnt in Papua New Guinea are generally not transferred.

In 2004 the Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Education (PRIDE) were launched at the Institute of Education at USP, jointly funded by the European Union (8 million euros) and New Zealand (NZ\$5 million). The aim of PRIDE is "to expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social, spiritual, economic, and cultural development of their communities and contribute positively to creating sustainable futures" (USP Press release 14/05/2004). AusAID's Suva office has observer status at PRIDE meetings.

Excluding Papua New Guinea, the total population of the Pacific Island Countries is around 2.9 millions—less than that of Sydney. Yet each one of these countries has its own education system, syllabuses and curricula. From an external perspective, this does not appear to make sense. Whilst each country understandably wishes to tell its own history, surely mathematics could be the same across the region and geography could share many common elements. Sometimes common sense prevails and there is sharing. Indeed Francophone schools in Vanuatu very successfully use maths books developed for Mali in West Africa (not least because each child is given their own set of books). More often, however, each country devotes extensive donor-provided resources to developing its own curriculum and texts. There is a possible counter argument, which says that the value of developing a national curriculum for each subject, even for a nation with fewer than 200,000 people, lies in the ownership which local teachers develop through having been personally involved in activities such as the drafting of the texts. But then there must come a trade off between price and quality and immediate local ownership. Teachers in Tuvalu did a wonderful job of developing their own business studies texts for a country in which many children have never seen a bank, a cheque or a tourist, only to be told by a jealous education department that they did not meet international standards. AusAID needs to carefully reconsider how far it is prepared to support national educational efforts in areas such as school curricula and the syllabus for teacher training when regional efforts could produce a higher quality product at significantly less cost.

One problem with regionalism as it is practiced in the Pacific is that there is often an expectation that each country will get a piece of each regional project. In practice this often means that the countries with the best trained people get themselves organised first and therefore get a greater access to whatever goods the project is offering. Thus the result is that more is given to those who are already favoured and the less advantaged are left with the remainders. Thus Polynesia flourishes whilst

Melanesia is once again left behind. Tonga claims to have more PhDs per capita than any other country in the world. Even if this is only approximately true, why should Tonga need assistance with educational planning? Would it not be better for Tongans to decide what they need by themselves, possibly drawing on a regional model, especially since Tongan academics are most vocal in decrying donor interference in Pacific education?

Relevance

There is an increasing demand that Pacific education should be relevant. In past times children did sit on floors of crushed coral in classes with walls of woven pandanus leaves learning about Christmas in the snow—a substance which they would never see. But beyond agreement that texts should be illustrated with crabs rather than rabbits, and palms rather than oak trees, there is limited discussion of what relevance actually means in the context of the island countries (Thaman 1998).

In broad terms the discourse about relevance can have two quite divergent meanings. One meaning relates to relevance to the local context: learning about cyclones rather than snowstorms. This view extends to the Pacific reluctance to adopt educational systems which depend upon creating both winners and losers/drop outs in a competitive spirit foreign to Pacific norms (Thaman 1998). The second meaning targets relevance to the adult lives which the children will inherit. To achieve relevance in the second sense requires a clear vision of what kind of world the children will live in as adults decades hence. At one extreme, the question may be whether a child being educated in Samoa or Tonga should be educated for a future life in Auckland, San Francisco or Sydney. But even for the Melanesian countries, where emigration plays much less of a role, the question remains whether children should be educated for subsistence agriculture and rural crafts or a world in which modern technological devices such as computers are ubiquitous. In countries with greater resources in terms of agricultural land, it is possible to envisage moving from subsistence to commercial farming but outside Melanesia there is limited scope for creating much employment in commercial farming especially on coral atolls. Prospects for the future are more likely to involve employment in tourism or information technology. Those who argue that it is possible for children to be educated for both worlds: the traditional and the global need to do far more to address the very real contradictions between the two worlds. To give just one example: traditionally children do not ask questions of their elders, indeed, in some contexts children and even women are not supposed to speak aloud when elders are present. Surveys of why Fijian islander children often lag behind their Indian classmates show that this respect for authority is one factor involved. An education system in which children question their teachers is essential but goes against Fijian tradition. More broadly, traditional cultures respect the elders because they have lived longer and know more (Thaman 1998). In modern education students increasingly know more than their parents or even their teachers. Elders may still be respected for their wisdom but may be unsuited for running the economy or determining the curriculum.

Pacific education is littered with examples of educators telling parents and children alike that what they want, as in a strongly academic, examination based system, is bad for them and should not be provided by the state education system. The debate over technical education has been particularly lively. Parents across the Pacific prefer an academic education to a vocational one for the very good reason that white-collar jobs are better paid and more comfortable and secure than trades positions. Parents in Kiribati were not alone in boycotting vocational schools as second best for their children.

If we look at data on what schools actually teach, for Samoa we know how many of the country's 25 government secondary schools teach various subjects (Samoa 2004). At Year 12 there are 22 schools which teach accounting but only five which teach agricultural science. The core subjects of Samoan, English and mathematics are taught by 24 schools and economics and home economics are both taught by 12 but only two teach computer studies. In terms of relevance, this data suggests that agriculture will remain a neglected area and that IT is significantly underfunded. Indeed government secondary schools have only one computer per 150 students as compared with Mormon schools which have one per 10 students.

Data on educational expenditure by level shown in Table 5 above suggests that Pacific Island countries have put a fair emphasis upon expenditure on primary education. On average teacher pupil ratios in primary school are reasonable and, by developing country standards, even generous. Teachers' salaries make up a very high proportion of unit costs in education. Thus it would be good to also have the ratios for books per student which are much more problematic than class size.

Table 5: Educational Expenditure by Level: Selected Pacific Island Countries

Country	% Primary in Govt Ed budget	Unit Cost Primary Education	Unit Cost Secondary Education	Student Teacher Ratio Primary	AusAID Funding for Education 2003 \$millions
Fiji	52	493	866	29	4.9
Kiribati	n/a	154	341	24	5.4
PNG	n/a	187	433	34	60.5
Samoa	69	101	119	28	3.5
Solomon Is.	n/a	64	273	n/a	0.7
Tonga	53	n/a	n/a	21	2.0
Tuvalu	40	n/a	n/a	24	1.6
Vanuatu	58	194	604	24	6.0

Source: ADB Education Database

The Export of People

As noted, educational relevance depends upon where the students are going to live. To quote Tonga's representative speaking at the World Bank Annual Meeting in Singapore in September 2006: "It is the export of people, or migration, coupled with remittances of cash and goods from those whom reside and work overseas, that

sustain the Tongan economy and the present standard of living of the people”. The Hon Siosuia Utoikamanu went on to explain that “remittances equivalent to 40 per cent of GDP were estimated to have been received in 2005-6 for Tonga. A recent study by the World Bank indicates that official statistics significantly underestimate remittances, and further indicates that approximately 90 per cent of households in Tonga received cash remittances in 2004, averaging US\$3,067 per household and US\$753 per capita.”

The speaker also pointed out that in that same year Tonga reduced the number of public service positions by 30 per cent thereby reducing the total number of formal sector jobs available by some 20 per cent. Thus for Tonga, there can be no question that relevance in education must comprise a highly significant international component. Remittances themselves are used to invest in the education of those left behind to increase their marketability overseas. Given that the majority of all Tongans now live overseas Tonga needs to have a national curriculum which both assists with the preservation of Tongan language and culture and prepares Tongans to be citizens of the world. Yet Tonga also needs to consider the educational needs of those who live on the outer islands who may never have the opportunity for international travel. The national educational plan is specifically required to address the challenges of articulation between education and the world of work, not only in the context of paid employment but also of “self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-employment”. If Tonga can indeed find a way to articulate students who have completed school back into subsistence agriculture and fishing, then the country will have achieved a unique feat.

It can well be envisaged that one important factor in overcoming the gap between the outer islands and emigrants in Sydney or Salt Lake City is the Internet. Tongans are major users of the internet and this allows them to maintain kinship links across the world. The strategic education plan for Tonga is required to have balance between the weights for each education sector from pre-school to tertiary; core business and new improvements; “regard for traditional values of Tongan society and the new values of the modern world needed by Tonga for future success” and “emphasis on achieving academic excellence, while also recognising the necessity to develop the skills that the economy needs” (Catherwood, Levine and Moeaki 2004:12). Interestingly, Tongans define the skills needed for life and work in a global world as literacy, numeracy, ICT and English skills [in that order] together with life and work preparation skills.

Whilst concern tends to focus on the brain drain, the OECD now provides data not only on the total number of expatriates living in OECD countries but also on the percentage that are highly skilled. As can be seen from Table 6, some Pacific countries, notably Samoa and Tonga, manage to export large numbers of people, only a small proportion of who are highly skilled. [Since the data are based on birthplace the figures for Papua New Guinea will include people of European descent who were born in PNG in colonial times]. The White Paper (2005: 52) tends to assume that migrants need skills to move and stresses that Australia will be up skilling Pacific islanders so that they can migrate and send home remittances.

Table 6. Pacific Expatriates in OECD Countries

Country	Total Number of expatriates in OECD countries	% of expatriates who are highly skilled
Australia	267,314	43.6
East Timor/ Timor Leste	8,994 + 2,190	17.5/20.8
Fiji	119,400	26.4
Kiribati	1,964	22.4
Nauru	646	30.7
New Zealand	410,663	40.6
Papua New Guinea	36,074	43.9
Pitcairn	173	42.2
Samoa	71,801	10.3
Tonga	41,116	11.2
Vanuatu	2,002	32.1

Source: Dumont and Lemaitre 2005: Table A 6

Technical and Vocational Education

Australia is now going to establish an Australian Technical College in the Pacific region (APTC). The College will have a distributed network of campuses across the Pacific and will deliver Australian-standard vocational education and training qualifications to the region. This is not a purely altruistic enterprise: one objective is to train Pacific islanders to take up the slack in the Australian skills shortage. Areas of focus will include health care and personal services, hospitality and tourism and the automotive, construction and electrical trades. Whilst Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, which already have well established technical and vocational education provisions, will certainly benefit from the new College—if it does not simply result in the neglect of existing facilities—it is less clear what will happen to the Melanesian countries. Vanuatu already has a high class institution in INTV, The problem is that INTV already produces more skilled graduates than the local economy can absorb and Ni-Vanuatu are not keen to emigrate.

It is difficult to gauge the demand for skilled tradespeople in the Pacific (Voigt Graf 2006). Employers will generally say that they need more people—but often their requirement is more for people with a strong work ethic whom they can train themselves than for skilled workers *per se*. Automotive trades are on the list of skills to be taught. A leading automotive sales and repairs organization in the Pacific already sends its own staff for training in Port Moresby, Sydney and Tokyo. In Fiji a group of auto-repairers supports a very successful joint vocational programme for their staff in Nandi. If employers are not willing to train their own staff this raises grave questions about their commitment and profitability. A classic World Bank study in Indonesia showed that employers preferred taking history graduates and training them themselves to taking the graduates of technical colleges who had been trained in outdated methods on outdated machinery. Around the world technical and

vocational colleges in developing countries have produced graduates whose skills do not meet industry requirements (Heyneman 2003). Often this is because their training has been too theoretical and has not involved enough practical work with the equipment and methods actually used in industry. Theoretical training unfortunately comes much cheaper than practical work which requires up to date machinery and consumables and teachers who really know what they are doing. Across the Pacific vocational students are trained on foot operated lathes and sewing machines because newer machines powered by electricity are too costly and that is what their teachers know. In some places without electricity this is of course quite appropriate, the difficulty comes from vast differences across and within individual countries in the levels of technology which are useful and available.

If the APTC was de-linked from the possibility of migration to Australia there would be serious questions as to the alternative availability of private sector employment options for the graduates within the region. Australia officially states that the “objective of the college is to contribute to the development of a skilled and competitive Pacific workforce. With Australian qualifications, graduates will be more competitive in gaining employment in their region [with whom?] or in the global skilled labour market” (Australian Statement to the 39th Session of UN Commission on Population and Development, 3-7 April 2006). It is also Australia’s official position that: “Remittances are not a panacea, but in concert with developing countries’ efforts to achieve good governance, peace and stability, remittances can be an important source of development finance, to complement (not substitute) aid and foreign investment” (ibid).

Higher Education

In terms of theoretical orientations, the Australian Aid Program tends to follow the World Bank with a five to ten year time lag. AusAID has been reluctant to support tertiary education in the Pacific in general but especially reluctant to support the University of Papua New Guinea and other universities in Papua New Guinea. The World Bank view is now that:

Knowledge-based competition within a globalizing economy is prompting a fresh consideration of the role of higher education in development ... previously it was often viewed as an expensive and inefficient public service that largely benefited the wealthy and privileged. Now it is understood to make a necessary contribution, in concert with other factors, to the success of national efforts to boost productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. Viewed from this perspective, higher education ceases to contend with primary and secondary education for policy attention. Instead, it becomes an essential complement to educational efforts at other levels as well as to national initiatives to boost innovations and performance across economic sectors. (J-P Tan Foreword to Bloom, Canning and Chan 2006)

To quantify the gains from higher education, the calculation is that a “one-year increase in tertiary education stock may boost incomes by roughly 3 per cent after five years and by 12 per cent eventually” (Bloom, Canning and Chan 2006: iv). These calculations refer to situations where those trained remain in country; it would be interesting to calculate the benefits to be drawn for say Samoa and Tonga from up-skilling future emigrants. Data to become available from the Tonga migrant lottery study will actually make this possible (Gibson 2006).

Are Pacific Educational Standards Declining?

Clearly the question of whether education standards are declining across the Pacific would merit a paper, indeed a thesis by itself. AusAID assumes that Pacific education standards are declining. The only data presented to support this statement in the White Paper are from the very imperfect EDI indexes for 1998 and 2002 (comparative EDI data for Australia or New Zealand are not available). Without quibbling too much, these data show that Samoa’s performance improved. The detailed data for Papua New Guinea show a highly implausible decline in the adult literacy rate over the five year period as well as a fall in the survival rate to grade 5 which does not accord with changes in the primary enrolment rate or the sex ratio. As at home in Australia, doom and gloom may well reflect an impression rather than a reality. Samoan data for the National Year 8 examinations which are sat by 90 per cent of all Samoan students show that from 1997 to 2003 scores varied little overall from year to year but some subjects were consistently found to be harder than others, with Samoan being the easiest and mathematics the most challenging.

Language issues are very complex (Mugler and Lynch 1996; Low, Penland and Heine 2005). One highly sensitive point which is worth making is that standards of spoken and written English, including amongst teachers, may well be declining. The reasons for this include the simple fact that there are proportionately far fewer native English speakers living and working in the region than there were in the immediate post-colonial era and that there is greater use of the vernacular in the media such as the radio. The Asian Development Bank argues that one of the best indicators of the quality of teaching is the linguistic ability of the teacher in the language of instruction and this is certainly a problem in many of the outer islands (ADB 2005:46). Supporting English language radio lessons for schools and teachers or the use of oral lessons on CD can provide great benefits in this area.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there are a number of areas where Australia should reconsider its assistance to the education sector in the Pacific to ensure its effectiveness and that the money provided does more to improve educational outcomes and less to re-retrain educational bureaucrats. Often when aid programs fail it is because politics got in the way rather than, as AusAID almost invariably assumes, because the officials concerned needed more training. It would be good to have an overarching philosophy to guide educational assistance which would start from the simple declaration that every child has a right to go to school. Because of

its country programming framework, AusAID is much more likely to fund an examination of educational assistance within an individual country than a study of several countries across a region. However, a strong argument could be made for looking at educational assistance (a) to Melanesia/small scale cultures (defined as including Kiribati but excluding Fiji) which would use lessons drawn from AusAID's vast experience in the education sector in Papua New Guinea to inform what happens in the Solomon islands and Vanuatu and (b) Polynesia/diasporic countries (defined to include Fiji) which would focus more on issues related to education for migration and cover the crucial issue of what will happen if emigration becomes difficult/impossible. These studies should be structured to build on views from the Pacific islanders, both educators and parents, less in terms of vague generalities, than of forcing the hard choices as to where limited resources should actually be deployed. It is arguable that most Pacific countries could significantly improve their educational outcomes by cutting their educational workforces by ten per cent and spending the savings on in-service training and books for the children. With the new funding from AusAID they will not even have to cut staffing levels.

Australia attaches great importance to good governance but does not ask the question: 'What is it about what teachers teach and children learn in school which could contribute to good governance across the region?' Equally, in other regions of the world, adult literacy and human rights and good governance discourses are directly linked but there appears to be little of this in the Pacific. As argued above, Pacific education budgets are generally not inadequate but many children still miss out on anything resembling a quality education. Pacific civics education tends to be almost exclusively factual accounts of the formal structures of government. Islander academics stress the vital importance of Pacific values. They should be challenged to set out how the teaching of these values could serve to improve governance—not for the benefit of donors but for the benefit of the outer island children of the Pacific who sit on the lumpy coral floor copying down passages from the text-book from a cracked, faded blackboard because the school has no chairs and the teacher has the only book.

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Note: *Many national educational planning documents and statistical reports for the Pacific are available via the web page of PADDLE: the Pacific Archive of Digital Data for Learning and Education.