

## **Higher Education, Telecommunications Networks and National Development in the Pacific Islands: A Response with Focus on the Future**

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Today, institutions of higher learning in both the developing and developed countries of the Pacific are increasingly being asked to adapt more quickly to the changing technological and educational needs of the societies they serve. As such, universities are now not only the agents of change, but are having to undergo radical change themselves as they adjust to meet the educational needs of the 21st Century.

One result of this transformation of tertiary education has been the increased attention paid to modes and methods of distance learning. As the major background paper and the two position papers of this session have pointed out, within the Pacific Islands region in particular, universities and colleges are busy building the telecommunications infrastructure that will guarantee their students and faculty equitable access to information regardless of geographic location and as a result are participating in the transformation of Pacific Islands society.

Efforts currently being undertaken in the Pacific Islands region by such institutions as the University of the South Pacific (USP), the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education as well as by such rim country

organizations as the National Institute for Multimedia Education (NIME) in Japan and the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) in Canada, point to the growing role distance higher education is expected to play in the provision of post-secondary education in the region. These institutions and organizations are endeavoring to identify a cost effective technical and organizational approach based either on a single-purpose national network (such as is the case in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands), or a multi-purpose regional network (as with USP) to meet the current and future telecommunications needs of distance education in the Pacific Islands. Yet, for the directors and managers of extension programs, university vice-chancellors, and educators in the classroom, the goals are to make the equipment of distance training as transparent as possible, to improve the delivery of educational materials, and to promote the financial, socio-cultural, and political resources to bring this about. Many see such efforts as defining the core of the respective Pacific Island countries' national goals for human resource development; both through the innovative organization and delivery of institutionalized learning as well as non-traditional forms of distance and continuing education.

What then is the future of distance learning in the Pacific Islands? Where is it headed and what form is it taking? And is distance higher education having an impact on the transformation of Pacific Islands society? If I may have your indulgence on this matter, I would like to address such questions, based on the context set in the background and position papers presented in this symposium, by discussing some of the forces I see as driving changes in higher education in the Pacific Islands as they face the challenges of the 21st Century. Some of the issues are often contentious. Some are economic, some are political, and they can quite often point in diverse directions for their answers. I would like to present such issues in the context of two future scenarios; one as a projection of present trends along a familiar path, and the other which diverges from the norm and presents a very different picture. Both are possible futures among many alternatives. However, in the end, reality may be very different from either, while containing aspects of both.

## Background

As was already mentioned in this session, the countries of the Pacific Islands cover an area of ocean far larger than the continental United States and, if we exclude Papua New Guinea, are inhabited by only about 1.2 million people, living on over a thousand islands. An unfortunate reality of development over the last decade, the inhabitants of these island countries have all become poorer as their per capita gross national product (GNP) has fallen in real terms. There is, however, great variation in wealth between countries. For example, Fiji has a GNP per head of around US\$1,700. On the other hand, Kiribati -- defined by the United Nations as one of the least developed nations in the world -- covers an ocean area three times as great as Fiji's but with only one-tenth of the population and only one-fortieth of Fiji's GNP.

Many of the independent Pacific Island countries are less than 25 years old and as such are fierce in the protection of their own national identity and treasure their sovereignty. There are very strong cultural and linguistic ties between some island countries; such as those that make up Polynesia. Likewise, there are equally strong differences between them. However, all share a common heritage of colonialism, of which the educational system is just a part.

Within the Pacific Islands educational levels vary widely, both between countries as well as between the population concentrations around the capital towns and the rural areas or outlying islands. Everywhere, even in Fiji, preparation in science and mathematics is generally poor. Although English is everywhere taught in schools as a second language (a product of their colonial heritage), standards vary widely and are often quite low.

In tertiary education, there are some 13,000 full-time students throughout the region. Approximately one-third of them are at USP, the only regional (as opposed to national) institution, and excluding UPNG, it is also the only significant institution teaching at the university level. The other two-thirds are at some forty institutions throughout the region, half of which have fewer than 100 students each. There are also nearly 3,000 students studying at universities outside the region at any one time. Most of these students are

studying in the rim countries of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States including, rather non-geographically, Hawaii.

This wide geographic distribution of students is in many ways uneconomical. For example, at the university level the cost of a student at a rim university is three or four times the cost at USP for a comparable course. It was recently estimated that the total overall annual cost of all 16,000 students is some US\$85 million, of which about 70 percent is spent on the one-fifth who study outside the region, and only 30 percent on the four-fifths studying in the region.

Further illustration of the political economy of higher education in the Pacific Islands region was provided by the results of a World Bank funded tracer study of the 1985 and 1988 cohorts of graduates from four countries; Fiji, Kiribati, The Solomon Islands, and Western Samoa. The study revealed that a very high proportion of these graduates emigrate to the rim countries. Of the 1985 and 1988 cohort graduates, about one-third are now working overseas. Moreover, large numbers of those who had not yet emigrated said they were likely to do so in the future. Much of this data is further corroborated by the preliminary results of a study recently conducted by NIME in which I had the pleasure of assisting as a foreign visiting researcher earlier this year. Adding these figures to those who had already left, we find that in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, and Western Samoa, no fewer than 70 percent of graduates had already left to work overseas or expected to do so in the near future; for the Solomon Islands the figure was closer to 30 percent.

Other indicators confirm what this would lead one to expect--a continuing and severe shortage of qualified manpower in the Pacific Islands. This situation seems unlikely to change, at least in the near future, and illustrates the almost complete integration of the island labor markets--at least for the professionally and technically qualified--into the wider Pacific labor markets of mainly Australia and New Zealand, but also the United States and Canada. In the absence of any barriers, migration from low- to high-wage countries is bound to occur.

So why invest scarce resources in the higher education of so many people who are going to take their qualifications to other countries? In defense it must be said that higher education is usually not seen, in the Pacific Islands or elsewhere, only as an economic investment. Individuals want for themselves and for their children the expansion of personal capabilities and opportunities. For many of those who live in very small communities, this will also involve a desire to travel, to experience living elsewhere, or even to migrate. However, for such individuals who maintain strong family linkages to their home communities, there is also the likelihood of their sending back monetary remittances. In Western Samoa and Tonga for instance, such remittances are the largest source of foreign exchange. From this point of view, *people* can be seen as a valuable export, as long as traditional extended family loyalties continue to operate in ways that ensure migrant Islanders continue sending home a part of what they earn overseas.

The case for further investment in and expansion of tertiary education, therefore, seems self-evident. Such expansion would continue to meet the demands of the island economies for skilled labor, to maintain the flow of foreign currency-earning emigrants, and to satisfy individual and family aspirations.

## **Two Scenarios**

After presenting you with this brief "snap-shot" of what I and others see as the political economy of higher education in the Pacific Islands, I would now like to turn to the task of answering the questions I posed earlier and to introduce two possible visions of the future of distance higher education in the Pacific Islands region. However, when one sets about the task of developing alternative future scenarios, one is constantly oppressed by the present. The present calls for our immediate attention like a crying child, and the sketch of the "present" outlined above seems to scream at us. What then are we as educators to do? Based on the contextual issues presented thus far in this symposium, I propose two alternative scenarios.

### *Scenario I - the present is the future*

From a strictly economic point of view, if the future is a continuation of the present then educational institutions in the Pacific Islands should try and get better value for their present investment. One means of doing this would be a policy of rationalizing tertiary education along lines that would secure economies of scale as well as possible improvements in the quality of education delivered. Such a rationalization ploy would call for the establishment of a "three-tier system" of tertiary education with the national, regional and rim country institutions each being allocated appropriate functions. According to reports received from a seminar held in Suva, Fiji attended by Pacific Island country education officials, a similar perspective was presented which urged the "optimization" of the use of institutions at all three levels. This would involve the replacement of many small local institutions (such as the various national teachers' colleges and nurses training schools) by larger ones, some of them operated regionally or sub-regionally. At university level, it would mean the further development of USP as a regional institution and the diversion to it of a substantial part of the funds now used to pay for students at overseas universities, the rationale being that at USP the same volume of funds would buy at least three times as many places. Such a policy could also lead to the improvement in the quality of the regional provision of higher education since overseas scholarships at present attract away the best of the annual crop of island students who would, under this plan, attend USP instead. Rim country institutions would, of course, be used only for the few promising students for whom post-baccalaureate degrees are desirable. Distance education would most likely languish, being allocated the "second-class" status of providing limited tertiary training to the few students located in the urban centers of the Pacific Island countries who could not gain scholarships to the national or regional institutions as well as providing a means of continuing education for those already in the local workforce wishing to upgrade their credentials for promotion purposes but having little other intrinsic value.

## *Scenario 2 - Islands in the network*

My own vision of the future of distance education in the Pacific Islands, and indeed the future of higher education in general, is one which sees the development of computing, information, and telecommunications resources at a regional institution, such as USP, which would function as a modern technological resource for the whole region. I believe that only by developing a strong central facility would it be possible to build up the smaller countries satellite libraries and centers of information technology. Already, USP's regional centers have the potential to develop in ways that excel anything most Pacific Islands governments could conceive.

Likewise, I believe that it is extremely important for developing countries to have their **own** universities, reflecting their own cultural, social and economic circumstances. I also believe that it is possible to combine this with standards that give their students and faculty access to the international world of learning and professional recognition; but I also see this only being achieved in the South Pacific by and through a strong regional university. Thus, the regional centers of USP could come to take on more importance in the local island societies; simultaneously providing quality tertiary education at a distance with the most efficient information and telecommunications technology while becoming a focus (with such local national institutions as the National University of Western Samoa or the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education) for cultural studies and the nurturing of national identity. It is important that the regional centers in each of the member countries of USP be seen as not only a viable means of providing higher education, but also that it fosters a strong sense of belonging to the community to which it serves. I feel that rationalization, or indeed any further decentralization, would only serve to spell the demise of regional higher education in the Pacific Islands.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to mention that many of the issues brought up for discussion today will not be solved overnight. However, the daunting task of providing quality education to a widely dispersed population must be taken on for the sake of the Pacific

Islands' collective and individual future. In my response to the previous papers I have described how the present influences the future of distance higher education in the Pacific Islands and how this influences the course of development. I feel I have also made a humble attempt to advocate a stronger role for a regional university like USP while at the same time attempting to stress the importance of providing increased local visibility (and viability) for such an institution through its regional centers and the fostering of cultural and national pride through local institutions. The planning and funding of higher education must give a central place to that need, however hard it is to quantify.

The likelihood that graduates will continue to seek employment opportunities overseas while maintaining vital links with their family and kin at home stresses the importance of educating for a global labor market. Likewise, the continuing shortage at home of skilled personnel coupled with the desire of many more to remain in their home islands while continuing to seek better employment opportunities and/or higher educational attainment stresses the necessity for innovative application of distance education. No doubt, technology will drive the changes in the delivery of distance higher education. However, we must not lose sight of what one of our presenters has stated, "...any communications system is only as good as the use to which it is put..."