

# ‘When I go back’: Experiences and expectations of PNG women scholarship graduates on return home

Betty Lovai  
Geejay Milli  
Sonia Palmieri



Researched and written by Professor Betty Lovai (University of Papua New Guinea), Ms Geejay Milli (University of Papua New Guinea) and Dr Sonia Palmieri (The Australian National University)

June 2022

Peer reviewed by Dr Judy Putt and Dr Julien Barbara (ANU)

Funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade under the Women's Leadership Initiative, managed by Cardno Emerging Markets.

The Women's Leadership Initiative is a five-year, \$5.4 million initiative of the Australian Government promoting women's leadership and building a future generation of women leaders in the Pacific region. It delivers a range of learning, networking and development opportunities to Australia Awards scholars from the Pacific studying at Australian universities and institutions.

More information is available at: <https://womensleadershipinitiative.org.au/about/>

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the recipients of Australia Awards who participated in the study for their considered contributions and reflections. We also acknowledge the comments received from Ms Joanne Choe, Ms Georgina Cope, Ms Karyn Docking and Mr Tony Liston (Cardno Emerging Markets).

### **Corresponding Author**

Sonia Palmieri, Gender Policy Fellow, Department of Pacific Affairs  
+61 2 6125 6560  
[sonia.palmieri@anu.edu.au](mailto:sonia.palmieri@anu.edu.au)

The Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 2600 Australia  
[www.anu.edu.au](http://www.anu.edu.au)

CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

*Cover image: Courtesy of Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative*



**Australian  
National  
University**



THE UNIVERSITY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

# ‘When I go back’: Experiences and expectations of PNG women scholarship graduates on return home

## Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acronyms .....  | ii  |
| Executive summary .....   | iii |
| Introduction.....   | 1   |
| Research approach .....   | 3   |
| Scope.....  | 4   |
| Research as a partnership.....  | 5   |
| Sample .....  | 5   |
| Data collection and analysis.....   | 6   |
| Research limitations.....   | 7   |
| Change agency expectations.....   | 9   |
| Learning from the region .....  | 11  |
| Improving the workplace .....   | 12  |
| Contributing to PNG development .....   | 13  |
| Meeting expectations of regional learning .....   | 15  |
| The comfort of Pacific sistahood.....   | 15  |
| Australian mentors.....   | 16  |
| Testing the assumption: Regional connections supporting leadership opportunities<br>at home ..... | 17  |
| Meeting expectations of workplace improvement .....   | 18  |
| Job satisfaction prior to study .....   | 18  |
| Experience of the workplace on return home .....  | 20  |
| Testing the assumption: Integrating learned ideas and skills in the PNG workplace<br>.....        | 21  |
| Meeting expectations of contributing to development.....  | 23  |
| Self-perceptions of leadership.....   | 23  |
| Others’ perceptions of alumnae change agency .....  | 26  |
| Testing the assumption: Linking leadership competence and sustainable<br>development .....        | 27  |
| Conclusion .....  | 29  |
| References .....  | 31  |
| Endnotes .....  | 34  |

## Acronyms

|      |   |
|------|---|
| AA   | Australia Awards                            |
| ACER | Australian Council for Educational Research |
| ANU  | Australian National University              |
| DFAT | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade     |
| DPA  | Department of Pacific Affairs               |
| GTF  | Global Tracer Facility                      |
| UPNG | University of Papua New Guinea              |
| WLI  | Women's Leadership Initiative               |

## Executive summary

With international community focus on development goals since the late 1990s, more attention has been paid to the links between increased educational opportunities, human development and gender equality (Spark 2011). Specifically, a common theory of change informing many development initiatives suggests an overseas education – funded through scholarships to individuals in developing countries – improves the scholar’s socio-economic status and human capital, and in so doing, her opportunity to contribute to development outcomes in her country. Research (for example, Agarwal 2017, Connell 2009, Conway and Potter 2007) has pointed to different scales of change as a result of an overseas education, ranging from change in everyday practices and small-scale actions, to building networks or coalitions through which they might embark on collective action that results in broader, transformative institutional and social change. These conceptualisations of change fit within a broader literature on developmental leadership that considers the legitimacy, authority and capacity of change agents to mobilise people and resources, and to forge coalitions in the pursuit of positive developmental goals (Booth and Unsworth 2014, Corbett 2015, Denney and McLaren 2016, DLP 2018, Barbara and Baker 2020).

Supporting education through scholarships has been a long-term development strategy of the Australian Government, including in the Pacific region, most notably through the Australia Awards Linkages Framework (DFAT 2020). This sustained investment has been regularly monitored and evaluated with tracer studies of Australia Awards alumni undertaken through DFAT’s Global Tracer Facility (GTF). These studies consider alumni perceptions of their relationships with Australia, and the extent to which alumni consider they have made a development contribution on return home (Edwards et al. 2020). In contrast, there is a more limited academic literature on the experiences of Pacific scholars once they have returned home from overseas, and more particularly, the gendered nature of those experiences (Howard 2019, Howard et al. 2019).

This research aims to fill this knowledge gap and asks three interrelated questions:

1. To what extent do alumnae (that is, women scholarship graduates) expect, and feel they are able, to act as agents of change on return home?
2. What factors either support or hinder alumnae approaches to facilitate change on return home?
3. What are the consequences of alumnae attempts at – and/or achievement of – change?

In answering these questions, a small-scale pilot study was conducted with a group of women who were not only recipients of an Australia Award (AA), but had also participated in a niche enrichment program known as the Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI). Since its inception in 2017, almost 130 Pacific women scholars have participated in the WLI, with half of these from Papua New Guinea (PNG), reflecting the larger pool of AA recipients from PNG.

This being the case, the pilot study was conducted as a partnership between researchers at The Australian National University (ANU) and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). The fieldwork was conducted between April and June, 2021, during



the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourteen alumnae currently based in Port Moresby were interviewed about their experiences in their families, communities and the workplace on return home, representing a response rate of 61 per cent. Participants were selected on the basis of their proximity to the researchers (also based in Port Moresby) to enable face-to-face interviews. In addition, each research participant was asked to nominate a champion, or person they considered supportive of their change agency at home. Of the 14 participants, only nine felt comfortable nominating such an individual, and only four of the nine responded to an online survey, representing a response rate of 44 per cent of invitees.

The research uncovers three sets of expectations that underpin our study participants' experiences of their scholarship and involvement in the leadership program. Alumnae expect to learn from their region while they are away, improve their workplaces and contribute to development outcomes on return home.

In meeting these expectations, we identify both enabling factors and barriers. Positively, regional connections have proven useful to advancing women's leadership on return home in two key ways: as a form of emotional support derived from the shared meanings and experiences with their 'Pacific sistas'; and as a means to gather information on specific workplace issues and needs, when supported by subject expertise in Australia and across the Pacific. Alumnae also indicated high job satisfaction and opportunity for change agency in the workplace when they can contribute to the direction of the organisation, and are given on-the-job learning opportunities. Positive role modelling, including any in/formal mentoring provided by men, in the workplace is also key. We also find that as a consequence of their experiences in Australia, alumnae – and their champions – believe they have become more competent leaders.

This notwithstanding, the study also reaffirms earlier findings (Howard et al. 2020) that mentors are useful on return home only if they understand the local context and can continue to support workplace legitimacy through their relevant Pacific networks. We find that change agency within a PNG context depends on the opportunities provided by, and the specific cultures of, the workplace. Too often, sexist cultures and derogatory social norms are significant barriers to women's legitimacy in PNG workplaces. Further, women's increased leadership competence (that is, skills building), usually only translates to developmental change if their interventions are valued, and heeded, by those around them. Alumnae most commonly articulated developmental change as a 'project' rather than engaging with the root causes of development challenges posed by gender inequality, climate change, and income inequality.

A consequence of these findings is the potential for the expectations raised during a period of overseas study to do more harm than good if they are not followed through and supported when scholars return home. Expectations are – consciously and unconsciously – built into donor programs; in addition, participants identify their own expectations for themselves, their communities, and their country. While efforts are made to manage those expectations in Australia, more is required to support and manage those expectations on return home. This pilot study found three of the 14 women interviewed have endured significant periods of unemployment on return home, and another was at the point of resigning from her position due to repeated incidences

of sexism and discrimination in the workplace. Interviewees referred to a 'patriarchal culture' in PNG as a given, an accepted norm of work and social life. In some workplaces, women have been blocked from leadership opportunities sometimes in spite of their higher qualifications and experience in Australia.

These findings point to a need to complement programmatic emphasis on scholars' experiences *in Australia* with their experiences *on return home*. There is considerable scope to consider more carefully programming options that support a safe re-entry with families, communities and workplaces.



*Image: Courtesy of Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative*



## Introduction

With international community focus on development goals since the late 1990s, more attention has been paid to the links between increased educational opportunities, human development and gender equality (Spark 2011, Spark and Lee 2018). Specifically, a common theory of change informing many development initiatives suggests an overseas education – funded through scholarships to individuals in developing countries – improves the scholar’s socio-economic status and human capital, and in so doing, her opportunity to contribute to development outcomes in her country.

Supporting education through scholarships has been a long-term development strategy of the Australian Government, having hosted more than 2.5 million international students in Australia in the last fifty years. In 2021 alone, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) offered 818 Australia Awards scholarships to individuals from 20 developing countries at an estimated cost of \$225 million. Of these 818 scholarships, 233 went to students from Papua New Guinea (PNG), and a further 93 to students from other Pacific countries (DFAT 2021).

On acceptance of an Australia Award, scholars sign a contract declaring that they will comply with the conditions of the scholarship, including the requirement ‘to leave Australia for a minimum of two years’ after completion (DFAT 2020). Scholars know at the beginning of their journey that they will eventually go home. This being the case, previous studies have catalogued common expectations among scholarship recipients about their return home. These include the ability to improve the long-term welfare and status of their family; personal satisfaction in being returned to family and friends; reduced living costs (compared with overseas); and a more relaxed pace of life (Strachan et al. 2007, Connell 2009; cf. McGavin 2017).

Such expectations suggest that scholars have made ‘rational’ calculations that there is some benefit to uprooting themselves from their home and community to study overseas. These benefits are not all material: many reflect Pacific Island cultures that prioritise family and community (Gegeo 2001, Douglas 2002). Scholars often consider an overseas education an important mechanism by which they can ‘give back’ to their families and communities. Scholars also have high expectations of increased job satisfaction; they expect to be able to contribute to a more successful workforce, to help change policy, and, ultimately, improve community/national development (Strachan et al. 2007, Connell 2009, Zubrinich and Haley 2009).

Expectations are not all internally driven, however. While away, students are frequently encouraged by a range of actors in the scholarship ecosystem to expect more of themselves and their home environments; scholars are referred to as ‘agents of change’ in donor-sponsored resources, platforms, discussions and publications. A term derived predominantly from the organisational change literature, change agents are those individuals or groups who seek to apply new practices or ‘logics’ to their organisation (Lunenburg 2010). Gender scholars (Jolly 2000, Parsons and Priola 2012, Derbyshire et al. 2018, Roche et al. 2018) have also applied this theory to prospects of gender equality reform in various organisations.

Research (Agarwal 2017, Connell 2009, Conway and Potter 2007) has pointed to different scales of change as a result of an overseas education, ranging from change in everyday practices and small-scale actions, to building networks or coalitions through which they might embark on collective action that results in broader, transformative institutional and social change. These conceptualisations of change also fit within a broader literature on developmental leadership that considers the legitimacy, authority and capacity of change agents to mobilise people and resources, and to forge coalitions in the pursuit of positive developmental goals (Booth and Unsworth 2014, Denney and McLaren 2016, DLP 2018, Barbara and Baker 2020).

The link between overseas education and change agency, however, is complicated by structural factors such as workforce participation rates and patriarchal cultures (Arnot and Fennell 2008: 4). In PNG for example, job prospects for returned graduates can be determined by a combination of the structure of the economy (resource and tourism dependent, vulnerable to external shocks including natural disasters, see, for example, Duncan 2010), and the weakness of key institutions, such as government and the wider public service which tend to be major sources of employment (Cocklin and Keen 2000).

The concept of an individual change agent has also been questioned in the organisational management literature, which has shown that personal change does not equal organisational change as the latter is 'rarely implemented by one person' (Buchanan et al. 2007: 1066). Zubrinich and Haley (2009), for example, found that women's experiences in the public sector in PNG after studies in Australia were particularly challenging. Pacific cultural and social norms play a significant role in determining the appropriateness of employment for women and men in certain industries and at which level they are employed (Dyer 2017).

Previous research has also underlined that Pacific scholars return to specific social cultures and norms in their workplaces, communities and households. Martin and Thomson describe the return culture in Kiribati, for example, in terms of the 'communal living and participatory processes situated within the *maneaba* system' (2018: 12).<sup>1</sup> This culture bestows privilege: the cultural leadership role of the 'boss' (at work, or in the community), who is responsible for all decision-making; respect for elders, requiring complete adherence to decisions they make even where there may be personal disagreement; 'secret knowledge' that is not widely shared and only passed on when an individual has 'earned the right to know'. Similarly, in Vanuatu, Strachan, Samuel and Takaro note that:

Christianity has played an important role in defining the position of women in contemporary Vanuatu society. That role is most often one of domestication, accompanied by self-effacing behaviour ... and the cultural imperatives to conform to gender-stereotypical roles are very powerful, even for highly educated women (2007: 148).

In various ways, these specific social norms conflict with (what may appear to be) more 'egalitarian' workplace cultures and practices observed in the country of study. This again contributes to heightened expectations that the knowledge and expertise scholars have learned and cultivated while studying will be valued in the workplace, when in practice, other forms of knowledge and ways of working are privileged in the home context.

Indeed, new mindsets and attitudes can have consequences in the PNG – and Pacific Island – workforce. Some research has found that feelings of being an ‘outsider’ on return home can surface (Agarwal 2017), as well as a desire to return back to their country of study (Zubrinich and Haley 2009). Scholars can come to resent incidences of nepotism in the workplace; be disappointed in the lower wages paid than overseas; and succumb to a general cultural shock when back at work. On their return, students have missed specific aspects of ‘Western culture’, including greater independence and personal decision-making; personal space and privacy; freedom of dress and movement; and entertainment options such as going to the movies and theatre (Strachan et al. 2007, Connell 2009, Agarwal 2017, Martin and Thomson 2018).

There is a specifically gendered effect at work too. Across multiple disciplines, research has found that gender inequalities persist due to culture, processes and practices that underpin organisations and workplaces, and which largely go unnoticed and therefore unchallenged (see for example Meyerson and Thompkins 2007, Spark et al. 2019, Tuuau 2019). Moreover, on return home, research has uncovered that Pacific women find that their husbands expect them to resume their traditional role in the family, including housework, care for children, elderly and villages. The work of Ceridwen Spark (2011, 2017) as well as that of Nicole Haley (2015) points to male partners’ frequent resort to violence when women challenge traditional gender roles. While some Western experiences simply clash with traditional workplace practices, on other occasions Western ideas can be seen as a threat to traditional island cultures and provoke serious and violent backlash (Eves et al. 2018).

The assumption that overseas study, including participation in overseas leadership intensive programs, can support women to shift social and workplace cultures and practices – that currently delegitimise women’s broader leadership when they return home – requires some further exploration. Considering the reality of women’s experiences on their return is particularly important from a ‘do no harm’ perspective, given the well-documented increased risk of violence against women when they challenge Pacific gender norms (Eves et al. 2018, Luinstra and Spark 2014, Spark 2011, 2017).

## Research approach

This literature raises three interrelated questions:

1. To what extent do alumnae (that is, women scholarship graduates) expect, and feel they are able, to act as agents of change on return home?
2. What factors either support or hinder alumnae change agency on return home?
3. What are the consequences of alumnae attempts at – and/or achievement of – change?

In answering these questions, this report begins by presenting the change agency expectations as expressed by the research participants. We use participants’ self-identified expectations of their overseas study as a mechanism, or baseline, by which to assess the extent to which change agency is desired on return home.

We categorise these expectations of change agency into three groups – namely to ‘learn from the region’, ‘improve the workplace’ and ‘contribute to development’.

We then interrogate each of these sets of expectations, and uncover an associated assumption in the theory of change agency for scholarship recipients (see Figure 1). Making these assumptions explicit also helps us to analyse the extent to which participant expectations are realistic and achievable on return home, thereby informing our response to the research questions.

**Figure 1: Expectations of change agency as expressed by participants and related assumptions**



## Scope

This small-scale pilot study represents an initial exploration of the research questions with a specific group of alumnae based in Papua New Guinea. The research participants were returned alumnae of the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI), a targeted activity funded by DFAT under the Australia Awards Linkages Framework. The initiative supports participants – selected among Australia Awards scholars and alumni from the Pacific Islands region – to fulfil their leadership potential and 'drive big ideas and reforms in their communities' (DFAT 2017). By the end of an intensive leadership program, it is envisaged that female and male Australia Awards alumni are actively engaged in networks and coalitions that seek to achieve change in their own countries; female Australia Awards alumnae are strengthening cooperation between Pacific countries and Australia; and Australia Awards alumnae use their leadership skills to contribute to sustainable development outcomes for the Pacific (WLI 2018).

In working towards these objectives, participants: complete two week-long leadership intensives involving a range of outdoor, classroom and other learning experiences; are mentored by an Australian woman leader who is matched to their academic, professional and leadership interests and ambitions; have access to one-on-one leadership coaching, academics and subject matter experts to help build their knowledge, apply their learning and improve their leadership practice; develop a range



of skills, networks and competencies that will make each woman an effective, ethical leader of developmental change; are invited to share experiences with other scholars and leaders at a range of learning and networking events and activities; and are eligible to apply for a workplace internship (if they have successfully graduated from the Leadership and Mentoring program).

While the WLI is not alone in articulating these kinds of objectives (see Conway and Potter 2007), the initiative provides a useful case study to test the assumption that developmental leadership in an alumnus' home country benefits from an overseas education and partnerships with Australians.

## Research as a partnership

In undertaking this research, a partnership was struck between academics at the Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA) at ANU and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in early 2020. DPA's significant experience in undertaking Pacific research demonstrates the value of research projects undertaken in partnership with a local research institution, supported through curated events that enable local buy-in and contextual understanding.<sup>2</sup> In light of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21, partnership with longstanding colleagues at UPNG became more than important to the quality of the research; it was essential to the project's execution. With international borders closed throughout the period of data collection and analysis (April–June 2021), this research would not have been possible in the absence of this trusted partnership.

## Sample

Due to the comparatively higher number of WLI scholars originating from Papua New Guinea, the pilot study was undertaken with participants in that country. WLI alumnae were selected on the basis of their having returned home for at least one year (irrespective of their length of stay in Australia) and while a scholar having done the following: participated in at least one of the two week-long WLI intensive programs; been allocated an Australian mentor (irrespective of the number of sessions with the mentor – given the perception of the scholar's involvement in the program is as important as their learning from the mentor); and participated in at least two coaching sessions with the Australian-based WLI coach.

A total of 14 women participated in the study, from 23 approached via email, representing a response rate of 61 per cent. Four women were from the first WLI cohort (accepted into the WLI program in February 2018); six from the second cohort (accepted in July 2018) and four from the third cohort (accepted in February 2019). Experiences in Australia varied considerably given that the women studied different courses in very different parts of the country: of the 14, two studied undergraduate degrees, and the rest postgraduate, spread across ten universities: Australian National University, Curtin University, Flinders University, Macquarie University, University of Canberra, University of Melbourne, University of Queensland, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Western Sydney, and Victoria University. Five women brought children with them. Back home, seven women returned to work in the public sector (including in education); and six in the private or development sectors. One alumnae has still not been able to find employment on return home, and another two were unemployed for periods of at least ten months.

Given that developmental leadership is understood – and taught through the leadership intensive – as a political process that mobilises people and resources towards a collective outcome, a second group of individuals were asked to participate in the study, namely participants’ self-identified ‘champions’. Champions were used as a proxy for a broader coalition of change makers;<sup>3</sup> they were intended to represent individuals who could speak to the alumnae’s ability and success in creating supportive coalitions for change.

Of the 14 alumnae interviewed, only nine felt comfortable in nominating a PNG-based supporter, and only four of these nine nominated champions responded to the survey, despite assurances of confidentiality. Of those who responded to the survey, all were based in Port Moresby; three are female and one male. Two participants were in the age range of 50 years and older, while one was in the age range of between 30 to 50 and one participant was younger than 30. Two of the nominated supporters are self-employed, while the other two are employed in the government and private sector respectively. In terms of educational qualifications, three of the supporters completed university outside of PNG, while one completed university in PNG. While they met their respective alumnae through different avenues (at work; while studying; as a previous supervisor) in all instances they were working together on a current project.

## Data collection and analysis

This project adopted a multi-methods approach, so as to ‘more fully situate the practice of [leadership] within the social and cultural context in which it takes place, thus generating greater insight’ (Baker and Barbara 2020: 153) and was subject to ethical clearance by the ANU’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

In addition to a substantial literature review to situate previous research on returning scholars within the wider women’s leadership literature, the project used two other forms of data collection: interviews with WLI scholars, and a survey distributed to individuals identified by the scholars as their ‘champions’.

- **Interviews/storytelling** with research participants were undertaken to identify alumnae’s own perceptions, and experience, of returning to their workplaces, households and communities, and opportunities to initiate change in those environments. Semi-structured conversations were held with participants in an attempt to uncover their stories of change, both successful and unsuccessful, and their own understandings of the barriers or enablers to that change.

The interview instrument was developed by the research team comprised of academics in PNG and Australia. The two researchers from UPNG revised a draft questionnaire into two separate instruments: one for participants who remained in the same employment on return, and another questionnaire for participants who changed employment when they returned from Australia. Questions asked women to reflect on their career/job aspirations, their workplace environment and opportunities for growth including through mentorship; their personal experience of returning to PNG at home and in their community; and how studying in Australia and undertaking the WLI has made a difference for them back home. While there was some structure to the

interviews, participants generally felt comfortable enough to share their personal stories in some detail.

Interviews with the 14 women based in Port Moresby took place between April and June 2021, lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. Women from Port Moresby were selected – as distinct from other urban or rural areas of PNG – so that UPNG researchers, also based there, could conduct face-to-face interviews. COVID-19 restrictions and border closures meant that the ANU researcher could not participate in data collection, but did not prevent UPNG researchers from meeting research participants in person. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed in full. Given the positive response bias towards the scholarship provider commonly found in similar research, the importance of involving a researcher from PNG cannot be overstated. This research is richer for its presentation of the varied experiences of the alumnae interviewed, in their own voice.

- **An online survey of individuals identified as the scholars' 'champions'** was disseminated in May 2021 to explore the extent to which – and how – the people surveyed are actually supportive of women leaders and their change initiatives. Alumnae were requested to nominate one individual with whom they had developed a strong relationship and who they considered had supported them since their return. The nominated supporters took part in a short survey. The questions in the survey focused on the relationship of the nominated supporter with the scholar and any work project they had undertaken together to enhance her developmental leadership.

Data from both the interviews and the online survey were analysed through the online platform MURAL. This allowed researchers from PNG and Australia to consider all the data together by testing and confirming our understandings and interpretations. Quotes from the interviews and survey were pasted and moved around a white canvas, divided by various themes (for example, 'self-perceptions of leadership', 'workplace environment', 'initiated reforms'). The interactivity allowed by this tool was highly valuable in the analysis process, allowing researchers from very different perspectives to feel free to move ideas around the virtual board to reach a common understanding.

## Research limitations

As a pilot study, this research does not purport to be a comprehensive analysis of all Pacific Islands scholarship recipients, or indeed, of all WLI participants. Rather, it is an initial exploration of a critical development concern in the Pacific – women's leadership – through the lens of education and skills pathways.

While the questionnaire covered a range of topics including change agency at home and in the community, the participants interviewed tended to reflect more on change agency within the workplace. This suggests that interviewees conceptualised, and/or prioritised, development change through their workplaces rather than in other spheres of their life.

Three important points can be made in relation to the limited sample size of the study. First, not all WLI participants wished to share their experiences or were not in a

position to respond to the repeated requests for interviews. This may reflect a common trend evidenced in the Pacific more broadly that these women feel they are already 'over researched' through the Global Tracer Facility annual surveys as well as WLI monitoring and evaluation.

Second, and related to the first, the low response rate appears to indicate that very few of the champions nominated by WLI participants felt sufficiently comfortable to respond to a short online survey, or did not have the technological capacity/means to do so. The idea that these champions could realistically represent a proxy for a broader coalition is also problematic.

Third, the number of the participants involved in the study is low. This notwithstanding, the qualitative interviews generated rich insights into the experiences of PNG alumnae that constitute a previously undocumented evidence base from which to consider future programming in support of women's leadership in PNG.

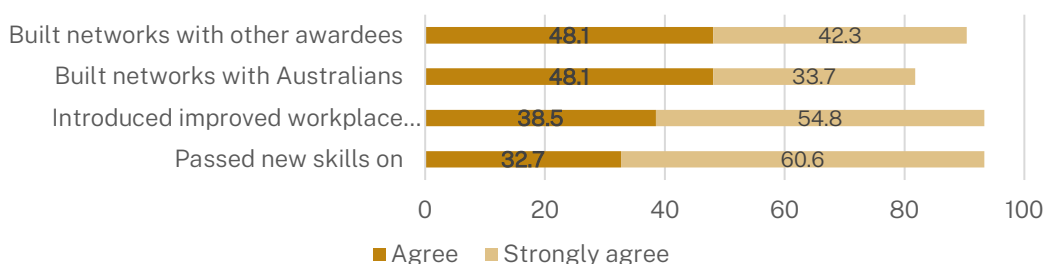


## Change agency expectations

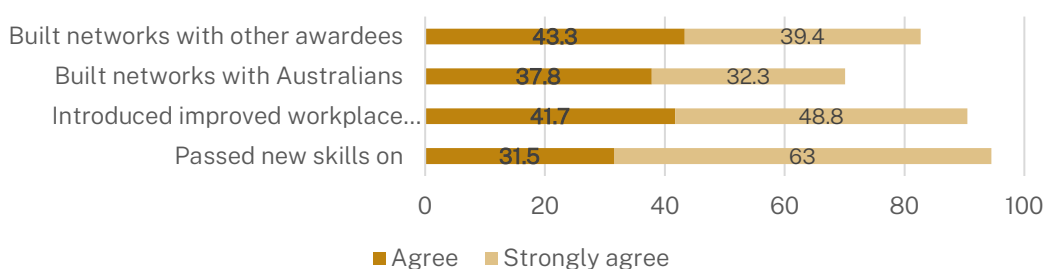
We were interested in understanding our participants' expectations of their overseas study, and how these compared more broadly to the expectations of all PNG-based alumni, captured through the Global Tracer Facility's annual surveys. One of the key questions regularly asked of all Australia Awards alumni is whether 'as a result of the award', they consider that they have 'passed on new skills and knowledge to others', 'introduced improved practices and innovations through [their] work', 'built networks with Australians or Australian organisations', or 'built networks with other awardees'. Figure 1 presents the responses of 104 male and 127 female PNG graduates of Australian-based universities between 1996 and 2016.

**Figure 2. Perceptions of change agency as a consequence of an Australia Award, 1996–2016**

### Men



### Women



Source: Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility (2020a), Global Tracer Surveys Years 1 to 3 [Data file]. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade & Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.

Both men and women alumni appear very positive about their own sense of change agency, potentially indicating some positive response bias given that participants know the questions are asked by/on behalf of the Australian Government.

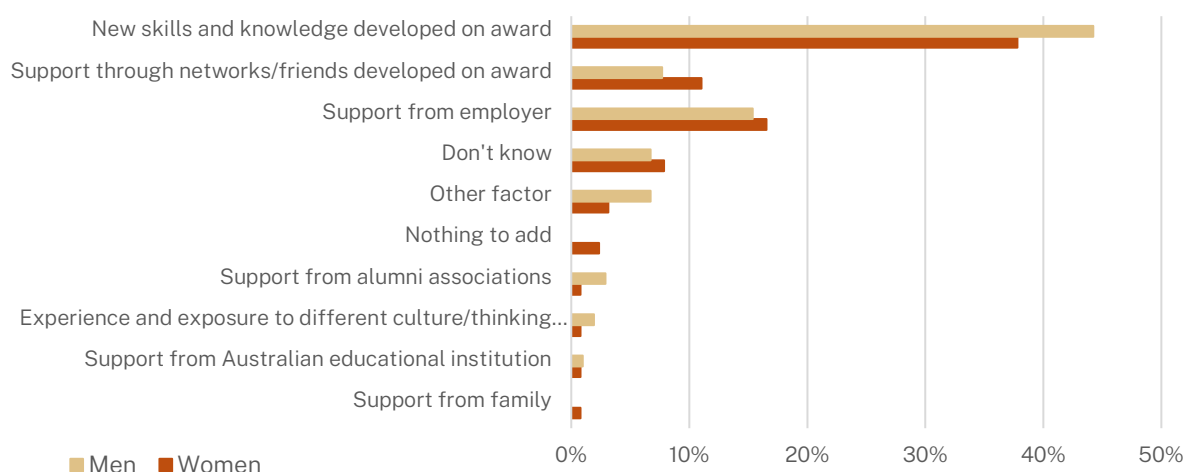
While still overwhelmingly positive, there are some differences between men and women. Women appeared less inclined than men to 'strongly agree' they had introduced improved workplace practice, but were more likely to 'strongly agree' that they had passed on new skills to their workplaces and work teams. This seems to indicate that PNG-based alumnae (that is, women scholarship graduates) are more

comfortable conceptualising their agency in terms of sharing knowledge, rather than reforming existing workplaces.

Small differences also appear between men and women returnees in terms of their perceptions of building networks. Women were less likely than men to ‘agree’ that they had formed relationships with Australians while on their Award, and with other scholarship recipients, but ‘strongly agree’ to both in similar proportions to men. This finding is less clear in its interpretation, although it may suggest that in the aggregate, PNG alumnae felt less comfortable than men in claiming relationship status with Australia/ns. This is interesting given that the proportion of PNG students who considered they had developed close professional relationships with Australians has been consistently high over the years compared with students from other countries and regions (Edwards et al. 2020, see also AA GTF 2020b: 31, AA GTF 2019: 38).

When asked what factors contributed to their perceptions of change agency, PNG-based alumnae were more likely than their male counterparts to nominate *support* – from networks and friends, employers and family – while men were more likely to point to the role of their new skills and knowledge (Figure 2).

**Figure 3. Contributing factors in perceptions of change agency, 1996–2016**



Source: AA GTF 2020a [Data file].

Not dissimilarly, our study participants articulated three sets of expectations in applying for a scholarship to study in Australia: to learn from others in the region; improve the workplace; and contribute to the development of PNG. As presented in Figure 3, it is noteworthy that each set of expectations identified by participants in the study reflects a specific – but implicit – assumption in theory of change agency. We now illustrate each of these sets of expectations with quotes from participants’ interviews.

Figure 4: Typology of participants' self-identified expectations

| To learn from the region   | To improve the workplace  | To contribute to development   |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to meet new people in Australia and the Pacific</li> <li>to find a mentor</li> <li>to learn from a woman leader in their field</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to be able to share new knowledge and skill sets in the workplace</li> <li>to better deal with workplace challenges</li> <li>to work with, and lead, men</li> <li>to gain recognition</li> <li>to be promoted</li> <li>to be able to support family</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to 'give back' to PNG</li> <li>to improve gender inequality in PNG</li> </ul>                               |
| <p><b>Assumption 1:</b><br/>Connections with women across the Pacific support women's leadership opportunities on return home</p>  | <p><b>Assumption 2:</b><br/>Ideas and skills learned overseas (in this case, in Australia), can be integrated in to the workplace and community on return home</p>  | <p><b>Assumption 3:</b><br/>Building women's leadership 'competence' will contribute their ability to drive development reforms on return home</p> |

### Learning from the region

Expectations of making connections in Australia and the Pacific were voiced by most alumnae. For many, a high priority was placed on building a network:

*I wanted to foster connections and relationships between PNG health and [a university in Australia]. Building a network was something I wanted to gain (Participant 11).*

*I expected to gain, apart from the qualification, a network with international students, and also learn from Australia (Participant 1).*

For others, however, the real value of the scholarship and participation in the leadership intensive was in finding a mentor and learning from an Australian woman in the same field of study and/or work:

*... one-on-one mentors, oh that was the most important [thing to me] ... (Participant 9).*

*I realised that I didn't have a role model and I wanted to have [that] and I wanted to learn what leadership was all about so that it could help me achieve my goals (Participant 8).*

*I wanted to learn what leadership looks like. And there, meaning, what does the Australian version of leadership look like (Participant 5).*

### Improving the workplace

Alumnae also identified great expectations of workplace change agency. Women expected that, on return, they would be able to share the skills they had learned while in Australia with their colleagues in PNG:

*I'm not a person who tries to hide, or keep knowledge  
if I can share it with somebody.  
So I was excited about being able to share my experiences  
(Participant 13).*

*I saw the WLI program as an opportunity for me. It really prepared me for this job, here. Because ... it's about managing people but it's about being strategic with the resources, forward looking; where you are now and where do you want to bring this organisation to  
(Participant 8).*

---

*I thought, 'when I go back, I will try this out, I will do these things'. That was what I was expecting I'd get out of it.  
But it's not been very easy (Participant 6).*

---

Some participants specifically linked their experience in Australia with the expectation that they would be better able to deal with the challenges they had faced in the PNG workplace before they left for study, including the opportunity to work more effectively with male colleagues:

*I would say that most of my expectations were drawn from the experience of my dad. I thought 'okay, maybe if I get a masters, I'll be like him', but I also thought it would put me in a better place among men, or managers, and open opportunities, maybe overseas as well  
(Participant 14).*

*I wanted to gain some skills from other women ... because I knew that when I came back here, I would lead both men and women. So I just wanted to experience what it would be like being a female leader  
(Participant 6).*

Alumnae family members, many of whom had made sacrifices to support their overseas study, also drove expectations of improved status and recognition in the workplace:

---

*... my husband did have an expectation that our life would be much better. By getting a higher qualification, I could get a higher paying job.  
And especially with my husband being self-employed ...  
So we had that expectation ...  
(Participant 5).*

---



### Contributing to PNG development

A third group of expectations was evident across returned scholars in terms of improving development outcomes in Papua New Guinea.

*I thought there was so much work that could be done in terms of climate change, adaptation especially, and that there wasn't enough capacity (Participant 6).*

*My friends said, 'why don't you apply for a job in Australia', but I said because my country needs me more and I knew that the benefits of my study could be applied to this country [PNG] (Participant 13).*

Scholars also shared a very strong sense of responsibility to make the best of the opportunity given to them by the Australian Government.

*[Because] I worked [when I was] in Australia, I learned a lot from that working environment that I wanted to change for myself when I came back. I learned that I had to be a lot more aggressive in what I wanted to do. And I shouldn't depend too much on management, or shouldn't depend too much on things that didn't go as planned. It was what I could do for the [organisation] and also for my country. I really wanted to give back what I learned (Participant 5).*

---

*It doesn't make sense to upskill and then come back to do nothing ... we have a responsibility, this is our contribution ... in our family, our community, our organisations that we work in.*

*I think people would expect that when we go for further studies, we [come back and] do things differently. We are blessed. Not everyone could have gone there, to get this Australia Award, be part of the WLI, we understand that there are financial constraints. So we know we have responsibilities to give back.*

*Whatever we can do for the nation, I believe it is better than nothing ... I think any opportunity – informal, formal – I still feel if there is a way that I can share with others, make a difference, I will do that (Participant 9).*

---

As with the expectations of workplace reform, developmental expectations were not only driven internally, but also externally: 'my family had a higher expectation of me contributing effectively in my local community ...' (Participant 2). For others, making a contribution implied a degree of 'self-improvement':

*I guess I had this vision of helping mostly in the area [that I work in], so my vision was to apply [for WLI] in line with my vision for applying for the [Australia Award] scholarship, and just basically to improve myself as a person and as a women's leader representative in the community and the workplace (Participant 14).*

*Because I am a conservative and shy person, I wanted to push myself, to be a more outgoing person, to be able to make a contribution (Participant 6).*

These are ambitious expectations and the degree to which they have been met on return home varies considerably. In the next three sections, we illustrate the opportunities and challenges faced by alumnae in meeting expectations of learning from the region, improving their workplace, and contributing to development in PNG.

## Meeting expectations of regional learning

We asked our study participants to consider the extent to which what they learned from others in the region improved their experience on return home. In their responses, alumnae referred to two different groups of people from whom they learned while in Australia: their 'Pacific sistas', and the Australian-based mentors with whom they were paired through the WLI program.

### The comfort of Pacific sistahood

Research participants enthusiastically referred to the networks they had established with their 'Pacific sistas'. Alumnae reported that these connections sustain them long after they leave Australia.

*We had the sistas from the Pacific, many of them had a lot of leadership challenges and strengths that were very similar. So you feel that when you say something, someone else in the room will have the same experience. I really learned a lot. As much as it was fun-filled, it was also very rewarding (Participant 9).*

---

*And others in the Pacific, we still email each other. We Facebook messenger each other, 'how are you doing, with your family?' and through the course of the workshops, we learned some of their husbands' names, 'oh [Simon], how is [he] treating you?' [laugh] ... Because we would share all these personal experiences during the workshop. So it's those personal connections that we still keep in touch and talk about, which is interesting. Yeah, sistahood. And sometimes that helps because they say, 'I've been through that. You can do it.' That sort of thing (Participant 3).*

---

*In terms of the people I've met, the connections I've made, not only regarding my studies, but also in the community. I got to meet people from all walks of life, different cultures... (Participant 13).*

Connection among members of the same cohort is one of the explicit objectives of the WLI. Leadership intensives are deliberately designed to facilitate women's sharing of experience and vulnerability. Not surprisingly, the team-building exercises at Outward Bound (a camping experience run in the outskirts of the Australian capital, Canberra), were frequently cited as having contributed to both personal growth, but also enduring friendships.

These friendships also appear to be grounded in a sense of shared Pacific meanings and experiences (including with intimate partners). PNG alumnae frequently commented on the comfort of being heard by their Pacific sistas.

### Australian mentors

Research participants also highly regarded the connections made with Australian mentors. Of particular value were mentors who worked in their field of study, and where that subject matter expertise was able to open new doors:

*I found the mentorship helpful ... she worked in health/HIV so that helped guide my work in public health (Participant 11).*

*I had a really good mentor ... she was in the [same] profession so it was a good match. I was engaged with her [organisation] for a term ... and learnt about sensitivity to disability and gender (Participant 12).*

Australian mentors were also valued when the relationship continued on return home and those continued discussions supported alumnae in their workplace:

---

*Discussions were based on what was currently happening with my studies and then preparing to return home. And when back in PNG working, discussions were around my work and how I can manage my team through the business changes and with the COVID-19 situation ... I have been able to apply skills and techniques I learned from my mentor ... because I still have ongoing discussions with [her] when I need to (Participant 4).*

---

*So having someone who was in the same knowledge area [was helpful], and when I came back she was one of the people who would always point me to others, find things for me. I see that they really care about you being a leader (Participant 9).*

Mentoring success, then, was evident when PNG alumnae felt comfortable enough to continue drawing on their mentors once they had returned home and when mentors' subject expertise could be drawn on in the context of the PNG workplace. Two of the PNG alumnae also referred to the continued support they receive from the Australian-based WLI leadership coach, Tony Liston.

Not all scholars, however, reported positive mentoring experiences. Negative experiences were generally reported as a consequence of 'inattentive', or 'time-poor' mentors. Where mentor matching has not been successful, alumnae felt significantly disadvantaged on return home, compared to their cohort:

*I never really got acquainted with her because she didn't have the time to come in the first mentoring session with me. The other mentors who came in the first mentoring session got on a good start with their mentees, whereas I was one of the unfortunate ones. I never met with her (Participant 5).*

---

*I was disadvantaged because the person assigned to me didn't even attend the workshops we had in Australia. The mentor let me down (Participant 3).*

---

*I had to wait a long time to get a mentor (Participant 8).*

These reflections point to the problems inherent in Australian-Pacific mentor matching, where the relationship is unable to take into account the specific workplace cultures and knowledge of the mentee, and where the mentor is unable to create, or share opportunities with the mentee when she returns home (Howard et al. 2020).

### Testing the assumption: Regional connections supporting leadership opportunities at home

Underlying expectations that alumnae will be able to learn from the region is the assumption that these connections will support women's leadership opportunities on return home.

The research shows that regional connections have proven useful to women's leadership on return home in two key ways: first, these connections have provided a form of emotional support. Women have been able to lean on new relationships formed with participants from across the Pacific – and trust in them – because of shared cultural meaning and understandings. These relationships are not necessarily 'transformational' in the sense that they have led to new leadership opportunities or changed the way women's leadership is legitimised in the PNG context, but have nonetheless made a significant impact on the lives of alumnae on return home.

Regional connections have also been useful to women's leadership on return home where those connections relate to the specificities of PNG workplace experience. In some cases, PNG alumnae have been able to use their connections with Australian mentors and Pacific sistas where they bring subject matter relevance (such as education support, or knowledge of specific health issues), or support that allows the alumna to show innovation that fits within the PNG context.

## Meeting expectations of workplace improvement

We asked our study participants to consider the extent to which they had been able to meet their expectations of improving – in any way – their workplace on return home. While some alumnae reported very positive experiences, responses also uncovered a fundamental contextual enabler in the workplace environment and cultures.

Indeed, opportunities for alumnae to contribute to workplace reform depended largely on the work environments and cultures. By way of testing opportunities for reform, we compared scholars' own sense of job satisfaction in their previous workplace before they applied for the Australia Award and leadership intensive program, with their descriptions of their work environment on return to PNG, and what they identified as supportive factors.

### Job satisfaction prior to study

For scholars, having a high level of job satisfaction before they left PNG to study in Australia was closely related to whether they saw themselves as having an ability, or an institutional legitimacy, to set the direction of their work, and the work of their organisation. It also appears to be linked to whether or not they felt supported in their role by a positive role model, or a person they defined as a 'mentor'.

*It was challenging but I was doing what I was passionate about ... my supervisor at the time was also like a mentor ... I was the team leader (Participant 10).*

*There were lots of projects going on at the same time and I was managing one of the major projects and I had delivered it successfully before going off, so I really enjoyed what I was doing before I left ... (Participant 3).*

---

*When I came to [the firm], they saw the potential in me ...  
They had a program where they sort of seconded you to projects ...  
I think [the firm's] ideology and vision is it's all rounded.  
When [the firm] leaves PNG ... how will they leave this one Papua New  
Guinean to be multi-skilled so she can find a job? (Participant 8)*

---

Alumnae commonly pointed to the role of men in championing their leadership and professional development, and acting as role models, before they left for Australia. These role models were both from PNG and expatriates. Their support, however, was not usually provided as part of a formal mentoring program.

*There used to be [a team leader] ... I saw that he had a succession plan that was also communicated to the staff.  
That was how I developed skills  
that he saw could enhance my [skills] –  
probably he saw that we had potential to be leaders (Participant 11).*



---

*I worked under two male directors. I saw a lot of opportunity – I found it interesting to work with them, like how they understood women. But also, I also felt like they opened up a lot of areas for me, and I took advantage of that, and engaged in learning while I was there with them (Participant 7).*

---

*There were lots of project consultants who came from the US, from South Africa, from Australia, from NZ, from within the Pacific, so I had that pool that I could tap into ... I thought, well I'm going to humble myself, be a nobody, and learn off these big guys, who had companies of their own. And so they guided me, they mentored me, they coached me throughout the project. It was a great experience (Participant 3).*

Conversely, alumnae's job satisfaction before they left was much lower where they identified a 'patriarchal culture' in the workplace. This culture was found to be perpetuated by both men and women, particularly in the public sector in PNG.

*I used to work in the private sector before joining the public sector. One particular challenge I encountered was the strong patriarchal culture where certain middle management level positions they are all blocked out for men. And it was difficult being a woman advisor, having to convince them on certain decisions (Participant 1).*

*Working in the government is a challenge itself, and in the legal profession, it's another challenge. Being female is another challenge. Being a female in a patrilineal society in a government office is another challenge (Participant 14).*

---

*You know, we come from a masculine society... if your [male boss is] happy with you, yes, your work runs smoothly; if they think you are a bit pushy, or you talk too much, or you are a bit more work, then they tend to kind of block some of the things that you want to do (Participant 6).*

---

*I think the biggest challenge for me are the cultural perspectives, the gender roles ... So for example, when I was working [in a leadership position], when there was travel, I was not given the option to travel or not. They just assumed that I had little children so they said, 'you are not going' ... I felt bad for that (Participant 7).*

### Experience of the workplace on return home

Where patriarchal workplace cultures continued to be identified on return to PNG – predominantly but not exclusively in the public sector – alumnae found it difficult to stay in those positions. In some cases, women had been forced to resign before going to Australia, while in others, the experience of ‘less patriarchal cultures’ in Australian workplaces made it unbearable to return to these work environments. In two cases, women endured significant periods of unemployment because of the challenges they faced when they returned to the PNG public service:

---

*A lot of things were going on in the office that were not right. I deal a lot with gender and issues concerning women, so I realised what was happening was about inequality and discrimination. I wanted to speak up but I was concerned about my job, and also concerned that if I did speak up, other people would be affected. They might lose their job. So I just thought, ‘I’ll take myself out of this place.’ And eventually I did ...It was difficult for me. I left my old job because of the environment and my decision to leave was made in a hurry; I didn’t really think it through, I just realised that I needed to leave. I got up and I left without finding another job. So that was hard. I put myself in that situation and I was unemployed for 12 months. The whole year, everyone thought that I went to a better job, but actually I was unemployed, living at home (Participant 14).*

---

*I was unemployed for 10 months after returning home (Participant 11).*

Where alumnae had returned to, and stayed in, the public service – usually for reasons of job security – they considered that opportunities for promotion, advancement and change were repeatedly blocked; often women did not feel they were able to practice the kind of leadership skills they had learned in Australia. Some scholars felt that, as women, they had been passed over for promotions because of a cultural de-valuing of the skills they had learned – and their higher education. A more concerning finding is the sexism apparent in some workplaces which undermines performance and works to limit women’s legitimacy within the workplace. This further restricts opportunity for workplace innovation and change agency.

---

*Career wise I haven’t gone up to a position where I felt I needed to be at this time. I feel like I should be in a more managerial position. It’s not that I feel - it’s not because I can’t be a manager - it’s because of the structure of the organisation. Our positions don’t allow us to graduate up very fast. People are like sealed to their positions so it’s very hard to promote somebody (Participant 5).*

---

*I have had an issue with colleagues making sexual suggestions, but I tried to just grow a thick skin. When I came back, I spoke my mind, and I think a lot of the men didn't really like it. Especially Papua New Guinean men. When it comes to meetings, when I have something to say, I say something. But at the same time I try to be as tactful as I can. I've really noticed that nobody really talks to me. From the comments they make ... you know they have obviously been discussing you – not in the context of work, but in the context of your sexuality.... The fact that I have come back with a [higher degree] ... I think that was something they found quite difficult to accept because usually a lot of our colleagues go for studies and they don't perform, and they come back and they still haven't [finished] ... Even to the point of telling me that I could have got an extension, why did I come back early? To the point of telling me, 'you went for a four year holiday'. These are the things I face every day. Sometimes I just brush them aside, or I just try to pretend I didn't hear (Participant 13).*

More empowering workplace cultures, however, were evident in the private sector and in the development sector, and where scholars work in teams with more gender balance, and/or more women in leadership positions. Participant 12, who now works in a team of six, five of whom are women, noted that she felt '*strengthened and empowered*'. Participant 4 now works in a gender-balanced team, and said that '*my colleagues now relate to me in my capacity as a supervisor more attentively...*' In an international NGO, Participant 10 worked under a female boss, and a gender-balanced team, noting, '*I still work in [an area I love] but now I'm working with local women so it is exciting!*' When Participant 14 finally did find work again, she explained that she now enjoys a more flexible and 'less toxic' workplace, in a team that included two women professionals and two male administration officers: '*I would say it's empowering, I know the boss herself, and being a Papua New Guinean female, it's very encouraging to see someone in front of you who actually made a life for herself in [this profession].*'

### Testing the assumption: Integrating learned ideas and skills in the PNG workplace

Underlying expectations that alumnae will be able to improve the workplace is the assumption that the ideas and skills learned in Australia can be integrated into the workplace on return home.

In testing this assumption, the research made two interesting findings. Change agency within a PNG context likely depends on the opportunities provided by the workplace. Interviews with alumnae uncovered that workplace change agency is best supported when women have high job satisfaction indicated by an ability to contribute to the direction of the organisation, on-the-job learning opportunities, effective leadership and positive role modelling, including any in/formal mentoring provided by men.

Sexism and derogatory social norms, on the other hand, are significant barriers to women's legitimacy in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> In some workplaces, women have been blocked from leadership opportunities sometimes in spite of their higher qualifications and experience in Australia (for example, Participant 5). When women return to PNG with an overseas education, they are more likely to feel like they can showcase their learned

leadership capabilities in workplaces where there are more women at the top of the organisation, and/or where the team has greater gender balance (Participants 4, 12 and 10). Indeed, the expectation of change agency has, in some cases, come at the cost of employment (Participant 14). This study also uncovered that some of the alumnae were unable to transition back into employment after their period in Australia, and that some of their new learning and experiences made it very difficult for them to endure their previous workplaces.

## Meeting expectations of contributing to development

We asked our study participants whether they felt they had been able to meet their own expectations of contributing to developmental outcomes, of any description. In considering this, and drawing on the importance of coalition building in the developmental leadership literature, we compared our study participants' self-assessments of change agency in their communities and workplaces, with assessments made by their nominated champions. As explained earlier, these champions represent – for the purposes of this study at least – a proxy for those broader coalitions of change.

### Self-perceptions of leadership

Undoubtedly, returned scholars saw themselves as having benefited from significant 'personal growth' as a consequence of their studies and the intensive leadership program. Women frequently referred to themselves as 'more confident', 'more resilient', 'more capable', and 'more connected'. Confidence was associated with the ability to speak up and address challenges; capability was associated with having more legitimacy in the workplace – being seen by those around them, be it colleagues or students or clients, as a source of expertise; and connection was seen as being able to bring new partners in to contribute to problem solving. Some alumnae suggested that others around them (including their family) also see them as 'more qualified', 'more ambitious', and a 'better provider'.



### MORE CONFIDENT

*I can't really say what I learned exactly ...  
but I've seen changes in myself.  
I'm able to lead now. Confidently.  
Stand in public and speak. I believe in myself.  
I think that was a real big issue before.  
I doubted myself a lot, but the training has really  
helped me to believe in myself; the confidence that  
I can help people change,  
and I can be that agent (Participant 14).*

*I learned ... how to confidently address uncertain  
and difficult situations (Participant 4).*

*The training really helped me in building and working as [part of] a team (Participant 11).*

*I've noticed every time I [teach], and I share my experience in terms of how it applies, and the reasons why we teach and you can see the look of interest in [the students'] faces. You can see that they have a lot of questions. I've also noticed that the students I've taught were a bit more curious and ask more questions ... So you can see they have an interest to learn because of my exposure (Participant 13).*

## MORE EFFECTIVE AND CAPABLE

## MORE CONNECTED

*Because I look after [my colleagues'] professional development, I have used my networks from overseas, teachers from [other parts of PNG], most of them are Australian. So I tapped into one of them with very good initiative. We had our first leadership training session with the head of department and they were really excited. [The networks that I bring are part of the reason] why [my colleagues] look up to someone like me (Participant 9).*

*I've fostered an important network with [an Australian] Institute, and I continue to work with them (Participant 11).*

---

*I still maintain my links to the PNG Alumni Associates and I still talk to my friends and my lecturers at [my Australian university] on a day-to-day basis. Like through email or FB or LinkedIn or FB Messenger or WhatsApp. And some of the cohorts are basically like friends, we talk. If there's an issue, especially with COVID, I was asking all the clinicians here, 'hey, what are you guys doing in your clinics? We want to set up here ... in the provinces', so that's where it came in handy, calling out for help, 'we're short of PPEs, which supplier, or where do I go to get PPE for this particular province?' So I still have my networks (Participant 8).*

---



While women rated themselves as more capable, the onus placed on them to contribute to development reform in PNG has been, to varying degrees, more difficult to meet. Some of this development reform was conceptualised as change in the workplace: an alumna returning to the education sector reported some success in implementing workplace changes, such as collaborating with external donors to improve maths and sciences curriculums (Participant 9).

There was certainly more activity reported outside of the workplace – including through small projects – although some of this remained in the ‘planning’ stage. The considerable number of development projects planned (if not implemented) is in part explained by the terms of the WLI program which encourages reform initiatives of any scale, including – in 2020/21 – through a dedicated ‘COVID-19 project fund’.

WLI’s establishment of this COVID-19 project fund has allowed returnee scholars to pursue micro-development projects, providing an interesting example of in-country support. With the benefit of that fund, one participant has been able to do ‘a lot of awareness on menstruation hygiene at school; care packs have been provided to over 300 girls’ (Participant 12). ‘Psyched up’ from her time in Australia, Participant 5 explained that she had been able to pay forward what she had learned on WLI when she returned home, when the local market in her village was closed:

*I'd really documented well what I learned ... When I came back, I was so psyched up, I taught 54 mamas. At that time, they took out the market, they wanted to put in a new one, and so these 54 mothers were without jobs. So I just came fresh from the leadership program and I said, you know what, I'm going to motivate you guys so you won't give up. So I took 54 mothers through the leadership program. And they felt so pumped up and motivated. And now they are business mothers, doing a lot of work, making more money than I am! But they really appreciated that leadership is not just someone who 'talk talk much much'. Leadership is in the form of anything at all. Even the silent person there that does things very diligently (Participant 5).*

Two other participants (4 and 11) were interested in improving their communities’ financial literacy. While one of them explained that the project was on hold as a consequence of the pandemic, the other participant said that she had started the project with her family in their village.

The village was also the location of Participant 3’s reform ideas. Having returned for a family burial, she observed that the waterways were blocked by plastic, and that the marketplace lacked security for women.

*And so I made some suggestions to the lead councillor. Maybe you guys should get your act together and close all markets by maybe 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock and go home. And your rubbish, don't throw rubbish into the water systems because we've been using it for ages. It's things like that. I asked him to interact with the local health centre workers and village leaders from different [areas] and I said you guys need to come together because now, in the highlands ... there is no cooperation.*

*I saw things like that and I talked to the councillor to at least give him some ideas. So it's that sort of thing, but at the work level or national level, no not yet (Participant 3).*

Participant 3's experience betrays her understanding that implementing reform ideas in the workplace and at the 'national level' requires much more than the sharing of an idea with the local councillor. In fact none of the participants were able to give an example of 'national level' initiatives, undertaken individually or in coalition with others.

### Others' perceptions of alumnae change agency

The literature on returned scholars suggests that their exposure to new ways of thinking and working is not always valued when they return; instead, the changes that are more valued are those that fit local cultures. Returnees are required to 'integrate [their] new skills in a culturally sensitive manner' (Connell 2009: 174), reinforcing the idea that local and regional cultural influences take priority over Western ideas.

Given these findings, champions were asked whether new ideas and practices brought back to PNG through the alumnae's studies and leadership learning were valued in their work environment on return home. Champions outlined what they thought these new skills and mindsets were: generating new ideas and being strategic; listening and responding to others positively; being calm, organised and consultative; and being a specialist in their chosen field. The four champions either agreed or strongly agreed that these new skills and mindsets were valued in the workplace. One of the four commented that these skills had been clearly recognised given the alumna s/he knew had been appointed a project leader after the completion of her studies (Champion 4). In a final remark, that champion considered that an alumna's experience on return home was influenced greatly by a local 'support system':

Having a support system upon return to country is vital in getting a scholar settled in and feeling empowered to extend the knowledge they have gained in the workplace. This support system of like-minded people will ensure that the scholar can excel and have a stable mindset as we know the prejudicial views that some have of scholars [who] return from studies entering the workplaces (Champion 4).

Champions were also asked how effectively these new strategies learned in Australia had been implemented. To this, champions' responses varied. One acknowledged that the alumna's students were very 'fond of her', and that her honesty and courage were widely valued by those around her (Champion 1); another considered the effectiveness of the alumna's new strategies lay in her having been able to adapt 'very well to the PNG way' (Champion 3). A third response linked the alumna's effectiveness to her increased confidence: 'women need a boost to their confidence and I think the training gives them that' (Champion 2). Another felt unable to comment because the alumna had not been back in PNG for long enough to make a fair assessment (Champion 4).

We were interested in the extent to which developmental projects being implemented by alumnae were seen as a demonstration of legitimate leadership in the community. Champions were asked about the perception of the projects currently being

implemented with an alumna, and whether funding for the project had been a challenge.

Champions were asked whether the community or organisation in which the project is being implemented 'accepts you and the WLI scholar as leaders'. Responses were mixed. One champion linked leadership with communicating and bringing others along in achieving a common goal, noting that the alumna 'can even empower others to be leaders in the area where she seeks one with the gift to adhere to a certain task' (Champion 1). Another champion suggested that his/her alumna definitely benefits from the support of their community because 'she leads the way and shows initiative' (Champion 3). More cautiously, another response indicated that there was:

... still prejudice in having women in leadership roles. These prejudices come from both female and male professional counterparts. The reasons may vary from person to person, however, these prejudices stem from others not having the awareness of the aim of [an alumna] and the 'bigger picture' of how [she] can be beneficial to the organisation (Champion 4).

Champions' also expressed interesting views on the implicit challenges in funding these development projects. As one supporter noted, 'funding is not an unusual problem when you want to achieve something different in PNG' (Champion 3). Commenting on a new collaborative project, another champion noted that while confident their project had the potential to draw funding, they were still facing setbacks in the initial set up (Champion 1). Other champions, however, suggested that funding was not an insurmountable barrier, either because the project was part of a larger organisational program with funding attached (Champion 2), or because 'very little funding was required' (Champion 4).

### Testing the assumption: Linking leadership competence and sustainable development

Underlying expectations that alumnae will be able to contribute to development in their home country is the assumption that building women's leadership competence can facilitate this. And yet, to make a contribution to development outcomes, the developmental leadership literature stresses the need for stronger relationship building, specifically in the home country. This research finds that this critical element – the development of effective, broad based coalitions in country – is a missing component of support from scholarship programs.

As a consequence of their experiences in Australia, alumnae – and their champions – generally believe they are more competent leaders. This competence can translate to developmental change when their interventions are valued, and heeded, by those around them. Funded projects – like the WLI COVID-19 project – can be an opportunity through which alumnae are able to demonstrate their leadership in the community. There is also a strong desire to pay forward the experience learned in Australia, be it with the *mamas* at the market, or by supporting the applications of other young women for leadership programs. It is noteworthy that WLI has inspired some alumnae to work together to create a formalised platform from which they could replicate the WLI experience, including through mentorship, 'so that we can share what we went through; for me, I want a lot of others to go through that' (Participant 1).

Alumnae were more likely to articulate developmental change as the design and implementation of their own personal project rather than engagement with the root causes of development challenges posed by gender inequality, climate change, and income inequality. It is unrealistic to assume that development outcomes are more likely to be achieved on return home solely by building individual (women's) leadership competence. At best, our research suggests that supporting individuals to drive development change requires further support when scholars return home.

## Conclusion

Pacific Island scholars return to communities and political economies defined by social and cultural relations. Social norms are constructed and reconstructed in multiple and overlapping sites: from the home, to the village, to the workplace. These norms are played out in mutually reinforcing ways, and interact, to varying degrees, with Western ideas. Over the past decade, there has been an increasing focus on the need to understand the local context before undertaking development assistance (Duncan 2010), but as Connell notes, ‘matching local needs and overseas skills is never easy’ (2009: 168).

This research has uncovered a strong sense of pride among alumnae in terms of their improved leadership competence, which they see as having benefited from an overseas education and participation in the WLI. These women are deeply appreciative of the investment made by the Australian Government: indeed, some appear more grateful of the opportunity to learn about leadership than to undertake undergraduate/postgraduate studies.

We were interested in the relationship between women’s expectations of overseas study and their experiences on return home. We tested this with a group of 14 alumnae of the Australia Awards program and Women’s Leadership Initiative from Papua New Guinea. We uncovered three sets of expectations that underpin their experience of a scholarship and involvement in the leadership program. These women expected to learn from their region while they were away, improve their workplaces and contribute to development outcomes once they returned home.

In meeting these expectations, we identified both enabling factors and barriers. Positively, regional connections have proven useful to women’s leadership on return home in two key ways: as a form of emotional support derived from the shared meanings and experiences with their ‘Pacific sistas’; and as a means to gather information on specific workplace issues and needs, when supported by subject expertise in Australia and across the Pacific. Alumnae also indicated high job satisfaction and opportunity for change agency in the workplace when they can contribute to the direction of the organisation, and are given on-the-job learning opportunities. Positive role modelling is also key, including any in/formal mentoring provided by men in the workplace. We also found that as a consequence of their experiences in Australia, alumnae – and their champions – believe they are more competent leaders.

This notwithstanding, the study also reaffirms earlier findings (Howard et al. 2020) that mentors are useful on return home only in so far as they understand the local context and can continue to support workplace legitimacy through their relevant Pacific networks. We found that change agency within a PNG context depends on the opportunities provided by, and the specific cultures of, the workplace. Too often, sexist cultures and derogatory social norms are significant barriers to women’s legitimacy in the PNG workplace. Further, women’s increased leadership competence (that is, skills building), usually only translates to developmental change if their interventions are valued, and heeded, by those around them. Alumnae most commonly articulated developmental change as a ‘project’ rather than engaging with the root causes of

development challenges posed by gender inequality, climate change, and income inequality.

The finding that the work environment in PNG can be inhospitable for women as change agents is not new: we know from previous research that while an education can change individuals and their personal expectations of work and life, structural factors – including social norms – often determine opportunities for work and leadership in Pacific Island contexts. Our research reaffirms that some workplace cultures in PNG remain deeply resistant to women’s leadership, and to the idea that alumnae, with their new ideas and skills, can make a legitimate contribution to existing social, political and cultural practices. In these cases, the Australian Government has an obligation – under the do no harm principle – to ensure that the women they have supported with a scholarship are not worse off than before they left PNG.

Importantly, tools exist to do just this. A do no harm approach to scholarships and women’s leadership take into account the norms and practices of the local community from which scholars come, and return to. More can be done to value and recognise women’s leadership competence and opportunity in ways that do not threaten the local community, and the women leaders themselves. Opportunities to showcase and demonstrate alumnae leadership in more empowering and conducive workplace environments could be far better coordinated.

This research also finds that workplace environments can be empowering for women where they feel they are able to make a contribution to the direction of the organisation, where there are on-the-job learning opportunities, and where positive role modelling exists, including from male leaders. There is a role for DFAT to ensure that women are welcomed back into these workplaces, communities and homes more broadly.



## References

- Agarwal, R. (2017) Agency and Selfhood Among Young Palauan Returnees. In J. Taylor and H. Lee (eds) *Mobilities of Return*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Arnot, M. and S. Fennell (2008) (Re)visiting Education and Development Agendas: Contemporary Gender Research. In S. Fennell and M. Arnot (eds) *Gender Education and Equality in a Global Context: Conceptual Frameworks and Policy Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility (AA GTF) (2019), *Tracer Survey Report Year 2 2017–18: Alumni of 1996 to 2005*. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade & Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
- Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility (AA GTF) (2020a) Global Tracer Surveys Years 1 to 3 [Data file]. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade & Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
- Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility (AA GTF) (2020b) *Tracer Survey Report Year 3 2018–19: Alumni of 2011 to 2016*. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade & Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
- Baker, K. and J. Barbara (2020) Revisiting the Concept of Political Participation in the Pacific. *Pacific Affairs* 93(1): 135–156.
- Barbara, J. and K. Baker (2016), [Improving Women’s Electoral Chances through an Evidence-based Approach](#), SSGM Discussion Paper, ANU: Canberra.
- Barbara, J. and K. Baker (2020) [Addressing Collective Action Problems in Melanesia: the Northern Islands Market Vendors’ Association in Vanuatu](#). *Development in Practice Online* 1–11.
- Buchanan, D. A., R. Addicott, L. Fitzgerald, E. Ferlie and J. I. Baeza (2007) Nobody in Charge: Distributed Change Agency in Healthcare. *Human Relations* 60(7): 1065–1090.
- Booth, D., and S. Unsworth (2014) *Politically Smart, Locally Led Development*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Cocklin, C., and M. Keen (2000) Urbanization in the Pacific: Environmental Change, Vulnerability and Human Security. *Environmental Conservation* 27(4): 392–403.
- Connell, J. (2009) ‘I Never Wanted to Come Home’: Skilled Health Workers in the South Pacific. In H. Lee and S. T. Francis (eds) *Migration and Transnationalism*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Conway, D. and R. Potter (2007) Caribbean Transnational Return Migrants as Agents of Change. *Geography Compass* 1(1): 25–45.
- Corbett, J. (2015) ‘Everybody Knows Everybody’: Practising Politics in the Pacific Islands. *Democratization* 22(1): 51–72.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (2021) [Information Brief: Australia Awards](#).
- DFAT (2020) [About Australia Awards Scholarships](#)

- DFAT (2017) [Women's Leadership Initiative](#) Media Release, 22 September 2017.
- Denney, L., and R. McLaren (2016) *Thinking and Working Politically to Support Developmental Leadership and Coalitions: The Pacific Leadership Program*. Melbourne: La Trobe University.
- Derbyshire, H., S. Gibson, D. Hudson, and C. Roche (2018) *From Silos to Synergy: Learning from Politically Informed, Gender Aware Programmes*. Birmingham: Development Leadership Programme.
- Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) (2018) *Inside the Black Box of Political Will: 10 Years of Findings from the Developmental Leadership Program*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- Douglas, B. (2002) Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu. *The Contemporary Pacific* 14(1): 1–38.
- Duncan, R. (2010) [The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific](#). Asian Development Bank.
- Dyer, M. (2017) Growing Down Like a Banana: Solomon Islands Village Women Changing Gender Norms. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 18(3): 193–210.
- Edwards, D., J. Doyle, A. Haddow and A. Radloff (2020) [Global Impact of Australian Aid Scholarships: Long-term Outcomes of Alumni](#). Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra.
- Eves, R., with G. Kouro, S. Simiha and I. Subalik (2018) [Do No Harm: Papua New Guinea](#). Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra.
- Gegeo, D. W. (2001) Cultural Rupture and Indigeneity: The Challenge of (Re)visioning 'Place' in the Pacific. *The Contemporary Pacific* 13(2): 491–507.
- Haley, N. (2015) [State of the Service: Women's Participation in the PNG Public Sector](#). In Brief 2015/60, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, ANU: Canberra.
- Howard, E., J. Barbara and S. Palmieri (2020) [Mentoring to Support Women's Leadership](#). Policy Brief 2020/01, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra.
- Howard, E. (2019) [Effective Support for Women's Leadership in the Pacific: Lessons from the Evidence](#). Discussion Paper 2019/01, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU, Canberra.
- Howard, E., E. Apinelu, T. Neemia and J. Towaki-Bue (2019) Women's Leadership: Bringing Context to Life. *Development Bulletin* 81: 28–32.
- Jolly, M. (2000) Women Ikat Raet Long Human Raet O No? Women's Rights, Human Rights and Domestic Violence in Vanuatu. In A. M. Hilsdon, M. Macintyre, V. Mackie, and M. Stivens (eds). *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Luinstra, A. and C. Spark (2014) [Transforming Workplace Norms in PNG: The Role of the Business Coalition for Women](#) In Brief 2014/35. State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, ANU: Canberra.

- Lunenburg, F. (2010) Managing Change: The Role of the Change Agent. *International Journal of Management, Business and Administration* 13(1): 1–6.
- Martin, T. and I. Thompson (2018) Adaptive Capacity in the Pacific Region: A Study of Continuous Professional Development for In-service Teachers in Kiribati. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 46(1): 6–21.
- McGavin, K. (2017) (Be)Longings: Diasporic Pacific Islanders and the Meaning of Home. In J. Taylor and H. Lee (eds) *Mobilities of Return*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Meyerson, D.E. and M. Tompkins (2007) Tempered Radicals as Institutional Change Agents: The Case of Advancing Gender Equity at the University of Michigan. *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 30(2): 303–22.
- Roche, C., J. Cox, H. Derbyshire, S. Gibson, and D. Hudson (2018) *The Bigger Picture: Gender and Politics in Practice*. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program.
- Parsons, E. and V. Priola (2012) Agents for Change and Changed Agents: The Micro-politics of Change and Feminism in the Academy. *Gender, Work and Organization* 20(5): 580–598.
- Spark, C., J. Cox and J. Corbett (2019) Gender, Political Representation and Symbolic Capital: How Some Women Politicians Succeed. *Third World Quarterly* 40(7): 1227–1245.
- Spark, C. and J. Lee (2018) *Successful Women’s Coalitions in Papua New Guinea and Malaysia: Feminism, Friendships and Social Change*. Developmental Leadership Program Research Paper 50.
- Spark, C. (2017) ‘I Won’t Go Hungry If He’s Not Around’: ‘Working Class’ Urban Melanesian Women’s Agency in Intimate Relationships. In M. Macintyre and C. Spark (eds). *Transformations of Gender in Melanesia*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Spark, C. (2011) Gender Trouble in Town: Educated Women Eluding Male Domination, Gender Violence and Marriage in PNG. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12(2): 164–179.
- Strachan, J., J. Samuel and M. Takaro (2007) Ni-Vanuatu Women Graduates: What Happens When They Go Home? *Development in Practice* 17(1): 147–153.
- Tuuau, A. A., with E. Howard (2019) [The Long Road to Becoming a Parliamentarian in Samoa: Political Apprenticeship, Learning New Language and Pushing Gender Boundaries](#). Discussion Paper 2019/4, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU: Canberra.
- Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI) (2018) *Monitoring and Evaluation Framework*.
- Zubrinich, K. and N. Haley (2009) [Experiencing the Public Sector: Pacific Women’s Perspectives](#) SSGM Discussion Paper prepared for AusAID.

## Endnotes

1. The *maneaba* (literally a social and community hall) is a symbolic representation of community life in Kiribati in which political, social, economic and religious ideas are discussed and resolved with traditional and religious leaders.
2. DPA exemplified this in its approach to building an evidence base around support for women electoral candidates across the Pacific in 2016. A three-day event was organised to review the evidence on women's successful campaigning, bringing together a broad range of stakeholders, including campaign activists, women candidates, former and current sitting members of parliaments, development partners, representatives of non-government organisations, policymakers and academics from the region. A synthesis report was produced (Barbara and Baker, 2016), in tandem with a range of framing papers, the results of which have been influential in subsequent DFAT-funded program designs (e.g. Balance of Power).
3. This deviated from the original research design which expected that 'each WLI scholar would be asked to nominate three women and/or men in their families, communities and workplaces that they have worked with in driving some kind of reform (of any magnitude)'. The more limited pool surveyed is a consequence of the research timing and the discovery that alumnae found it difficult to nominate one – let alone three – champions.
4. It should be noted that experiences of sexism are not restricted to WLI alumnae. Respondents of surveys run by the Global Tracer Facility also found that Australian Award alumni experienced sex discrimination when they returned to work in PNG: 'Gender! Being young and a female I had the worst experience of my career being undermined to the point of having my contract with the University removed'; 'I was invited on several occasions to attend international conferences but was replaced by male colleagues and other senior (in age) female colleagues to go instead' (AA GTF 2020a: 60).



**Department of Pacific Affairs**

The Australian National University

Canberra ACT 2601

T +61 2 6125 8394

E [dpa@anu.edu.au](mailto:dpa@anu.edu.au)

W [dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au)