

Strengthening the education focus of Australia's engagement with the peoples of the Pacific.

Submission to inform Australia's New International Development Policy

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I have three main points:

1. **There is an urgent need to strengthen the education focus of our development support in the Pacific.** Education is not mentioned in the terms of reference. Yet there are huge education issues in the Pacific reflected in the poor literacy and numeracy levels in primary school, low exam pass rates particularly in Mathematics and Science in secondary school, high dropout rates, lost learning as a result of school closures due to Covid-19, and limited participation in post-secondary education. Without better learning outcomes and a more skilled workforce, other Australian development support in the Pacific such as enhanced labor mobility, improved infrastructure, and support in adaptation to climate change, are likely to be limited in their effectiveness and long term sustainability.
2. **Education support should include developing partnerships** between Australian education institutions and those of Pacific Island countries (PICs). Partnerships signal mutual respect and will deepen Australia's relationship with the peoples of the Pacific, and help change the perception of Australia as a "donor" to that of being a "partner". Partnerships should include ones between Australia's quality assurance and accrediting bodies such as the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and Pacific countries' quality assurance agencies to enable recognition of Pacific qualifications in Australia.
3. More broadly, the Development Policy needs to have a **strengthened focus on monitoring and evaluation**. There is no point supporting countries and regions without them and us knowing if it's making a difference and how partnerships, investments and activities need to change to improve effectiveness. Under the former government evaluation effort was substantially reduced, and there is a need to rebuild. The new development policy also needs to invest in pilots and to employ rigorous program evaluation to select interventions for scaling up. A strong and substantial evaluation function should therefore be implemented, with a guarantee of resources and independence from ideology and political agendas.

Some details are below

1. **There is an urgent need to strengthen the education focus of our development support in the Pacific.** There is nothing short of an education crisis in the Pacific, with too many children missing out on a quality education. There is poor literacy and numeracy achievement in primary school, low exam pass rates particularly in Mathematics and Science in secondary school, high dropout rates, and limited participation in post-secondary education. Many of these issues are being explored through the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT)-funded Pacific Secondary School Project, being led by the World Bank in partnership with the Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP). While the reports from the four participating countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Tonga) are not publicly available yet, some of the identified issues include:

- i. *Many children are unprepared to start school.* Surveys to measure the Early Human Capability Index (eHCI)¹ have been carried out by the World Bank in a number of PICs. These indicate that the eHCI scores are low: in most countries, the average scores are well short of expected outcomes. Thus many children at age 5 are not prepared to start school – they will start behind and risk staying behind other children. Preschool is a mitigating factor - on average, children attending preschool have higher developmental scores². In many countries there is limited participation in preschool. While some countries are making significant efforts to improve early childhood education (eg Kiribati passed legislation to bring ECE centres into the education system, and Tonga has created some 42 government preschools), overall provision and quality is patchy and many children miss out.
- ii. *Weak literacy skills of many primary school students,* and the situation does not seem to be improving. The main source of data on this is the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA), undertaken by EQAP most recently in 2021 in 15 countries. This assesses literacy and numeracy skills of students in Year 4 and Year 6. The 2021 results showed that *only 43% of Year 4 students met the minimum reading performance standards* and *53 % of Year 6 students*. Girls scored much higher than boys. The 2021 results were broadly similar to the 2018 results, so in 3 years there has been no overall improvement in reading.
 - There are particular issues associated with the transition to teaching in English in some countries, where those children who have not learnt to read in their own language, fall further behind in the middle of primary school when English is introduced as the language of instruction.
 - The low literacy rates are a concern because literacy is fundamental for success in secondary school. The research is clear: if children cannot read proficiently by the end of third grade, they face daunting challenges to succeed later in school and beyond. Because reading is the gateway skill to further learning, children who cannot read proficiently seldom catch up academically and often fail to graduate on time from high school or drop out altogether.
- iii. *Weakening of numeracy skills in primary school students.* In the Pacific primary school students' numeracy performance is usually much better than their literacy performance. In 2018 83 % of students met minimum proficiency levels in both Year 4 and Year 6. However there was a marked decline in 2021 with only 67% of year 4 students and 72% of Year 6 students meeting the minimum standards. EQAP has called this decline “worrying”³.
- iv. *Many students are failing to learn in secondary school.* While exam pass rates are not comparable across countries, pass rates are quite low in many countries and in many subjects, and particularly in Mathematics and Science. Failure to pass often leads to

¹ The eHCI provides a score for 3–5-year-old children on different developmental domains: verbal communication, approaches to learning, numeracy and concepts, cultural knowledge, formal literacy (reading), formal literacy (writing), social and emotional skills, perseverance, and physical health. It is locally adapted to capture the unique cultural aspects of the country context.

² See for example Brinkman, S. & Thanh Vu, B. (2017). Early Childhood Development in Tonga: Baseline results from the Tongan Early Human Capability Index. World Bank, Washington DC.

³ EQAP 2021 PILNA results <https://pilna.eqap.spc.int/2021/regional/performance/numeracy/conclusions>

dropout and to grade repetition in some countries. This feeds into *low secondary school completion*.

- v. Many students leave school and then are *not engaged in employment, education and training (NEET)*. For example, in Tonga the 2016 Census found that 44% of females aged 15-34 are NEET, with the rate for males being 34%. This is despite females staying at school longer and learning more. Labourforce underutilization is also high. In general there is relatively low level of participation in post-school education and training, indeed in Tonga in the 2016 Census just 7.8% of Tongans had a TVET qualification.

This points to the importance of Australia's development assistance including *a heavy investment in early childhood education, and the teaching of literacy in the early grades of primary school* as well as the current focus on skills acquisition in the teenage years.

Many of these issues have been known for a long time, and governments have made serious efforts to improve their education systems, with regular monitoring of student outcomes through PILNA and support from various education programs including by DFAT, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. However it is clear that PICs will be asking for a more transformational approach and Australia needs to work in partnership with them and other development partners on a new approach. Without significantly better learning outcomes and a more skilled workforce, other strategies in the Pacific such as enhanced labor mobility, improved infrastructure, and support in adaption to climate change are likely to be limited in their effectiveness and long term sustainability.

2. **Education support should include developing partnerships** between Australian education institutions and those of PICs, and between government Ministries. Partnerships signal mutual respect and will deepen Australia's relationship with the peoples of the Pacific. It would also help Australia move away from a "donor-client" mindset which is its reputation in the Pacific⁴. This would require education development policy to become a genuine whole of government effort, in contrast to the current situation where it is largely DFAT funded and led.
 - i. *The Department of Education has a long history of working with other governments* such as China, Japan, and India, largely in support of the international education industry. It has a network of counsellors in Asia, Europe and Latin America to support this engagement. This model could be extended to the Pacific through a counsellor position for PICs based in the region and tasked with creating education partnerships at a government and institutional level to support mutual learning. This would require additional resources, but not a vast amount.
 - ii. Partnerships could include ones between Australia's quality assurance and accrediting bodies such as the *Australian Skills Quality Authority* and Pacific countries' quality assurance agencies such as the Tonga National Quality Assurance Board and the Samoa Qualifications Authority. The long term objective would be for Australia to formalize recognition arrangements so that where qualifications are obtained in Pacific countries they could be recognized in Australia, after Australian workplace experience requirements are met. This would be a big support to labor mobility and ensure that Pacific Islanders working in Australia are not confined to lower skilled occupations.

⁴ See the Hall, I (2022) "Confident, competent, inconsistent: Australia's strategic personality" Griffith Asia Insights <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/confident-competent-inconsistent-australias-strategic-personality/>

- iii. *Direct support for education institutions to partner in the Pacific.* In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), the sector I know best, the largest engagement between Australia and TVET providers in PICs is through the Australia- Pacific Technical Coalition (APTC). It is run by TAFE Queensland and funded by DFAT. It started by providing Australian level qualifications in the Pacific but in the last few years has broadened its assistance to partnering directly with PIC TVET providers to help them lift quality through staff training and curriculum and assessment reform. It is also supporting Ministries of Education and quality assurance agencies improve their policy capacity. This expanded role is most welcome. However, APTC is only one institution and the challenge of lifting TVET provision and quality to meet local needs and for labor mobility is much bigger.
 - a. Funding could be offered for partnerships between Australian VET providers and PIC TVET providers in specialised areas, possibly those useful for labor mobility eg aged care. This partnership model is being used in the World Bank Skills and Employment for Tongans project, with APTC and New Zealand TVET providers being the overseas partners. APTC could play a valuable role in helping to broker partnerships and sharing their learnings from their 15 years of experience in the Pacific.
 - b. Other opportunities for closer relationships are in secondary education. At present many PICs have very limited TVET offerings in secondary schools, and are looking to expand them to aid retention and skill acquisition. Given the long experience of VET in schools in Australia this is an area where Australia can offer much learning through partnerships between schools or school systems.
 - c. There are also opportunities to build stronger partnerships with regional education organisations such as EQAP which currently works closely with Australian Council for Educational Research, with DFAT funding.
3. **Evaluation.** Evaluation of development policies and programs, supported by robust monitoring, is essential for accountability and learning. The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) was established in AusAID in 2007 to lead on this function and for more than 12 years undertook strategic evaluations (such of climate change, pandemic preparedness and disability) as well as of large programs such as PNG roads. It also oversaw the quality assurance of performance information which was an important element of DFAT's reporting in its annual reports. Over time ODE grew to have a national and international reputation for evaluation quality and influence. The independence of its evaluations was assisted by having an Independent Evaluation Committee (IEC) of which I was a member. Despite the recognized success of the model and the usefulness of the function, ODE and the IEC were abolished under the Morrison government⁵ and development program evaluation effort reduced, and is now focused individual programs, not strategic evaluations. The new development policy, which at its core should be evidence-informed, needs a robust evaluation function. It also needs to invest in pilots and to employ rigorous program evaluation to select interventions for scaling up. A strong and substantial evaluation function should therefore be implemented, with a guarantee of resources and independence from ideology and political agendas. Only with some independence can there be credible, robust and genuinely useful evaluation and findings.

⁵ For a quick summary see Howes, S (2020) *Office of Development Effectiveness: praised, then abolished*. Development Policy Centre Blog, ANU 25 September. devpolicy.org/office-of-development-effectiveness-praised-then-abolished-20200925-3/

By way of context for these comments:

- I have been working for the World Bank on education projects in Vietnam and the Pacific since 2010. The education development projects have covered early childhood education, secondary education and vocational education and training. I also worked for the World Bank in Washington DC in evaluation (1998-20) and strategy (2001).
- Prior to that I was a Deputy Secretary in the Commonwealth Department of Education over 2001-2008, during which period I oversaw international education
- I was a member of AusAID and DFAT's Independent Evaluation Committee for eight years 2012-2020, and DFAT's Audit and Risk Committee (2016-20)

The views expressed in this submission do not reflect those of the World Bank.

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