

Review of the Australia Awards Tonga, 2024

**Review Report
31 January 2025**



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AAF	Australia Awards Fellowship
AAGSM	Australia Awards Global Support Mechanism
AAS	Australia Award Scholarships
AAPS	Australia Award Pacific Scholarships
AAT	Australia Awards Tonga
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADIS	Alumni Development Impact Survey
AHC	Australian High Commission in Tonga
APTC	Australia Pacific Training Coalition
AUD	Australian dollars
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DCSP	Defence Cooperation Scholarship Program
DPP	Development Partnership Plan (Australia-Tonga)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FJD	Fiji Dollar
FNU	Fiji National University
FTE	Full time equivalent
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
GLE	Global Education and Scholarships Section (DFAT)
GoT	Government of Tonga
GPB	Global Programs and Partnership Branch (DFAT)
GTF	Global Tracer Facility
IAP	Introductory Academic Preparation
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILO	International Labour Organisation
K&S	Knowledge and skills
KII	Key Informant Interview

KRQ	Key review question
MC	Managing Contractor
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEF	Australia Awards Global Monitoring and Evaluation Framework
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MBBS	Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery
MET	Ministry of Education and Training
MFAT	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (New Zealand)
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
OASIS	Online Australian Scholarship Information System
OTP	Office of the Pacific (DFAT)
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility
PASP	Pacific Australia Skills Platform (DFAT)
PSC	Public Service Commission (PSC), GoT
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TASP	Tonga-Australia Support Platform
TSDF	Tonga Strategic Development Framework
TLMSMS	Tonga Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy
TNU	Tonga National University
TOP	Tongan Pa'anga
ToR	Terms of Reference
USP	University of the South Pacific
VET	Vocational Education and Training
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
TWICT	Tonga Women in ICT
WLI	Women Leading and Influencing

Executive Summary

Overview

Australia Awards are offered to emerging leaders from developing countries for study, research and professional development in Australia and the Pacific region so they can return home and contribute to their nations' development, prosperity, and resilience. The goal of the Australia Awards is "to support partner countries to achieve their development goals through education and knowledge transfer and to build enduring relationships with Australia that advance mutual interests". The Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework defines the two long-term outcomes for the alumni to:

- use their skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development
- contribute to cooperation between Australia and partner countries.

The Australia Awards are a significant component (18%) of Australia's bilateral program to Tonga, with an estimated expenditure on the awards of AUD3.9 million in FY23/24. Since the 2001 intake, 525 long-term tertiary scholarships (Australia Awards Scholarships - AAS and Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships - AAPS) have been provided to Tonga scholars. Nearly three-quarters of these awards (70%) have been for study through the AAPS at selected Pacific institutions, with the remainder for study in Australia through the AAS. Overall, 64% of award offers have been made to females (68% for the 2024 intake). Since 2021, the majority of awards have been for undergraduate study (62%). However, the proportion of postgraduate awards increased to 67% for the 2021 to 2024 intakes.

As a result of their scholarship, over 550 Tongan alumni (including alumni from awards offered before the 2001 intake)¹ have completed their awards and gained knowledge and skills to contribute to strengthening the capability of government, private sector and non-government organisations (NGO) in Tonga (or across the Pacific region). Alumni networks are important tools to strengthen ongoing linkages with Australia and are an essential and significant component of Australia's soft power diplomacy.

Ascertaining outcomes from the Australia Awards is critical for informing programming by the Australian High Commission in Tonga (AHC) for the Australia-Kingdom of Tonga Development Partnership Plan, 2024-2029 (DPP). A review has therefore been undertaken by an independent team to assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the awards in Tonga. The review conducted between July to October 2024 included analysis of award data, consultation with Tongan stakeholders and alumni (through key information interviews and focus group discussions), and an alumni tracer survey. Consideration was also given to best practices implemented in other countries offering Australia Awards. Evidence from these data sources and stakeholder input informed the findings and recommendations in this report.

¹ This number reflects that some individuals have had more than one award (for example at undergraduate and then postgraduate level), and that the details of alumni prior to 2001 have still to be verified.

Findings

Relevance The provision of the Australia Awards in Tonga for tertiary education (level and fields of study) are highly relevant to the priority needs for a skilled workforce in Tonga (as identified by the Tonga Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy 2023) and the Government of Tonga Public Service Commission (PSC) annual list of tertiary education and training priorities. To the extent that it can be determined in a changing world and small economy such as in Tonga, the awards offered are also highly relevant to the workforces of the future (such as in the blue/green economies), although more could be targeted to support increased digitalisation in Tonga. The awards are also well-aligned with Australia's International Development Policy, the global strategy and policies of the Australia Awards, and the current priorities of Australia's bilateral programs in Tonga.

Effectiveness The offer of the Australia Awards is highly regarded by the Tongan alumni and stakeholders consulted, as is the knowledge, skills and experience gained both in Australia and the Pacific. The AAS/AAPS are positively contributing to achievement of the intended goals and outcomes of Global Strategic Framework for the Australia Awards. There are significant levels of positive evidence of alumni using and sharing their acquired knowledge and skills to make a significant contribution to the skilled workforce in sectors key to Tonga's development. Many of the alumni are now in senior roles and leadership positions with which to increase their impact. However, there are opportunities to further support alumni to apply their skills and knowledge, including through reintegration workshops and professional development activities.

Whilst the majority of alumni are maintaining connections with the people they met during their award (such as with their lecturers and fellow awardees/students), the evidence that these linkages are used for contributing to formal cooperation between Australia and partner countries was positive but less strong. Many of the alumni provided examples of cooperation between their organisation and Australian organisations, however the direct linkage to the connections made during their scholarship was less clear, particularly for AAPS alumni.

Inclusion There has been mixed progress towards achieving gender equality, disability, and social inclusion in the program. The awards provide access to tertiary education for Tongans who otherwise would not have been able to afford it. Whilst almost two-thirds (64%) of the AAS/AAPS have been awarded to females since 2001, the review found that more could be done to support females to apply for non-traditional fields of study and to support female alumni to use their knowledge and skills in leadership roles on their return to Tonga. Given the high dropout rate for boys in upper secondary school, there is also a need to consider how to encourage male school-leavers to apply, and be able to compete, for the awards.

The inclusion in the program of persons with disability is still limited. A more targeted approach would help to identify and support persons with disability to apply for the awards. More flexible modes of study would also reduce barriers to those who have difficulty travelling overseas (and without extended support networks). The award of AAS/AAPS for education and training in related fields will over time contribute to reducing systemic barriers to inclusion in Tonga. The AHC conducts outreach to promote the awards in rural/remote locations, although there is still an imbalance in award offers to school leavers in schools on the main island.

It will be important that alumni working outside of the capital are provided access to alumni activities once offered.

Efficiency Overall, the program's implementation arrangements (with AHC delivery of in-country activities) are supporting effective delivery in the pre- and on-award phases of the scholarships cycle but could be enhanced through better planning. With the current AHC resourcing, post-award alumni activities and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) are however limited. Whilst there are currently no external formal governance arrangements for the awards, the AHC appropriately manages risks and engages with key Tonga stakeholders in annual discussions of award targeting, and the Tongan PSC also participates in awardee selection.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, for continuous improvement of Australia Awards Tonga (AAT) and to support achievement of the objectives of the DPP, over the next 3-5 years, it is recommended that:

- 1) the Australia Awards Tonga program:
 - a. continue to offer awards that are aligned with Tonga's development needs (across all sectors) and with Australia's bilateral program for Tonga
 - b. rebalance award offers to approximately 60% AAPS and 40% AAS (given stakeholder feedback on the strong relevance of education at Pacific institutions and Government of Tonga (GoT) interest in maximizing the number of awards within the available budget (through the lower cost AAPS)
 - c. continue to target AAPS for undergraduate and postgraduate education (with TVET opportunities and scholarships provided through other mechanisms)
 - d. continue to primarily offer AAS for postgraduate education (with PHDs and undergraduate degrees offered by exception).
- 2) to enhance award outcomes, the AAT:
 - a. provide specialist course counselling to maximize awardee relevant knowledge and skill acquisition
 - b. support awardees to prepare an award/reintegration plan to guide their academic, on-award experience and networking over their award
 - c. conduct reintegration workshops for returning awardees
 - d. work closely with DFAT Global Education and Scholarships Section (GLE) to maximize opportunities for the Tonga AAS to benefit from the on-award enrichment activities available in Australia
 - e. develop and implement an Alumni Engagement Plan, which includes establishment of a Tonga Australia Awards Alumni Network
 - f. provide leadership training to alumni identified as emerging leaders or in existing leadership roles in key organizations.
- 3) the AHC:
 - a. develop and implement a Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) strategy for implementation across the scholarships cycle of the AAT
 - b. work with the DFAT GLE to establish feasible ways to increase Tonga's access to the Australia Awards Fellowships
 - c. commence planning to establish a short course program under the Australia Awards (with topics to be determined in consultation with alumni and in accord with DFAT development program activities in Tonga)

- d. strengthen post-award MEL for improved evidence-based decision making, and for its MEL obligations with respect to Global Australia Awards MEL and DFAT Tier 2 reporting.
- 4) The AHC implement flexible in-country management of the Australia Awards, including whereby:
- a. the AHC retain strategic in-house capacity for high value contact with awardees/alumni and stakeholders to form/maintain a strong association and branding with Australia
 - b. post-award MEL activities are contracted out to a suitably qualified and experienced local organization
 - c. other more administrative post-award tasks to support implementation of the AAT's annual plan are outsourced as required.

This review report was finalised following feedback by DFAT. A Scholarships Implementation Framework will be developed by the review team for use by the AHC in implementing the review recommendations accepted by DFAT.

Section 01

Introduction

01

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As a core component of Australia's support for education and training in the region, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Australia Awards are offered to emerging leaders from developing countries for study, research and professional development in Australia and the Pacific region so they can return home and contribute to their nations' development, prosperity, and resilience. The Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework² defines the following goal and outcomes:

Goal: *To support partner countries to achieve their development goals through education and knowledge transfer and to build enduring relationships with Australia that advance mutual interests*

Long-term outcomes:

1: Alumni use their skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development

2: Alumni contribute to cooperation between Australia and partner countries

The Australia Awards Tonga are a significant component (18%) of Australia's bilateral program to Tonga, with an estimated expenditure on the awards of AUD3.9 million in FY23/24. From the 2001 intake, 525 long-term tertiary scholarships have been provided to Tonga scholars. Nearly three-quarters of these (70%) have been for study through the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships (AAPS) at selected Pacific institutions, with the remainder through the AAS for study in Australia².

As part of the global Australia Awards, the AAT have the same goal and intended long-term outcomes. That is, for the alumni to use their skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development through strengthening the capability of government, private sector and NGOs in Tonga; and for the alumni to contribute to cooperation between Tonga and Australia.

1.2 Review purpose

Ascertaining the impact of the Australia Awards is critical to inform programming for Australia's Development Partnership Plan for Tonga, such as the role the scholarships play in contributing to local livelihoods, skills and economic opportunities. The DFAT Australian High Commission (AHC) in Tonga therefore commissioned this review (as per the Terms of Reference in Annex 1) to assess the relevance, effectiveness and management efficiency of the Australia Awards Tonga. The review makes recommendations to strengthen program implementation including prioritisation of levels and fields of study, inclusion, alumni engagement, program management and MEL.

² The use of the terms AAS and AAPS in this report refer also to their predecessors for tertiary study in Australia and the Pacific respectively.

The key review questions (with sub-questions listed in Annex 2) were:

- To what extent are the Australia Awards **relevant** to Australia and Tonga's development priorities?
- How **effectively** is the program in Tonga in meeting the objectives under the Global Strategic Framework for the Australia Awards?
- How well have the Australia Awards been implemented in Tonga to support Australia's **GEDSI** objectives?
- How **efficiently** is the Australian Awards program being implemented?
- What **recommendations** can be made to improve future programming and alignment with DPP?

The primary user of the review findings and recommendations will be the AHC management and the scholarship program team in Tonga. Secondary users include the DFAT Australia Awards section in Canberra, the GoT, and potentially DFAT Posts across the Pacific.

1.3 Review approach and methodology

The review is being conducted between July to December 2024 by a two-person external review team (managed by Palladium), with extensive knowledge of the development context in Tonga, and in the implementation and review of the Australia Awards in the Indo-Pacific. The review team is responsible for conducting the review and producing the agreed deliverables. The AHC has overall responsibility and provides strategic direction for the review.

This Review Report describes the review purpose, methodology, key findings and the review team's recommendations. As detailed in Annex 3, the review team undertook an inclusive and utilisation focused approach to the review, including:

- desk-based background reading and research (as listed in Annex 4)
- analysis of Tonga AAS and AAPS application and award data from Online Australian Scholarship Information System (OASIS)
- contact tracing by the AHC to collect the current emails of AAS and AAPS alumni
- semi-structured consultations with 24 (17M/7F) purposively sampled Tongan key government, private sector and NGO stakeholders and 11 DFAT and Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) stakeholders ((as listed in Annex 5)
- a Tracer Survey to collect data on alumni employment, knowledge and skill (K&S) utilisation and ongoing connections with Australia. 99 AAS/AAPS alumni responded to the survey (an effective 50% response rate of opened emails, and 27% of 'valid' emails that reached an email address)

- Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with alumni in Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u. These FGD provided in-depth data on alumni perceptions of their time in Australia, utilisation of the knowledge and skills gained and on-going engagement with Australia³
- in-depth talanoa with six alumni (4M/2F) who have made significant impact in Tonga resulting from the knowledge, skills and connections gained whilst on their award.

Whilst there were some anticipated limitations in the extent of participation by stakeholders in the review, overall, the evidence and input collected provides a solid basis for the findings and recommendations described in this report.

This Review Report has been finalised following AHC (and their external MEL support team) feedback. The review team will then prepare a Scholarship Implementation Framework to assist the AHC in the effective and efficient implementation of the program.

³ Alumni feedback cited in this report has been lightly edited where necessary to improve readability.

Section 02

The development context

02

2. The development context

Tonga is a constitutional monarchy, comprising 171 islands grouped into three main clusters, with only 36 inhabited. Tonga is categorised as an upper-middle income country by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD. Tonga faces significant development challenges due to the country's relative isolation and lack of economies of scale. Natural disasters affect more than 40% of the population in a typical disaster year, resulting in economic losses equivalent to 14% of gross domestic product (GDP).

Tonga's small economy is driven primarily by remittances, tourism, agriculture, and foreign aid. Employment is dominated by the public sector, with a small private sector in construction, services, manufacturing, fisheries, forestry and tourism. In 2021, the labour force participation rate was 60%, which was higher for men (70%) than women (51%). The labour market analysis in the Tonga Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy (2023) identified a lack of skilled and qualified workers to meet an expanding local and international demand for skilled labour.

In FY24/25, TOP 365 million will be provided to Tonga by development partners. Of this development funding Australia is the largest bilateral donor (16.4%), followed the People's Republic of China (16.2%), and the Government of New Zealand (11%). Multilateral funding is also provided by the World Bank (21%) and the Asian Development Bank (15%).

In Tonga, education is free and compulsory for children aged 6 to 14. The 2013 Education Act in Tonga states that all children under the age of 19 have access to quality education, regardless of gender, religion, socio-economic status, disability, or location. Girls tend to advance to upper secondary education at the expected age more frequently than boys, whose educational progression is more likely to stall during lower and upper secondary stages. According to the Examination Unit (MET) 775 students graduated from senior secondary school graduated in 2023.

Tonga has 14 institutions⁴ offering post-secondary certificate and diploma-level technical and vocational education and training (VET)⁵. These include Tongan institutions such as the Tupou Tertiary Institute and the Tonga Institute of Science and Technology, as well as the regional University of the South Pacific (USP), which has a campus in Tonga. In addition, Government ministries provide specialized education and training programs aligned with their core functions (such as the Ministry of Health with their School of Nursing).

As of the 2021 Tonga Census, 22.5% of those aged 20-49 hold a tertiary qualification. Whilst 13.6 women complete university compared to 10 men, women remain underrepresented in traditionally male-dominated fields like maritime and technical sciences. This gender disparity is influenced by societal norms regarding career choices and perceived capabilities, with 8.4 females completing TVET compared to 10 men. Female share of employment in senior and middle management in government accounts for 32% in 2021.

⁴ Scoping Report for the Tonga National University

⁵ VET equips workers with the technical and practical knowledge and competencies required in various trades, industries, and occupations needed to build a skilled and adaptable workforce

The 2018 Disability Survey found that 11% of individuals over the age of 18 experience disability, affecting some 7,649 people (52% female). Children with disability face considerable barriers to mainstream education, with limited facilities available for children with disability, with none located on the outer islands. The survey reported that 61% of children with disability dropped out of school, and 8% never attended. The Disability Survey found that 63% of persons with disability were not in the labour force.

Most of Tonga's population, of 100,179 people (in 2021), reside on the main island of Tongatapu. There has been a steady net migration to Tongatapu since 2016. For every 10 people, 2.1 live in towns. The Tonga Strategic Development Framework (TSDF) II claims that this movement is driven by limited education and employment opportunities in these small communities. Urban areas show higher educational attainment compared to rural/remote areas.

Section 03

The Australia Awards in Tonga

03

3. The Australia Awards in Tonga

Globally, the Australia Awards have four key modalities: the AAS, the AAPS, the Australia Awards Fellowships and short-term training courses (the latter of which are not currently provided by AAT). The DFAT GLE⁶ have overall responsibility for Australia Awards strategy and policy, with in-country management being the responsibility of the DFAT Posts. In countries with larger number of awards, implementation support is typically provided by Managing Contractors (MCs). Also under the Australia Awards, for which Tonga is eligible, are the DFAT Aviation Scholarships, and the ACIAR John Allwright Fellowships (JAF).

3.1 AAS and AAPS

Since the 2001 intake, 525 long-term tertiary scholarships (AAS and AAPS) have been provided to Tonga scholars. Up to 2005 there were less than 10 awards per year, with a peak number of 38-46 awards between 2013-2015. Only 21 awards were made in 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic that restricted travel/university course delivery. The awards were primarily for AAPS until 2008 reflecting the high failure rate of undergraduate awardees studying in Australia, the lower cost of AAPS and DFAT support for the Pacific regional institutions. The proportion of AAS in Tonga has increased since then, with 57% of the 28 awards for the 2024 intake being for AAS. AAS have been predominantly for postgraduate study, with AAPS predominantly for undergraduate study. In 2024, 61% of awards were for postgraduate study.

3.2 Australia Awards Fellowships (AAF)

The AAF provide short-term opportunities for in-Australia study, research and professional development, hosted by Australian organisations. The AAF target senior and mid-career officials and professionals to advance development outcomes in priority areas and increase the institutional capacity of their country through their leadership. AAF application rounds are held through a competitive selection process managed centrally by DFAT Canberra. There have been 162 AAF recipients (54% female) from Tonga in 19 rounds (commencing in 2007, with a gap during the COVID-19 pandemic). The highest proportion of the Tongan fellows have been in the sectors of education (53%) and health (21%). Almost half (44%) have had fellowships at an Australian university, 38% in a government agency and 18% in an NGO/other organisation.

3.3 DFAT Aviation Scholarships

The Aviation Scholarships were introduced for the 2024 intake (with Tonga receiving six awards – 5 AAS and 1 AAPS) and are offered equally to males and females. The awards are for study in the Bachelor or Postgraduate Certificate of Aviation Management at Griffith University or in the Certificate 4 in Aviation Mechanical Engineering at the Fiji National University (FNU)⁷. Policy and contracting arrangements are managed by DFAT in Canberra, from the Australia-Pacific Partnerships for Aviation Program budget.

⁶ Global Programs and Partnerships Branch, Development Policy Division, DFAT

⁷ The awards for FNU are part of the Aviation Program's capacity strengthening in the Pacific - including curriculum design, resource development facility, technology and instructor development.

3.4 ACIAR John Allwright Fellowships (JAFs)

The ACIAR JAFs provide scientists, currently or recently involved in ACIAR research projects, with the opportunity to obtain postgraduate qualifications at an Australian tertiary institution to enhance scientific research capability. In 2024, there were approximately 38 JAFs studying in Australia at 18 universities across the country⁸. ACIAR also offer a number of short-term education and training opportunities through the Meryl Williams Fellowship, the John Dillon Fellowship and the Pacific Agriculture Scholarships, Support and Climate Resilience Program.

⁸Data on the ACIAR awards for Tonga were requested but not provided in time for this report.

Section 04
Review findings

04

4. Review findings

Given the relatively small number of awards, the AAT uses the Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework to inform and assess its implementation of the Australia Awards program. This section presents the findings of this evaluation (with specific reference to the AAS/AAPS unless stated otherwise), structured around the key review questions on relevance, effectiveness, inclusion and efficiency.

4.1 KRQ 1 Relevance - To what extent are the Australia Awards relevant to Australia and Tonga's development priorities?

As summarized below (and with further detail in Annex 6 – the development context), AAT is well aligned with both Tonga's priority needs for a skilled workforce and Australia's development support for Tonga.

It is recommended that the prioritization of the Australia Awards for Tonga continue to be aligned with Tonga's development needs (across all sectors) and with Australia's bilateral program for Tonga.

Alignment with Tonga's development needs

The AAT is aligned with the GoT Tonga Strategic Development Framework (TSDF II) 2015-2025, to improve the focus of education and training on increased productivity of the work force. The value placed by the GoT on tertiary education is demonstrated by their own investment in tertiary education. For 2024 this is indicatively estimated at AUD 7m. This includes support for the Tongan National University (of TOP \$5.4m); contributions to USP (FJD 1.5m in 2022); and funding of tertiary scholarships and study leave pay⁹.

The ORIMA 2023 AAS surveys found that alumni satisfaction with the alignment of their course with development outcomes was 91%, and with the utility of knowledge and skills provided by their course for future work in developmental issues in their home country was 100%.

Whilst DFAT provides support for VET through its regional programs such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC), and in earlier years through the Tonga TVET Support Program and Tonga Skills for Inclusive Economic Growth, the focus of the AAT has primarily been to address skilled labour shortages through awards for undergraduate and postgraduate study. In offering these awards, the AHC has actively responded to the training needs list developed annually by the PSC to meet the skills gaps identified by each of the Tongan ministries. Reflecting these needs, since the 2001 intake, the highest proportion of awards has been for study in priority health-related (29%) and education courses (19%), as well as in society and culture, including law (18%). One third of the health courses (33%) have been undertaken through the AAPS at the highly regarded Fiji School of Medicine, now included in the FNU.

To the extent that it can be determined in a changing world and particularly for a small economy such as Tonga, the AAS/AAPS are preparing Tonga for workforces of the future. Since the 2001 intake, 42 awardees have undertaken fields of study relevant to the green/blue economy, representing 13% of awards

⁹ 50% salary in year 1, 25% in year 2 while scholars are on leave, (it is assumed that these roles are back-filled, ie that study leave payment is an additional cos).

offered for the 2000-2024 intakes. Examples of the green and blue economy roles undertaken by survey respondents include Principal Energy Planner, Senior Forestry Officer, Fisheries Officer and Livestock Officer.

The International Monetary Fund note that “digitalization can be an effective way to overcome geographical limitations and widen economic opportunities”. Since the 2001 intake, 29 awardees have received education in information technology and communication fields of study, representing 6% of awards offered for the 2000-2024 intakes.

Alignment with DFAT global policies and strategies¹⁰

The AAT is well-aligned with Australia’s International Development Policy objective to advance an Indo-Pacific that is peaceful, stable, and prosperous. To achieve this requires sustainable development and lifting people out of poverty. Skills and training are powerful drivers of economic and social growth. The AAT supports Tongans to gain advanced knowledge, skills and networks, enhanced by the experience of studying and living overseas. The AAT alumni are working in a broad range sectors that are contributing to their country’s development, including in areas that enhance Tonga’s resilience to external pressures and shocks.

The AAT emphasis on initiatives to promote inclusion and its successful gender outcomes are consistent with the DFAT’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy. Whilst the global Australia Awards policies reflect the DFAT Development for All 2015-2020: Strategy for strengthening disability-inclusive development, due to systemic constraints, the number of people with disability benefitting from the Tonga awards is still limited. The AAT has offered awards for undergraduate and postgraduate study in climate change related courses. With respect to First Nation’s Engagement, more could be done by the AAT to increase awardee/alumni understanding of the strengths and perspectives of First Nations peoples.

Implementation of the AAT is consistent with the Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework investment principles with respect to: alignment between Australia and partner country development priorities; merit-based selection; equity of access; and value for money. There is potential for AAT to enhance relevant aspects of: on-award engagement (Australia Awards Linkages Framework); alumni engagement (Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy).

It is noted that some relevant DFAT strategies and programs are under development - for example with respect to GEDSI, and the planned next phase of regional support for VET in the Pacific (the Pacific Australia Skills Platform – PASP). The AHC will need to be mindful of changes in these strategies and policies when implementing the AAT over coming years.

Alignment with Australia’s bilateral program with Tonga

Australia’s partnership with Tonga has a long history of working together to address shared social, economic and security priorities, including enhanced state resilience, improved human development and climate action. Australia remains Tonga’s largest bilateral development partner - the development assistance has grown from AUD24 million in 2014 to an estimated AUD75 million in 2022-2023 – around one-quarter of

¹⁰ It is noted that the review primarily considers relevance against current DFAT policies and DFAT AHC programming of the AA, noting that these policies, schemes and focus areas have changed significantly over time.

all official development assistance to Tonga. Australia's DPP for Tonga, 2024-2029 translates the development priorities Australia shares with Tonga into action. The plan includes ongoing support for Tonga's economic recovery, investment in renewable energy, aviation and communications, resources to adapt and manage climate change, investment in health services, skills training to address shortages in the domestic market, core funding to civil-society organisations advocating and providing services for inclusion and support for agriculture.

The DPP also maintains Australia's investment in the AAT, to support Tongans to advance their professional and academic skills (under Outcome 3.2 Tongans, including women and people with disability, gain new or improved skills that are aligned with the needs of the domestic labour market). The Plan commits to delivering around 25 scholarships annually for tertiary study in Australia and the Pacific and to enhancing engagement with alumni, supporting lifelong learning and connections in support of Tonga's development.

Australia continues to advocate for GEDSI, through provision of resources and foster collaboration to diversify economic, social and political opportunities for all Tongans. The DPP maintains Australia's commitment to align its development program to support the shared vision of inclusive development that continues to empower women and addresses systemic barriers; support people with disabilities to achieve equal participation and promote locally led, sustainable change through civil society partnerships.

The awards offered under the AAT are well-aligned with Australia's planned and earlier development partnership with Tonga that supports Tonga's priorities in economic sustainability, energy security, infrastructure, social inclusion, health, education, climate change resilience, disaster preparedness and response, aviation, and agriculture. Three-quarters (75%) of the AAS/AAPS offered for the 2024 intake reflected the DFAT Development Cooperation Factsheet, May 2024 priority fields of study for Tonga. Outcome 5 (leadership and decision-making) of the Tonga Gender Country Plan 2024-2028 is that more women and girls, in all their diversity, are respected, listened to and able to influence decision-making at different levels of society. The Plan recognises that the Australia Awards are supporting women and men to obtain higher education qualifications and to bring skills, networks and experiences back to benefit their communities and workplaces in Tonga. Scholar and alumni initiatives, including the Women Leading and Influencing program delivers a range of learning, networking, and development opportunities.

Alignment with Australia's other education and skills initiatives available for Tonga

The AAT investment in AAS/AAPS for tertiary study complement DFAT's largest VET investment for the Pacific region, the APTC. Since 2007, 639 Tongans (51% female) have graduated from the APTC. In 2023, 146 Tongan students (38M/108F) studied at the APTC (at campuses in Tonga and other Pacific countries), almost all (92%) on DFAT funded scholarships.

Australia has been investing in the USP for five decades. USP is a key source of graduates for the Pacific region, providing the critical workforce for economic development, particularly in areas of new technology and responding to challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, renewable energy, and oceans. The funding of the AAPS indirectly supports USP (and the FNU) through the institution fees paid on behalf of awardees and through the experience gained in delivery of the AAPS management contract with DFAT.

The Australian Government Defence Cooperation Scholarship Program (DCSP), managed centrally by the Department of Defence also provides Tonga with tertiary scholarships for study in Australia¹¹. It is noted that, unlike the Australia Awards, the DCSP provide funding for immediate family support for their scholars.

Competitiveness with other scholarship programs available to Tonga

Australia provides Tonga with more long-term scholarships than New Zealand, Japan and Tonga's other development partners (excluding China). This level of support was found to be on par with stakeholder expectations, commensurate with Australia's role as the lead provider of bilateral funding, although not surprisingly stakeholders would also welcome the provision of more scholarships by Australia.

The largest award of scholarships to Tonga is by China. Although not able to be verified, the review team was advised there were at least 50-75 scholarships awarded annually by China (including by central Chinese agencies and individual universities). It is noted however that one Ministry commented that recognition of courses studied in China (particularly if studied in the Chinese language) and the relevance of the studies (especially in the health area) could be problematic for alumni employment opportunities.

In recognition of the need for a tertiary trained workforce, the GoT has its own sizeable tertiary scholarships program, both for in-country study, and for study overseas (predominantly in Australia and New Zealand due to the quality of education and value for money) where the course is not available in-country). In 2024, the GoT provided 67 scholarships with the following profile: 67% UG; female 69%; 58% employed (the rest school leavers/currently studying); medicine 24%, education 22%, commerce 20%.¹²

It is noted that the Fulbright and Chevening scholarships focus on offering only a small number of awards (1-3 each year) to the "best and brightest" for each recipient country. Associated promotion of these awards contributes to their strong recognition as highly prestigious awards. For a similar impact the AHC could consider offering a small proportion of the AAS for undergraduate study to high-achieving secondary school leavers.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 2024 Competitiveness Analysis notes that the "point of difference for the Australia Awards is the quality of programs, consistency of delivery and strategic focus on equity and inclusion". This perspective was consistent with the views expressed by Tongan stakeholders. The ORIMA 2023 AAS surveys found that the Tongan students took up their award as the education received will help contribute to Tonga's development (92%) and the good universities, research facilities and other educational resources available in Australia (62%). It was reported that the New Zealand scholarship process "loses" at least one shortlisted candidate to AAT each year. The Tonga FGD alumni indicated that the higher level of benefits and a simpler application process were the main reasons for their choosing an AAS/AAPS (rather than a New Zealand scholarship). Despite the high cost, the alumni commented on the value of the AAS opportunity for their families to travel to Australia (and be exposed to Australian life and education).

¹¹ The number of these scholarships was not available for the review.

¹² Unpublished data provided to review team by Ministry of Education, July 2024

Furthermore, the surveyed alumni strongly agreed that 72% of their work colleagues (and 72% of their friends and family) would perceive the AAS for study in Australia as a prestigious international scholarship. This was a significant difference compared with the lower proportion with respect to perceptions of the AAPS for study in the Pacific (57%). AAS alumni were slightly more likely to report strong agreement with perceptions of the AAS among work colleagues/supervisors (74%) than AAPS alumni (69%). The AAS and AAPS reported similar perceptions of the AAPS among work colleagues/supervisors. One alumnus reported that: *“the quality and outcome would be considered 'less' if it was an institution in the Pacific. (However), I value study in the Pacific as a great (and cost effective) solution to the increasing workforce demand in the Pacific region. These programs can be more culturally relevant to the Pacific context.”*

4.2 KRQ 2 Effectiveness

In this section the review findings are presented as to the effectiveness of the AAT. As the program does not have its own country-specific goal and outcome statements, the program effectiveness has been assessed against the intended goals and outcomes of the global Australia Awards (with reference to the global MEL Framework)¹³. It is noted these findings are largely consistent with the evidence collected from the Global Tracer Facility (GTF) surveys and studies across multiple Australia Awards countries.

Connections made with Australia while on award

The Australia Awards gives awardees the chance to build their networks with Australia in their sectors and areas of interest, as well as with networks of influence in Australia that can be brought to bear in future by Australia Awards Alumni. The Australia Awards Linkages Framework⁸ outlines the vision to enhance the Australia Awards on-award engagement experience – to support scholars to build both their professional and soft skills, make new connections while in Australia, and access an extensive range of development opportunities beyond the acquisition of their tertiary qualification. The ACER Competitiveness Analysis states that “the connections between Australians and awardees often create a deeper understanding of our respective cultures and are more likely to work together in the future to advance our shared interest. The AAPS however foster Pacific regionalism with Australian involvement”.

The 2023 ACER GTF research study of the social networks of the Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) alumni suggests that enrichment opportunities that foster a collective interest among the alumni may encourage more cohesive alumni networks of professional support and collaboration with fellow alumni, and the skills, knowledge and confidence for developmental leadership. The GTF data also provide evidence to suggest that enrichment programs add value to the Australia Awards experience through strengthening alumni understanding of their role as change makers, and the importance of using their technical expertise and networks to support and drive developmental change

Alumni have necessary skills and knowledge to contribute to development

¹³ Ongoing utilisation of these global award objectives and MEL Framework is considered by the review team to be appropriate given the size of the Tonga program, their need to report program results to the DFAT GESS and the AHC’s limited capacity to maintain a separate framework.

Between the 2001 to 2024 intakes, 375 awardees successfully completed their AAS/AAPS funded course of study. A higher proportion of AAS awardees completed their course of study (95%) compared to AAPS (16%)

As a small Post with limited resources and a small number of awardees spread across many of the 40 Australian universities, there has been insufficient scale economies (or budget) for the AHC to conduct its own on-award engagement program. It is noted however that there is a range of on-award engagement activities conducted in Australia by universities, DFAT Canberra and State and Territory offices¹⁴ in which the Tongan AAS could participate. In particular, the AHC should encourage the AAS awardees to increase their understanding of Australia's First Nations' culture through participation in observance of significant dates such as National Reconciliation Week and NAIDOC Week, to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and through university organised indigenous experiential activities and network building with local indigenous people's organisations. It will also be important to ensure that the AAPS awardees are also afforded opportunities to learn about Australia's First Nations people. As this need is common to other Pacific countries this could perhaps be conducted as an on-award enrichment activity by the Fiji Post, or alternatively provided on awardees return to Tonga.

Course completion

To achieve program outcomes, awardees need to complete good quality, relevant education. As noted above the AAS/AAPS provide tertiary education in fields of study relevant to Tonga's development needs. Quality education is provided to the AAS by Australia's higher education system (independently ranked third in the world in 2024). As one alumnus commented, "*I am a professional 'made' in Australia.*" Evidence of the quality of the Pacific institutions attended by AAPS alumni was not available to the review team. However, the quality of education at USP and the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at FNU (formerly the Fiji School of Medicine) was not questioned during consultations with Tongan stakeholders and was also positively rated by awardees in the 2023 ORIMA AAPS surveys.

To support awardee transition to an overseas education system, the AAS/AAPS provide awardees with Introductory Academic Preparation (IAP) covering information on living and studying in their study locations. Some awardees also do additional courses such as academic English and Maths refreshers. Supplementary tuition support and academic/welfare counselling is also available for AAS and AAPS awardees.

¹⁴ These include the core all-inclusive Welcome and Farewell events to celebrate scholars receiving or completing their scholarships (which remain important to enable networking and DFAT to deliver messages directly to large groups of scholars) and the emerging targeted thematic collaborations, to strengthen connections with relevant DFAT thematic teams, Australian centres of excellence, private sector and tertiary institutions here in Australia and reinforce and elevate the Australia Awards brand and networks.

However, 13% of awardees (of the 2001 to 2024 intakes) did not complete their course of study for a range of academic and personal reasons. Tongan awardees that did not pass their course of study were: AAPS (16%)¹⁵ compared to AAS (5%); for males (17%) compared to females (11%); for undergraduates (18%) compared to postgraduates (4%). Since 2015 there has been a similar non-completion rate (4-6%) for postgraduates at both AAS and AAPS; whilst for undergraduates it was 13%.¹⁶

Reintegration and employment on return

Reintegration. One of the enabling outcomes of the Australia Awards is that “employers remain engaged with awardees” to facilitate their reintegration following their award. The PSC continues employee salaries whilst on approved study leave. One smaller ministry reported that they remain connected to their awardees through Facebook, although this may not be such an effective communication channel for more formal communications (updates about the organisation etc) especially in larger ministries.

The overwhelming majority of alumni reported minimal difficulties adapting back to living and working in Tonga rating back to Tonga after their award. Over half (52%) of the surveyed alumni considered their returning home experience to be extremely easy (with 30% reporting it was easy and 13% neither easy nor difficult). FGDs indicated that the main difficulty was, for a few awardees, finding relevant work. None reported extreme difficulty with adapting to life back in Tonga. There was a significant difference by gender, with female alumni less likely (47%) to find the experience extremely easy than male alumni (59%). AAS alumni were less likely (48%) to find the experience extremely easy than AAPS (57%). There was not such a large difference in reported experience between undergraduates (50%) and postgraduates (54%).

Employment. Another enabling outcome is that “employers deploy alumni so they can use their skills, knowledge and networks”. The ORIMA 2023 AAS surveys found that 86% of the Tongan scholars close to completing their studies had work arrangements in place. This high percentage likely reflects that the positions of the GoT public servants undertaking an Australia Award remain open for them to return to on award completion. This compares with the Orima 2023 AAPS survey of Tongan awardees that found that only 73% of the FNU and 61% of the USP awardees (with a larger proportion of school-leavers, without existing jobs to return to) had work arrangements in place for their return.

Almost all the review tracer survey respondents (n=99) were employed full-time or self-employed (94%), with the remainder retired or their main activity being studying. None said they were not employed. Not surprisingly (given the dominance of employment by the public sector in Tonga and as public servants retain their position while they go on award), most of the alumni are currently working in the public sector (73%)¹⁷, with 8% working in the private sector, 7% in an International/regional organization, and 6% at a tertiary institution. Postgraduate alumni were more likely (12%) to be working in an International/regional organization (most often a DFAT funded program) compared to undergraduates.

¹⁵ Comparative data on completion rates for other Pacific countries was requested but not provided in time for this report.

¹⁶ DFAT Fiji has been requested to provide comparative data on AAPS completion rates for the other Pacific countries.

¹⁷ Noting that the proportion of Tongan alumni employed by the public sector is considerably higher than in other Australia Awards countries.

Over three-quarters of the review tracer survey alumni are working in a professional role (56%) or as a manager (38%). Postgraduate alumni were more likely to be in a managerial role (47%) than undergraduate alumni (28%). A small percentage of alumni (7%) were working in technician/ trades/clerical roles where they are less likely to be using the K&S gained during their awards. Female alumni were slightly more likely (8%) than males to be in a non-professional role than male alumni (2%).

Location of employment. To enhance development across Tonga, it is important that alumni are not just working in central ministries but that some are also working and using their K&S in the outer islands. Although most survey respondents reported living in Tongatapu (73%), some 9% were living in the outer islands of Vava'u, Ha'apai and the Niuaus. Undergraduate alumni were more likely to be working in the outer islands (16%) than postgraduates (2%). The undergraduates were working (mostly posted by their ministry) in roles including as a magistrate, dentist, doctor, teacher, tax official and monitoring the impact of tourism operators.

The Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook states that upon completion of studies, alumni must return to their home country for at least two years [unless alternative arrangements are approved by DFAT]. Civil servants are bonded by the GoT in recognition of their posts being kept open for their return and continuance of salary benefits¹⁸. It was reported by the PSC that a very small number of alumni did not return from Australia, but that the bond arrangements had not been enforced in these cases. Most private sector awardees have to resign from their posts and so are not bonded to the organization.

Of the tracer survey alumni, 18% are living overseas (9 in New Zealand, 6 in Australia and the remainder in Fiji and the Marshall Islands). There was no significant difference in proportion of respondents living overseas by gender or award scheme. This compares with the 7% found in the GTF alumni surveys across all the Australia Awards programs. As many of the alumni were not able to be traced, this may understate the proportion of alumni living overseas. Alumni employment overseas likely reduces the direct impact of the alumni on development in Tonga, and can contribute to skills shortages in Tonga, especially where the alumni have highly specialized knowledge and skills. However, (as found in the GTF case study on alumni living outside of their home country) these alumni may be contributing their expertise in a regional context, and/or sending valuable remittances back to Tonga.

Alumni skill and knowledge utilization

Alumni use their skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development

The review found that overall, the Tongan alumni are employed in relevant organisations and are using and transferring the skills and knowledge gained during their scholarship at organisational, national and regional levels.

¹⁸ 50% of the salary in their first year of scholarship, 25% in the second and none in the third year

As a result of their scholarship, over 550 Tongan alumni (including alumni from Australian scholarship awards offered before the 2001 intake)¹ have completed their awards and gained knowledge and skills to contribute to strengthening the capability of government, private sector and NGO in Tonga (or across the Pacific region). Alumni networks are important tools to strengthen ongoing linkages with Australia and are an essential and significant component of Australia's soft power diplomacy.

Knowledge and skill transfer. Transfer of the K&S gained during the award are a critical aspect for development contribution and capacity building. There is strong evidence of the contribution alumni are making in transferring their K&S within their country after returning from their award. Almost every tracer survey respondent indicated that they have shared new K&S. The respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they had shared their K&S with their colleagues (96%), students they teach (90%), people involved in projects and programs they work on (93%), their families and friends (92%) and other people in their community.

Knowledge and skill utilisation. The surveyed alumni reported that they strongly agreed/agreed that they had used their K&S to improve their work/career opportunities (97%); improve the organizations they work in (95%); promote inclusion in their workplace/community (88%); and contribute to improving local communities (90%). One alumni commented, *"the Australia Awards has given me an enlightening experience where skills and knowledge were useful for dialogue and facilitation on policy matters"*.

At the macro level, alumni were asked about whether they have been able to contribute at a national level and at a global or regional level. Most of the alumni (89%) reported having contributed (agree/strongly agree) to national development. AAS more likely to strongly agree/agree (94%) than AAPS alumni (84%) that they had contributed at a national level however this may well reflect the level of study rather than the place of study¹⁹. There were no significant differences in reported contribution levels by gender. Alumni reported examples of their contribution at a national level, including:

- *"Being chair of the Parliament Public Account Committee engaging government in relating to public finance management matters such as government budget, parliament enquiries on issues related with government operations etc."*
- *"I created the Annual Management Plan for Inclusive Education in the Ministry of Education"*.
- *"I am currently co-coordinating a post graduate program for nurses at TNU. My experience of the Australian healthcare and the knowledge learned has been very helpful with my new role."*

Most of the alumni (84%) reported having contributed to development at a regional/global level. AAS more likely to strongly agree/agree (93%) than AAPS alumni (74%) that they had contributed at a regional/international level, however this may well reflect the award level of study (postgraduate (89%), undergraduate (78%). As above, there was not a significant difference in this contribution by gender. Examples of these contributions at the regional level reported by alumni include:

¹⁹ There are too small numbers of awardees to control for level of study when analysing the AAS data

- *“I have represented Tonga in the Drafting Committee at the 15th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women and the Eighth Meeting of Pacific Ministers for Women in RMI this year.”*
- *“Exporting fresh fish worldwide, regional scientific fisheries research, national hydrographic survey and volcano assessment charters.”*
- *“I am a member of the Pacific Islands Investment Forum”.*

The FGD alumni highlighted that the contributions they have made since their award can be attributed to the improved K&S acquired because of their award and increased confidence developed through their scholarship experience.

Challenges in knowledge and skill utilisation. The survey asked the alumni as to the factors that have prevented or challenged them to utilise their K&S to make a development contribution. Despite the high rates of surveyed alumni reporting using their K&S at national and regional levels, half of the surveyed alumni reported (51%) facing at least one factor that prevented or challenged their being able to contribute since returning home to a great extent. Undergraduate alumni reported a slighter higher level of experiencing at least one challenge (54%) compared to postgraduates (47%).

The top three challenges reported by the surveyed alumni were: Lack of resources or funding to implement changes; resistance to change; and lack of networking opportunities. The FGD participants reported similar challenges in using their K&S. These included the lack of relevance of the training due to the unavailability of more recent equipment in GoT workplaces and the negative perception of the ability of young (particularly female) alumni.

One female alumni reported, *“an outcome of the Australian Leadership Award is this unlocking of mindset, so I was determined to find a way to thrive in Tonga even if I faced difficult situations. For example, there was a bias in my profession against women taking on senior relationship roles... But I knew how to read a balance sheet and make a sales pitch, and that confidence made me overcome that barrier. Over time I contributed to reducing the stigma of women taking on senior relationship roles.”*

Impact of Australia Awards on leadership in Tonga

AAS/AAPS selection processes consider applicant’s leadership potential to use their knowledge, skills and networks to influence change after their award. Living and studying overseas is typically a transformative experience that contribute to leadership potential, with awardee thinking and behavior influenced by Australian (and Pacific regional) values.

Some of the alumni commented:

- *“Having the exposure to better systems and more Western ways of thinking has broaden my perspective in life. I think I have adopted a ‘can do attitude’ rather than I do not know what to do. Australia Awards has given me the opportunity to see the world differently.”*
- *“The opportunity to study in Australia made me realise that I must work hard...I must ask questions as no one will do things for me. These new skills have changed me.”*

- *“I count myself lucky to have studied in Australian universities, where they teach you principles, which have stood the test of time, in government administration and governance, the proper management of organisations and effective and efficient use of resources. This has equipped me as a professional to drive public service reform, organisational development and management development in organisations.”*

In countries where there is an Australia Awards MC, support for enhancing leadership capability is provided through, for example, reintegration activities, leadership professional development training and mentoring programs. Although a high proportion of the Tongan alumni are in senior (manager/professional) roles, the AAT has not explicitly conducted leadership activities to further prepare alumni for making a positive impact in these roles. Nevertheless, almost three-quarters (72%) of the surveyed alumni reported having a leadership role, with little difference by gender. Not surprisingly, postgraduate awardees were more likely to report a formal leadership role (86%) compared to undergraduates (57%). A further 17% of respondents reported an informal leadership role.

Furthermore, at least 45 of the AAS/AAPS alumni (42% female) are currently working in the most influential and senior roles in Tonga²⁰. These roles include Privy Counsellor, Members of Parliament (3), Ministers and Governors (4), Judges (2), in banks (6), CEOs (8) and Deputy CEOs (6) of government agencies, in the private sector (7), in churches (3), and in development projects (3).

Ongoing networks and relationships with people met during the award

Alumni networks are important tools to strengthen ongoing linkages with Australia and are an essential and significant component of Australia’s soft power diplomacy. The Australia Awards Global Strategic Framework and the Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy, are based on the premise that meaningful engagement with alumni contributes to Australia’s national interests by: strengthening our people-to-people links, diplomatic relationships and mutually beneficial partnerships; growing trade investment and business linkages; promoting our ingenuity, capabilities and credentials in education, research and innovation; showcasing Australia as a contemporary, innovative and open society.

Alumni have relevant and useful networks and relationships

The Tongan alumni have strong people-to-people engagement with other AA alumni and have overall maintained contact with the people met whilst on award (such as their university lecturers and other Australian/international students. Whilst AAS alumni engagement with Australian contacts is stronger than for the AAPS, nevertheless over two-thirds of AAPS alumni have contact with individuals in Australian organisations and/or businesses working in their field of work.

Ongoing connections with Australia. The surveyed alumni reported ongoing contact with people met during their award, including (always, sometime, often) with other Australia Awards alumni (90%), Australian students (61%), other international students (81%), university lecturers/academics (64%), individuals in Australian organisations and/or businesses working in their field of work (66%), and other

²⁰ As identified by the AHC scholarships team and the review team

individuals in the Australian community (79%). Alumni reported they used their connections to seek work related advice. For example, one alumni in the outer islands reported asking fellow awardees and lecturers on interpreting scans and x-rays.

Not surprisingly ongoing contact with Australian connections was slightly higher for AAS than AAPS alumni (especially with Australian and other international students), but nevertheless around two-thirds of AAPS alumni reported contacts with Australian individuals in organisations related to their field and with the community (likely made through the strong connections Tonga has more broadly with Australia).

The highest level of contact (where alumni are 'always' or 'often' in contact) were with fellow Australia Awards alumni (48%)²¹. The alumni reported least contact (never) with university lecturers (33%). Female alumni were more likely to report contact (always/often) with other people met while on award, across all connections. This was particularly with respect to individuals in Australian organisations working in their field (29%) compared to male alumni (14%). One alumni reported "*Maintaining contact with my lecturers and colleagues to share knowledge was very useful, especially while I was head of the research division of the Ministry of Agriculture*".

Alumni contribution to cooperation between Australia and partner countries. The tracer survey asked alumni as to the extent of ongoing engagement or cooperation with Australia as a result of their scholarship. The alumni reported examples of cooperation in a range of sectors/organisations. These included where alumni are in contact with the AHC and working in development projects in Tonga funded by Australia. It also included other organisations such as with: Australian NGOs supporting aquaculture activities; Rotary Aid Funding to help hospital and clinics; collaboration with James Cook University for upskilling and training local dentists; and with the National Anti-Corruption Commission.

Alumni contribute to cooperation between Australia and Tonga

Half of the surveyed alumni reported that they/their organisation had cooperation with Australia (such as through joint projects and to a lesser extent community initiatives and research). The FGD and surveyed alumni gave examples of this cooperation across a range of sectors and Australian organisation types (public, universities and NGOs).

AAS alumni were more likely to have a form of cooperation with Australian organisations than AAPS. This included with respect to joint projects (AAS 40%, AAPS 10%), research (AAS 8%, AAPS 4%). This may have been largely due to the level of study of alumni and the now seniority of their role (rather than the connections made in Australia). For example, 61% of undergraduate alumni reported no organisational cooperation compared to 42% of postgraduate alumni. 32% of postgraduates reported joint cooperation with an Australian organisation compared to 16% of undergraduates. Despite this positive result, it is noted

²¹ Apart from the WLI example, no evidence was found on more formal networks of alumni

however that half of the survey alumni (51%) reported that they/their organisation had no cooperation with Australia (AAS 38%, AAPS 65%).

Alumni connections in Tonga

AHC has had limited systematic engagement with its alumni over the past few years. The first major formal alumni event since the COVID-19 pandemic was held in 2024 and was very well received by the participating alumni. The AHC also hosts events where smaller groups of alumni are invited, mainly because of their current employment roles, to functions organized by the AHC.

The majority of the surveyed alumni are interested in being part of a Tonga alumni association - 69% said they were interested to a great extent and 23% to a medium extent. There was no significant difference in interest by alumni gender, award program or level of study. The top four engagement activities that alumni reported would be of interest were: professional development (78%); special interest groups (66%); access to grants (63%); and social activities (55%). The alumni were also interested (albeit to a lesser extent) in community service/fund raising events and mentoring of awardees/new alumni. The strong interest in professional development activities was also most often mentioned by FGD alumni, including with respect to keeping their K&S current after a number of years since completion of their awards.

The value in alumni engaging with each other is demonstrated by the meeting in February 2024 of five Tongan WLI program alumni who met to share their experiences, ideas for possible project collaboration and to deepen their professional and social relationships. One of the alumni reported that the event was "crucial" to nurture a strong local network of highly experienced Tongan women who can work together to bring benefits to national development "*instead of migrating for greener pastures overseas*". The event provided "*a safe and relaxed space for sharing of personal and professional experiences and lessons learned overcoming leadership challenges*".

Public diplomacy

The ACER Competitiveness Analysis found that a student's positive in-Australia experience is the most important driver contributing to cultural capital and soft-power outcomes. Awardees and alumni play a key role in Australia's public diplomacy in Tonga. This is founded on the overall highly positive perceptions of their award experience, and the relevance and utilisation of the K&S gained to contribute to development in Tonga.

The ORIMA 2023 surveys reported that the Tongan new AAS arrivals found studying experiences in Australia to be positive (79%), although some awardees reported less positive perceptions, such as experiencing discrimination. The surveys of ongoing Tongan AAPS students also found high levels of satisfaction with the: quality of services and facilities (71% FNU, 89% USP); the Australia Awards overall (97% FNU 96% USP); and the alignment of their course/curriculum with learning and development outcomes (99% FNU, 92% USP).

Alumni view Australia, Australians and Australian expertise positively

Overall, the vast majority of the alumni consulted during the review expressed positive perspectives of Australia. This was reported as being due to factors such as appreciation for the funding of their studies and the opportunities this has given the alumni, the support given during their overseas education, and due to

their contact with the AHC and the Australian individuals and organisations as a part of their employment/roles. Additionally, AAS alumni have mostly positive experiences of their time living and studying in Australia.

The review team found that considerable value is attached to the Australia Awards²² by senior government, private sector and NGOs - contributing strongly to Australia's reputation and bilateral relationships in Tonga. Australia's inclusion of Tongan input in oversight of the awards (such as through discussions on award targeting and selection interview panel participation) is also positively perceived by stakeholders, as other development partners with more centralised processes - such as New Zealand, Japan and China - do not involve Tongan stakeholders to the same extent.

The AHC uses its Facebook page to promote the availability of award opportunities and to spotlight the work of individual alumni. In recent years, the AHC has publicly recognized the AAT through "celebratory" events prior to awardee departure and some ad-hoc alumni functions. This public diplomacy helps to build public understanding of Australia's support for the development of Tonga, to raise awareness of the quality of education in Australia, and to promote Australia as a reliable partner.

Public recognition for the awards has come from the highest level. In September 2020, the former Hon Prime Minister Dr Pohiva Tu'i'onetoa, himself a former Australia Awards scholar, called on the Tongan alumni, *"I expect you to play a leading role. You will be future leaders of Tonga, our future catalysts of change. You will shape Tonga and the world around us. You will use your Australian qualifications to make a positive contribution to Tonga's development."*

The ACER Competitive Analysis concluded that "These diverse and talented individuals are a vital diplomatic asset. Engaging more broadly with this community is a soft power priority." It will be important for the AHC to continue to plan and budget for public diplomacy related to the Australia Awards. The celebration of highly influential alumni and an increase in alumni engagement activities as proposed by this review will enhance public diplomacy opportunities. The AHC should consider promoting not just the number of AAS/AAPS funded by the bilateral program but the totality of funding, including that from central budgets, ACIAR and DFAT fellowships.

4.3 KRQ 3 Inclusion - How well have the Australia Awards been implemented in Tonga to support Australia's GEDSI objectives?

Systemic barriers to inclusion

DFAT is committed to promoting equity of access at all stages of the Australia Awards, including interventions to address barriers to participation at the pre-award stage and provide on-award or post-award support to enhance participation by women, people with disability, and other disadvantaged groups. The overarching barrier to accessing the AAS/AAPS is for Tongan applicants to meet the minimum education

²² It is noted that whilst feedback on Australian expertise was not directly captured by the review, FGD alumni expressed appreciation for the technical support given by joint cooperation with Australian organisations.

qualification requirement set by the Pacific and Australian universities for acceptance to the chosen program of study. There are also a range of systemic and other barriers that inhibit some people from applying and being accepted for a scholarship, particularly by persons with disability, students from the outer islands and those who are unable to leave family and work to undertake a long-term scholarship.

Gender. As noted in section 2, overall boys are achieving lower academic results in secondary school than girls. Gender norms also impact scholarship applications. Stakeholders noted that many young men are already engaged in labour mobility schemes, which can divert them from pursuing traditional academic paths. Women are under-represented in applications in typically male dominated fields such as science, IT and engineering. There is a higher proportion of female applications for studies in society and culture, management and commerce, and health (and equal proportions for education studies).

In discussions with the review team, some alumni reflected that working mothers are often reluctant to apply for long-term scholarships for studies outside of Tonga, especially those with children. Women often struggle with issues such as, who to care for the children while they are away, or how to finance the mobilization and ongoing expenses of families while overseas.

Disability. Data from the Disability Survey shows that people with disability face significant barriers to attending and staying in school. The education system in Tonga is not at a stage where it can adequately support these students. Stakeholders also noted that the greatest barrier is parent, teachers, and community attitudes towards people with disability and the perception that they will not succeed academically. This perception has further discouraged those with disability from applying for a scholarship.

There are also diverse range of disabilities with different support needs. One alumni with a learning disability shared their experience of the challenges of completing their award, albeit with individual support offered while on award in Fiji. Although there are supports documented in the Australia Awards Scholarship Policy Handbook, there is still uncertainty by people with disability on how to access this support while overseas.

Outer island inclusion. The AAPS/AAS provide an opportunity for access to tertiary education for many who otherwise would not have been able to afford it. The ORIMA 2023 AAS surveys found that less than 10% of the Tongan new arrivals would have studied in Australia without a scholarship. The typically lower quality of education (with respect to accessing resources and the best teachers) also limits achievement of university entry requirements for students at rural/remote schools. Outer island students compete with high performing secondary school students in Tongatapu for award selection which puts a high value on academic achievement (as an indicator of ability to undertake higher level studies). Outer island students are also disadvantaged with internet connectivity and information about courses and universities.

English language is not considered by the stakeholders consulted to be a significant barrier to access to the scholarships and successful study in Australia. Only a small proportion (mainly postgraduate medical students) do not reach the International English Language Training System (IELTS) level required by some institutions. These scholars are provided with pre-course English language training in Australia to reach the required level. The ORIMA 2023 AAS Surveys found that 88% of Tongan new arrivals felt that their English

language skills were sufficient for undertaking their course of study in Australia (compared to 95% globally across all new arrivals).

Outcomes from AAT approaches to enhance inclusion

While the above systemic challenges cannot be directly addressed by the AAT, the AHC undertakes a range of measures to mitigate barriers to inclusion in the awards. These measures would be enhanced by development of a GEDSI strategy for the AAT to ensure that equity of access is consistently applied throughout the scholarship cycle.

Gender. The AAT has consistently promoted the awards to both male and female applicants over many years. Reflecting this promotion (and the systemic factors outlined above), the AAT has benefited women disproportionately (with 64% of awards made to females between 2001-2024). For the 2024 intake, 68% of the awards were offered to females (roughly in proportionate to the applications received by gender). However, in reviewing the selection and post-award processes for the AAT, several gaps have been identified in achieving gender equity - the absence of an equity process, such as a quota system for male and female applicants, and the lack of encouragement for applications by women in non-traditional fields of study are notable local constraints.

The Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI), managed centrally by DFAT Canberra, is however working to increase the number of Pacific women (including 1-2 awards for Tongans each year) who hold positions of influence in all sectors and spheres of society. The initiative supports AA scholars and alumni to fulfil their leadership potential and drive big ideas and reforms in their communities²³. As noted above, the Tonga WLI participants continue to engage with each other because they are small in numbers and are able to organise themselves to start co-developing projects and consultancies using their areas of expertise.

Disability. The Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook takes a person-centred approach to providing disability inclusive support throughout the scholarship process. Funding for disability related support is provided for successful scholarship applicants. DFAT and institutions will provide reasonable adjustment and accommodation to allow awardees with disability to participate in the AAS and AAPS. DFAT GLE engages a Disability Support Consultant who will assist in developing Disability Support Agreements in consultation with institutions, applicants and Posts to assess support needs and identify practical solutions to enable the successful selection and mobilisation of selected awardees with disability.

It is the responsibility of each Post (or their MC) to support persons with disability through prioritising processing of their applications; facilitating the removal of barriers during the selection process; explaining the disability support process; providing all document and contact information of awardees to the disability support consultant; and managing expectations. Owing to the systemic issues outlined above and limited target approaches by the AHC to date, the program has had limited success in the inclusion of people with disability in the program. Only six persons with disability (4M/2F) are recorded on OASIS (2001-2024). No awards were made to a person with disability in 2023 and 2024. One alumni with disability told the review team, *“for someone who did not attend primary school because of illness, I count myself blessed when DFAT sponsored my degree. This was a life changing experience because it encouraged me that the impossible is possible. I hope that everyone in Tonga will learn from my experience.”*

Rural/remote inclusion: To ensure access to the awards throughout Tonga, DFAT conducts outreach to promote scholarship availability to the outer islands of Vava’u and Ha’apai and ‘Eua (but not the two Niuas). The number of AAS/AAPS offered is broadly representative of the applications received from the outer islands (as shown by applicant birthplace).

4.4 KRQ 4 Efficiency of AAS/AAPS implementation²⁴

Overall, the program’s implementation arrangements are supporting effective delivery with respect to the pre- and on-award phases of the scholarships cycle. With the current AHC resourcing, post-award alumni activities and MEL are however limited. Whilst there are currently no external governance arrangements for the awards (such as a Scholarships Steering Committee with external members), the AHC appropriately

²³ The objectives of the WLI are that: female alumni use their leadership skills to contribute to sustainable development outcomes for the Pacific; female and male alumni are actively engaged in networks and coalitions that seek to achieve change in their own countries; female alumni are strengthening cooperation between Pacific countries and Australia.

²⁴ With the ACIAR and DFAT fellowships being centrally managed in Australia.

manages risks and engages with key Tonga stakeholders in key aspects of award oversight (award targeting and selection interviews).

Scholarship cycle implementation

Implementation by the AHC of the AAS/AAPS pre- and on-award functions were found by the review team to be administratively intensive but efficient overall. The required activities are conducted by local staff with relevant skills and experience in accordance with the schedule and practices in the global Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook. AHC implementation of on- and post-award activities is at reduced levels compared to the larger Australia Awards countries, where MCs conduct a broader range of activities.

Pre-award activities. AHC implementation of pre-award activities (from award targeting, advertisement to mobilisation of scholars) includes:

- Award promotion for each new intake is done across all sectors through the DFAT Australia Awards and the Tonga AHC Facebook posts, direct consultation with the PSC (for on forwarding to ministries), and to a lesser extent the private sector and NGOs.
- There are approximately ten applications submitted via OASIS for each scholarship awarded. This creates significant workload in the shortlisting process. Careful promotion of the eligibility criteria could reduce this proportion (and decrease applicant time and expectations).
- Shortlisting and selection are led by the AHC in accordance with DFAT guidance. Shortlisted applicants are interviewed by a panel chaired by an A-Based staff member, DFAT Canberra representative (or a contracted Australian academic), plus two GoT representatives (from the PSC and Ministry of Education).
- Institution placement, visa, and travel arrangement processes are overall efficiently managed by the AHC, using OASIS. Some delays are however experienced in mobilising awardees due to late AAPS university placements.
- An important aspect of the awards is that awardees are provided with reasonable support to be able to adjust to studying outside of their home countries and to complete their award in the expected duration. The AHC provides basic (one day) pre-departure briefings (PDB) for the AAS and for the AAPS. This provides minimum, but adequate, preparation for awardees, given that the host universities are contracted to provide airport reception and IAP²⁵. The ORIMA 2023 AAS surveys found that 88% of new arrivals from Tonga agreed that the information provided in the PDB, guidebook and weblink video reflected the experiences they encountered when living in Australia. There was overall new arrival satisfaction with the IAP (90%). No concerns were raised in FGD regarding preparation for studying and living in Australia/Pacific.

²⁵ Or the two-week USP equivalent: Preparation for Higher Education Workshop (PHEW).

Given current staff resourcing, the AHC does not currently provide course counselling for shortlisted applicants or to support awardees to complete a “reintegration plan”. Recommendations with respect to conducting such activities are described below.

It is noted that the AHC staff reported that there are inefficiencies in double-handling of some of the above processes in OASIS, as it does not provide the full-functionality (for example in bulk processing) and is often unavailable. It is anticipated that improved functionality will be available once the new One Education system comes online (in FY25/26).

The policy handbook specifies the DFAT Canberra, Suva, and the AHC roles in the scholarships cycle. Gaps in coordination between the different offices appear to cause challenges in role execution. Revisiting these role definitions, for example with respect to the time taken for activity processes and delegate approval will ensure that all involved stakeholders can effectively perform their roles across the scholarships cycle.

On-award support and enrichment. The AHC on-award activities are currently limited to processing award variations requiring A-Based approvals, report preparation, stakeholder meetings (including government officials and Canberra/Suva counterparts). On-award progress monitoring (including for award variations) and awardee support (including academic and welfare counselling) is managed by contracted universities through DFAT GLE for the AAS and through DFAT Fiji for USP/FNU. Positive comments were raised in the FGD regarding the on-award academic and pastoral support provided by DFAT and host universities to AAS and AAPS awardees.

The AHC rely on the Australian institutions to provide on-award enrichment activities (for the AAS awardees specifically and as combined with university activities for all international students). This includes events and programs catering to students' different areas of interest (such as attending the FIFA Women's World Cup, visiting art exhibitions, and trips to local scenic attractions). Some universities also provide professional development opportunities including project management, innovation, and leadership to build on classroom learnings. Some DFAT State offices also provide networking opportunities, particularly on national culturally important or other awareness days (such as International Women's Day).

However, the Tongan AAS awardees do not currently benefit from the targeted range of on-award activities as arranged by the Australia Awards MCs. There are also very limited options for on-award enrichment for the AAPS scholars.

Post-award activities. Prior to the recent recruitment of a contracted Alumni Officer (0.5 FTE), the AHC did not have the staff resources to conduct reintegration activities on alumni return to Tonga. Although almost half (47%) of surveyed alumni found the experience of adapting back to living and working in Tonga after completion of their scholarship to be easy, 4% said it was somewhat/extremely difficult. While most awardees (in the public service) already have jobs there is benefit in connecting new alumni with other alumni, providing context specific advice on (personal and work) reintegration challenges (to address issues as outlined in section 4.2.4), finding relevant jobs, considering private sector employment, networking skills, K&S utilisation and influencing change particularly with respect to inclusion in the workplace etc.

Harmonization. In previous years, some program efficiencies were achieved through harmonization of Australia and New Zealand award cycle activities. The two high commissions still harmonise some of their

award activities through consultation on award targeting and by joint outreach to secondary schools in Tongatapu and to the outer islands of Vava'u and Ha'apai and 'Eua. However, opportunities for joint activities decreased following the New Zealand move to centralize the majority of the Manaaki Scholarship processes for all recipient countries. The two high commissions still and undertake a harmonized process for award promotion throughout Tonga, to minimize disruptions to secondary schools.

Given the relatively small number of awards offered each year by each country, for improved efficiency and effectiveness the AHC should explore opportunities with New Zealand for activities such as shared pre-departure briefing for awardees studying in the Pacific, reintegration workshops for alumni, and selected alumni activities (such as in special interest groups).

AAT MEL

The Australia Awards Global Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF) provides high-level guidance on the monitoring and evaluation of Australia Awards. The MEF enables implementers of Australia Awards to collect, analyse and report on all information necessary to meet the requirements of the DFAT Making Performance Count. As a small program, the AAT does not have its own MEL Framework but uses the overarching Australia Awards Framework and systems as the basis for their MEL.

Data on AAS/AAPS applications and awardee study progress, award variations and completion are systematically collected from applicants and the tertiary institutions in OASIS. This is readily available to the AHC to manage pre- and on-award scholarship activities and to communicate and assess program outputs for monitoring and reporting purposes²⁶. The AHC scholarship team's internal reflections on the implementation of the scholarships cycle inform planning for the continuous improvement on promotion, application, selection and mobilisation activities.

The ORIMA surveys provide summary data on Tonga AAS and AAPS experiences (managed by DFAT GLE and DFAT Fiji respectively). The ACER GTF collects data on alumni through regular annual tracer and other surveys. Due to the small number, the findings from the Tongan alumni are not typically separately identified in these reports. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of host institution contracts and annual performance assessments are conducted by DFAT GLE (for Australian universities) and DFAT Fiji (for Pacific universities).

AHC resourcing constraints have meant that minimal MEL data on the Tonga alumni are collected. This significantly limits the ability of the AHC to communicate and assess AAS/AAPS outcomes. Additionally, AHC access to data on Tongan DFAT AAF and ACIAR JAF awardees/alumni is only available on request.

Consolidated reporting on the AAS/AAPS is undertaken by DFAT GLE and DFAT Fiji. The AHC has recently been asked to contribute AAT data for the global reporting of the Tier 2 of the DFAT Performance and Delivery Framework and on the Core Global indicators of the MEF.

²⁶ Although Australian privacy guidelines limit direct AHC access to full information on student grades and where awardee progress is impacted by personal health, mental welfare and other challenges.

Section 05

Lessons learned and Recommendations

05

5. Lessons learned and Recommendations

Lessons learned from the review findings (as may be applicable to other small Australia Awards programs or other DFAT programs in Tonga) include the following:

- in countries with a low number of children with disability completing primary school, identification of children with disability with academic potential and their support through secondary school is needed to increase their inclusion in the awards.
- with improved internet access, cost and reliability, mixed mode study (including distance/remote learning) is now a realistic and preferred option for some motivated students (with family, career and other responsibilities).
- programs with small numbers of awards need to be supported by DFAT Canberra or partner with other Pacific countries or MCs to get improved access to fellowships and on-award engagement activities.
- alumni who studied in the Pacific need to be given supplementary opportunities to network with AAS alumni and visiting Australians.
- tracing alumni several/multiple years after they have graduated is much less effective than keeping in regular contact with alumni after award completion.

Based on the review findings and relevant good practice from other Indo-Pacific countries offering Australia Awards, this section outlines recommendations (and approaches) for the continuous improvement of the AAT. These recommendations are consistent with emphasising quality in delivery of the investment in Tonga, and in streamlining administration where efficiencies can be gained while maintaining effectiveness and quality standards. The recommendations also reflect proportionality to the relatively small size of the AAT (compared to other Australia Awards countries outside the Pacific) and the budget/staff resources available for implementation by the AHC.

Consideration by the AHC of the recommendations in this report will inform development by the review team of a Scholarships Implementation Framework. Given AHC limited capacity to design and implement new activities, it will be important to phase the timing of implementation of accepted recommendations.

5.1 Funding for and targeting of AAS/AAPS

The DFAT AHC are responsible for decisions about how the AAS/AAPS will contribute to Tonga's development, the combination of modalities and the selection of awardees. This acknowledges that the AHC is best placed to understand their respective country responsibilities, context and needs.

Funding

The bilateral funding for FY24/25 for the AAS/AAPS is A\$3.9 million (for ongoing and new award and post program costs such as mobilization, in-country alumni activities²⁷). This is 18% of the funding of the total bilateral program budget estimate of \$22.1 million.

Given other current priorities in the bilateral program (and any new priorities in the DPP), the review team consider that the allocation of 18-20% of the available budget for skilled education (through the AAS/AAPS) is a reasonable proportion of the bilateral investment over the next three-five years. This expenditure is complemented with funding from through the DFAT Office of the Pacific (OTP) for an additional nine AAS for the 2025 intake and DFAT funding for five regional aviation scholarships for Tonga.

This level of funding would (unless there are changes in scholarship support for Tonga by other development partner) retain the recognition of Australia as the pre-eminent provider of quality and relevant tertiary education scholarships for Tonga. Consideration of this funding level would need to be reviewed if there are any changes to the level of OTP funding for scholarships. There is also possibility for AHC access to funding for on-award enrichment and alumni activities through the DFAT GLE and the proposed Australia Awards Global Support Mechanism (AAGSM) budgets. The total provision of Australia Awards for Tonga would be further enhanced through greater use of the AAF and the ACIAR JAF.

Principles for award targeting

Australia's International Development Policy presents a long-term vision for how the development program will meet the critical needs of our partners; while also supporting Australia's national interests and the interests we share the Indo-Pacific region. In accord with a partnership approach, and particularly given the small size of Tonga, although there is no longer a formal Scholarships Committee, local stakeholders provide guidance for the AAT through discussion of award targeting and advice on selection of awardees.

The ACER Competitive Analysis found that *“the targeting of sectors, scholarship types and duration and support for inclusion can be used strategically to ‘signal’ to the market a scholarship’s potential competitiveness. Targeting can have an impact on the diversity and quality of applicants at the pre-award stage and can have the potential to yield positional advantage in home country labour markets at the post-award stage when alumni return to their home countries”*.

It is proposed that an annual scholarship targeting workshop be held to prioritise and harmonise the offering of tertiary (and VET) scholarships by the GoT and development partners. This workshop could be This workshop could be led by the National Scholarships Committee (through the PSC or Ministry of Labour) or alternatively the national skills development working group chaired by government. It would include representatives from the government, private and NGO sectors and development partners.²⁸ By aligning

²⁷ Include \$100k for alumni activities (primarily at this stage mission level public diplomacy functions)

²⁸ The workshop would consider: current high-need skilled and semi-skilled vacancies, the urgent PSC training needs list (as well as those of other sector); stakeholders forward looking human resource plans (including those of major upcoming development projects and jobs of the future (e.g. green, blue, digital); the pipeline of tertiary education and training currently being undertaken; the appropriate modality to meet the skills gap needs; and inclusion considerations.

scholarships with emerging needs, prioritisation and targeting of scholarships will be more streamlined and predictable for the GoT.

Decisions about the targeting of awards are more complex in Tonga due to the availability of both AAS and AAPS, and the relative importance of the awards for Tonga. Decisions about the ratio of AAPS and AAS reflect (often competing) factors, including with regard to:

- analysis of Tonga's relative need for undergraduate compared to postgraduate knowledge and skills
- the number of awards that can be offered within the budget available (to maintain/enhance the pre-eminence of the offering of scholarships by Australia, to increase the total alumni with positive perceptions of Australia and for maximum outcomes from alumni K&S utilisation) to make an impact. An average AAS is 2.5 times the cost of an AAPS for a 3-year bachelor's degree)²⁹
- meeting the DPP commitment to delivering around 25 scholarships annually for tertiary study in Australia and the Pacific
- the relative higher quality of education provided by Australian universities compared to those in the Pacific that are still developing consistent quality across their institutions
- the opportunity for AAS awardees to better understand Australia and to engage/network with Australian individuals and organisations while on award
- the strong relevance (and use of technologies available in Tonga) of Pacific tertiary education, particularly in the fields of health and education
- the relative ease of adjustment to living and studying in the Pacific for younger Tongan awardees
- DFAT support for USP and FNU – including consideration of the positive contribution of the awards (income and influence) to the capacity strengthening of Pacific institutions.

Targeting the level of study/award program

As summarised in Annex 6, Tonga faces critical labour supply gaps in semi-skilled areas. To meet these needs, there are already a range of VET opportunities available to Tonga (such as through the APTC, Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM), International Labour Organisation - ILO/World Bank skills programs, DFAT funding of ILO programs and the new bilateral DFAT skills program for Tonga). It is therefore proposed that the AAS/AAPS not be provided for VET training at this time but continue to be targeted to undergraduate and postgraduate education. This recommendation would need to be reviewed should the next phase of the APTC (PASP and bilateral skills program under the Tonga-Australia Support Platform - TASP) not provide the priority VET skills development required by Tonga. AAS/AAPS targeting would still however include for the training of TVET teachers (unless otherwise provided by the PASP).

²⁹ The average annual award cost (including costs such as Establishment Allowance, return and reunion airfares, preliminary course fees, OSHC, Academic Fee, Stipend, Institution Management Fee, Supplementary Support) for a three-year bachelor's degree in Australia (2025 intake) was \$98,400 compared with \$37,524 at USP Fiji. That is 2.5 AAPS can be offered for each AAS. The average annual award cost for a two-year Masters' degree in Australia is \$89,897 compared with \$34,081 at USP Fiji. It is noted that some regional courses are more expensive, for example the annual cost for a Master Law (at USP Emalus) is AUD 51,901.

In consideration of the above factors, particularly noting stakeholder feedback on the strong relevance of education at Pacific institutions and GoT interest in maximizing the number of awards within the available budget (through the lower cost AAPS), it is **recommended** that the AAT:

- **continue to offer awards that are aligned with Tonga’s development needs (across all sectors) and with Australia’s bilateral program for Tonga**
- **rebalance award offers to approximately 60% AAPS and 40% AAS** (which with funding of ongoing intakes, may need to be progressively changed over several years)³⁰
- **continue to target AAPS for undergraduate and postgraduate education**
- **continue to primarily offer AAS for postgraduate education** (with PhDs and undergraduate degrees offered by exception).

Given the high cost of sometimes lengthy PhDs, and the loss of critically needed leadership while awardees are away from their positions³¹, it is proposed that limited PhDs be awarded on an exception basis where there is a very strong case for research that is of high priority for Tonga³².

To achieve the intended outcome of increasing understanding of, and connections, with Australia, this rebalancing of awards would need to be accompanied by supplementary alumni activities/professional development/short courses to enhance AAPS linkages with Australia. There may also opportunities to explore inclusion of AAPS awardees in student exchanges between USP and Australian universities and to connect AAPS awardees with visiting New Colombo Plan students.

Targeting of awards by fields of study

The targeting of fields of study offered for the AAS/AAPS should reflect the Australia’s development investment focus to best contribute to the entry points that can have catalytic and multiplier effects across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - food systems, energy access and affordability, digital connectivity, education, jobs and social protection, and climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. With respect to the bilateral relationship, field of study targeting should also contribute to reducing the skill gap needs identified by the DPP and DFAT sectoral programs in Tonga.

For Tonga, the 2023 Tonga Labour Mobility Supply Management Strategy ([TLMSMS](#)) has identified significant shortages for medium to high-skilled professionals across all sectors, particularly for accountants, engineers, IT technicians, secondary and TVET teachers, medical professionals, registered nurses and allied health care workers, scientists, and policy analysts. The PSC Training Needs List also identifies the public sector skilled labour needs on any annual basis.

³⁰ It is noted that Fiji awarded approximately equal number of AAS and AAPS for the 2024 intake. The New Zealand Manaaki Scholarships also have a similar balance for study in the Pacific region and New Zealand universities.

³¹ Also noting the oft stated (but unverified by the review team) high proportion of PhDs in Tonga, and lack of evidence on the relative impact from this level of qualification.

³² Since 2001 only 13 of the awards have been for research (7 Doctoral and 6 Master (Research) degrees).

From an initial analysis of this data, it is proposed (subject to further consultation with Tongan stakeholders or changes in context), that for the next 3-5 intakes:

- the highest proportion of AAS/AAPS awards be made for study in health (including in allied health) and in education
- at least one award be made each year for study in each of the other bilateral priority areas of: agriculture; building resilience (humanitarian assistance, disaster risk reduction, social protection, stability and recovery); effective governance (policies, institutions and functioning economies, law and justice, technology and innovation); gender equality empowering women and girls; and infrastructure – particularly engineering.
- at least one award be made for study related to each of: information technology; communications; commercial/private sector development (innovation and trade facilitation and international competitiveness); climate change (sustainability; green/blue economy specialisation); disability inclusion; renewable energy and MEL.
- at least one award be made for emerging needs, identified through consultation with the National Scholarships Committee. This flexibility allows the program to adapt to changing priorities, ensuring that Tonga's development needs are met efficiently and systematically over time.

In a rapidly changing world, there is difficulty in predicting emerging needs for skilled labour. For Tonga, the determination and prioritization of skills gaps is sensitive to change in its small economy and the uncertainties of a small labour market impacted by short-term development projects/brain drain. There is also a lag of up to four years between the determination of priority fields of study and award completion. Consideration to targeting investment to support Tonga prepare for a sustainable future (including green sector, digital and blue jobs) including through: targeting of long-term awards to highly specialized education; integrating climate change as mandatory degree subjects within other courses (e.g. engineering); providing short-term training or fellowship opportunities in specialist areas to complement more generic undergraduate training.

Although careful award targeting is essential, it is important to recognise that individuals (or key partner organisations) are often best placed to understand the development needs of their country and drive innovation in their areas of professional expertise. Where strong justification is provided, and the candidate is of high leadership potential, some allowance should also be made to also offer scholarships for fields of study that fall outside the targeted priority areas.

Award modalities

With increasing demand to support human resource development in Tonga, it is timely to explore other modes of scholarship delivery which could increase reach, efficiency and value for money in support of the global AA objectives. This includes consideration of offering more flexible short-term, hybrid and online modalities that may reduce barriers to accessing education and training for people who have narrowed options for travelling overseas for long periods of time due to obligations outside of work. This relates particularly to women (who often carry responsibility for child-rearing and care for elderly family members) and to people with disability who face increased challenges in living away from established support networks. More flexible study modalities are also advantageous where extended absence from the workforce may create leadership or skills gaps and place pressure on critical services.

Fellowships. The AAF are the most flexible, and underutilized modality currently available for Tonga. Whilst the review was not able to collect data on outcomes from the Tongan recipients of the AAF, the GTF case study research illustrates long-term benefits from the AAF. The 2022 GTF case study showed how the AAF contributed to organisational change the Pacific region's financial sector by helping equip partners with a common purpose to achieve their development goals.

Feedback from the key stakeholders interviewed indicates there is limited awareness of the AAF. There was however keen interest in the awards, as a mode that targets both specific skill/experience gaps and engagement with Australian organizations. The challenge is that, unlike the MCs for other Australia Awards countries, individual Tongans do not have sufficient existing engagement with the Australian organizations who are responsible for preparing and submitting an AAF application. Stakeholders report that to take advantage of the AAF they would need support in brokering partnerships with Australian organizations.

It is recommended that the AHC work with the DFAT GLE to establish feasible ways to increase Tonga's access to the AAFs.

Options for increasing the number of AAF in Tonga, could also include the DFAT OTP implementing a Pacific regional approach to brokering partnerships for AAF applications; use of the services under the AAGSM; and/or for MCs to be requested to provide places for Tongans within their planned AAF applications.

Short courses. Although not currently provided in Tonga, the Australia Awards also include short-term training and professional development courses which are delivered by Australian providers and professionals (in Australia, partner countries or third countries) and by approved local providers. These target senior officials and mid-career professionals who demonstrate they can advance priority development and foreign policy engagement, providing key interlocutors for Australia and/or to enable alumni to quickly apply the K&S they develop during their study and respond to their country's changing priorities and challenges. They can provide 'just in time' support to Australia's partners in Tonga. Short courses can enable the refreshing of K&S learned in earlier awards, highly specialist or technical knowledge, and K&S in emerging/fast-moving fields. There has been an increase in the short courses offered by other Australia Awards countries over the

last three years³³. Some posts use the courses to increase the numbers of Australia Awards offered for the same cost (as an indicator of efficiency/effectiveness).

³³ As an example, twenty-seven Pakistani professionals completed short courses in 2023. Pakistani professionals also participated in four Regional Short Courses all of which were focused on responding to climate change

It is recommended that the AHC commence planning to establish a short course program under the Australia Awards.

Topics for the short courses would be determined in consultation with alumni and in accord with DFAT development program activities in Tonga. Indicative courses based on review consultations might include for example for private sector development, courses that require updated K&S in emerging/fast-moving fields such as cyber security, telecommunications, specialist legal fields and in cross-cutting areas of inclusion, project management, climate change/resilience and MEL.

Given other priorities and recognizing that flexible study modes need higher and more agile levels of planning and resourcing, it is proposed that short courses under the AAT be phased in, with design, resourcing and implementation planning to be conducted prior to any commencement in 2027. An option would be for management of these short courses to be integrated with that of short courses arranged by the other bilateral programs offered by the AHC in Tonga. It may also be possible for the DFAT GLE/AAGSM/MCs to support a Pacific regional approach to providing short course training.

Distance Education. With improvement in internet communications and the range and quality of remote learning, distance education is now a proven modality in Tonga, especially when combined with on-campus study/networking (such as for the Pacific Community funded Masters of Community Health). The Samoa Post has successfully implemented scholarships for distance education, proving advantageous to awardees in senior roles who value learning that can be immediately applied, whilst continuing in their role. When combined with ongoing work and family responsibilities, distance education requires considerable planning and commitment.

Given other AHC priorities and pending DFAT GLE guidance as to relevant global policies for the offering of distance education awards, it is proposed that the AHC further explore the offering of distance education following introduction of a short course modality. Any use of distance education would need to consider how to mitigate the impact of potentially reduced engagement with Australia.

5.2 Inclusion

Inclusion is a fundamental principle of the Australia Awards. The scholarships can provide an opportunity for the deliberate targeting of disadvantaged populations, where the K&S and professional connections that awardees and alumni make can help advance social and economic growth across Tonga. To ensure that there is diversity in scholarship applications and that equity of access is consistently applied throughout the scholarship cycle, **it is recommended that the AHC develop and implement a GEDSI strategy for across the scholarships cycle of the awards for Tonga.** This strategy should be based on a more in-depth analysis than was possible in this review, to identify and address key barriers across the awards cycle to women, people with disabilities, and those from rural and remote locations.

Subject to this analysis, a GEDSI strategy/plan could include for example:

- a specific gender equality outcome⁵

- strengthening of the outreach by the AHC to raise awareness (in collaboration with disability organizations, women's networks, and local community groups) about the awards and to support potential applicants to address the unique challenges they face in accessing scholarship opportunities
- adjustments to the current selection that primarily emphasises academic merit and fields of study to include mechanisms to ensure fair gender, disability and outer island representation
- ensuring that professional opportunities for alumni are inclusive and accessible
- provision of flexible study modalities for people unable to travel for tertiary education.

Gender. Australia Awards investments aim to empower women and address gender equality issues. As seen above, 64% of AAT awards have been made to females since 2001. Given this already high proportion, DFAT could focus on targeting development sectors where women's tertiary skills and participation in policy development, decision-making, and technical implementation are most needed in Tonga. One approach could be to promote and encourage female applications for non-traditional fields such as IT and engineering, where women's representation is typically lower. DFAT can leverage existing partnerships, such as the Tonga Women in ICT (TWICT), GoT ministries, and international partners like New Zealand, to better target and encourage women's participation in these critical sectors.

Another approach would be to empower the female alumni through professional development to enhance their leadership skills (and providing networking and mentoring support). This training could be based on relevant aspects of the WLI program. These programs should also be made available to carefully selected male alumni who could play a critical role in shifting norms and advocating for change (including facilitating a space for women to be mentored and promoted).

Given the lower proportion of males (completing secondary school) and applying for scholarships, and the imbalance to date in award offers to females, there is a need to explore strategies for a more even gender balance of award offers. This could include the introduction of a gender quota or minimum clear gender targets for selection, with a move to a 60/40 ratio of award offers to female/males (particularly for school leavers who meet university entrance requirements). This could later be transitioned to at least 40% representation for men and for women, with the remaining 20% made up from either category to deliver the required outcomes on diversity, balance and leadership performance.

A complementary approach could be to focus on aiming for gender parity in selected sectors initially, progressively expanding this to other sectors in subsequent years. To encourage male student applicants, a program could be developed to identify high-performing male students in secondary schools. These students can be mentored, receiving tailored guidance to help them navigate the scholarship application process and succeed in obtaining an academic scholarship.

Disability. As noted above, there are still limited numbers of people with disability completing secondary school and in the workplace in Tonga. Those that are, should be celebrated and supported to apply for an award. Organisations for Persons with a Disability (OPDs) and counterparts in DFAT's sectoral programs should be enlisted to identify persons with disabilities in their organisations that may be eligible for an award and encourage and support them to apply. The AHC can (as supported by DFAT Canberra) enhance their resources (such as accessible application materials and sign language interpretation) and individual support to accommodate application and selection by individuals with disability.

It is proposed that the AAT provide at least one award per annum to address the significant need for more Tongans with the K&S to help build capacity and foster greater inclusion in schools and the workplace. DFAT could also consider providing short courses to upskill (such as in braille and sign language) both professionals supporting persons with disability and individuals with disability themselves. Furthermore, all alumni with disability should be supported in the reintegration process, in finding relevant work and in accessing any professional development opportunities offered to AAT alumni.

Outer Islands. The review consultations have found that students from the outer islands still face financial barriers to furthering their education (as well as barriers in competing for scholarships with students on Tongatapu). To promote inclusivity, the AHC could pilot a small number of in-country scholarships that provide partial or full tuition and internet access at USP for top-performing students from the outer islands. This would allow them to complete the first two years of their studies through extension programs at USP centres in Tonga. If these students succeed, they could automatically qualify for an AAPS to complete their studies at one of the main USP campuses. Additionally, the Alumni Engagement Strategy should ensure that activities are inclusive of outer island alumni, fostering stronger connections and support networks across the country.

5.3 Strengthening of on-award engagement with Australia

On-award enrichment activities are an inexpensive way to enhance students' experiences, leadership skills and confidence and deepen their networks, adding value to the more formal education benefits of the scholarships. Evidence from other countries shows that scholars who build links and networks while they are on-award in Australia are more likely to stay strongly connected to Australia as alumni. The review has also found evidence of the connections made by Tongan awardees while they are in Australia and maintenance of these networks on completion of their studies (see section 4.2.7).

Most of the Australia Awards MCs now organize enrichment activities for their awardees³⁴. As a small Post with limited resources and with a small number of awardees spread across many of the 40 Australian universities, there is insufficient scale for the AHC to conduct such activities. Instead, the AHC should encourage Tonga awardee participation in the activities arranged by the universities and DFAT (including the State and Territory Offices). It is understood that the AAGSM will also be tasked (and provided with some funding) to support Posts with on-award enrichment activities.

It is recommended that the AHC work closely with DFAT GLE to maximize opportunities for the Tonga AAS to benefit from the on-award enrichment activities (including those that increase understanding of Australia indigenous culture) available in Australia.

5.4 Strengthening of alumni engagement

The Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy 2016-2020 outlined the government's commitment to promoting connections with and among alumni, and optimising opportunities for professional development, shared research and strengthened business connections. The ACER Competitive Analysis (2024) found that "alumni networks are the greatest asset to the Australia Awards program. Where opportunities exist to foster meaningful alumni engagement, this can have positive outcomes for an individual's employability, job promotion, skills development and contribution to development in their communities".

The DPP commits to enhancing Australia's engagement with the Australia Awards alumni, supporting lifelong learning and connections in support of Tonga's development. It includes a performance indicator

³⁴ For example, in 2023, the South Asia & Mongolia program offered 31 opportunities for scholar enrichment throughout the year, including the Scholars Forum and a series of scholar enrichment activities with a focus on gender equality/ intersectionality.

(3.2.3) of alumni participating in mutual collaborations between Tonga and Australia, after completion of an Australia Award. The targeted result is for at least 30 alumni to participate in collaborations in FY24/25, growing to 70 alumni by FY26/27.

To maximize the investment that has already been made in the awardees, and to support achievement of the DPP performance results, **it is recommended that the AHC develop and implement an Alumni Engagement Plan, which includes establishment of a Tonga Australia Awards Alumni Network.**

This plan would provide options to establish a range of alumni activities to strengthen people-to-people links and professional networks (within Tonga and with Australia) and to provide alumni with opportunities for capacity building, whilst also enhancing public diplomacy benefits. It is proposed that the AHC establish an Alumni Network³⁵, led by an Advisory Board of diverse Tongan alumni. With support from the AHC, the Advisory Board would meet regularly to initially establish the Alumni Network and then to approve an annual plan of alumni activities (such as indicated by the tracer survey alumni). Recognising that many of the Advisory Board members will be in senior roles (and often with family and community commitments) logistical support would be provided (where needed) by the AHC (or as outsourced) in implementation of network activities. It is noted that the success of the network will be dependent on the ongoing collection of alumni contact details, particular those from intakes prior to 2001.

Subject to advice from a Network Advisory Board, broader consultation with alumni and other stakeholders, the AHC may decide to fund short-course cross-cutting professional development activities – for example in leadership, inclusion, M&E, project management and start-up of private sector activities/consultancies. The Board may also consider establishing Special Interest Groups (for example for alumni to conduct sectoral based activities in health, education, infrastructure, information and communications technology, climate change, the private sector, green/blue economies and M&E). Other possible activities (as implemented in other award countries), could include for example a mentorship program, graduate internships, collaborative community development grants, etc.

The Alumni Engagement Plan should also include activities to enhance alumni linkages with Australia (particularly for the AAPS who have not had the opportunity to make these networks). This could include for example, opportunistic networking in arranging activities when Australian government officials, and academics visit Australia, establishment of mentoring by Australia (such as arranged through the New Zealand Public Service Fale programme for Pacific public service commissioners, including Australia). A global Australia Awards alumni network would be of value to the Tongan alumni who expressed interest in re-connecting with awardees met whilst on their studies and working with other alumni to address common issues in the Pacific.

The Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy took a broad definition of alumni³⁶. It is proposed that there be a staged establishment of alumni engagement, starting first with AAS and AAPS alumni. This could

³⁵ Fiji and other countries experience is that the formation of a formal association requires fulfilling partner country legal and other registration obligations

³⁶ To include full-fee paying international students, research fellows or academic exchanges, New Colombo Plan alumni, short term study abroad or exchange students, expatriate Australians.

then be extended with different “tiers” of engagement/activities for AAF, ACIAR JAF and DCSP³⁷ alumni. A further stage/tier of engagement may also include with other Tongans who are graduates of Australian education (such as GoT scholarship or self-funded alumni³⁸).

It is noted that whilst the bilateral program should allocate funding for alumni activities, additional support may be available through the global funding for the Australia Awards to support long-term engagement by Posts. The AAGSM will also include the provision of dedicated long term advisory support to bolster DFAT’s capability to enhance alumni engagement. The AHC could also consider utilizing the WLI ‘Leadership Connect’ component as an established tool for working with the Pacific region on alumni engagement.

5.5 Enhancing alumni leadership

There are challenges in identifying future leaders most likely to contribute to the development of Tonga and the bilateral relationship. This is particularly the case for selection of school leaver applicants, with current selection largely based on academic merit and responses to questions on applicant experience and motivations for applying for the award in the application form and selection interview of shortlisted candidates. It is noted that New Zealand selection processes now include psychometric testing, but as yet there was no evidence available as to outcomes from this approach (or the appropriateness of the generic tests in different cultural contexts, age-groups and genders). Whilst emerging leaders who are already employed can be more readily identified by their work and community achievements, the PSC suggested that selection also include consideration of annual public service performance appraisals (and similar mechanisms for other sectors).

At present the AHC do not undertake supplementary post-award leadership training for the future. **It is recommended that the AHC provide leadership training to alumni identified as emerging leaders or in existing leadership roles in key organisations.** The WLI model could potentially be used as an exemplar for such training. Other alumni engagement activities such as mentoring can also enhance alumni leadership skills.

³⁷ It is noted that the number (and list) of the DCSP alumni was not available at the time of preparing this report.

³⁸ Whilst noting the challenges of identifying and contacting this tier of alumni.

5.6 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

DFAT's Design and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Standards state that development program MEL processes should be as simple, fit for purpose and cost-effective as possible whilst meeting these Standards. This is particularly relevant for a small program such as the AAT. The responsibilities of the AHC (and other stakeholders) with regard to implementing the Australia Awards Global Monitoring and Evaluation Framework are outlined in Annex 7. As noted above, the review found that while AHC pre- and on-award MEL mostly meet these responsibilities, post-award MEL of the Tonga awards have been limited.

It is therefore **recommended that the AHC strengthen their post-award MEL system for improved evidence-based decision making, and for its MEL obligations with respect to Global Australia Awards MEL and DFAT Tier 2 reporting.**

The minimum M&E system to support data capture, analysis and reporting on the AAT would include continuation of the monitoring of applications, award offer and award progress/completion currently conducted by the AHC. It would additionally include the AAT conducting: (at least) annual alumni contact tracing activity to update an alumni database; an Awards Development Impact Survey at least every three years; annual preparation of case studies/most significant change stories highlighting the development impact of the awards; MEL of any new activities (such as alumni engagement initiatives); and at least annual AHC reflection. This expanded MEL would inform AHC decision making on the awards (including informing consultation with partners), public diplomacy and for global reporting and preparation of a summary report on the AAT. Holistic reporting would also consider evidence (collected externally) on the impact of the AAF and ACIAR JAF for Tonga.

Additional MEL activities would need to be appropriately resourced³⁹. This may include through options such as additional in-house expertise; access to external MEL specialist resources (such as currently provided); or tasked to a MC through an arrangement such as with the AAGSM or through a facility such as TASP.

5.7 Resourcing for Australia Awards implementation

The AHC has primary oversight of the AAT, with support from DFAT Canberra (desk, global awards and thematic sections), as per the responsibilities listed in Annex F. Local award management is conducted in-house by a single Tongan staff member (1 FTE), under the education section with the support of the Senior Program Manager⁴⁰. Given the intensive processing for pre- and on-award management, and with this level of staffing, the AHC has been unable to conduct other core award activities such as alumni engagement and MEL. However, an additional 0.5 FTE contract role has recently commenced at the AHC to support alumni engagement. Consideration needs to be given to the ongoing resourcing levels (and mechanisms) for the higher levels of alumni engagement and post-award MEL proposed in this review.

³⁹ It is noted that the 2024 Vietnam Aus4Skills design included an M&E allocation of up to five percent of the total budget to promote continual learning and improvement.

⁴⁰ It is noted that the AHC in Samoa manage the awards with an A-based and part-time officer. The responsibilities of the Tonga NZ High Commission Scholarships Officer are considerably smaller than that of the AHC officer, with selection and placement centralised and visa/administration activities the responsibility of the awardee.

For strategic in-house capacity to form/maintain a strong association and branding with Australia (and the AHC), core contact with awardees, alumni and partners should remain the primary responsibility of the AHC/DFAT. This would include primary engagement with Tongans regarding award targeting, selection decisions, award ceremonies, and other high-value alumni activities. Largely administrative activities that may be suitable for delivery outside of the AHC include events management (e.g. large-scale awardee/alumni receptions); alumni activities (e.g. maintenance of the alumni database, support of a Tonga Alumni Network; and post-award M&E). At a later date, there could also be outsourcing of administration of flexible study modes (such as short courses).

The International Development Policy commits DFAT to better support local leadership by taking a more flexible and innovative approach to program planning and implementation through approaches that increase participation from local actors. A range of delivery options (insourced, outsourced contractually, partnerships) for conducting the above administrative activities were considered by the review team (as summarized in Annex 8).

Following consultation, and consideration of the feasibility and value for money of these options, **it is recommended that the AHC implement flexible in-country management of the Australia Awards, including whereby:**

- **the AHC retain strategic in-house capacity for high value contact with awardees/alumni and stakeholders to form/maintain a strong association and branding with Australia (and the AHC).** A Scholarship Officer and a contracted (0.5 FTE) Alumni Engagement Officer would conduct the current award activities and manage the proposed expanded alumni engagement
- **post-award MEL activities are contracted out to a suitably qualified and experienced local organisation** (to enhance local capacity)
- **other more administrative post-award tasks to support implementation of the AAT's annual plan are outsourced as required.** Local support services could be managed through a contract/tasking note arrangement with TASP (or its successor) and Australia support through tasking of the AAGSM.

5.8 Other recommendations

Unlike many of the other countries offering awards, the AHC does not currently provide course counselling for shortlisted applicants, ask awardees to complete a reintegration plan or conduct reintegration workshops.

It is recommended that to enhance award outcomes, the AAT:

- **provide specialist course counselling** (including institution and subject electives) to maximise relevant K&S acquisition (particularly for the AAS where there is a broader range of course options available). An experienced course adviser with the relevant background (as identified with support from DFAT GLE/the AAGSM) could provide this service following the selection interviews (and before placement).
- **support awardees to prepare an award/reintegration plan** to guide their academic, on-award experience and networking over their award. The plans should be living documents, revised while on-award and prior to graduation, and then on return to Tonga. Public sector awardees (who are returning to

their workplace), would be encouraged to collaborate with their employers to plan how their studies will benefit their workplaces.

- **conduct reintegration workshops for returning awardees.** These workshops would facilitate alumni finding of relevant jobs, increase understanding of Australia (for AAPS alumni), provide guidance on overcoming challenges, and networking between AAS and AAPS alumni. Partnering with local employers to facilitate internships or leadership roles for returning alumni could also improve reintegration outcomes