



APTC and the pandemic

By Soli Middleby and Mere Nailatikau

Recent months have shown us more than ever the need to be flexible and responsive, to pivot when needed. However, to borrow from friend and colleague Chris Roche: “As in Pilates so in development cooperation: if you want flexibility, you need core strength.”

As one of Australia’s largest and longest standing regional development programs in the Pacific, the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) is no stranger to adaptation. In this blog, we reflect on how we have evolved over the years and how our evolution has positioned us to respond to the disruption of COVID-19, as a key element of Australia’s response to the impacts of the virus.

Our core strength comes from a deep and localised understanding of the Pacific context, and the technical and vocational sector, which comes from 13 years of investing in long-term partnerships and cultivating a highly skilled, connected workforce empowered to adapt and innovate.

Supported by the Australian Government and managed by TAFE Queensland, APTC has been slowly evolving into a more Pacific-led, owned and managed operation. Announced at the Pacific Islands Forum in 2006, APTC commenced with only 18% of our workforce being Pacific Islanders. Now 87% of our staff are Pacific Islanders, including 66% of our senior management team. International, Australian and Pacific expertise in development, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), are drawn together in APTC, and their respective strengths, both political and technical, have laid the foundation for the organisation to innovate, adapt and respond to local needs during this time.

After many years of investing in and learning from mutual partnerships with national TVET institutions, industry, governments, and local and regional organisations, we see the value of partnerships and their ability to manifest impactful local owned and led change. The strength and richness of these relationships, through many obstacles and successes, have proven invaluable in APTC's ability to respond to the crisis in new and creative ways.

The following are examples of how our local knowledge, long-term partnerships and connected workforce have helped us to respond to the current crisis.

As COVID-19 loomed over the region, TVET as we knew it came to a halt. In step with Pacific training partners, we shut classrooms, repatriated students, and supported students who we could not get home before borders closed. COVID-19 highlighted the urgent need to find ways to continue delivering education and training through remote means and we moved quickly to remote delivery wherever possible. Our trainers were provided with training in remote communication and teaching methods, equipping them with skills to design and deliver remote training. Students were put on individual learning plans,

contextualised to their individual situation to ensure they could continue their own learning journey.

We moved to full remote and digital delivery for all courses that lent themselves to these modalities, such as Leadership and Management, and partial delivery for those that did not, such as trade qualifications.

More recently, across the region, and where government guidelines for containment have allowed it, APTC has been able to resume COVID-19 modified face-to-face delivery with national trainers as well as remote delivery with demobilised international trainers. Vanuatu was the first campus to re-open, followed by Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. In all cases, the reopening of campuses complied with COVID-19 protocols and training delivery was modified to account for national guidelines on limiting numbers in gatherings, social distancing, and hygiene protocols.

As borders have shut down, the pandemic has been devastating for Pacific labour mobility - an important source of employment for the region, as discussed [here](#) and [here](#). While we have no control over when borders will reopen, we can support increased skills for those seeking these opportunities as we recently discussed with the Center for Global Development's Helen Dempster [here](#).

Over the past 18 months, APTC has developed a range of products to support work-ready (or employability) skills required to work in the Australian and Pacific labour markets. Over the past few months, we have worked closely with our partners, including Pacific governments, the [Pacific Labour Facility](#) (PLF) and Plan International to increase access to these products through distance, remote and online training focused on developing these essential skills.

We are taking this training to the airwaves. With the Vanuatu Government's Department of Labour, the PLF, and Wan Smolbag Theatre, we have designed a work-ready skills program for radio. Working through existing partnerships to identify national training and employment needs, we will be able to provide free training to thousands of ni-Vanuatu across the nation's many islands and villages.

Without COVID-19, such innovations would have progressed much slower.

We have also been able to step in to reskill Pacific workers who have lost their jobs in the Australian tourism sector to enable them to work in other critical industries such as aged care, allowing them to remain employed in Australia and send critical remittances home. These additional skills and experience will support their future employment both in Australia and when they return home - providing a net-skill gain to the region.

We are also pivoting our support towards Pacific tourism as it reels from the devastation of COVID-19 ([here](#) and [here](#)). Over the past month we have been working with key industry partners, including the Fiji Hotels and Tourism Association, to contextualise and deliver [TAFE Queensland micro-credentials](#) for tourism workers who have lost jobs. These micro-credentials respond to industry demand for increased digital skills for the workforce, equipping affected workers with increased digital literacy and preparing them for future digital training that will be needed to support the industry's recovery from COVID-19.

COVID-19 impacts will shift priorities in Pacific labour markets as workers are displaced in severely impacted sectors and opportunities emerge in others. Reskilling and upskilling are important ways to ensure a skilled, inclusive and productive workforce contributes meaningfully to the Pacific's economic recovery from COVID-19. Collaborating through the [Regional Tourism Sector Skills Coalition](#), formed last year after the [Pacific Skills Summit](#), we have secured the additional support of the [United Nations Development Program \(UNDP\)](#) to be able to expand delivery of these micro-credentials to over 3,500 more workers across the region who have lost their jobs.

Looking forward, our existing collaborations with local organisations and programs will make it possible for us to maximise outcomes for students in terms of their ongoing learning and employment prospects. Internally, the respective strengths of our Australian and Pacific TVET professionals, as well as our Pacific experts' collective development knowledge and 'political' understanding of the

region, will remain critical to our ability to innovate and adapt.

Without core strength, flexing or pivoting too far would have risked a very inelegant outcome. Stepping up, then pivoting, is a challenging manoeuvre. Our experience illustrates the value of a long-term program that values both Australian and Pacific expertise, and works in collaboration and partnership with the governments, institutions, industry and communities of the Pacific. With core strength, we have been flexible and responsive to local needs, enabling rapid and bespoke training, adapted to the changing circumstances brought about by COVID-19.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

About the author/s

Soli Middleby

Soli Middleby has worked in International Development for over 20 years, predominately in the Pacific region. This has included 15 years with the Australian Government's aid program including four years in Papua New Guinea on a decentralised governance program and three years in Fiji as Australia's Regional Counsellor, managing regional development assistance to the Pacific. Most recently Soli was Strategic Advisor on Partnerships to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Oceania Regional Office and a Pacific Partnership Manager to the International Centre for Democratic Partnerships. She is the co-director of Pasifik Nau, an online art gallery showcasing contemporary art from the Pacific Region and organised the first TEDx event to be held in a Pacific Island Country. Soli is currently based in Fiji where she is the CEO of stage three of the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC).

Mere Nailatikau

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